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

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

- Economical
- Identity
- Vocational
- Epistemic

- All
- Over fifty
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.*