

Zen and the Art of Adult Learning

David San Filippo

Abstract

Many adult learners are spouses, significant others, parents, and/or employees with conflicting priorities while they pursue a higher education degree. The attainment of a higher education degree can be difficult for any learner regardless of age and education experience. To find balance in life, one must inventory his or her life activities and accord the activities a balance of one's finite time. This paper explores approaches that bring a balance and quality of life to adult learners through a Zen attitude as they pursue their education. A Zen attitude can have a positive impact in the quality of the education experience for the adult learner. It can help to maintain a balance and quality of life for the adult learner.

Keywords: Adult Education, Quality of Life, Balance, Zen, Stress

Zen and the Art of Adult Learning

The attainment of a higher education degree can be difficult for any learner regardless of age and education experience. However, the quality of life for an adult learner can be compromised due to their need to balance their multiple of responsibilities beyond those required by their education.

Balance and Quality of Life

What brings a sense of balance and quality to a life? To find a balance in life, one must inventory life activities and accord a balance on in a days, weeks, months, and years. Gyanchandani (2017), when writing about work-life balance, stated:

Work-life balance is characterized by a condition of balance in which the demands of both a [an individual's] occupation and individual life are equivalent. It involves contributing equivalent measures of time and vitality between work and individual life.

The transformation of information and communication technologies and its usage has affected individuals work and family lives positively or negatively. (p. 53)

Academic pursuits have similar demands as work settings. Both work and academics require uncompromised focus of attention and disregard for personal needs (while conducting the work requiring the focused attention). Adding an academic pursuit to an adult learner requires balancing life from three perspectives, work, academic, and personal.

Academic pursuits have similar demands as work settings. Both work and academics require uncompromised focus of attention and disregard for personal needs. I began my doctoral studies while working at an executive level for a national company. I was also married with young children. In order to find quality of life, I attempted to set boundaries with my work, and when I was home, I was home. I intertwined my education and personal/family time by doing my reading when I had time, either early in the morning or while the kids were playing; I used to carry my books with me everywhere I went and read whenever I had time. I made time for family a priority, so that I could maintain the balance in my life. Although, I attest that I was

successful and balancing a quality life, my wife and kids may provide a different perspective, but I believe we all believe we have a full, quality life.

I have a colleague who was asked once how he had stayed with our university for more than 30 years. Without a blink of an eye he stated, “Long ago, I set my priorities: God first, family second, work third.” As long as those priorities were maintained, his life was in balance and he would stay on the job. He’s still here. To find a balance and a quality life requires setting priorities and staying honest to them. We need to strive to keep the sectors of our lives balanced and when we become aware that we are wobbling out of balance, take action to regain our equilibrium.

Adult Learner and Learning Theory

An adult learner in higher education is defined by chronological age (25 years old or older), delayed higher education enrollment, part-time work, full-time work while enrolled, financial independence, parenthood, military services, and possibly the lack of a standard high school degree (Schreyer, 2007). According to Fairchild (2003), adult learners are employed full-time, are care-givers to children and perhaps aging relatives, community leaders, and volunteer workers. They are also usually married or are involved with a significant relationship. These multiple responsibilities can lead to barriers in educational pursuits. Mercer (1993) uses Cross’s model, dividing barriers to persistence into three classes: situational, dispositional, and institutional. These barriers can impact the quality of education for the adult learner in many ways. Malcolm Knowles (1984) cited five assumptions concerning the characteristics of an adult learner. He professed that adult learners were generally self-directed, had the resources of experiences to draw upon to apply to their learning, they were ready to learn, they oriented to learning by moving from a subject-centeredness to learning to a problem-centeredness of learning, and finally, were motivated to learn.

Finding a Zen Attitude

Finding a Zen attitude is guided by practicing mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh stated, “I define mindfulness as the practice of being fully present and alive, body and mind united. Mindfulness is the energy that helps us to know what is going on in the present moment” (as cited in Maunu, n.d., p. 5). The philosopher Ram Dass (2010) taught: “Be here now” (p. 90). A Zen attitude can have a positive impact in the quality of the education experience for the adult learner. Zen brings peace by the practitioner sensing oneness beyond self and experiencing reality fully. A sense and/or attitude of Zen brings a balance into one’s life (Lin, n.d.). Finding a Zen attitude requires a decision to change how you look at yourself and the world around you. It also requires an alteration in how you think of yourself and others. Finally, finding and maintaining a Zen attitude requires practice.

The Practice of Zen

There are a few steps you can take to bring more balance into your life and maintain a Zen attitude. One action is to find a way to find some calmness in the busyness around you. One application might be to take a break and go for a walk. Another action is to practice being in the moment. An application to being in the moment is that when you go out for a walk, do not think of what you left behind or what you are returning to but see what you are passing by, feel the air,

feel the sun, and smell the air. Practicing awareness is another action to bring balance to your life. Practicing awareness helps you to stay in the moment.

Watch a bird fly or a caterpillar cross a sidewalk. Developing good relationships also brings us balance in our life. Relationships help us live lives outside of ourselves and engage with other people, to take a break. As a spiritual teacher once shared with a group I was in, “It’s not all about you.” Finally, it is important to allow some self-time. You carve out time for others and your work; you should also honor yourself by finding some self-time. It is not all about you, but it is important to have self-time to maintain balance. These steps can help bring more balance into your life and maintain a Zen attitude.

In addition to the steps discussed above for finding a Zen attitude, incorporating some changes in thinking and feelings is useful. Some of these changes include finding peace in your life by letting go of what you cannot control, working to see the big picture not what is currently being experienced, changing or controlling what is within your control, focusing on the positives, practicing positive visualization, and appreciating the journey of life.

Another practice to bring balance is to own your feelings by being cognizant of your temper and keeping it in check or getting help to do so. Also, pay attention to your stress levels, be aware of your response to negative events, work not to take things personally, smile, and when you think negative thoughts look for the positives. Finally, give yourself space by starting the day right by finding a good routine. As mentioned above, take self-time, slow down your normal pace, take time to meditate by practicing mindfulness, get refreshing rest, and unplug from our digital world. Bringing balance into your life takes practice. As with anything that takes practice, there are successes and failures, but in most cases, you get better the more you practice. Be mindful of the world around you and in yourself and bring a balance and quality to life.

Reflections on Living and Learning with a Zen Attitude

To maintain a balanced life, it is important to find balance in our three spheres of existence. We must care for our body, our mind, and our spirit. We must find time to acknowledge them, listen to them, and care for them. Finding moments to be in the moment and prioritizing responsibilities can lead to a quality of life and education. One should balance his or her time with spirituality, family, work, and school. Adult learners should share their educational pursuits with others. Supportive families and co-workers encourage the adult learner to be successful. Quality time in a balanced life leads to a fulfilled person who is a good worker, family member, and student. By practicing the art of being in the moment and being aware in our three spheres of existence. We must care for our body, our mind, and our spirit. We must find time to enjoy the moment, whether it is at work, home or school. Quality of life in adult learning comes from a balance in our education, vocation, and family. Adult learners should strive to apply their experiences to their learning and their learning to their experiences. This can bring a completeness to the educational experience of an adult learner.

As you choose to live and learn with a Zen attitude, be sure to engage in a relationship that will sustain you through your journey of finding balance, peace, and a quality of life. As Proverbs 27:17 states, “Iron sharpens iron, and one [person] sharpens another.” You need others to converse with and travel with you on different parts of your journey of life. As you progress

through your education and life, find people who will tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear and will hold you accountable to your actions.

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Dr. David San Filippo earned his earned his Ph.D. in Human Science from Saybrook University, San Francisco, CA. He is a licensed mental health counselor. He is an Associate Professor in the School of Health & Human Services in the College of Professional Studies and Advancement at National Louis University. He teaches and writes on topics associated with business and health services administrations, leadership, ethics, gerontology, death, dying, and bereavement.