

***One Program, Two Pathways:
The Transformative Learning Journeys of 2 Adult Learners in Graduate School***

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Abstract

This paper documents the transformative learning of 2 working women adult learners who returned to higher education for the Master of Education (Teaching and Learning). This graduate degree offers two different teaching and learning pathway; the traditional pathway comprising on-campus classes with 11 modules to complete and the APEL Q pathway which requires learners to complete 4 instruments instead of the 11 modules. Learners do not attend physical classes and are assigned an Advisor each who will guide the learners throughout their entire academic journey. To understand how adults learn, Knowles's (1984) Andragogy framework and Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning provide the conceptual framework. The Andragogy framework proposed a set of five assumptions i.e. the learner's making personal decisions, life experiences, readiness, orientation, and motivation to learn explains the learners' intentions for further study while Mezirow's (2000) definition of transformative learning enlightens on how both learners acquired new perspectives which lead to understanding the changes in events. Narrative inquiry was used as the research approach with questionnaire and interviews as data to answer three research questions; what are the experiences of working adult who return to school, have these experiences transformed their lives and does the program structure make a difference in the learning journey? Results reported positive outcomes from the emotional, professional, social, and even physical aspects since completion of the graduate program.

Keywords: Transformative Learning, Adult Learners, Graduate School

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Introduction

This paper presents a detailed examination of the transformative learning experiences of two working women who returned to higher education to pursue the Master of Education (Teaching and Learning) degree in a Malaysian private university in. The graduate program offers two pathways: a traditional on-campus route that involves 11 modules, and the APEL Q (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) route, which allows learners to complete four instruments rather than attending physical classes. This study investigates how both adult learners navigated their educational journey and what transformations they experienced in the process.

The theoretical frameworks that underpin this study were Knowles's (1984) *Andragogy* and Mezirow's (2000) *Transformative Learning Theory*. These frameworks offer a comprehensive understanding of how adults learn and change through when they decide to go back to school after a long period of absence due to work, family and other personal commitments. Through the narrative inquiry approach which comprised a set of questions for the participants to reflect on before the lengthy interview of 2.5 hours, this paper explores the learners' experiences, the impact of the program structure, and how their educational journey transformed their lives, both personally and professionally. The findings reveal significant emotional, professional, social, and physical changes in the learners' lives after completing the program.

The Context: A Dual Pathway Graduate Program

The Master of Education (Teaching and Learning) in a Malaysian private institution of higher learning, offers adult learners two distinct pathways for completing their degree: the traditional pathway and the APEL Q pathway. The traditional pathway is held during the weekends and is an on-campus, modular system, requiring students to attend classes and complete 11 modules. In contrast, the APEL Q pathway is designed for adult learners with at least 20 years of prior work experience and relevant qualifications. Instead of attending physical classes, learners in this pathway are required to complete four comprehensive assessment instruments.; Portfolio, Field Validation Visit, Challenge Test and the Capstone Project. For the APEL Q program, each learner is assigned an academic advisor who provides guidance throughout the program, ensuring that their learning is both self-directed and tailored to their individual experiences, 2 assessors (internal and external) and a moderator who ensures the validity and reliability of the assessments.

Both routes allow for working adults, who often have professional and personal commitments, the flexibility to pursue higher education while continuing their careers and managing other responsibilities. For the two learners in this study, both routes provided an opportunity to reflect on and integrate their professional experiences into their academic learning. Three research questions guide this study; what are the experiences of working adults who return to higher education, how have these experiences transformed their lives and does the program structure (traditional vs. APEL Q) make a difference in the learning journey.

Theoretical Frameworks: Andragogy and Transformative Learning

To understand the learning experiences of these adult learners, the study is grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: *Andragogy* (Knowles, 1984) and *Transformative Learning* (Mezirow, 2000).

Knowles' (1984) Andragogy emphasizes that adults learn differently from children and identifies five key assumptions about adult learners:

1. **Self-Concept:** Adults prefer to be self-directed in their learning and are accountable for making decisions about their education which include the route of their studies and the strategies they use to achieve learning goals.
2. **Life Experience:** Adults learners bring a wealth of life experiences to the learning process which in turn, enhances their understanding and affords a valuable basis for learning.
3. **Readiness to Learn:** Adults learners are driven to learn when they see the learning as relevant to their life or career and are more likely to participate in learning that is relatable to their lives.
4. **Orientation to Learning:** Adult learners tend to focus on problem-solving and real-world applications of knowledge. They seek learning that helps them address specific challenges in their professional and personal lives.
5. **Motivation:** Adults learners are motivated primarily by internal factors, such as the desire for personal growth or career advancement, rather than external rewards.

In the case of the two learners in this study, both demonstrated high levels of self-direction, bringing their life experiences into their learning process. Their readiness to learn was driven by the desire to enhance their professional competences, and their motivation to complete the program was entrenched in a commitment to self-improvement and career progression as noted in the interview when one mentioned that "*I decided to give it a try because I was thinking why not challenge myself to do something.*" and "*one of the main reason (to do this) is I want to upscale myself.*"

Transformative Learning, as defined by Mezirow, involves a process of critical reflection that leads to a shift in perspective. Mezirow (2000) argues that transformative learning occurs when individuals critically examine their beliefs, assumptions, and understanding of the world, often resulting in a profound change in how they perceive themselves and their environments. This process involves the following stages:

1. **Disorienting Dilemma:** Learners face an experience that challenges their existing worldview.
2. **Critical Reflection:** Learners engage in reflection, questioning their prior assumptions and beliefs.
3. **Perspective Transformation:** As a result of critical reflection, learners adopt new ways of thinking and understanding.

For the two learners in this study, their return to education highlighted the disorienting dilemma(s) that challenged their current professional and personal identities for example, how they learnt in the past and their teaching and classroom management in the present. One learner mentioned "*main reason for taking the program is really to answer questions for myself from my younger colleagues and it's good to probably hear about different ways to doing things.*" These experiences allowed them to reflect on their teaching practices, professional roles, and approaches to learning. Through this process of reflection, they both

experienced a perspective transformation, which led them to re-evaluate their pedagogical practices and consider alternate approaches to teaching and learning.

Research Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

The study employed narrative inquiry as its research approach. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative method that emphasizes understanding individuals' lived experiences through storytelling. This approach was particularly suited to capturing the transformative learning journeys of adult learners, as it allowed the researchers to explore the personal narratives of the participants in depth.

The participants comprised Shean, a mother of two who is in her early 50s. She obtained her undergraduate degree in Canada and works in an organization that organises team building sessions for corporate organisations. Once a week, she teaches English in a private tuition centre. Shean underwent the conventional program. Kris, who is also in her early 50s, received her Diploma in Early Childhood a few years ago, and was trained as a music teacher. Her hobbies include travelling and she is also an art and craft enthusiast. Kris is the owner and Principal of an Early Childhood Centre and she undertook the APEL Q route.

Data was collected through a in-depth interview which comprised a 185-page transcript with the two learners. The research sought to answer three central questions:

1. What are the experiences of working adults who return to school?
2. How have these experiences transformed their lives?
3. Does the program structure make a difference in the learning journey?

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant transformations that occurred in the emotional, professional, social, and physical aspects of the learners' lives after completing the graduate program.

Emotional Transformation: Both learners reported a sense of pride and fulfilment from overcoming the challenges of balancing work, family, and study. The emotional satisfaction of completing a graduate program despite these challenges was apparent when one of them mentioned that she “*never knew I had done so much in the past, and I am proud of what I have achieved.*”

Professional Transformation: Professionally, both learners experienced substantial growth. They reported feeling more competent and confident in their teaching roles. Through the program, they were exposed to new pedagogical strategies and invaluable insights, which they were able to integrate into their teaching practices. For example, one of them mentioned that she has “*become so much more confident in my work place...the past traumatic incident that took place which I was doing this... and how I managed to overcome all of it...while struggling with the project (capstone)....*” The other learner was excited because she learnt new ways to teach, “*experimenting on my students on when I learned about flip learning from Dr XXX ... what was this flip learning? I tested that even on my students and WOW, it works.*” She continues to be current in her teaching and says *I'm still experimenting up to today and that that really drives me, I have to say.*”

This led to a shift in their professional identity, as they saw themselves not just as educators, but as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners.

Social Transformation: Socially, the learners noted the importance of building connections with peers and mentors throughout the program, although this was more apparent for the learner in the conventional route who mentioned that she reminded herself that she has to be “*really very conscious about every decision I make in group projects*”. Additionally, the opportunity to collaborate with others helped her expand her professional networks and gain a sense of community.

Physical Transformation: Although the program was intellectually stimulating, it also brought physical challenges. The learners had to balance demanding work schedules, family responsibilities, and academic commitments, for example one learner mentioned that she and her peers would “*meet at like 11:00 PM to 12 midnight ...only then we can work because some mums put their kids to sleep at 12 midnight, you know?*” Additionally, the flexibility of the APEL Q pathway allowed one learner to manage these challenges more effectively, and both learners reported that the program's structure made it possible for them to succeed without significant physical or emotional burnout.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the transformative potential of adult education programs like the Master of Education (Teaching and Learning) that offer flexible learning pathways, such as the APEL Q route. The use of Knowles's Andragogy and Mezirow's Transformative Learning theories provides a useful framework for understanding the motivations, experiences, and outcomes of adult learners in this context. The learners in this study experienced significant emotional, professional, social, and physical transformations, all of which were made possible by the program's structure and the opportunity to engage in self-directed, reflective learning.

Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of providing adult learners with flexible, relevant, and supportive learning environments that cater to their unique needs and life experiences. By doing so, higher education institutions can foster transformative learning that positively impacts both the personal and professional lives of adult learners.

References

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