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Adult Learner Experiences of an Accelerated Degree Program

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Abstract: This qualitative case study explored the experiences of adult learners in an undergraduate accelerated degree program. Key beliefs of the experience focused upon four themes: 1) the adult degree program as a supportive world, 2) fellow students as a family, 3) successful adult students are dedicated, and 4) the paradoxical involvement in learning in an accelerated program.

Introduction

Accelerated degree programs have become a major innovation in serving adult undergraduate learners. Created to meet adult learner needs for convenience, access, and relevancy, these accelerated degree offerings typically represent professional areas of applied study, specialized curricular formats, cohort learning models, and compressed time schedule of one course offering during a 4-6 week period. While there is recent significant growth of accelerated degree programs, there is little empirical research regarding the quality and the impact of accelerated degrees on adult learning. Of these limited studies (Kasworm, Wlodkowski, Donaldson, & Graham, 2001; Scott & Conrad, 1991), key findings note that there is comparable performance between traditional and accelerated degree students. Time is not the principal driving force regarding learning when time was isolated as a variable. (However, when time is in concert with other factors, it may be consequential for student learning.) Concentrated, in-depth experiences do facilitate student development in ways not yet understood. In addition, it is suggested that faculty attitudes presented the most significant obstacles to intensive courses.

This current study considers adult beliefs and experiences of an accelerated degree program. The research is based in a framework that considers both the social and psychological aspects of adult learning through the theory of situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This framework presumes that there are a number of important understandings and experiences which frame and illuminate adult learning, based in both the social and the psychological world of the learner. Because of both the complexity of this framework and the lack of prior research in this area, this study will focus upon a qualitative investigation exploring the meanings, behaviors, and assumptions by adult learners within the context of an accelerated degree program.

Research Case Study

This qualitative case study explored the experience of adult learners in an accelerated degree completion program majoring in applied management. The research was part of a larger study examining the adult undergraduate experience of learning engagement and had included five other institutional contexts (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Purposeful sampling was used to select

twenty (20) participants. These interviewed adult students represented a variety of ages, gender, educational backgrounds, workplace roles, and commuting experiences. In addition, the sampling included different cohort groups who were at various stages of the program, from 3 months of experience to program completion. Data was collected on-site through taped interviews, lasting from 1 to 2 hours. For this current study, additional secondary data analysis further explored the depth and complexity of experience of an accelerated degree completion. Through the use of inductive analysis, key categories and themes were identified.

Findings

Adults characterized their accelerated learning experience through the positive forces and conflicts to be successful, to learn, and to complete the degree program. They note that there were four key elements that influenced their experience: 1) the supportive world of the program, 2) fellow students as family, 3) their own personal dedication, and 4) their paradoxical learning engagement.

A Supportive World through an Accelerated Degree Program

Adult learners viewed the accelerated degree experience as creating the environment for learning and successful degree completion. This environment for learning focused upon a predictable program structure with preset courses, one course involvement at a time, pre-designated evening for all course meetings, and a predictable time line for completion of degree. They also pointed to caring faculty, fellow students, an applied instructional focus, and other related aspects of the program and learning environment.

The program structure "pushes you" to successful completion. For these adults, the structures and processes of the program predicted success, if the adult would make a commitment to the program. This belief was often based in adults' past problematic experiences with other collegiate institutions and the projected 5 to 10 years of involvement for degree completion. They believed that the accelerated degree program was a valuable alternative with a defined 15- to 18-month maximum involvement. They believed that this customized program offered a predictable and supportive environment. The accelerated degree program was seen as locking them into a learning process and a structure that held them in place and that "pushed them" to completion.

I know exactly what my class schedule will be from now until the day I graduate. There's absolutely no question about it. I like to think about it as the closest thing you could come to education, without having to think. You do have to think very hard for class, but you don't have to think of anything else. It enabled me to see the light at the end of the tunnel and that's what I like about it.

This key theme was similar to Root's study examining adult persistence in degree accelerated programs, suggesting a substantive theory of academic momentum. Root noted that adults reported the following strategies for success through highly detailed degree plans, structured daily lives, prioritization for use of limited time, unstinting class preparation, and adoption of a

"can do" attitude (Root, 1999). Adults believed the program provided this momentum, a structured push towards completion.

The program is supportive, predictable, and relevant. These adults also spoke to valuing the predictable, supportive, and relevant instructional focus of their program. This instructional focus targeted faculty who were practitioners, homework related to adult student lives through problem-identification and problem-solving, small classes allowing for everyone to come to know and value everyone, a caring environment of faculty and fellow adult students, and feedback with grades that gave adults a sense of accomplishment. Adults believed that this instructional focus was valued and important to them as adult learners.

So I feel like I have also achieved a higher level of thinking or something or introspect or something. I feel more in tune with myself and I feel better about the people around me. I have had this kind of support, which is really a nice thing to have...,and those people who are pushing for you are all going through the same thing.

They noted that part of this valuing of the program focused upon the program's orientation to real world knowledge and application, to supportive faculty who were practitioners and who cared, and to the integrated experiential and active learning through students' life experiences. Lastly, they valued the customized nature of the program and related services (delivered course books, responsive administrators to student issues, ongoing advisement) directed to working adults. As one person called it, "It's a one-stop shop. You don't have to think about anything, but being a student."

Strong bonding of fellow students in a learning community. Another valued component of the program was based in the strong bonding and support of fellow students through both a designated student program cohort of 12 to 17 students and within class student project groups of 4 to 5 individuals throughout the program. This structure of the program focused upon creating a learning community through these student cohorts, special class project groups, and integration of student lives with the learning process. Many found these fellow classmates to be a pivotal support. As noted by one student, "The group is a positive force because the group demands that you do your homework. It's not a matter of you just letting yourself down, you're letting other people down that you're responsible to. I have a real strong sense of responsibility."

Support of Fellow Students as Family

Adult students noted the importance of being with fellow adult students who also participated in work, family, and community responsibilities along with their student commitments. Beyond the prior discussion of fellow students as supporters and enhancers of classroom engagement, these students also spoke of a different quality and impact on their lives by their fellow students. These student colleagues became "quasi-family members" who gave unconditional support to "making it." They provided aid and counsel on various personal issues, but more so to helping them to survive in their complex and sometimes conflicting adult lives.

And over time they become your support group and you learn to talk about your fears and your problems and anything that you are having difficulty with in school, as well as out of school with this group of people. And they help you work through things.

These individuals found key sustenance and survival through their close relationships with these fellow student colleagues.

Successful Adult Students are Dedicated, Motivated, and Committed

These students believed that their own commitment was important to their success. They looked to others, along with themselves, and believed that those that took learning seriously and were dedicated represented successful student qualities.

These folks going at night aren't kids (comparing to an undergraduate youth-oriented program). They've got a reason to be there, and I would venture to guess that by and large they are much better students academically; just because they have been around more and learned more through life. And I don't think you would really appreciate being in a classroom full of people that didn't want to be there.

These adults reflected several paradoxical issues, particularly as they faced the last few courses or recent completion of the degree. They felt relieved that they would or did complete the degree and believed that their dedication, their fellow students' support, and the program's structure were the key influencers for success. But they also noted that they were "different." They felt unique because they had 1) a work situation providing tuition reimbursement, 2) family support to devote time to school, and 3) their own burning desire to "get the degree." However, they also noted concern for a few fellow students who only wanted the credential and subsequent displacement of another applicant who was not admitted but "deserved" to be in the program. They expressed concern for other adults who couldn't afford the high costs of the program and therefore couldn't participate; they felt uncomfortable in this elitist position of access. And some students spoke wistfully about desired but unmet original pursuits of an alternative college degree (often engineering or computer science), noting the lack of adult access and support in these programs.

Adult Beliefs of Learning in an Accelerated Degree Environment

Adult students in this compressed and intensified learning format expressed paradoxical beliefs about learning. They valued the applied and predictable focus of the courses, yet at times desired choice and exploration of other content beyond the confines of the program. They valued the accelerated nature of the program, yet reported facing stress and anxiety about their involvement, trying to be the "perfect student," and coping with the demands of their work, family, and children's needs. Lastly, they valued their involvement in the program, but were concerned about some individuals' perceptions of the program as a diploma mill and their receipt of a "fluff degree."

When discussing their learning, they continually noted the value of the practical, applied, work-based learning outcomes of the courses and the program. Most believed that the anchoring of their learning in the work world made their involvement most relevant, exciting, and important. While all noted the importance of this applied focus to their worksite, a few also noted the importance of class discussions targeted to diverse ways of looking at the content and of its applications to diverse contexts that created differences in understanding the knowledge beyond their worlds. They also spoke of the potential value of exploring other types of topics and courses, yet recognizing they were completing a program with a locked set of courses and no choices.

They desired to actively engage and learn all that should be learned, while facing the dramatic pace and demand of quickly moving through each course and the curriculum. They attempted to keep up with the demands of the courses by creating a belief system to support this involvement. They also made specific mental compromises between covering all of the content and knowledge, versus selectively learning to keep up with the classes, papers, and exams.

It's a fourteen-month program, or fifteen month, very, very rapid; everything is fast paced. Getting my life organized around this program; that was a big factor. I mean even right down to grocery shopping; I even had to change that schedule. And now - all of a sudden - you no longer do your chores whenever you want to; you have to do them around the class... You jump right into it - head first. You're just going full speed ahead from the first class. But starting this program, it just comes right in at once and it was very confusing, a lot of information real fast. And it's a lot to absorb, a lot to comprehend. So probably for the first month, I was really confused. But as time progressed, you get your feet on the ground, and you understand how the system works. You become more comfortable and go from there.

With the accelerated class, I feel like I'm missing some stuff. And it's not the school's faculty; they make an assignment, and may be I don't get it done. But if I had more time, maybe I could... Again, you've got so much you have to cover, maybe the negative part of an accelerated class is you just don't learn all that you want to learn just because of the time constraints and all...It's a lot of work in a short period of time.

Many of these adult students spoke about trying to be the best that they could be in their student roles. Most of these adults recognized that because of the time compression, the program demands, and their own life demands, they needed to think differently about being a perfect student. "And I know that there's a lot of people who suffer in our class, thinking that they've got to be the best in everything... And they don't recognize that they don't. You strive to be the best, but it's not necessary that your are." As these adults noted their desires of perfection, they also spoke to the pressures and frustration at not having the leisure to learn all that they wanted to learn. They also noted their concern of missing some important information because of the time compression. They placed a heavy reliance on instructors who were expected to make sure they learned the important things.

In addition these students continually noted their conflicting efforts to cope with the intensity of the program. Feeling tired and guilty, they often noted the paradox of the program's intense pressure with their own intense, conflicting commitments to spend time with family and losing time with growing children. Curiously, work related issues of intensity were rarely identified.

It is almost too intensive...Its really demanding...At this point, I'm not sure, how I would make the call, when you take 3 years away from your kids and 3 years away from your wife and it's a big price to pay. I didn't realize it when I started what price I was going to pay. (from an individual who was also in a lower-division accelerated program to enter the current degree program)

A number of the adult students noted concern about other people's perceptions of the nature of the accelerated degree program. They reported that some of their family and work colleagues believed that they were in a simple and undemanding program; that they were participating in a "diploma mill, a fluff degree." Thus, many were adamant that their degree was as important and as significant as other college degrees; they were just as competent as those who had a different degree. Some believed that their degree was more significant, because it focused on real world issues and applications. Their years of work experience enhanced their learning and understanding for meaningful learning and meaningful use. They desired to assuage this paradoxical stance with their colleagues and friends who were perceived as too judgmental and who did not understand the demands and complexities of the program and of their learning.

Summary

This study presented the complex beliefs and meaning structures of adults within a highly customized learning environment linked to communities of work practice. These adults shared beliefs that were highly focused, time-bounded, complex, and paradoxical in relationship to the structures and processes of an accelerated degree program. As part of the intersubjective process of social and psychological situated learning, these adults suggested a dynamic interaction between the program and their sense of identity, competence, and learning. In particular, the intensity and compression of the curriculum with related program support structures shaped key values and actions in their experience of an accelerated degree program.

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