

Navigating Experiential Learning: A Case Study of Adult Learners in the APEL Q Assessment Process

Jennifer Tan, HELP University, Malaysia

The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

There are many pathways for working adults to return to school to continue to pursue formal academic degrees; one such program is the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning for Qualifications (APEL Q) which assesses adult learners based on their experiential knowledge rather than traditional coursework. Some distinct characteristics of this program, unlike other conventional ones, include no classes to take, no lecturers to refer to and no peers to share the learning journey with. This program thus opens a different pathway to academia and provides opportunities to those who can work independently. For APEL Q, assessments comprise 4 assessment instruments – a portfolio, workplace visits, a challenge test comprising five essays, and a capstone research paper to meet program learning outcomes. Grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, this qualitative case study investigates 3 adult learners' strategies, challenges, and adaptations in navigating the program as they work towards completing the 4 main assessment instruments. Data collection includes in-depth interviews and document analysis of communication. Thematic analysis is employed to identify key patterns in learning experiences. Findings show that adult learners leverage on their prior knowledge and lived experiences when they engage with competency-based assessments. Additionally, they face personal and work-related challenges while demonstrating their learning.

Keywords: APEL Q, adult learning, experiential learning, transformative learning

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The recognition of experiential learning has recently become increasingly popular in higher education, particularly for adult learners with extensive professional experience and seek academic credentials but may not be able to enrol due to lack in specific criteria for enrolment. In Malaysia, the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning for Qualification (APEL Q), introduced by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency, provides an alternative pathway for individuals to obtain academic qualifications based on prior learning and this has opened doors for many adult learners to continue pursuit further education.

The Master of Education (Teaching and Learning) programme at a Malaysian private higher education institution offers adult learners two pathways to degree completion: a conventional route and the APEL Q pathway. While the former route follows a weekend, on-campus modular format, requiring students to attend classes and complete 11 modules, the APEL Q pathway is tailored for experienced adult learners with a minimum of 20 years of relevant professional experience. Instead of attending formal classes, learners complete four assessment instruments: a portfolio, a field validation visit, a challenge test, and a capstone project. Each learner is supported by an academic advisor who provides ongoing guidance, while the assessment process is overseen by two assessors (internal and external) and a moderator to ensure validity and reliability. This pathway eliminates the need for the conventional coursework and physical attendance and instead emphasises assessment-driven learning supported by an academic team of four.

This study explores how adult learners navigate this pathway. It addresses three research questions:

1. What strategies do learners use when attempting the assessment instruments?
2. What challenges do they face during the process?
3. How do they adapt their learning approaches to meet the programme requirements?

Theoretical Framework

Data derived from this study will be analysed through two theories; Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (2014) which conceptualises learning as a cyclical process involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (2000) which emphasises critical reflection and the transformation of meaning perspectives. Through reflective processes, learners reassess their assumptions, leading to shifts in their understanding and professional practice. Together, these two theories provide a structured framework to examine how adult learners adapt experiential knowledge into their academic learning and in that duration of study, undergo personal transformation in areas of their lives.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, focusing on participants lived experiences and personal meaning-making processes. Narrative inquiry is preferred for this study because it focusses on understanding individuals lived experiences through storytelling. This approach was particularly suited to capturing the transformative learning journeys of adult learners, as it allowed the researcher to explore the personal narratives of the participants in depth. Data were collected through lengthy interview sessions lasting over 2 hours per session. Pre interview questions were sent in advance to pre-empt the participants on the discussion

topics. Besides the interviews, emails and other forms of written communication were included for trustworthiness of findings.

Participants

Three female adult learners in their mid-50s participated in the study. All were experienced educators; Kris is the owner of a childcare centre, Teng is a Mathematics teacher who has been teaching for more than 30 years and Amy wears many hats; teacher, principal and school administrator. Each participant has substantial professional experience prior to enrolment in the programme.

Findings

Strategies Used by Learners

Participants employed several strategies in completing the assessment instruments. The first strategy was to methodically chart their prior experiences to the programme learning outcomes. This involved analysing and understanding the required competencies and aligning them with professional practice and experiences which demonstrate structured organisation of experiential knowledge. Second, participants engaged in extensive evidence gathering. They searched for previous documentation such as reports, certificates, and teaching materials to substantiate their claims, some of these documents dated more than 20 years ago. Third, they integrated theory with practice, particularly in the challenge tests. Participants actively sought theoretical frameworks to support their experiential knowledge. Finally, participants applied newly acquired knowledge in their professional contexts, for example, new strategies to try out in class, indicating the relevance of learning to practice.

Challenges Encountered

Participants faced several challenges throughout the process of completing the 4 instruments. The main challenge according to all was the lack of documentary evidence because of the long lapse of time. Despite extensive experience, participants struggled to locate sufficient proof of their prior learning. Time constraints were another significant challenge, as participants balanced professional and personal responsibilities with academic demands. Academic challenges also emerged, particularly in relation to unfamiliar skills such as academic writing, theoretical engagement and content knowledge. Finally, but not surprisingly, participants reported emotional and physical strain, highlighting the intensity of the assessment process and their own work and personal commitments.

Adaptations in Learning

Participants adapted their learning approaches in several ways. Reflective learning became central, particularly in portfolio development. Participants revisited their professional experiences, leading to deeper understanding and appreciation of their work. They also demonstrated strong self-directed learning, independently sourcing materials, exploring theories, and developing strategies to complete tasks. An additional “bonus” was how the participants developed new digital and research skills, reflecting the demands of the programme and their growing academic competence, as one aptly puts it “*I didn’t even know how to use PowerPoints before.*”

Discussion

The findings align closely with Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Participants began with concrete experiences derived from their professional backgrounds, along their academic journeys, through reflective observation, they were able to analyse these experiences, particularly during portfolio preparation where they discovered they had *“done so much and accomplished a lot”* and *“ I never knew my travelling and interest in art and music could contribute to my portfolio even.”* This led to abstract conceptualisation, where they connected experience with theory as they had to complete their essays and relate pedagogy with educational theories. Finally, through active experimentation, they applied new knowledge in their professional contexts.

From Mezirow's Transformative Learning, participants experienced changes in their perspectives, particularly towards themselves and their own capabilities; in the beginning, all three experienced uncertainty and were very overwhelmed, however, they gradually developed confidence and academic capability. As they reflected on their journeys, they re-evaluated their assumptions and reinterpreted their experiences as valid academic knowledge and that they *“actually know more than I thought I did in the beginning of this program.”*

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that adult learners in the APEL Q pathway engage in a dynamic process of learning that integrates experience, reflection, and transformation. Through strategic approaches, reflective practices, and self-directed learning, participants successfully navigated the assessment process.

The findings underscore the transformative potential of higher education for adult learners, not only in terms of academic achievement but also in reshaping professional identity and confidence. As a result, several implications for practice are to be taken into account; firstly, adult education programmes should provide flexible learning pathways that recognise experiential knowledge, secondly, some form of structured academic support is essential, particularly in writing and research skills and finally, emotional and professional support systems should be taken into account and made available.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of HELP University, Malaysia, in funding this study through the HELP University Internal Research Grant Scheme [IRGS 25-09-008].

References

Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. Wiley.

Contact email: jennifer.tan@help.edu.my