"I Hate to Be Evaluated": A Grounded-Theory Analysis of Adult Learners" Evaluation Anxiety in Korea National Open University

K.P. Joo
Pennsylvania State University

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Abstract: Drawing upon the grounded-theory approach, this research examines how adult learners in Korea National Open University (KNOU) experience evaluation anxiety through centralized institutional examination activities. The final model categorizes conceptions of personal, institutional, and socio-cultural origins and patterns of apprehension and anxiety in relation to evaluation.
Keywords: Evaluation Anxiety, Grounded-Theory, Open University

Introduction

Over fifty countries, including not only developed nations but also developing and even underdeveloped ones, have institutionalized open universities for their adult populations at the national level by adapting cutting-edge pedagogical technologies such as the World Wide Web and the internet. Despite the number of open universities around the world, the top-down institutional character and attendant adult students' experiences rarely have been examined from a critical lens; this approach offers insight into the complex reciprocal relationship between the educational system and individuals' learning experiences as these individuals engage with the educational activities imposed by the institution. In an attempt to meet this gap, the current research critically examines evaluation anxiety among KNOU students.

Since the examination activities involve various actions and rules established by the institution, they also enable many facets of participants' evaluation anxiety to be discerned in a comprehensive manner. However, the predominant discourse has regarded evaluation anxiety as an exclusively mental process (e.g., Elliot & Dweck, 2005). This research hopes to move beyond the cognitive understanding of evaluation anxiety in adult learning. A negative response to evaluation could have been influenced not only by personal or individual attributes but also by the institutional and socio-cultural specifics of evaluation. For example, the Korean society, like many others, commonly recognizes academic credentials as a determinant factor of social status (Choi, 2009). As a result, prestigious institutions are populated by the very few who passed highly competitive examinations. This stressful situation, which most Korean adults had experienced throughout their school lives, would influence adult learners' responses to evaluation while attending adult education programs.

This study thus begins from a broad inquiry on the issue of "Why are adult learners anxious about taking examinations in higher education institutions, and subsequently what made them have those apprehensive feelings and attitudes toward evaluation?" This issue was explored with respect to the adult learners' general characteristics and related cognitive and social theories and issues, which enabled me to unearth many dimensions of adult learners' evaluation anxiety in KNOU. In so doing, a grounded-theory approach informs the data collection and analysis, and subsequently leads to a theoretical modeling of adult learners' evaluation anxiety while participating in an open university.

Research Design

Since it was first established by Glaser & Strauss (1967), grounded theory has long been accepted as a legitimate qualitative research method designed to help build substantive and explanatory conceptual models derived from relevant empirical data (Hutchinson et al., 2010). Accordingly, this approach can be usefully employed to conceptualize adult students' statements of anxiety over evaluation when identifying a set of emergent concepts (or themes) by constituting "an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict [evaluation anxiety] phenomena" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the beginning of 2009, I interviewed thirteen KNOU students (nine women and four men) in various majors and grades. Whether they were currently registered or not, the participants were chosen from among students who have completed at least one semester, which means that they had taken a set of examinations during more than one semester. In order to gather information about participants' examination experiences, I developed a semi-structured interview guide, including both scheduled and unscheduled interview questions (Berg, 2001).

In the very first stage of interview, participants were asked about the reasons that they were attending the institution. In this beginning phase, I intended to collect data related to their motivations to attend, specific events that led them to enroll, and their impressions about the institution. Thereafter, the participants were asked more evaluation-related questions such as "how do you prepare for evaluation?" and "tell me about your experiences taking tests or evaluations." Subsequently, the respondents were asked to elaborate upon one specific issue or problem elicited from the previous questions and to reflect on their feelings and thoughts about their experience of taking examinations in the institution.

The data analysis was conducted in NVivo 9. In the early process of concept identification, I scanned the entire transcripts to grasp the overall themes and organization of the textual descriptions before searching for more specific codes. Those specific codes were rearranged based on the emergent conceptions regarding evaluation anxiety among KNOU students. Axial coding helped me to reassemble data dispersed during open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I subsequently attempted to explicate patterns and relations based on both explicit and indirect evidence embedded in the passage. I finally produced as many reports as the themes and closely reviewed the reports over and over again until I found meaningful patterns, similarities, and differences.

A Critical Overview of the 'Evaluation Anxiety' Literature

As a grounded-theory study strives to elicit a conceptual understanding from the researcher's absorption in the data, rather than from preset meanings by speculation (Vliet, 2008), I avoided summarizing the current literature of evaluation anxiety for interpreting the interview data. Instead, the up-to-date literature of evaluation anxiety was reviewed for the purpose of comprehending the general paradigm in regards to the topic. A critical overview of the 'evaluation anxiety' literature allows me not only to identify deficiencies of applying the

current discourse to the adult education context, but also to carry out a dialectical reflection of a priori concepts and emergent patterns and meanings in analysis.

Evaluation anxiety has long been researched in various fields such as sports (Smith & Smoll, 1990), organizational studies (Moss & Martinko, 1998), and program evaluation (Donaldson, 2002). In the *Handbook of Social and Evaluation Anxiety* (Leitenberg, 1990), several authors wrote chapters in the categories of sport performance, speech, and testing to theorize evaluation anxiety. More recently, in the *Handbook of Competence and Motivation* (Elliot & Dweck, 2005), Zeidner & Matthews (2005) revisited the current theory and research of evaluation anxiety, categorizing different forms such as test, math and computer, social, and sports anxiety. Despite the diverse forms and types of evaluation anxiety, the emphasis has been typically on cognitive and motivational tenets.

There has been a paucity of studies on evaluation anxiety in the realm of adult education with a few exceptions. However, as most evaluation activities in adult education, whether they are formal or not, entail an emotional reaction of uneasiness and apprehension (Donaldson et al., 2002), individual adult learners are more likely to experience evaluation anxiety. From a microscopic and psychosomatic perspective, anxiety can be related to the adversity and stress adult students experience when they face tests or examinations in the educational system. For example, Handler (1990) examined math anxiety in the context of adult education, and Dupin-Bryant (2002) and Mcinerney et al. (1999) explored computer anxiety in adult learning. In addition, Sogunro (1998) re-conceptualized evaluation anxiety in relation to adult education and learning by quoting the extensive literature on the concept at both children and adult education levels. Researchers taking this approach may attribute individual students' anxiety to their personal, cognitive, and emotional characteristics in relation to learning.

However, it is insufficient to attribute their hardship and attendant anxiety to just personal characteristics. Even if individual adult students tend to relate their anxiety to personal perceptions or characteristics, its origins are by no means detachable from the culture and context surrounding an institutional evaluation system as well as the entire educational system of the society. In order to more thoroughly take into account the relation between the institutional system and adult learning, we must closely look into broader meanings of anxiety. One of the most salient attempts of this research is to extend the predominant conceptualization of evaluation anxiety in adult education by examining its socio-cultural and institutional origins and meanings.

Findings

The table below delineates the results of analysis of evaluation anxiety among KNOU students.

<Table> Evaluation anxiety of KNOU students

Main Themes	Key Conceptions	Question(s) to build theory w/ relational patterns among relevant conceptions
1) Personality & Identity	- Self-esteem and – efficacy - Personal learning habits - Recognition of reputations & others' expectations - Positive & negative attitudes toward evaluation	Does individual learning and behavior traits influence evaluation anxiety among KNOU students?
2) Institutional Structure	- Pedagogical organization - Restricted curriculum - Graduation policy & accreditation	Does a specific aspect of KNOU's institutional structure facilitate evaluation anxiety among KNOU students?
3) Socially Entrenched Perceptions of Evaluation	- Credential-centered society - Schooling experience - Functions & roles of evaluation	1) Does evaluation shape a particular image among people in the society? 2) Do pre-institutional experiences affect evaluation anxiety among KNOU students?

Personality, Identity, and Evaluation Anxiety

The first theme derived from the key conceptions is adult learners' personality and identity. As adult students in higher education, the participants expressed anxious feelings about preparing for examinations, which they related to their individual characteristics such as learning habits and personalities. The relation between their negative emotion and individual characteristics can be further explained when we analyze the statements about how study styles have been shaped throughout their lives. For example, Kim said, "I am unable to concentrate on studying with even small noise. I forgot even a few things if someone bothered me while I was memorizing." She thought this lack of confidence made her get even more nervous than others when preparing for examinations. She considered her nervousness to be challenging and threatening. Her focus was not on the effective process of preparation and desirable outcomes but on undesirable results of personal inadequacy. In this sense, adult learners' anxiety may be attributable to a negative attitude toward learning and evaluation situations.

When participants described taking examinations, they reflected their self-perception in relation to anxiety, whether the results of the examinations were successful or not. Data illustrates that how students view themselves has a significant impact on the extent to which they are anxious in the evaluation situation. For instance, Park expressed that he is so poor at memorizing that his expectations about examinations are low. His low expectations ironically lower his stress about examinations. In this sense, self-perception can be related to self-esteem and efficacy in adult learning (e.g., Riddick et al., 1999). Moreover, most of the older participants, either directly or indirectly, attributed their anxiety to their ages. They appeared to express the lack of confidence when facing evaluative situations due to a long hiatus before returning to the educational situation.

Spieberger's (1972) concept of trait anxiety supports the role of self-perception in affecting evaluation anxiety. Distinguishing between state anxiety and trait anxiety, he defined trait anxiety as "relatively stable, individual differences in anxiety proneness" (Spieberger, 1972, p. 39). Gall (1985) also underscored that test anxiety is typically situation-specific, which proves that students' individual traits and characteristics influence anxiety types and degrees. Likewise, adult students' anxiety is portrayed as a subjective experience and a context-sensitive phenomenon, especially at the individual level.

Institutional Structure and Evaluation Anxiety

Even though most of the participants' answers were individual-level perceptions of evaluation activities in KNOU, some evidence indicates a coercive institutional structure that could have fostered their evaluation anxiety. For example, Kim asserted that KNOU's evaluation system is inappropriate for adult learners since it imitates one of traditional colleges. Similarly, Lim questioned whether the evaluation and accreditation system of KNOU is best suited for adult students' needs and characteristics in terms of tests and assignments. She insisted that KNOU's evaluation system may lead adult students in KNOU to focus on memorizing superficial information instead of pursuing in-depth knowledge regarding the subjects.

KNOU as an accredited national higher education institution has qualification guidelines for students to complete their degrees. This qualification process mostly involves formal examinations (e.g., multiple-choice tests) whose organization is very similar to those found in formal schooling. Irrespective of students' intention, they found themselves put under stress to take this kind of formal examination once they attended the school. Even if their lives (e.g., their employment and social position) were not necessarily relevant to the results of examinations and GPAs, this external force of the pre-structured evaluation system may have created adult learners' evaluation anxiety. In addition, since KNOU is a mega-university with more than 100,000 registrants, it is infeasible to alter its evaluation system to a more sophisticated, knowledge-producing process. This efficiency-oriented approach to evaluation and accreditation is a potential reason for evoking individual students' evaluation anxiety.

Some of the participants also denied the effectiveness of the current evaluation system when they were provided with a curriculum and learning sources that were both insufficient. Lee complained that there are no substantive lessons but just materials to memorize to pass examinations. There is a contradiction in students' voices, even among the participants, in terms of the balance between the provided curriculum and evaluation types. Considering their limited

time and resources as adult learners, some students preferred being given easier and lighter curriculum and tasks to more easily complete their degree. On the other hand, the other students wanted to spend their time not preparing for examinations but by learning substantive, in-depth knowledge. In both cases, adult learners encountered evaluation anxiety. However, it is noteworthy that different reasons and diverse motivations led to their anxiety.

Socially Entrenched Perceptions of Evaluation and Anxiety

Participants' evaluation anxiety can be also conceptualized at the societal level. The entrenched negative definitions of evaluation in the society were embedded in reflections on their previous educational experiences at school and in the workplace. As the South Korean government has established a centralized national education system, the screening role of evaluation has been overly emphasized in schooling. Students at school have been forced to take examinations for the purpose of ranking their abilities and knowledge in subjects, which causes serious pressure for students and parents. Students are under enormous stress to enter better schools with higher scores. This pervasive perception that educational accomplishment determines one's social status, so called credentialism (Choi, 2008), has long been a social issue in the Korean society. The data reaffirms that the negative connotation of evaluation shaped throughout the schooling years persists in adult learning, indicating that the overall South Korean education system has brought about negative images of evaluation among the citizens. For example, Pak noted, "Our discomfort with any type of evaluation is from our school experiences when we were young. We had to take examinations more than eight times a year, and to get the signature of the parents to prove our mom or dad knew what our rankings were. We were just afraid of examinations themselves."

Their negative perceptions of evaluation do not exclusively originate from educational experiences. For instance, Choi demonstrated that any evaluative activities in the workplace were stressful, as she had realized that the evaluation result would have determined her professional reputation and promotions. Likewise, anxiety arises from both the explicit and implicit processes and outcomes of evaluation. She also asserted that her nervousness and anxiety about potential harms of evaluation resulted from her discomforting experiences of evaluation. Likewise, the negative connotation of evaluation entrenched in the Korean society impacts individual evaluation anxiety among KNOU students.

Implications

Anxiety is inevitable in many adult education situations. Since anxiety is not only a cognitive and psychological reaction but also an institutional and socio-cultural issue, the multi-dimensional approach of this study implies the necessity of further research on the variety of types and aspects of anxiety in adult education and learning. In particular, this grounded-theory analysis of adult learners' evaluation anxiety in KNOU illuminates how individual learners' experiences in a centralized adult education institution can be critically examined along with an institutional evaluation activity (e.g., examinations). Findings demonstrate that adult learners'

evaluation anxiety has multivariate dimensions: personal, institutional, and socio-cultural. The final model systematized via the grounded theory approach explicates the origins and patterns of anxiety in adult learning as well as reasons for and expressions of anxiety in this specific adult education context of KNOU. All-in-all, this study suggests that it is necessary to take into consideration more than the individual aspects of anxiety in adult higher education.

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