

DIVERSITY OF ADULT LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

As a woman of Asian origin, the experience of growing up in an Asian country rich in its cultural diversity and later pursuing higher education and teaching in a Western country, has enriched my cultural awareness and the influence cultural diversity has in education. Learners as individuals being unique and diverse in their own right show different learning styles in order to meet the requirements of their educational curriculum. Not only are we talking about the differences in life styles, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, class and experiences, the educational philosophy, the culture of teaching, social needs of society and economy together with various other factors contribute to the diversity in learning styles of learners. This diversity that learners bring to the class make teaching an interesting task and a challenging one at the same time.

This paper discusses the diversity of adult learners by evaluating a few theories of adult learning and motivation. As diversity of learners is a broad area, the focus has been placed towards distance learning with personal reflections in teaching e-commerce at a tertiary level. Reflections have been discussed from the perspective of culture, age, gender, class and ethnicity. Drawing from my personal experiences as a teacher and as a learner in an Asian country and a Western country, this paper also offers ways to enhance the motivation of adult learners in order to meet the expectations of the educational curriculum.

Introduction

It is never too early or too late to start learning. There is evidence to show that learning starts as early as the fetal stage in a mother's womb and lasts till a person reaches his or her tomb (Kroeker, no date). According to Kathy Kroeker, personalities start to develop before birth and that fetuses have an amazing capacity to learn and remember. So learning is believed to be a lifelong process. It appears mothers' actions during pregnancy cause the release of hormones, which affect the fetal development and this leads to the development of personalities before birth. So based on this, it is not surprising to see the diversity of babies born in this world.

With the experience of growing up in an Asian country rich in its cultural diversity and later pursuing higher education and teaching in a Western country, my awareness of learner diversity in education has grown. According to the American Psychological Association's (APA) Learner-Centered Psychological Principles "learners have different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning that are a function of prior experience and heredity" (APA, 2003). Not only do learners have their own style of learning, but they learn at different rates as well. This diversity that learners bring to the class not only makes teaching an interesting task but it can be a challenging one at the same time.

Distance Learning

With political and economic upheavals in the world causing travel concerns (e.g. war, terrorism and the outbreak of SARS), distance learning is becoming more and more appealing as the preferred mode of teaching and learning. During the outbreak of SARS this year, virtual learning continued to take place in some schools in the SARS affected countries

such as Hong Kong, China and Singapore through Web-based virtual classrooms (Borja, 2003; BBC, 2003). This was through the use of information technology such as Web cameras, audio-video phones, Web conferencing software, messaging tools and multimedia animation programs. Not only did virtual learning prove to be useful in medical crisis moments like SARS, but it could be used as a learning option in other situations too such as during the sniper shooting in Washington earlier this year, during snowstorms and tornadoes where it is safer for people to stay indoors (Borja, 2003).

There are several definitions of distance learning but one that is adopted by The Open Polytechnic Of New Zealand (TOPNZ), refers to it as an education process in which the learner and tutor are physically separated from each other. The Open Polytechnic is the only specialist in open and distance learning in New Zealand. It's mission is to "support the development of lifelong learners through open learning" (TOPNZ, 2003). The open entry is aimed at reducing barriers to learning and it particularly suits adult learners who like the flexibility to study at any time, any place and in a way that best suits their circumstances. The institution supports over 30,000 adult learners of which 96% of them work part-time and 74% of them are over 25 years of age. From a gender perspective, based on statistics gathered in 2001, about 59% of students are women and 41% are men (TOPNZ, 2003).

Most students who choose distance education are adult learners who are in the workforce with family commitments and obligations. They expect to maintain their careers while they study to seek better prospects in their lives. So education for these adult learners are in a way "a matter of secondary interest" as it is "overshadowed by the realities of life ..." (Rogers, 1996, p. 69). However, for some it would be a prime interest especially if they have made a huge commitment to study at a considerable cost. This mode of study also suits international

students who wish to seek a foreign qualification, as they can remain in their home countries and avoid the emotional loneliness or separation from their families. Having been an international student myself, the level of adaptation, openness and understanding needed to fit into a new society is significant. Besides the culture, customs, social and business etiquette, processes, sense of humour and language being different, the values, interpretations and perspectives are different too. So without the support and guidance of families, adjusting to the new environment can be challenging. A high level of pastoral care and effective intercultural communication are therefore needed to show the commitment and support for international students. Despite the challenges, foreign students are prepared to travel abroad and face these challenges. As Knowles (1975) points out in his Andragogical Model, adult learners perceive themselves as self-directing human beings who have the power to choose the best options for themselves and define themselves in light of their own achievements and experiences.

In distance learning, the instructor adopts a facilitator role (rather than a lecturer role) to guide, motivate and steer the learners forward. The majority of the teaching and learning takes place through asynchronous communication via “print, electronic and/or telecommunications media” (TOPNZ, 2003). So face-to-face contact with learners is minimal. Learner diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, race, culture or class is not totally visible unless an effort is made to look into a student’s academic record. So tutors cannot rely on body language or physical appearance to understand students’ needs or to adjust their communication accordingly. For example, if tutors know that they are dealing with an elderly learner, it may be preferable to use a less authoritative tone when discussing any problems with them. This would be particularly important in Asian cultures where

appropriate behaviour and respect is expected when dealing with older individuals. Student needs in distance education are mostly perceived through written communication. The Open Polytechnic uses information and communication technologies (ICT) such as web-based discussion forums and e-mails to facilitate and promote learning among students. According to Hodgson & Kambouri, ICTs are the “most appropriate ways of facilitating lifelong learning” (1999, p. 188). So significant emphasis tends to be placed on the tone and the choice of words used in written communication as the teacher-student relationships is based on the effectiveness of this communication.

Diversity in Adult Learning

When we teach, we have the potential to trigger the process for change within students. It is not possible to transform someone, however one can inspire someone to transform. This is because everyone has a mind of their own and to transform or not to transform is within their control. When a change takes place as a result of teaching, it is a change that is caused by learning and gaining knowledge. Learning can only be said to have happened if the knowledge gained was new. So with an element of curiosity and/or a need to know, the learning process takes place. It is an active process, which involves cognitive processes and it is based on existing knowledge that we have. Brookfield believes that “when we teach, the world changes” (1995). However, in order for change to take place, the teacher needs to go through the learning process and change first so that the understanding can be passed on to the student. For this to happen effectively, it helps if teachers have an awareness of learners’ diversity.

In discussing diversity of adult learners, we are not just referring to the differences in life styles, ethnicity, cultural backgrounds, class and experiences, but we are also referring to differences in the educational philosophy, the culture of teaching, social needs of society and economy together with various other factors. Learners as individuals being unique and diverse in their own right show different learning styles through observation, active participation, listening, reading, networking with people and so on. APA's Learner-Centered Psychological Principles states that learning is most effective when teachers take into account the differences in learners (2003). However, before we address the diversity of learners, there is an overriding question about whether teaching adults is any different to teaching children or whether it should be different.

In looking at various adult education literature, the answer is not entirely clear. While adults are perceived to be more self-directing, more responsible and more motivated to learn, than children, the use of directive teaching is still needed for both adults and children (Gorham, 1985, cited in Imel, 1989). However the amount of directive teaching could be less with adults because they are considered more disciplined than children.

Adults have higher cognitive abilities than children. Their learning is based on prior experience and pre-established beliefs. If adults are to learn, the teaching and the assessments should be at a level that stimulates their cognitive processes. APA's Learner-Centered Psychological Principles points out that assessment questions for adults ought to be more problem based to promote critical thinking and intrinsic motivation to learn when compared to assessments for children (2003). So as per Knowles's Andragogical Model the learning process for adults is learner-focused (1975). In the pedagogical model for children however, it is more teacher focused because the teachers control the learning process by

making decisions for them i.e. by telling them what to learn, how to learn and when to learn, as children are not at a stage where they can make good decisions for themselves. So the adult teaching is perceived to be different from children teaching. However, one could argue that whether we are dealing with adults or children, the learning process and the teaching is based on their cognitive capacity to learn at their age. So it is somewhat unfair to compare adult's learning with children's learning when we are clearly not 'comparing apples with apples'. We are also making generalisations about very diverse groups (i.e. adults and children), and the generalisations may not apply to everyone in the group.

Susan Imel argues that Knowles's andragogical approach does not necessarily use a different teaching style for adults, therefore is not convinced that adult learning is different to children's learning (1989, cited in Imel, 1995). Adult educators who do not believe their role is to help adults think critically, need not use the transformative approach (also known as the emancipatory adult learning) to teaching which promotes critical reflection (Imel, 1995). So to these educators, teaching adults and children would be similar. However, I must argue that if institutions want their qualifications to receive the recognition that it deserves in the market place, then they should take the responsibility to prepare their graduates to face the challenges in the real world by ensuring that adult learner's cognitive abilities are tested sufficiently. If adults have the capacity to think critically, then their cognitive abilities should be tested to ensure that they earn their qualifications and are ready to face the world. Furthermore, if adult educators do not believe their role is to help adults think critically, then where else can students go to learn how to think critically? Critical reflection is about having a dialogue with oneself and it is an iterative process that can lead to self-realisation and understanding. Brookfield (1995) points out that critical reflection is a

dimension of adult learning. Moving into this dimension is one way of keeping the course material challenging enough for an adult learner.

Cultural and Racial Perspective

Culture and race are variables that influence the diversity of adult learners. Culture varies across national boundaries and even differs between regions within a nation. It plays a significant role in shaping the beliefs and values of a person. It can be defined in several ways. Hofstede defines it as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (1997, p. 5).

In looking at diversity from a cultural perspective, Asian students are a good example to compare with Western students because Asian countries are well known for their cultural richness. The differences in language, customs, beliefs, values, economic and social needs, geographical location together with a whole range of other factors cohesively influence a learner.

From a racial perspective, Johnson-Bailey (2002) argues that in the teaching profession, race cannot be cast aside. According to the Cambridge dictionary, race is defined as a group of people with similar physical characteristics. While the definitions of culture and race are different, in my view race and culture are intertwined and they influence the learner’s learning styles based on traditions and cognitive capabilities. The learning styles help to meet the student’s learning needs. Curiosity driven by a need to know, serve as motivational factors to learning which in turn influence the learning style. So the learning styles go hand in hand with learning needs and therefore, cannot be discussed in isolation without considering the other.

Hodgson & Kambouri argue that three factors underpin the way adults learn – personal characteristics, motives for learning and the context in which they learn (1999). He discusses the term ‘characteristics’ at a personal and individual level. However, the way adults learn and how they behave in class could be underpinned at a much higher level such as from the cultural perspective of a community of people. Cultural characteristics of a race can underpin the way adults learn and how they behave in class.

Learning and teaching in Asia differ in their approaches to the Western world. Adult learning in Asia is very much subject oriented where the focus is on the accumulation of academic knowledge based on cognitive learning (Rogers, 2003). The students’ goal is to study the course content well and the educator’s role is to teach everything that the student is meant to know (Canton, 1994 cited in Imel, 1995). In the Western world, the focus is more on the practical application of knowledge where learning is based on experience gained. According to Rogers (2003), experiential learning is significant as it is equivalent to personal change and growth. Therefore the word ‘knowledgeable’ carries a different meaning between the two worlds. While there are differences in teaching and learning between different worlds, I believe teaching should not focus merely on transmitting information or helping students to pass a course. Tutors should go beyond this to provide guidance to help students see the underlying significance of what they have learnt, help them construct their own understanding and help them acquire the knowledge with a sense of responsibility so that they can apply the knowledge on their own elsewhere.

From a personal experience as a learner growing up in an Asian country, I was exposed to various cultures and beliefs and certainly at school, the classes were normally filled with students of various cultural backgrounds. There was a general expectation in society that

once high school is completed, students would pursue tertiary education one day. So the motivation to learn was high due to pressures from family and friends. Most adult learners aim to complete their tertiary education as full time learners before getting involved in “life phases and developmental stages” (e.g. getting married or starting a family) that could potentially get in the way of their education. (Cross, 1981).

‘Silence’ from students was pretty much considered as normal behaviour in the class. The teachers said what they needed to say and as questions from students were minimal, the teacher often called out to individual students and asked questions. It was uncommon to find students challenging their teachers or be outspoken in class. Questioning or challenging the teacher in class was considered disrespectful. I believe the reasons for this is tied strongly to the culture and beliefs of how they regard the ‘teacher’ who is considered an authority figure and questioning the teacher is seen as questioning the teacher’s capability and competence (Baker, 2002). The teaching strategies were oriented towards making sure the student knew all that they needed to know about a subject. It is therefore not surprising to see John Biggs (1999) mentioning that “students in Hong Kong expect their lecturers to teach them everything that they are expected to know”. Student-student interactions or teacher-student rapport are minimal while the class is in session. John Biggs has pointed out that Asian students are passive in class and rarely ask questions for fear of undermining the teacher’s authority (1999). As Hodgson & Kambouri point out, what adults know, think, feel and do is also related to the “extent to which they are prepared to change or learn at any particular time” (1999, p. 177). The Asian students’ regard for their teachers influence the extent to which they will participate in class. Active participation in class is something that Asian students are not comfortable with and this characterises many Asian educational systems.

The Asian learner's expectations of the educational system, their expectations of their tutors, their moral and ethical principles that govern the teacher-student relationship, and relevance of the course to their social and economic situations are some areas that can govern what students are prepared to do or not do in class.

Asian students are often labelled as passive in class. If teachers are culturally aware of their behaviour, they could anticipate questions or call out to students to check on their level of understanding. So to teach culturally diversified students, teachers need to be culturally responsive to their needs, so that they are able to draw students' interests in the best way possible. By understanding and being aware of the cultural differences, they are able to address and manage issues that arise from the differences. Cultural awareness helps to improve the teacher-student relationship and enhance the teaching performance.

In Western countries active participation and interaction in class is encouraged. It is not uncommon to see students challenging their tutors. Interaction is encouraged on discussion forums as much as possible to promote interactive learning through the exchange of information. So if New Zealand is to promote their educational programmes to other countries, an awareness of cultural differences is needed to ensure the expectations of overseas students are met. The teaching styles, the structure and style of assessments may need to be reviewed or adjusted accordingly. Otherwise, it would seem the students' learning styles are not taken into account when teaching the course.

Class Perspective

In reading Rata's article on 'Teachers and Socioeconomic Class in Education' (2001), class has some influence on students' achievements. However, it is difficult to determine class

differences among students in distance education and probably also in contact education (i.e. face-to-face classes). Often class is seen as a combination of social status, income levels and ethical values but judging someone by these factors can lead to poor judgement. Without probing deeply into a students' life and family background, it is difficult to determine a students' class. If a person's class is judged by income levels alone, then when income levels change, the social status in society changes as well, so does this mean the person's class changes too? Sometimes a person's class is judged by their behaviour. This is because depending on how exposed and familiar they are to academic conventions and social etiquette, there is some influence in the way they interact. Their level of professionalism emerges in their written communication. However, judging a learner by this factor alone would seem incorrect as their written communication could have been influenced by several other factors (such as their personal circumstances, their mood at the time, the state of their relationship with people around them, etc).

Those from the upper class have better access to resources, better living and learning conditions, therefore they are in a better position to be high achievers in education. The working class due to their poorer conditions may need to work harder to achieve the same standards. So their level of access to resources and learning conditions may have some influence to their learning styles.

Reflection on Personal Teaching

The principles of motivating and supporting learners in an online environment are really no different from those that apply in the classroom. According to APA's Learner-Centered Psychological Principles "what and how much students learn is influenced by motivation"

(2003). The most common motivational issue faced in a class is in trying to get all the students in the class to interact. While there may be many who interact freely, some may choose to remain quiet as an observer in the background. However they could be highly motivated, self-directing and high achievers who may prefer to learn on their own.

In Wlodkowski and Ginsberg's Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching (1995 cited in Wlodkowski, 1999), motivational strategies are provided to teach culturally diversified students. The *establishing inclusion* condition is believed to be vital for setting the scene and the ground rules for class discussions. It is about setting a learning atmosphere where learners and teachers feel respected and connected to one another. However, the model fails to illustrate the outcomes of it or how one would go about acquiring the qualities needed to practise the motivational conditions. To establish inclusion, it is useful for teachers to know the kind of students they are teaching. It is part of motivational planning that tutors could do to set the scene for a harmonious class atmosphere. While harmony is important, it is also equally important for learners to question and challenge one another in a stimulating learning environment. One approach would be to set a positive climate with some ground rules, to help establish the teacher-student relationship. For example, I could introduce myself and use my long name to add a bit of humour to help break the ice. I then invite students to introduce themselves so that everyone gets to know one another. I could provide some guidance about some of the things they may like to share with the rest of the class in their introductory message such as their professional interests, reasons for taking the course, what they were hoping to learn from the course and so on. As students introduce themselves one by one, I like to welcome them individually by personalising my reply based on their introductory message to help them feel welcomed.

When setting the ground rules it is useful to highlight the importance of interaction and the difference between a discussion forum and a 'question and answer' forum. The tutor need not necessarily answer questions raised in a discussion forum. They are open to anyone who may wish to step in to exchange their thoughts, as opposed to a 'question and answer' forum where questions are directed to a person whose responsibility is to answer the questions. This is to help promote interactions and help them understand the environment.

I explain my position as a tutor and try to give them the assurance that I am there to clear any doubts they may have and to help them move forward, so they should not hold back on their questions. Empowering them to feel free about sharing their ideas and thoughts and to even form a study group with those who may live close to each other would be helpful. With distance education, being organised and having good time management skills is important. Most of all I like to emphasize the importance of perseverance as they go through the course material.

According to Wlodkowski, when students participate highly in class, they usually tend to be highly motivated (1998). However, according to John Biggs when students are passive in class, it does not necessarily mean that they are not motivated because success can be attributed to increased effort or having the ability to succeed (1999). While Asian students are known for their passivity in class, they generally perform well in courses through their increased efforts. Students may be quiet or hold back their questions due to various reasons such as shyness, lack of courage to ask questions for fear of looking stupid in front of the teacher or fellow students, fear of losing marks in case questions end up being offensive to the teacher, truly experiencing difficulty but prefer to stay quiet to save the embarrassment, and so on. So a teacher should not wait for students to ask questions. Instead they should

intervene and provide the necessary direction if they see students fumbling around looking for answers. In distance learning this could be picked up through their message postings on the forum or simply through their silence. Tutors often may need to follow up on 'silence' by contacting them through the telephone or e-mail. So it is useful for teachers to pre-empt questions or have sufficient insight to understand students' needs and know when to be directive or to take the initiative to guide students accordingly.

As a course leader for the Electronic Commerce course at the Open Polytechnic Of New Zealand, I find the adult learners in my class come from all walks of life. The course is a business management paper for a degree and diploma programme. The course aims to prepare students for future business management roles with regard to online businesses. The adult learners in the class are either from a business background or from an Information Technology (IT) background. Many of them already have business management roles in their workplace but they enrol in the course to seek a formal qualification and to learn more about the subject. Those from a technical IT background on the other hand are interested in gaining some business knowledge to support their technical background.

In reflecting on the level of participation students placed on the discussion forum, I found it was reasonably vigorous. Those from a business background tend to discuss business aspects of the course and those from an IT background liked to include aspects of e-commerce technology in their discussions. It was interesting to note that their level of participation increased closer to the assessment due dates especially in terms of trying to clarify what was expected of them. Students exchanged their views openly and even helped one another. Their increased participation during assessment periods could simply refer to time management issues on the learner's part or signs of desperation to complete the

assessments in time. It also appeared that most of these interactions were over the weekend which reflects their busy state of life as adult learners. In order to avoid similar events from recurring, I believe regular weekly communication in a form of a newsletter via e-mail with some guidance on what is expected of the assessment and tips about how to manage their time and workload would be useful for the students. This helps to clarify any possible doubts in the weeks prior to the assessment due dates. It also ensures that students are kept up to date in case they do not access the discussion forum regularly.

Gender & Ethnic perspective

Below are some supporting statistics showing the students' level of participation with respect to their gender and ethnic origin for the Electronic Commerce course during Semester 3, 2002 and Semester 1, 2003. For privacy reasons, the students' names have been suppressed. The course was first launched in Semester 3, 2002. The course started with 5 students (refer to Table 1 below) with slightly higher proportion of males to females. Since then the size of the class has grown. New Zealanders were a minority.

Table 1 Statistics of students in Semester 3, 2002 based on gender, ethnic origin and forum participation

Students	Male/Female	Ethnic origin	No. of interactions
Student 1	Male	Indian	1
Student 2	Female	New Zealander	14
Student 3	Male	Chinese	4
Student 4	Male	Indian	10
Student 5	Female	New Zealander	1
TOTAL	2 Females 3 Males	2 NZers 5 Other	30

Source: *Open Mind Online, 2003*

Student 2, a female New Zealander appeared to show the highest level of participation on the forum. Her motivation to achieve a good grade was high in the class and this was reflected in her interactions. Her background was business management supported with

technical IT experience. The fact that a female New Zealander achieved the highest level of participation and grade for the semester contradicts Flannery & Hayes's view of Western, middle-class, white masculinist being strongest in self-direction and autonomy (2001). Judging from the level of participation on the forum, there does not appear to be any pattern linking the number of interactions to gender or ethnic origin. For example, the level of participations between the two Indians or between the two New Zealanders show vast differences, which show how misleading generalisations about race, culture and gender can be.

In looking at Semester 1, 2003's statistics, the proportion of gender mix again showed a slightly higher number of males to females (47% males versus 43% females). Majority of the adult learners were of New Zealand origin. The proportion of culturally diversified students made up about 29% of the class. Student Q, a male Yugoslavian showed the highest number of interactions on the forum. He had a strong motivation to excel in his work and to achieve the highest mark for each of his assessments. His learning goal was strong and clear. As Wlodkowski points out, the student's expectancy to succeed cannot be detracted if they understand what they are to learn (1998). While he did not succeed in achieving the highest score for all his assessments, he did achieve first rank with his overall grade in the class. Other students with a reasonably high level of participation were Students B, F, I and N who were New Zealanders.

Table 2 Statistics of students in Semester 1, 2003 based on gender, ethnic origin and forum participation

Students	Male/Female	Ethnic origin	No. of interactions
Student A	Female	New Zealander	4
Student B	Male	New Zealander	14
Student C	Male	Indian	0
Student D	Male	Indian	1
Student E	Female	New Zealander	1
Student F	Female	New Zealander	28
Student G	Female	New Zealander	0
Student H	Male	New Zealander	6
Student I	Female	New Zealander	13
Student J	Male	New Zealander	2
Student K	Male	Chinese	7
Student L	Female	New Zealander	0
Student M	Female	New Zealander	1
Student N	Male	New Zealander	23
Student O	Male	New Zealander	0
Student P	Male	New Zealander	0
Student Q	Male	Yugoslavian	36
Student R	Female	New Zealander	3
Student S	Female	Chinese	3
Student T	Male	New Zealander	0
Student U	Male	New Zealander	4
TOTAL	9 Females 12 Males	16 NZers 5 Other	179

Source: *Open Mind Online*, 2003

Student I achieved the lowest overall grade in the class. In looking at her level of participation, it clearly shows it is not the lowest, so as per Wlodkowski's view that highly participating students are highly motivated (1998), she would be considered as reasonably motivated. If she was more motivated than those who hardly participated, then how come her grade was the lowest in the class? It appears the level of participation on the forum reflects the level of motivation but it does not necessarily mean that the learning has taken place effectively, since Student I received the lowest grade. For those who hardly participated or who showed a low level of participation, it would seem that they were not motivated as per Wlodkowski's view. However, it appears they were motivated enough or made sufficient effort to achieve a grade that was above Student I's grade. So while there

was passivity in the class, students were still motivated to learn. The statistics also show that some New Zealanders have been more passive than the Asian students. So John Biggs's view of Asian students being passive in the class is debatable as there have been several Westerners with less number of interactions than the Asian students.

Rogers points out (1996) that adult learners have their own patterns of learning. Those who interacted actively appeared to be confident with their level of knowledge and were happy to raise questions when in doubt. They were bright, challenging and had a strong drive to succeed to meet their learning needs. This notion is on par with Rogers's general characteristic of adult-learners that they "... come to education with intentions" and truly demonstrate their ability to be self-directing (1996, p. 60). This applied to both male and female adult learners and the gender diversity did not appear to show a strong influence in the level of participation. In fact mixed results were seen where both male and female students were seen to be active as well as passive in their participation levels. So generalisations about gender and cultural groups can be misleading, as there are always exceptions. As an overall observation, participation from male adult learners was higher than female adult learners (although four of the males did not participate at all).

As plans for future improvement, for those who achieved low grades in assessments, it would be useful to touch base with them personally over the phone and offer tips and approaches that they could use to improve their learning. It would also be useful to inform them how many marks they ought to aim for in order to complete their course especially if they are on a borderline to passing the course.

A teachers' attitude towards students have a significant impact on the learner as far as motivation is concerned (Wlodkowski, 1998). As a learner, I have found that having a

teacher who is approachable and who believed in my capabilities was certainly encouraging. According to APA (2003), the degree of whether a class environment is nurturing or not plays a significant impact on a student's learning. Knowing how to treat students well as individuals without undermining or patronising them helps with the retention and completion rates of students for a course. It also stops them from taking a surface approach to learning (Biggs, 1999) and helps them engage more openly in class discussions thus contributing to the harmony of the class atmosphere. It is about working democratically with students and being "at-one-ness" with them (Brookfield, 1995). So it is to the best interest of the tutor as well as the institution to ensure students feel accepted as individuals regardless of their race, culture, ethnicity, age, class and background and be acknowledged for the effort they put into their courses. Gay (2000) believes that teaching should be responsive to the learner's culture for it to be effective.

The approach that best describes my teaching practice is a combination of Biggs's perspective of *teaching as accommodation* and *teaching as education* (1999). I have found that by taking steps to understand the diversity of learners in the class, it helped me to be more accommodating as a tutor. For example, spending some time reviewing students' profiles in the beginning of the semester helped me to understand the diversity of students in the class and to have a general feeling about the kind of questions I could anticipate from them. Students ought to feel that their tutors do genuinely want to educate them and are not there merely to transmit the course material for the sake of teaching but to ensure that they receive the sustenance from it and achieve their goals.

While every tutor has his or her style of teaching, I feel it is important that the spirituality of the teacher shines through in the teaching. This does not necessarily mean the tutor has to

discuss spirituality as a subject directly but can balance the “intellectual and emotional components of learning” by sharing feelings and thoughts with the learner (Rogers, 2003). This helps to promote experiential learning and help students relate to the tutor more as a human. It also serves to provide an emotional experience through *affect* as an intrinsic motivator (Wlodkowski, 1998). It is a way of enhancing the learner’s educational experience through a transformative approach by enabling learners to relate to the course through real life’s experiences. In order to do this effectively, I have found that judging the course content as a student and teaching it the way I would like to be taught helps. However, understanding that others may prefer to be taught in different ways is needed also. I believe the best people to judge the course content are the students and it is useful to capture their thoughts and feelings about the course. It also helps me to self-reflect and judge myself as a tutor. As Brookfield (1995) points out, critical self-reflection is crucial for a teacher’s survival.

In distance education, while the students are “adults by definition” (Rogers, 1966, p. 60), their messages need not necessarily reflect the maturity that would normally be expected of their age. In my view, the very word ‘student’ places an image of a younger person when compared to the word ‘adult learner’. Hence it is quite easy to forget that we are teaching adult learners as we interact with them on the discussion forums because students are not visible to the tutors. Tutors could reply to students as if they are addressing a younger person. Therefore in distance learning, it is important that tutors remain consciously aware that they are dealing with adult learners and perceive students’ needs through their written communication. This has been a revealing personal experience of mine when a student argued about the correctness of his work and that he had answered what was expected of

him in the assessment. His e-mail message was worded in a child-like manner insisting that his answers could also be accepted. While his answer was acceptable, another supporting element to his answer was also needed which was not provided. Nevertheless, upon checking his student profile later, it was found that he was significantly older than the rest of the class and that his argument did not match the maturity expected of his age. So rather than thinking of ourselves as '*tutors teaching students*' it may be useful to think of oneself as an '*educator working with adult learners*'. This puts a slightly different perspective in our minds with regard to how we treat our adult learners. If we always worked from this perspective our practice should be more appropriate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while there are several theories and practices to address the diversity of adult learners, the teaching and learning experience is enhanced when tutors are able to understand the diversity of learners and are able to connect with them. It is about teaching from the heart and from the mind (Wlodkowski, 1998).

So while it is important to acknowledge and be aware of the diversity of learners from various perspectives such as culture, race, ethnicity, gender, class and age, it is equally important to also realise that under all these differences lie similarities of simply being a human. If we can tap into this consciousness and look beyond the differences and maintain a neutral communication, it could help facilitate the building of teacher-student relationships with our diverse students.

The learners must feel the passion of the tutors wanting to educate them. The joy and enthusiasm in learning is experienced when tutors are not only able to teach academically

but go beyond the realms of the educational curriculum to provide sustenance and surplus knowledge about the meaning of what they have learnt.

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