

Emotional Challenges of Adult Learners in Higher Education

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Learning is an act of hope. Although adults enter learning experiences from many frames of emotion and cognitive beliefs, each views this experience as the purposeful choice for a new and different future, a future of hope and possibilities. Thus, as Taylor (2006) suggested, quoting from the Talmud, “We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are” (p. 200). For adult learners, the pursuit of higher education is a choice and a life-changing engagement.

Given the courage and the fragility of adult students, this chapter explores four key emotional challenges of the complex journey in developing a successful student identity. The premise for this exploration is that adult students live in multiple worlds: worlds of action and commitment, worlds of emotional validation and conflict, and worlds that will change both the mind and the heart.

Entering College to Succeed

Adults, unlike younger adult collegiate learners, do not view themselves as typically going away to college, as starting a separated life from family and community. Whether they sometimes are pushed into collegiate learning through losing a job or voluntarily seek out college to develop a different life opportunity, college for most adults is not a physical separation from their past worlds. Rather, most adults continue their complex lives—with the added challenging role of student. Many of these adult students are

continuing a previously interrupted journey of college studies, a journey that expands their world of commitments and possibilities. Another subgroup of adults enters college as a new, unknown journey. They seek out college for the first time to either reinvent themselves through a new environment of people and ideas or to build a life with possibilities to support a more stable future. Whether these adults are expanding their lives, investing in a new career option, or reinventing themselves, entry is often a complex and treacherous journey that supports but may also diminish their sense of identity.

The first act of hope for adult learners is seeking entry to college. Confident and resilient learners find entry into college often challenging to their identities and their sense of adult competence. Although these individuals typically have a sense of mission and purpose and often a long-term plan for their collegiate pursuits, they experience doubts and insecurity. They may face challenges negotiating the institutional procedures, the time commitments and demands of course work, and the ego demands of classroom assessment. They may sometimes be discouraged or disheartened. However, these individuals present attitudes, skills, and beliefs of resilience and risk taking; they believe that they have a high probability of success and are committed to quality learning experiences and a collegiate credential.

Of greater concern for adult educators are adult students who often are unsure of themselves and their futures, whether they are first-time-entry or reentry students. They often seek college entry through a life crisis, such as divorce or separation, work issues, or some form of significant individual need, such as seeking a career with financial stability. These adults display emotional chaos as they develop a student identity, contemplate future success in a collegiate classroom, and psychologically manage their turbulent life circumstances. In addition, they may have unresolved life issues that draw on their energy and time, as well as potentially negative past experiences of learning that create additional anxiety. They often have a questioning sense of who they are, what they should be doing as learners, and how they can be effective and successful in a collegiate environment. Furthermore, these adults may have fragile financial support and equally fragile interpersonal supports to pursue a college degree.

Given these emotional conditions, one of the first acts of hope for the adult entering higher education is to purposefully decide to be a college student. These individuals need the courage and support to apply for admission, register for classes, and participate in collegiate courses. Drawing on their past life experiences and their evaluation of their past learning, these individuals enter the classroom with an evolving and sometimes conflicted learner identity. Research suggests that many adult learners experience significant anxiety and self-consciousness about their acceptance, place in a collegiate environment, and ability to perform as undergraduate students (Kasworm, 2005, 2006). They often experience issues with family, coworkers, and key friends who are not supportive of this new involvement and its

demands. Although each adult uniquely experiences these potentially tense beginnings, their anxieties often dissipate after successful entry and completion of several courses. Through their engagement and adaptation to the role and rigors of student life, these individuals usually develop a sense of their place in a college environment, a voice for student learning, and the belief of personal success in this academic context. Their initial entry is buoyed with special positive validation from other older students and faculty, as well as friendship and assistance from select younger students and collegiate staff (Kasworm, 2005). Furthermore, many adults have reported that their children, their spouse, their siblings, and sometimes their coworkers provide initial support and encouragement for this long journey.

What provides the supportive collegiate bridge for these adults' emotional engagement into college studies? Key authorities highlight the importance of supportive messages in the collegiate literature of programs and services; key staff provide personal attention and advisement with admissions entry, career advisement, potential basic skills and study strategies courses and supports, and an institutional climate that welcomes adults into their programs (Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback, 2002). A number of institutions have stylized adult degree programs and adult student units that offer a special instructional environment, support services, and an adult-friendly culture. Many offer special offices to serve adults, as well as orientation programs directed to adults, first-year-cohort courses for adults, and adult student organizations. All of these structures and programs create responsive and supportive opportunities to aid the entry of adults.

Continuing in College Through Renegotiation or Adaptation

The second act of hope by adult students is their ongoing engagement in a collegiate environment. Because adults have competing lives, hopes, and realities, each semester of college involvement represents either a renegotiation or adaptation of themselves and their lives. Although there is historic contrary evidence, Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, and Jenkins (2006a) noted in a recent major analysis (2006b) that adults were more likely to persist in college in comparison to younger adult students:

Older students have a clearer sense of their objectives for going to college, they know how to navigate the educational bureaucracy, and they are generally not as shy about asking for help or demanding service. Older students are less easily discouraged or thrown off course, even though they often have more outside pressures and obligations than do younger students [2006a, pp. 23–24].

Part of this persistence and learning engagement is supported by the theory of socioemotional selectivity, which suggests that the perception of

time that adult learners have plays a fundamental role regarding these emotional engagements in significant academic learning. When time is perceived as limited, emotion-related goals assume primacy. As Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles (1999) suggest, “Older people relative to their younger counterparts describe their futures as limited and recognize that they do not have ‘all the time in the world’ left to pursue their goals” (p. 168). Thus, adults select challenging life goals “even at the cost of emotional satisfaction. . . . During this period of life, the exploration of the world demands emotional resilience in the face of failures and social rejections” (p. 168). This theory captures the paradoxical place of the adult student as an emotional self and a knowledge-striving self. The cognitive and the emotional aspects of their collegiate commitment are intertwined and represent both emotional resilience and emotional vulnerability. Thus, faculty and staff need to understand the paradoxical focus and goals of adult students. They need to have adult-supportive policies and instructional designs for adults experiencing this emotional learning journey.

Beyond the demands of limited time parameters to pursue college, adults also need to experience the connected classroom. Because of complex individual identities, adult students best learn through key acts of meaning making connected to their adult identities. The connected classroom represents this social and psychological space for learning, connecting the adult’s life to academic studies and other key adult life roles (Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback, 2002). Because adult students continue with their complex adult lives, the classroom world should ideally connect them with their other worlds. In particular, the most powerful influences on adults are class-related learning successes and their relationships with faculty validating their adult identity as worthy and valued (Graham and Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback, 2002). In essence, adult students engage in higher education based in an emotionally connected place. This place, the connected classroom environment, provides the collegiate social context for learning and for defining their success as college students. This place validates their other sense of self as knowledgeable and competent adult actors, as well as potentially challenging their values, beliefs, and behaviors in these roles to imagine and perceive different possibilities and understandings. Although learning may sometimes be threatening and uncomfortable, the connected classroom provides the supportive ballast for adults to consider dissonant ideas and images of their world.

Becoming One in the World of Collegiate Learning

The third act of hope for adults focuses on their engagement in learning new knowledge, as well as new perspectives and potentially new beliefs. These adult students engage in learning through co-construction of meanings between their individual understandings, the knowledge and skills presented in the course and text, and the faculty and fellow students’ understandings.

These co-constructed meanings represent the adult life of the known and unknown, the cognitive and the affective. The paradox of this third act of hope is that adults are often taught to learn discipline content and skill yet engage in learning through their life experiences; they view the world through their past and current adult roles, not typically through the discipline perspective. As Pepin (1988) suggested, "We constantly attempt to create the world in our image, to contain it within structures we have available to us" (pp. 176–177). The challenge of higher education in serving adults is to create both learning that reflects the current adult learner's world and creates possible alternative understandings of that world in relation to the enhancement of critical thinking, multiple worldviews, and self-authorship.

In recent research, adult undergraduates were found to negotiate the meaning of their undergraduate learning in elaborate and complex patterns, characterized as meaning structures or knowledge voices (Kasworm, 2003). These patterns represented epistemological beliefs of the learner embedded in two worlds: the world of academic knowledge (of books and theory) and the world known by many adults as real-world knowledge (of tacit understandings and everyday applications). Beliefs and the utility of these two forms of knowledge influenced adult students' goals and eventual outcomes for learning. Furthermore, these meaning structures were not just cognitive lenses for engaging and retaining classroom knowledge. These knowledge voices also represented affective connections to self, life roles, and life actions.

In considering these knowledge voices, two of the voices represented adult undergraduate beliefs that collegiate learning should be anchored and reinforced through their practical world experiences and their current adult role identities (Kasworm, 2003). These two voices, the Outside voice and the Cynical voice, place affective and cognitive emphasis on knowledge that validates and reinforces current adult beliefs, roles, and related life action contexts. Adults operating from these two voices selectively engage in learning knowledge that does not contradict their understandings of how they see themselves and their worlds. If these students are required to memorize and be graded on knowledge that is contradictory to their beliefs, they will rely on learning through short-term memory recall and readily dismiss this knowledge beyond the requirements of the course.

Two other knowledge voices of adults present a belief of the two separate knowledge worlds, but with a primary anchor based in the academic world of knowledge. In the first pattern, Entry voice, adult students view themselves as novices in the stylized environment of the college classroom. Thus, they compartmentalize their prior understandings of self-efficacy and competence in their adult life worlds, believing that their backgrounds have limited or no value in the academic world. The second voice, the Straddling voice, represents a knowledge structure of students who delineate incoming knowledge and act on that knowledge through different worlds: the academic world of knowledge and the real world of knowledge. In this

knowledge structure, these students operate with bifurcation of knowledge and related affective understandings; they learn and act on knowledge separately through the academic and the real worlds. The fifth and final pattern, the Inclusion voice, represents the integration of knowledge engagement across both life worlds. It demonstrates a unification of the cognitive and emotional worlds of adult students and their epistemological beliefs of different worlds of academic knowledge and knowledge based in adult life roles. In this knowledge structure, these students unify their understandings and beliefs through the broader conceptual thinking and decision making anchored in the intellectual understandings of the academy. They view both their real-world roles and their collegiate learning through multiple theoretical frames of understanding. Adults in this final voice often suggest actions of transformation of self through an ongoing active cycle of reflection and action integrating knowledge and life applications. For these adult students, the power of learning has an impact on both the life of the mind and of the self. As Mezirow and Associates (2000) suggested, through the process of transformational learning, adult students become different people, viewing themselves, their families, and their world from new and different perspectives.

These patterns of epistemological meaning making through knowledge voices highlight the importance of faculty respect and differentiated responsiveness to adult learners, as well as faculty skill in designing connected classrooms for both the intellectual and the emotional worlds of learning. As outlined more extensively in other discussions (Kasworm, 2003), faculty can provide invaluable support and appropriate intellectual challenges for adults in these varied epistemological states. Furthermore, adult students are not passive within these classrooms; they continually engage in metacognitive decision processes related to classroom engagement, identifying relevancy and importance of classroom knowledge in relation to themselves and their adult lives. Some choose to dismiss the content and the faculty member as irrelevant, while others attempt to create further understandings and applications through self-directed learning actions beyond the classroom.

Considering Future Possibilities

As the final act of hope, adult learners also face challenges in gaining a place, a position, a voice, and a related sense of valued self in the cultural worlds of higher education. Because the collegiate setting is significantly valued by society and is often a selective, discriminating learning world, adult learners also experience emotional cultural demands in relation to this setting. As expressed by adult learners' positional and relational identities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998), adults actively negotiate their sense of place, social authority and agency, and relatedness to others who value or marginalize their presence. Although adults bring a rich and

complex adult identity into the collegiate environment, they face unique challenges to their identity through the varied supportive and negative sociocultural contexts of higher education. Whether within the classroom or experiencing the broader social world of the college, they experience environmental and relational cues, messages, and supports (or lack thereof). These adults identify through these cultural cues which students matter and the valued student behaviors for success in this context. Through these cultural engagements, adults co-construct their sense of who they are as collegiate students (in relation to other students and in relation to their other adult roles) and their sense of possibilities to be successful and valued in both this academic world and many other adult worlds. They come to image themselves as actors in future learning possibilities or to resist future learning opportunities as identity threatening based on their current cultural experience. This last act of hope suggests that learning is not just within the adult; it is co-constructed through cultural and social interactions within a specific context that can unify or fracture the learner identity of the adult. Context does matter in the emotional journey of the learner.

Conclusion

Through these four acts of hope, adult learners experience the evolving development of a student identity. "We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are" (Taylor, 2006, p. 200). Adult students come as highly complex yet ever changing selves. They negotiate their sense of an adult student identity based in who they are and who they wish to become, as well as through the complex interactive environment of the collegiate world. Through acts of hope, they engage in a rich repertoire of emotional and cognitive needs while locating their place and voice in the classroom, of negotiating positional and relational agency in relation to their fellow students, faculty, staff, and the institution. At the heart of collegiate learning is the recognition of the adult as not just a mind at work, but also of a complex individual who is both a learner and a contributor to the class and the institution.

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