Build It But They May Not Come: Subjective Factors In Participation Decisions Among Under-represented Groups

Ralf St. Clair
University of Glasgow

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Ralf St.Clair
University of Glasgow

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Abstract: This discussion presents a model for thinking about participation in learning for under-represented groups. The model is designed specifically to be useful for thinking about this question in the context of policymaking rather than a re-theorization of participation itself.

Background

This paper is based upon a substantial literature review and analysis concerning how learners from groups currently under-represented in adult learning made participation decisions, and how that participation could be strengthened. The need to understand the participation decisions of specific groups emerges clearly from a recent study:

> Two things are clear from the research studies that we reviewed. First, a myriad of factors have been hypothesized, and empirically shown, to be important in explaining participation and non-participation in AE [adult education] . . . Second, different groups or types of people may face different barriers to the same activity.(Silva, Cahalan, & Lacerino-Paquet, 1998, p.103)

The majority of the literature, however, does not provide the level of detail appropriate to group based analysis. This led to the question of how participation by under-represented groups can be understood by theoretical extension of the present information—that is, if we know that previous education matters a great deal in participation in adult education, how do we understand what this means for participation decisions by under-represented groups such as unemployed people? In addition, the model also tries to sort out the nature of barriers and motivations, and what their relationship is. The assumption that simply removing barriers will lead automatically to participation seems over simplistic and could lead to a "blaming the victim" mentality—after all, if we educators have removed all the barriers, anybody who does not participate is clearly making bad decisions. Avoiding this way of thinking requires recognizing the subjective nature of participation decisions, and the importance of learner, and potential learner, agency.

Understanding Participation

Before turning to a discussion of participation there are a number of complexities that it is useful to bear in mind. First, what counts as participation is far from clear, and the way this is approached changes both the baseline and desirable participation rate. The current UK definition (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2004) is extremely inclusive—having learned anything in the last three years in any context counts as participation. Given the breadth of this approach it is interesting that the reported participation rate is only around 40%.

Second, there is an assumption that any participation in learning is always a good thing, irrespective of purpose, content, or context. It may be helpful at some point to examine the limits of learning—where and for whom participation in learning is most valuable, and how that value is expressed. Third, there is a common assumption that participation inevitably leads to

progression up the "educational hierarchy"—that is, that literacies lead to further education then to higher education and so on. This is often an unrealistic assumption, if for no other reason than the long-term nature of educational participation means that it may take adults many years to progress through the various levels of education and there may not be sufficient motivation to do so. For people whose interest in education is instrumental, short term participation that meets their goals may be more attractive than long-term progression. The fourth complexity is that learners' own notions of their own progress and participation are often different from the views of policy-makers, funders, and educational practitioners (McGivney, 2003).

The most inclusive and detailed review of participation theories and empirical research on participation was conducted in the late 1990s (Silva et al., 1998) as part of the review of the US National Household Education Survey (NHES). Altogether 23 different theoretical frameworks for participation were included, organised into 9 categories by approach: economics, social psychology, leisure studies, health, adult education, change theories, education drop-out and student attrition, time allocation, and consumer behaviour. In their conclusion, the authors state:

> The reasons why people do or do not choose to participate in adult education are multi-dimensional; the decision is a complex one, influenced by factors ranging from self-perceptions and attitudes to the costs and timing of available courses. Second, different groups or types of people may face different barriers to the same activity (Silva et al., 1998, p.103).

The single most influential approach to accounting for broader influences is Cross' (1981) Chain of Response Model, which has been described as one of the major undeveloped models for adult learning (Hiemstra, 1993). Cross offered a way of understanding participation that was complex enough to recognise the broad array of factors bearing on participation decisions, and also began to work towards an approach able to bridge agency (the areas individuals can control) and structure (more socially regulated aspects). The model takes into account self-perceptions; attitudes towards education; life transitions; value of goals (and expectations that participation will meet goals); information; and opportunities and barriers. None of these models necessarily helps to clarify how policy can helpfully support participation, how, and, most importantly how learners make sense of the complex context in which they make decisions.

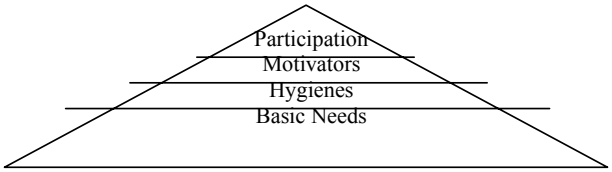
Towards a Broad Model of Participation

The model of participation is built upon two underlying theories, both of which belong to the field of social psychology. The first is the notion of a hierarchy of needs, as developed by Abraham Maslow (1954). Maslow's basic idea is that humans have two kinds of needs: deficiency needs and growth needs. The deficiency needs are the basic requirements for survival, including physiological needs such as food and water; safety needs such as being out of danger; belongingness needs such as being accepted by others; and esteem needs including being competent and gaining recognition. Only when deficiency needs are satisfied can the individual move on to the growth needs, which include the need to know and understand, and aesthetic needs such as an attractive home. This has two implications for participation decision-making. The first is that people will participate in education when their basic deficiency needs are taken care of. The second implication is that vocational and leisure focused learning will appear at different places in Maslow's hierarchy. This creates a potential separation between participation decisions around learning for interest and learning for vocational or other direct advantage.

The second theory is based on the work of industrial psychologist Hertzberg (1966), who argued in the context of work that barriers and motivators for productivity were not at opposite ends of a single continuum (for example, lack of autonomy is a barrier, lots of autonomy is motivating). Instead he suggested that they were completely different sets of factors. His model calls one set 'hygienes,' referring to factors that have to be present to allow for a particular behaviour to occur (such as sufficient pay to ensure productivity is not lost to hunger), and the other set 'motivators,' referring to factors that make that behaviour more likely when they are present (such as when changing working hours to suit workers leads to more productivity).

This model contains no assumption that simply removing barriers is sufficient to bring about participation. While hygienes can be seen as the factors that have to be addressed to ensure there are no barriers, the model still retains motivation as a separate layer. It is quite easy to imagine circumstances where the hygienes are satisfied but the individual still does not participate in learning because there is no specific motivation. Participation in learning is not seen as an unquestioned norm, but a strategic decision on the part of an individual (Van Damme, 1999). The combined model is summed up in the following diagram:

Figure 1. The Participation Pyramid



In summary, participation in learning comes about when basic needs are covered, hygiene is addressed, and there is positive motivation. Learning in this model is not assumed to be a default behavior that humans will do when barriers are removed, but a product of contextualized subjective processes. This model was applied to existing empirical research to generate a general list of factors likely to function as hygienes and motivators, and theoretically generalized to create more specific insights for a range of groups currently under-represented in adult learning, such as older adults and individuals from lower social class groups.

General Factors

When this model is applied to the corpus of participation literature built up over the last half-century, empirically identified factors generally fall into the categories of hygienes or motivators, While there is not sufficient room to reproduce the entire discussion within this paper, two examples of hygienes are:

Support mechanisms: Within the providing organisation, support mechanisms for non-traditional learners are a critical factor. This may mean, for example, organising learner support groups or staff mentors for learners. (Cloonan & Crossan, 2000; McGivney, 1992; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003)

Information: One of the simplest factors affecting participation is whether potential learners feel as if they have enough information to make an informed decision. Clear links need to be shown between educational achievement and work opportunities; the way potential learners see themselves and learning; and personal goals and learning. (Bowman, Burden, & Konrad, 2000; Cloonan & Crossan, 2000; La Valle & Finch, 1999; McGivney, 1992)

If these two factors are addressed through policy decisions or program planning they are less likely to prevent participation. But potentially more important are the factors that provide motivation for participation, such as:

Employment Mobility: This includes both getting a new job if currently employed and getting any job if currently unemployed. Learning is widely perceived as a way to attain and maintain the skills making the individual attractive to a range of employers. (Cloonan & Crossan, 2000; Kopka & Peng, 1993; La Valle & Finch, 1999; O'Connell, 1999; Sargant, 2001)

Learner Identity: Based on some recent research it may well be that the individual's identity as a learner is a significant influence on participation decisions. It is likely that any initiatives that promote the notion of a learning career will be helpful to the creation of the learner identity. (Crossan, Field, Gallacher, & Merrill, 2003; Lygo-Baker, 2000)

It is interesting to note the hygienes are far more amenable to policy or institutional interventional than the motivational factors, and this pattern continues across broader examination of empirically derived factors included in the full research project.

Participation in Non-Formal Adult Education and Lower SES Groups

The model can be applied to many under-represented groups, and this can be demonstrated by examining potential participants who have lower SES placement. Non-formal education has been remarkably successful in encouraging participation from lower SES groups, but there is still a 'participation gradient' showing lower participation in these social groups. The participation model can be used to identify hygienes and motivators for these groups by theoretical extension of existing findings. For example, if existing literature shows that educational history matters, and people within lower SES groups have less contact with educational provision, it makes sense to design strategies that recognise that this as both a hygiene and an issue for motivation. So it is likely that potential learners will need both support on entering education (hygiene) and good reasons to view education as a valuable activity (motivator). Only by addressing issues in this two pronged manner do we support the ability of potential learners to make an informed decision about participation. Some examples of strategies relevant to this group are:

1. Continued development of programmes in convenient locations and with strong community support, ideally with well-developed systems for learners to move into other forms of education.
2. Support mechanisms are critical, though these are often intrinsic to the design of Non-formal education because of the commitment to community these programmes represent. However, further structures such as cohort programmes, where a group of people move collectively through an educational programme, may have advantages.
3. Information is an important consideration for groups of people who have historically been less involved in education. This could include extensive opportunities to interact with people who are currently engaged in education as well as mentoring in order to support potential learners.
4. Attention should be paid to affordability. While people from a financially privileged background can often deal with unexpected expenses, this is not so easy if money is tight.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This discussion raises four key issues for consideration of participation patterns:

1. There is an irreducibly subjective element to participation. While this element is strongly influenced by structural considerations, the motivation to learn must be internally driven and individually experienced by the potential learner.

2. Basic needs have to be satisfied for learning to occur. This calls into question programs which attempt to help learners to "learn their way out" of poverty and unemployment. Lack of basic security around income and housing, for example, is likely to prevent meaningful engagement in learning beyond that needed for immediate survival.

3. Many critical factors in the individual's decision to learn are beyond the direct, immediate reach of policy. A clear example is previous educational experience—a central factor in participation decisions, with no way for policy to change this in the short term.

4. Based on the previous three issues, increasing participation in learning cannot be conceived as a top-down, mandated process. Instead it relies on inclusive developmental initiatives that support individuals to develop a positive orientation towards learning.

This dicsussion implies that motivators may be beyond the reach of direct policy intervention (though hygienes are often not). Motivators are bound up in the individual's subjectivity, and difficult to influence from outside that lifeworld. The most valuable policy initiatives would work broadly to make it easier for people to participate in learning when they are ready to do so, while also working closely with under-represented groups to support that readiness. In the end, the most respectful thing we can do as policymakers and educational providers is to build it and accept that people may have very good reasons for not coming.

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