Barriers to adult learning: Bridging the gap

Marina Falasca
Universidad Tecnológica Nacional
Buenos Aires, Argentina

A fundamental aspect of adult education is engaging adults in becoming lifelong learners. More often than not, this requires removing barriers to learning, especially those relating to the actual organisational or institutional learning process. This article explores some of the main barriers to adult learning discussed in the literature and examines some practical guidance on how to overcome them.

Introduction

Much has been said and written about barriers to adult learning. However, most of the literature in the field is concerned with barriers to participation, and not many authors or writers focus on how to deal with these barriers. Thus, the purpose of this article is both to place more emphasis on barriers to the actual (organisational or

institutional) learning process and to discuss possible techniques and strategies to help overcome them.

In so far as the adult learners themselves are central to the topic of barriers to adult learning, this article starts by considering different definitions of adults as learners. The second section explores some of the main barriers to adult learning discussed in the literature, and the third section examines some practical guidance on how to remove, or at least minimise, these barriers. Finally, the article provides a short overview of why educators of adults need to consider barriers to learning in their practice.

Adults as learners

There are several definitions of the adult learner throughout the literature. However, different authors focus on different perspectives.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999: 70–71) define the adult learner in terms of who participates and who does not participate in adult education. They identify the profile of the typical adult learner as being 'remarkably consistent: white, middle class, employed, younger, and better educated than the non-participant'.

Other authors have attempted to define adult learning by distinguishing it from pre-adult schooling. Knowles (1980), for example, identified the following characteristics of adult learners:

- adults are autonomous and self-directed; they need to be free to direct themselves
- adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities and previous education
- adults are relevancy-oriented; they must see a reason for learning something

- adults are more problem-centered than subject-centered in learning
- adults are motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external ones
  (in Merriam & Caffarella 1999)

Vella (2002: 5) also honours the fact that while 'people may register for the same program, they all come with different experience and expectations'. Moreover, she claims that '[n]o two [adults] perceive the world in the same way', and stresses that adults need to understand that they themselves decide what occurs for them in the learning event. At the same time, she recognises that adult learners need to see the immediate usefulness of new learning: the skills, knowledge or attitudes they are working to acquire.

Galbraith (1990) goes one step further and admits that 'adults [are] different from children and youth as learners in many respects' and therefore 'different methods from those of traditional pedagogy would be likely to be more effective with them' (p. ix).

In spite of all these contributions, it is still difficult to arrive at a clear and simple definition of adults as learners, especially because of the complex and multi-faceted nature of their motives and orientation. As Galbraith (1990: 25) puts it, 'it is erroneous to speak of *the* adult learner as if there is a generic adult that can represent all adults'. However, it is perhaps this diversity among adults that makes helping them learn a challenging, rewarding and creative activity.

Main barriers to adult learning

According to most researchers, there are two main barriers to adult learning: external or situational, and internal or dispositional. External barriers are typically defined as 'influences more or less external to the individual or at least beyond the individual's control' (Johnstone & Riviera 1965, in Merriam & Caffarella 1999: 56–57),

whereas internal barriers tend to be associated with those which 'reflect personal attitudes, such as thinking one is too old to learn' (Merriam & Caffarella 1999: 57).

Among the so-called external barriers to learning, we can mention:

i.   The effects of aging, such as loss of vision and hearing, which some authors believe tend to affect the capacity for learning of those adults who participate in formal adult education, especially because 'most institutions do not take into consideration the physical differences of adult learners' (Merriam & Caffarella: 97).

ii. Changes in health and certain life events which, according to Merriam and Caffarella (1999: 99), 'indirectly influence adult's ability to learn. [For example] Pain and fatigue often accompany both acute and chronic illnesses, leaving adults with little energy or motivation to engage in learning activities'.

iii. Role characteristics and their impact on adult learning, such as changes in nuclear family roles (like marrying and having children), changes in other family roles (such as death of a parent) and changes in work roles.

iv. Motivation factors, for example, being forced to attend career-related workshops or conferences for job security.

Internal barriers to learning normally include all or some of the following:

i.   Failing to explore several perspectives or adhering to 'pervasive myths, or mindsets, that undermine the process of learning', as for example: 'Rote memorization is necessary in education', 'Forgetting is a problem' and 'There are right and wrong answers' (Langer 1997: 2).

ii. Depending on remembered facts and learned skills, or trying to make sense of new learning by relying on 'old categories' formed in the past.

iii. Staying focused on one thing at a time while failing to 'see a stimulus as novel' (Langer 1997: 39).

iv. Being anxious and concerned about not being able to succeed in a new learning situation or manifesting 'negative perceptions of schooling and skepticism about the value of learning' (LSC 2005).

Overcoming the barriers

Despite these barriers, research has shown that adult learners of any age *can* learn and succeed in their pursuits if they are afforded the opportunity, assistance and support they need. In order for adult educators to be successful in doing so, they should resort to strategies such as 'seeing support for learners as an entitlement, not an optional extra' and '[flexibility] to suit adults' circumstances and schedules', among others (LSC 2005).

Above all, however, it is important to try and create a safe and supportive learning environment. Not only should learning tasks demonstrate the teacher's 'concern for safety, learners as subjects, and an inductive approach', but adult educators should also listen, observe, design and use open questions that will invite participation in a positive learning atmosphere (Vella 2002: 186).

In a formal educational setting, such a positive classroom environment could be created by:

- 'involving learners in mutual planning of methods and curricular directions;
- involving participants in diagnosing their own learning needs;
- encouraging learners to formulate their own learning objectives;

- encouraging learners to identify resources and to devise strategies for using such resources to accomplish their objectives;
- helping learners to carry out their learning plans; and
- involving learners in evaluating their learning'.
  (Galbraith 1999: 5)

Apart from trying to help the adult learner feel safe, educators of adults must bear motivation factors in mind. In order to keep their learners engaged and motivated, Cross (2004) suggests that they should:

- try to establish a friendly, open atmosphere that shows participants they will take part in a positive and meaningful educational experience;
- adjust the level of tension to meet the level of importance of the objective. If the material has a high level of importance, a higher level of tension/stress should be established. Otherwise, a low to moderate level is preferred; and
- set the degree of difficulty high enough to challenge participants, but not so high that they become frustrated by information overload.

In addition, 'Feedback must be specific, not general. [Adults] must also see a *reward* for learning … [They] must be interested in the subject [matter]. Interest is directly related to reward. Adults must see the benefit of learning in order to motivate themselves to learn' (Galbraith 1990: 25).

To sum up, adult educators *will* be able to 'bridge the gap' as long as they provide a climate conducive to learning and view themselves as participating in a dialogue between equals with learners. As Galbraith (1990: 6) himself expresses it, 'Implementing these principles requires the adult educator to be technically proficient in content and program planning areas as well as highly competent in interpersonal and human relation skills'.

Conclusion

Even though some evidence may be lacking, most of the viewpoints and suggestions outlined earlier are important and *can* make a valid contribution to the topic under consideration. However, to understand fully how barriers to adult learning work, educators of adults should move to multiple explanations of what adult learning is all about, rather than rely on just one or two perspectives. The more we know about adult learners, the barriers they face and how these barriers interfere with their learning, the better we can structure classroom experiences that engage all learners and stimulate both personal growth and reflection.

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About the author

Marina Falasca *is Head of the Applied Linguistics Department at Universidad Tecnológica Nacional in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she teaches Methods of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Multimedia in Education. She holds a M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction, Adult and Higher Education, from South Dakota State University, and an M.A. in Latin American Studies from Virginia Tech, USA. She has published manuscripts on Latin American culture and foreign language pedagogy, both in Argentina and the U.S.*

Contact details

Marina Falasca, Ituzaingó 541 (1834), Temperley, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Tel: (54) 11-4243-2278   Fax: (54) 11-4245-0218
Email: marinafalasca@gmail.com