Facilitating Adult Learningin Private Educational Institutions in Singapore: A Singaporean Perspective

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Abstract

As a private educationist, one needs to know the working students' key challenges and motivation to learn and his or her learning styles. Moreover, one also needs to know how in balancing work and studying as well as working on assignments and preparing for examinations, the working student ultimately secures his or her academic goals and success. This practitioners' paper seeks to uncover the key challenges of adult learners (part-time/ working students) as well as to examine the various learning styles and key ways in which some private paying students who may (or may NOT) be sponsored by their companies are motivated to learn and get their necessary qualifications as well as achieving their academic success in their private studies.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, Cooperative learning, Confidence building; SkillsFuture, Adult learners/ working adult learners

Introduction

In today's workplace, lifelong learning has become a fact, if not a part of life. As the Singapore's economy evolves to become more knowledge-based (Low and Singh, 2007), a growing number of its citizens who missed the chance of tertiary education are turning to Private Educational Institutions (PEIs) in order to substantiate their skills, earning potential and career advancement.

There have been some huge shifts in recent years in the Singapore's education sector which have changed the cultures of both public and private institutions. Without going into long explanations, it is useful just to think of some of the key changes and look at how these have

impacted on the role of andexpectations from teachers especially in the private education sector.

Given Singapore's more affluent and integrated society, the capacity to work together collaboratively has become one of the core survival skills in the global workforce (Foyle & Shafto, 1995). The educational landscape has undergone fundamental re-structuring, for example teaching students how to communicate, collaborate effectively and to engage in self learning has become the basis of education (Cheng 2003).

Theoretical Framework and Summary of the Literature

Today's education consistently has learner-centeredness as a fundamental element in adult (student) learning. As a consequence of the upsurge of adult learners, universities and private colleges, commonly known as PEIs (Private Education Institutes) in Singapore, need to consider redesigning programs and services to meet the needs of these adult learners. An underlying assumption from the literature is that "colleges and universities cannot continue with business-as-usual" (Apps, 1981, p. 11) for the spike in number of adult learners returning to complete undergraduate programs. PEIs and universities may want to consider learning more about their adult student demographics, characteristics, and needs for special resources and services. In today's adult education, it advocates for the uniqueness in learning. They have tremendous experiences that they bring to the classroom (Knowles, 1973). Their desire is to translate and apply learning to their real life.

The literature on undergraduate students in higher education suggests that student engagement and building relationship is a fundamental component in adult learning. The literature suggests that in-class learning time and interactions with faculty have a powerful influence on an adult's learning journey and personal development. Adult learners value and seek out classroom experiences that are based in relevancy, respect, adult dignity, and reciprocity of adult-to-adult relationships. The connecting classroom metaphor suggests an environment that embraces the value and worth of adults as knowledgeable learners, and which also values adult life experiences and perspectives as part of the learning process. (Graham et al., 2000, p. 12)

Other authors are in unison suggesting that classrooms are the center stage for adult learning (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Donaldson et al., 1999; Graham et al., 2000; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Kasworm & Marienau, 1997). Students will be proud to be an alumnus with their college if they feel the institution cares about them and their success.

Extant literature in counselling has a basis for understanding the transition that undergraduate students and adult learners experience when they return to college. The most notable literature was Schlossberg et al's model (1995) of transition. Schlossberg et al. (1995) support a model of transition with three components: approaching transition (moving in), taking stock (moving through), and taking charge (moving out). These three phases suggest that an individual who is approaching a transition needs to leave something behind before beginning something new. It is at this stage where evaluation needs to take place regarding the impact the change is having on the individual's life.

Overall, it should be noted that adults learn best and retain much of their learning through a variety of ways (Brookfield, 2006; Low, 2010, 2005) and that also include fun and being taught in a creative way.

Methodology

This qualitative study is concerned with facilitating adult learners in PEIs in Singapore as well as the challenges they faced in their learning in higher education. The use of interviews as the main data collection tool held the greatest possibility of exploring the adult learners experience in detail (Arksey & Knight 1999, Patton 2002).

The researchers used course-level and student-level data from higher education courses during 2013-2014. The total numbers of respondents were 325.

The data was obtained from the Registrar's Office of XYZ Academy and covered 13 undergraduate classes taught by 8 different instructors. In addition, we explored student-level data for 12 courses taught in Q3 2013 and Q2 2014. A survey questionnaire was administered for each course in the last month of every semester. At the time of the survey the instructor leaves the classroom, and an academic coordinator administers the survey and handed the completed surveys to the Registrar's Office in order to ensure strict confidentiality of the students' replies.

The survey questionnaire handed out to the students that were present in class at the time of the survey. No information on the identity of the students was collected in the survey. Hence, all forms were anonymous. When completing the survey, students were asked to rate several aspects of their learning experience as well as their own involvement and effort for that course during the semester. Of particular interest to the researchers, are the overall ratings student's preference of instructor's teaching styles and ways, pinpointing those appropriate for adult learners.

In our sample of 13 courses taught during 2013-2014, students rate their instructors on average 4.28 out of 5 when they are asked "Overall, I would rate the instructor as: 1:Poor, 2:Fair, 3:Satisfactory, 4:Good, 5:Excellent". The average expected grade is 2.96 while the (actual) average grade received by all enrolled students is 2.34. It should be noted that while the expected grade variable is obtained from the responses from the students that were present at the time of the survey, the actual grades variable is calculated using grade data from all enrolled students after grades are submitted by instructors. This difference may also reflect overconfident grade expectations (Nowell & Alston, 2007). Summary statistics indicated that 43 percent of courses were taught by female instructors, 16 percent of them were taught by senior instructors and 74 percent were taught by full-time faculty members. There is no difference in learner's perspective whether is taught by full-time faculty or by adjunct.

Findings

   (1) **Critical Needs of Adult Learners**

- *Course timetable that works with their work schedules*

Adult learners continue to rank the convenience of their work schedule and the location of courses as critical. Flexibility continues to rank as a top concern since more adult learners were unemployed and taking full-time or part-time course loads. However, this likely reflects the fact that adult learners are primarily in school to either improve their professional skills or to prepare for a new or different career. Additionally, most adult learners have dependents at home. Thus, they need to finish their degrees as quickly as possible to return to, or advance in, the workplace, but they must have flexible options in order to fit courses into their weekly schedules.

58% of those surveyed (or 189 respondents) cited their concerns of non-completion of their courses/ individual modules while 70% pointed out that they were out-of-touch with any form of study or academic work, clearly suggesting the typical working adult learner's fear of failure of their courses/ modules.

Several respondents spoke of "building their confidence and improving themselves; (they) would then learn well and succeed."

- *Relevant degree programs*

  The majority 85% (or 276 respondents) indicated that they studied because they wanted to improve themselves and better their incomes/ salary levels.

  Adult learners want programs aligned with their life and work goals. They know they need a degree to advance their careers (Several respondents said, "I want to improve my income level"; "looking towards better incentives and better job prospects and promotions"), but they have specific aspirations. Among those popular courses were: organizational leadership, nursing, computer information technology, business administration and education. Some of these majors pursued by adult learners' support the need for advancement in their current professions while others, such as nursing and education in particular, suggest students are looking to change careers.

- *Clear expectations*

  Time-conscious adult learners want to know what is expected of them to complete their programs/ degrees.

- *Feedback from lecturers/tutors*

  PEIs who frequently teach adults are well acquainted with this expectation. Many of them have not been in a classroom for years; often, their first attempts at school result in poor academic performance. Therefore, they lack confidence in their academic abilities and need reassurance. Sometimes, this need for feedback results in conflict between adult learners and their lecturers/tutors. Lecturers/tutors who are new in teaching adult learners must be clear as possible about how and when students (adult learners) can expect to receive feedback. Related to this is a strong disdain for assignments that may be viewed as "busy work." Adult learners want to know what they are learning and how it relates to the subject matter and its practicality to their work place. Lecturers/tutors who can articulate the learning outcomes of their courses

and relate them to broader degree program objectives are typically very respected by adult learners.

- Acknowledgement of prior learning

    Increasingly, adult learners want opportunities to receive credit for prior learning. This stems from both personal and financial needs. On a personal level, adult learners want validation that what they have learned through their work and volunteer experiences matters. Similarly, they want to trim the total cost of their education, and with good reason: they are now largely paying for their education themselves. Adult learners need, and want, to contain costs through prior learning opportunities.

    The options available for us to address student needs continue to change rapidly through new technologies and partnerships but, at the core, the needs of our adult learners have not changed dramatically.

(2) A growing number of adults who join the workforce (who are 25 years or older), a group that possesses a distinct set of goals, views and needs.

- Today's workforce is distinctly different from a generation earlier.
- Rapidly changing technology, greater job instability and higher industry expectations that workers be more flexible require adults to continue learning throughout their careers.
- These adult learners have contributed to the evolution of the Singapore's labor workforce.
- And in the face and pace of modern 'fast-living' and needing a variety of teaching ways, these students also need time or pause to reflect, think and relate with the subject matter to prepare them for discussions as well as to learn or absorb better (Brookfield, 2006) and succeed in their studies/ programs.
- Adult learners (usually part-time working adults) enroll in PEIs for many different reasons and at different points in their careers, but they often face similar logistical, academic and financial obstacles when trying to achieve access and success in higher education.
- In short, they face barriers because institutions and policies continue to focus on traditional students.
- Although PEIs have historically served adult learners, with shorter duration to earn their degree compared to public 3-4-year institutions remain the gateway for adults to earn a low-cost four-year degree.
- Perhaps, being helpful, policymakers and higher education institutions (faculty members) must do more to encourage greater participation and success among older students?

Analysis and Summary of Findings, Implications and Conclusions

- Working adults want formal feedback via graded assignments, but they also seek informal feedback as they progress through their courses (Johnson, et. al., 2013); faculty members/ instructors need to relate, give them feedback, and inform them accordingly and at regular intervals while building the (self-) confidence of these working adults.

- In terms of clear expectations, the courses and programs/ lectures are also expected to be, on the whole, well-organized so that these working adult students can learn better (Brookfield, 2006). They expect their advisors to be clear and knowledgeable about degree requirements. Beyond advising, they want to be able to access institutional information when it is convenient to them, in diversity and/ or a variety of teaching methods/ ways including online and via email, telephone, blogs, etc.
- Adults seeking postsecondary education face several challenges such as work pressure, domestic and family related issues such as heightened anxiety of bread-winner, loss of job or income.They may also face financial challenges such as the need to finance or get study loans for their education.
- Supportive institutional and state policies and practices – for example Skills upgrading, Cross-training, SkillsFuture…. can encourage their participation and success.
- Compared to traditional students, many more adult students have full-time jobs, spouses, and/or dependent children—in short, they are place-bound and busy people.
- Not surprisingly, adult students are far more likely than traditional students to attend college part-time.
- Accelerated degree vis top-up degrees at PEIs aimed at the adult learners market have grown in recent decades. This expansion, while significant, still does not reach the majority of adults in need of further education.
- Public polytechnics and universities e.g. Polytechnics, UniSIM have taken steps to serve adult learners market as well though of course, more can be done. These institutions and faculty members should clearly see themselves as "helper(s) of learning" (Brookfield, 2006: 276).
- Hence PEIs need to engage in outreach activities that encourage participation. They need to expand flexibility in course delivery by offering weekend and evening classes, accelerated degree programs and distance learning.
- Preview sessions, course information, evening orientation and "transitions" and study skills workshops, a mentoring program, student referral, accelerated programs, an adult learnerstudent organization, and places to spend time and network with other adults.
- Many of these services have been shown to correlate with student success, particularly for low-income students.
- Adult students also face an array of academic challenges e.g. a sizable proportion of adults, particularly low-income adults, are academically under-prepared for degree-level work, putting them at greater risk of failure.
- Many ill-prepared adult learners have taken remedial courses as they are less endowed academically but compensated by their working experiences.
- Some adults come to PEIs with considerable real world and/or academic experience that, if recognized, would promote program completion and reduce costs and time-to-degree.
- In addition, policies on assessment of prior learning can support the granting of credit for life experiences and for courses taken outside of traditional academic settings (e.g., industry-provided courses)
- Adults learners generally tend to have different educational goals and learning styles than traditional students, with a particular focus on how their courses relate to their lives and jobs.
- PEIs need to recognize these differences and capitalize on them as strengths that adults bring to the classroom.

- Small group discussions, for example, allow adult students to connect to or relate with each other as well as linking classroom learning to real world experiences.
- Financial packages/ aids for adult students is limited and that adult learners receiving financial aid are far more likely to persist than their peers.
- But many student aid programs are geared primarily toward traditional students or skill based vocation studies, making it difficult for older students to qualify for the assistance they need.
- Skills future, UTAP (Union Training Assistance Program) is a training benefit for NTUC members to defray their cost of training. This benefit is to encourage more union members to go for skills upgrading.
- With effect from 1st January 2013, union members who initiate training on their own could be eligible for up to $250 training benefits* for courses under Union Training Assistance Program (UTAP) per yearand other government subsidies or tax relief are great relief for providing incentives and adult learners to succeed to obtain a degree (SkillsFuture Credit).
- Employers should be more involved in educating their workforce through working with the trade unions and alumni. It is worthy to note and repeat that many authors suggested that while classrooms are the center stage for adult learning (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Donaldson et al., 1999; Graham et al., 2000; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Kasworm & Marienau, 1997), students will be motivated, energized or pleased to be an alumnus with their colleges if they feel their organization and/ or institution care(s) about them and their successes.

Key Challenges of Adult Learners in Singapore

- Fear of failure (Low, 2005) or non-completion ("I don't want to be half-baked (meaning not getting my degree)"; one interviewee's exact words) of their modules/programs.
- Adults learners generally tend to have different educational goals and learning styles than traditional students
- Concern for their future careers.
- Anxiety and concern with the level of difficulty of the content and the amount of content to be covered in the curricular accomplishments (Svinicki 2005). Here, in our opinion, self-discipline also comes in and the adult learners have to or must be tough and wanting to succeed to do well in their studies.
- Re-adjustment of lifestyle
- Educational experience, academic rigor and teaching faculty (Berumen 2004)
- Difficulty level of academic subjects (Hurtado, Carter and Spuler 1996)
- Priority in meeting coursework deadlines, readiness for external examinations (Olsen and Jaramillo (2000)
- Inadequate secondary and post-secondary preparation, English language proficiency, poor study skills
- Experiences with the different teaching methodologies in the classroom
- Social interaction with other students and lecturers

Key Ways to Overcome these challenges & Ways to Increase the Motivation of these Working (Adult learners)

It should be noted that there are many ways to skin a cat, and what key ways the authors had indicated are by no means exhaustive; nonetheless to the authors' mind, what's important are the key ways to motivate and aid these working adult learners while assisting them in completing and achieving their academic goals.

- These students really desire to increase their income – certainly a strong motivating factor, and they are determined to get their degrees and the necessary qualifications.
- The typical fear of failure is high among these adult learners, and they certainly wish to succeed. There is a need for the teacher to pitch his or her teaching of the students according to their (*students'*) needs; (s)he has to apply different strokes for different folks. There is a Chinese saying which goes like this, "Teach a person based on one's ability" (Low, 2010: 682, *italics authors'*)."When my confidence is high, my learning is also high. (one respondent's exact words)" The students can also "emulate the teachers" and also "imitate their positive attitude" (several respondents' words)
- Another powerful motivation is the adult learners' own motivation; of interest one respondent highlighted his/ her need to pursue (his/ her) degree because (he/ she) want(s) to set an example for (his/ her) children"
- Of significance, the faculty members/ instructors – while being helpful – really need to bear in mind that they need to give relevant examples too so that the working adult learners learn well. Low (2010: 683) highlighted that "In providing examples, the teacher should also shares his or her experiences, tell relevant stories and give visual images or pictures on what (s)he is explaining on; the student learns better this way."
- The authors also hold the view that the adult learners' institutions and more so, the teachers and facilitators need to be positive-oriented in their thinking and approach to these adult learners. Low (2010: 682) spoke of: "A good teacher is a person who attempts to bring out the good and (s)he does not help the students to realize what is bad in them. Instead a good teacher remedies the weakness(es) of the students, and on the other hand, a bad teacher does not help to bring what is good or seeks to remedy the weakness(es). (The Analects, Chapter XII verse 16)."

SkillsFuture Credits as Solutions

- Interestingly, to make it easy and as part of the empowerment process, theSkills Future Credit aims to encourage individuals to take ownership of their skills development andlifelong learning. All Singaporeans aged 25 and above will receive an opening credit of S$500 from January 2016. The individual Singaporean's credit will not expire and the government will provide periodic top-ups, so one may accumulate one's credit.Serving as a good incentive, this also helps as encouragement for the working adult learner to take their studies and improve themselves academically.
- Introduced in early 2016, SkillsFuture Credit is moving in the right direction. SkillsFuture Credit is for all Singaporeans aged 25 and above – and is definitely a greatest plus factor in encouraging working adults to do academic studies.
- An individual Singaporean's SkillsFuture Credit can be used on top of existing government course subsidies to pay for a wide range of approved skills-related courses.
  (Source: http://www.skillsfuture.sg/credit/about (accessed on 28 Apr 2016)

What Is SkillsFuture?

- SkillsFuture is a national movement to enable all Singaporeans to develop to their fullest potential throughout life. Whichever stage of life an individual Singaporean is in, whether one is in one's schooling years, early career, mid-career or silver years, SkillsFuture will enable one to take advantage of a wide range of opportunities – to help one realizesone's aspirations and attain mastery of skills.
- At a national level, SkillsFuture will play an important part in charting Singapore's next phase of development towards an advanced economy and inclusive society. Every individual's skill, passion and contribution counts.
  [Source: http://www.skillsfuture.sg/ (accessed on 28 Apr 2016)]
- With the help of the SkillsFuture Council, education and training providers, employers, unions – one can thus own a better future with skills mastery and lifelong learning. It's a Singaporean's skills. His or her asset. His or her future.

Conclusion

- The needs of adult learners (Some of these needs include, for example, wanting to being educated, qualified, get promoted, "I'm pursuing my degree because I want to set an example for my children"; "I want to encourage them to study and learn well too." (several respondents' inputs)have largely flown under the radar screen of policymakers but it is currently being addressed by the government to adapt to the changing education landscape and maintain its competitive edge as education hub in South-east Asia.
- The private education landscape has been evolving and changed to some degree, but more needs to be done.
- Government and/or employers alike need to be more adult-friendly; need to systematically assess their human capital needs, set goals for adult learning, establish funding policies that support these goals and monitor progress.
- The Government needs to work collaboratively with the business community, labor unions and other agencies and organizations.
- PEIs need to improve the ways they serve adult learners, replacing outmoded policies and practices with ones supportive of older students.
- It is not simply a matter of helping individuals.
- Singapore's economy and future prosperity depend on the skills (continuous improvement and training) of its workforce, which requires access to lifelong learning.

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