

# Over-50 returning adult learners: another neglected species?

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# ToC

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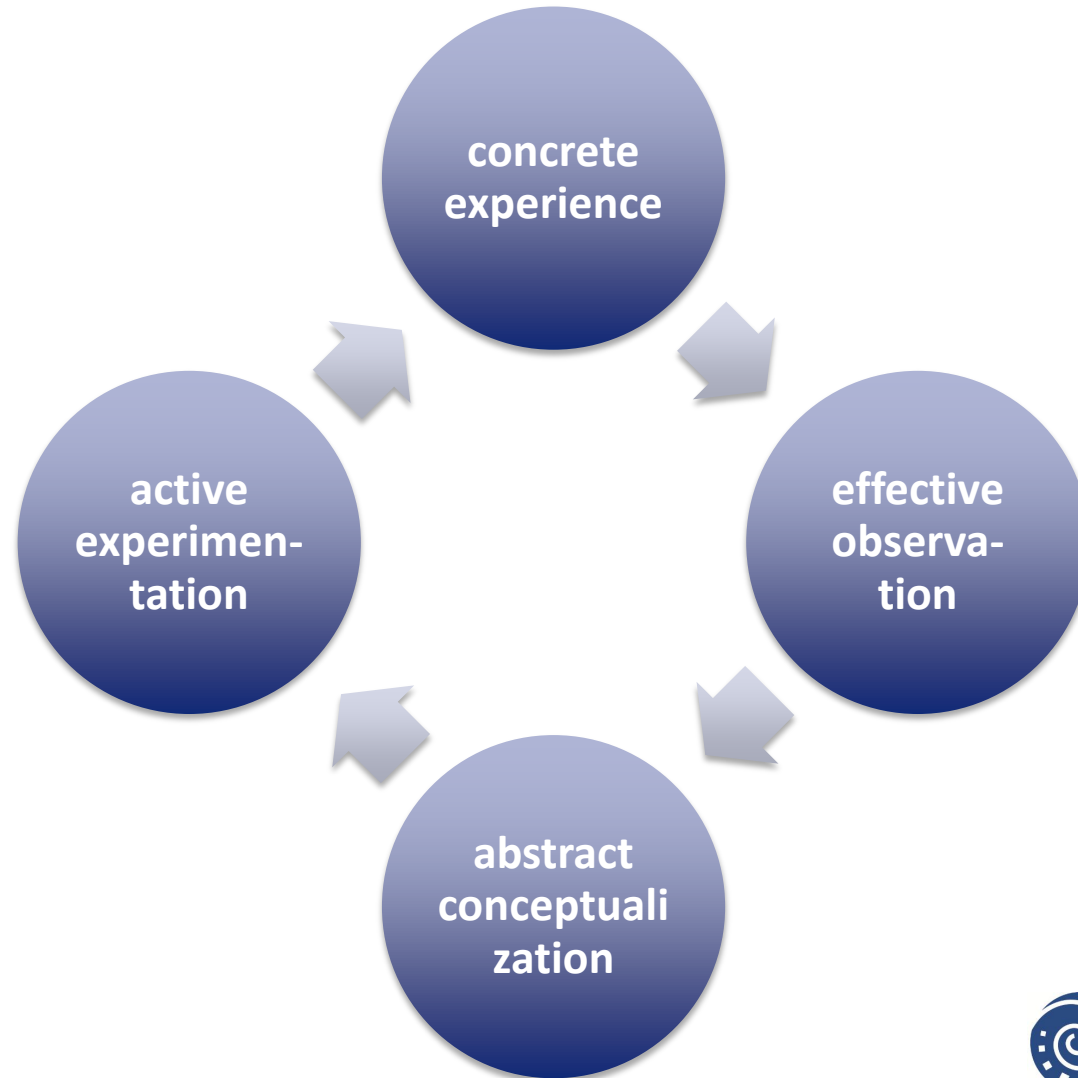
# 1. Introduction

- Knowles (1974) 4 key-assumptions
  - **Self-directed learning.**  
Adults tend to be more self-directed as a result of their maturity: adults prefer self-direction, autonomy in learning.
  - **Experienced-based learning.**  
Adults possess a “*reservoir of experience*” that can serve as a resource of experiential learning and upon which new learning can be applied.
  - **Application-targeted learning.**  
*“As a person matures his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles.”*
  - **‘Ready made’ learning.**  
*“As a person matures his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness.”*



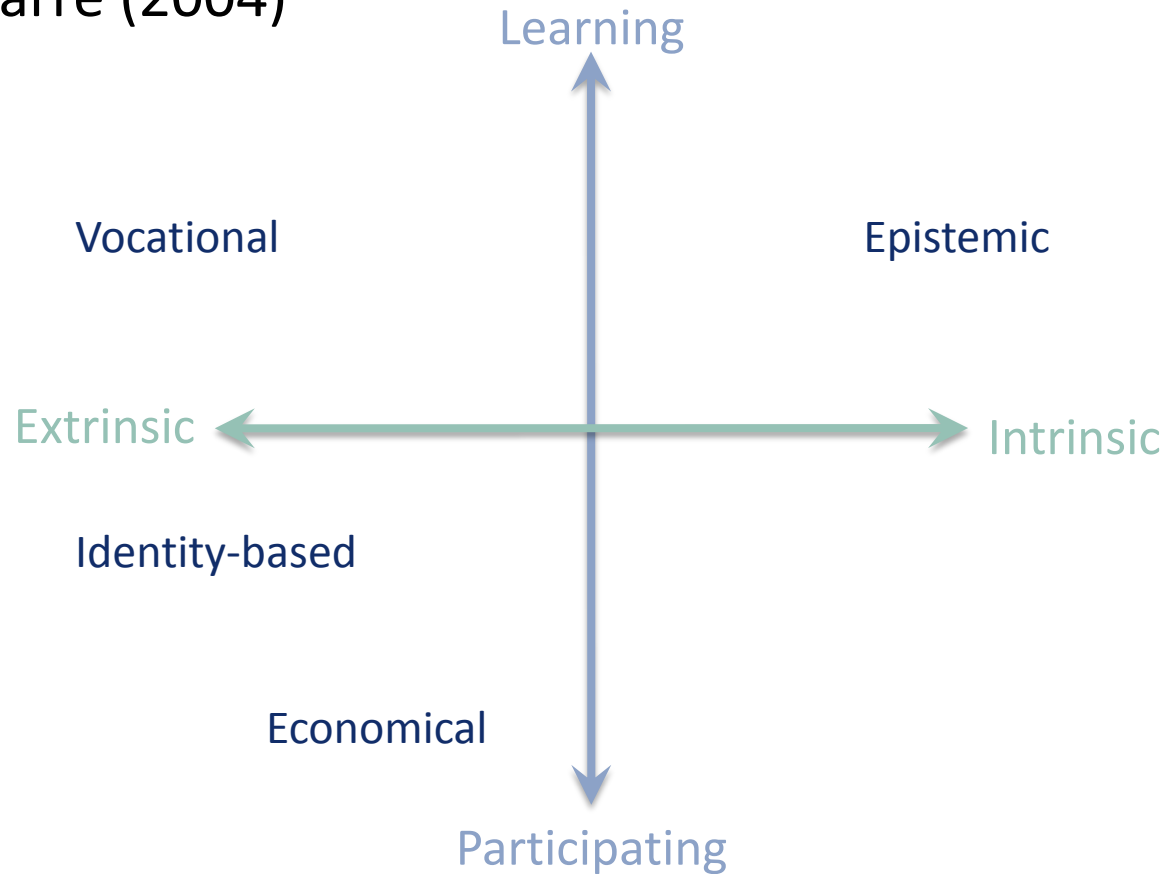
# 1. Introduction

- Kolb (1974) learning cycle



# 1. Introduction

- Adult learner's motivations: a model inspired by Carré (2004)



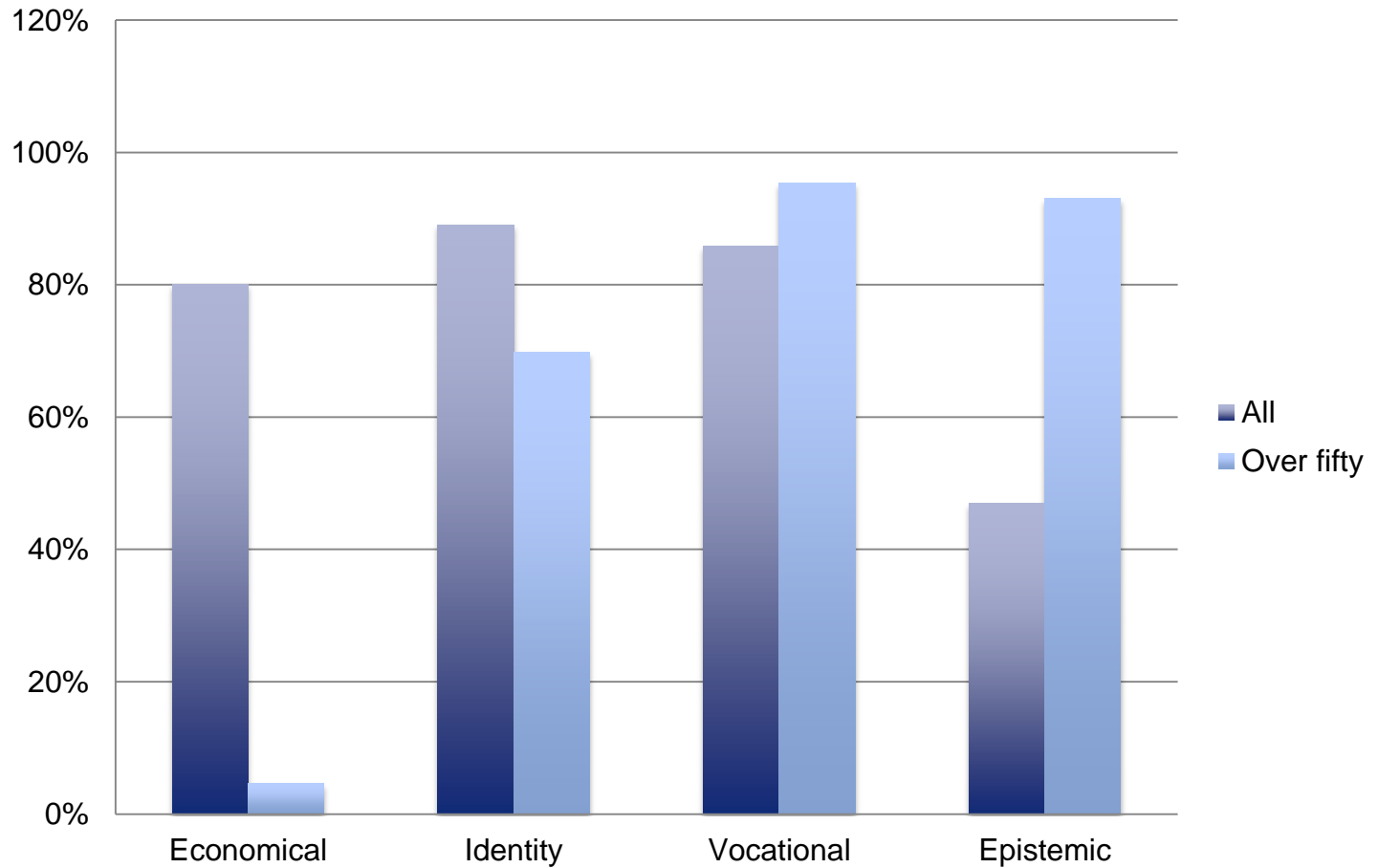


## 2. Initial goals, methodology, sample

- Do the most experienced returning adult learners (RAL) had better chances of success and graduation than the other ones?
- Sample :
  - 43 over-fifty returning adult learners (OFRAL) admitted through recognition of prior learning – almost the entire population
- Corpus :
  - the cover letters of the candidates' admission files.
  - semi-directive interview each year after their admission (i.e. 72 interviews).

# 3. OFRAL motivations

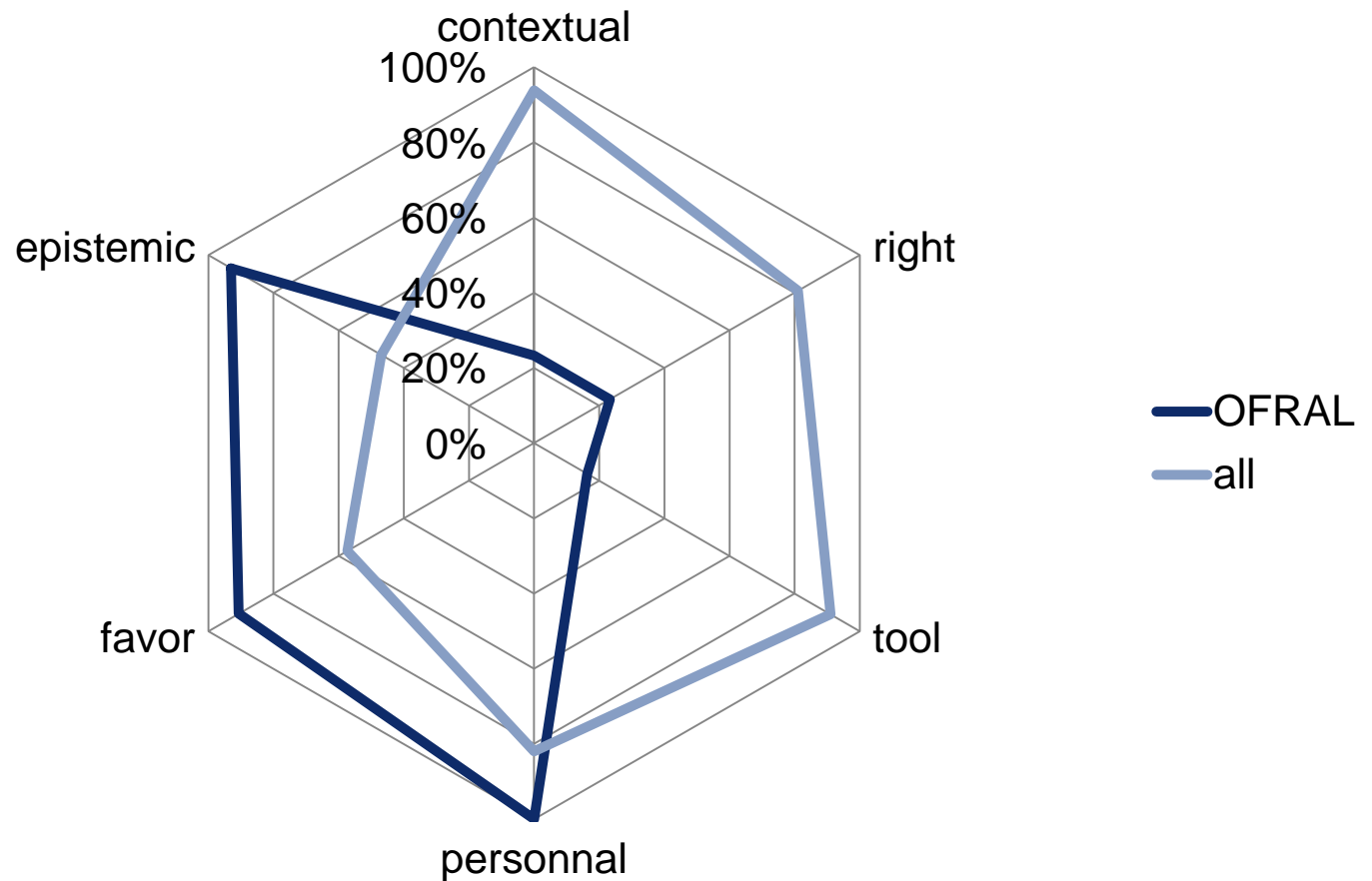
Comparison of motivations -  
All vs OFRAL - Model 1





# 3. OFRAL motivations

## Comparison of motivations - All versus OFRAL - Model 2





# 3. OFRAL motivations

- Specific motivations:
  - *1. Sharing knowledge*  
“I had an excellent professional career. But now that I am near to the end of that long, rich career, I want to learn how to share the knowledge I gained from my experience.”  
(Benoît, 55 y.o.)
  - *2. (Finally) doing something for himself/herself*  
“My life is really full of great achievements: I had wonderful children – they are quite old now, I had a good job. But I never thought about myself. I never allowed myself to ask the question “What do I want to do with my life?” Now it’s the time to think about me.” (Marie, 54 y.o.)
  - *3. An occupation after retiring from the professional world*  
“I am now retiring from my job. So, I must find something to do, to occupy my days. Now it is the time for me to study: I wanted this dream to come true, it is now or never... Don’t you think?” (Mohamed, 60 y.o.)



## 4. OFRAL & Life history: how to describe complexity ?

- Linearization effect: cross-interaction of experience
  - “At the age of 40, I came back to my first passions – art and literature. I resigned suddenly from my job as a firm executive and opened a gallery. I however used all my knowledge in the field of entrepreneurship and my love for art to set up this project” (Claire, 59 y.o.)
- Cause-consequence scheme
  - Causes = multivariate compounds



## 4. OFRAL & Life history: how to describe complexity ?

- An example :
  - “I was really a bad student: I was not at all able to follow university courses, I did not have the required skills, so I left the university after only 4 months and I began to work. (...) As a consequence of my lack of diploma, it was impossible to obtain a better job position, so I decided to quit and I was hired by another firm, and after a few years, I finally had a promotion even though I did not own the right ‘paper’.” (André, 65 y.o.)





## 4. OFRAL & Life history: how to describe complexity ?

- Why this story should be considered with great care
  - 1. Contextual, historical dimension
  - 2. Ex-post analysis and the tendency to explain things that happen by an underlying ‘intention’
- Biographical illusion (Bourdieu, 1994)
  - if you want to understand the trajectory of a passenger of the subway, you should not only list the different stations that he crossed: you should necessarily consider the structure, the map of the subway lines.

# 5. OFRAL expectations towards university courses

- Building ‘a network of knowledge’
  - “I have the impression that I knew a lot of things, in specialized, specific domains. But I was not able to put all those small bits into a big picture. It is like collecting all the pieces of the puzzle but not being able to put all those pieces together: it is totally meaningless.”  
(Bruno, 53 y.o. - 2009)
  - “Now I have the feeling that I’m beginning to understand some underlying, basic theories. And well... it makes sense with my own bits of experience.”  
(Bruno, 54 y.o. - 2010)
  - “I have the feeling that the courses helps to find a structure, a way to “organise” our knowledge on a backbone. I had the flesh, not the bones.”  
(Michèle, 59 y.o.)

# 5. OFRAL expectations towards university courses

- Humboldtian approach!
  - “The fact that we are put in contact with the research activities of the professors is a way to develop our own conception of the disciplinary field. I think that in a way, we are slowly becoming researchers, too.” (Jean, 62 y.o.)
- Applications = testing criterion, not a goal
  - “My experience is a good way to challenge my professor when he gives us his theoretical explanations. But I also have the feeling that the things he explains are much more general, much more complex. It allows me to enlarge my ways of thinking.” (Luc, 57 y.o.)
  - “I am in search of a broader point of view than my own experience.” (Hélène, 56 y.o.)





## 5. OFRAL expectations towards university courses

- Pleasure of learning...
  - “I really do not care for my final note; what really matters is my understanding of the courses. But when I told that exact same phrase to a professor, he shouted at me, telling me that I was disrespectful.” (Jérôme, 52 y. o.)
- Stresses can occur between OFRAL’s dedication to learning and the institutional rites (exams)

# 6. Conclusions

- We showed
  - that OFRAL have specific motivations,
  - that the tools developed to evaluate their experience are particularly inadequate in their case because they imply important bias
  - that OFRAL have specific expectancies towards the university. It is immediate that those expectancies do not respond to Knowles' definition of the "returning adult learner".
- We can therefore state that the over-fifty adult learners constitute *another* neglected species.

# 6. Conclusions

- For those specific students, the role of the adult education could be **building a network** of the concepts they learned from their experience.
  - The OFRAL motivations are really coherent with the university traditions and codes, but their high level of expectations can imply stresses with the professors (or the other students).
- *The universities should once again undergo an important institutional transformation to widen the participation of those students.*