Some principles for youth learning

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Abstract

This paper proposes some principles for youth learning developed from a major research project. Specific parts of the project have been published in other literature, and this paper summarises key findings before proposing a set of principles to support their learning.

The findings of the research about youth learners and how they learn were analysed in the context of adult learning principles proposed by Knowles (1990). The analysis exposed discrepancy between youth and adult learners, implying that adult learning principles is unsuitable for most youth learners. A profile of youth learners was drawn from the research data on priorities that youth have, their motivation, and learning attributes. The analysis leads to three broad conclusions about youth learners:

1. Most youth use a surface approach to learning largely due to time constraints, overwhelming volume of content, and assessment requirements that reward outcomes achieved through a surface approach.

2. Most youth are at Stage 2 of their learning orientation on an orthogonal scale. Their learning could be facilitated through a directive, but supportive approach where the facilitator plays the role of a motivator and guide.

3. Most youth seem to appreciate a relational level of understanding rather than abstract thinking. Youths' learning could be better facilitated using Kolb's learning theory using the information processing model. Their learning is best facilitated through an approach that begins with concrete experience and is followed by reflective observation and then abstract conceptualisation.

The research findings were used to develop a set of principles for youth learners in terms of education delivery practices, and skilling for higher learning. These principles would enhance facilitation of youths' learning.

A case for youth learners

Investment in education is often justified on the notion that youth and children are the future of our nation. They are arguably our infinitely richer and more valuable resource worth the investment. While there are numerous texts and research findings on how children and adults learn, youth have received scarce attention. The key to enhancing their learning is in gaining a thorough understanding about how youth

learn, then designing appropriate teaching or facilitation practices and setting a suitable environment for their learning.

A number of researchers (for example, Kasworm 1980; Labouvie-Vief, 1982; and Lankard, 1997) have argued that youth are a different group of learners compared to children and adults. A major research by Choy (2001) confirmed a long held recognition (eg. by Perry, 1968; Keniston, 1970; Kasworm, 1980; Allman, 1983: and Lankard, 1995, 1997) that youth learners are different from, and transitionally between, adults and children (for a summary see Choy & Delahaye, 2003). This finding is confirmed by research around life-span which recognises the youth 'phase' as a transition period between childhood and adulthood (Illeris, 2003). There is no doubt that transition from childhood and school to post school learning and work present major challenges to young people. Illeris (2003, p. 363) describes learning in youth as "…a gradual transition from the uncensored, trusting learning of childhood to the selective and self-controlled learning of adulthood." More recent literature about Generation X and Generation Y supports and highlights differences in youths' thinking, learning, values and general approach to life.

Traditionally, youths' learning was perceived as a linear progression from school to higher education, to employment. This stereotype description included youth joining the tertiary institution after completing high school with the main occupation to pursue a qualification in order to prepare for a chosen vocation (Kasworm, 1990). According to Dwyer, Harwood, Costin, Landy, Towsty and Wyn (1999) assumptions about youths' main occupation being students-as-learners are based on old biographies. These old biographies assumed a two-fold supposition of linear and

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predictable norms as the old biographies were developed within a social context shaped by predictability and assumed permanence of a career or vocation (Dwyer et al., 1999, p. 48).

What is perplexing about research on youth learners is that, despite recognition that they are different, responses to their learning styles and approaches have been superficial. There are no principles to enhance their learning during the transitory period. Adult learning principles remain the core guiding philosophy.

A major research by Choy (2001) examined whether youth learn in a manner similar to adults and, if not, what are some factors that contribute to the uniqueness of youth learning. The findings of the research informed the development of a profile of youth learners, and a set of principles to enhance their learning.

Methodology

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research designs was employed for this research. Youth were defined as those aged between 17 and 24 years, based on the recommendations of several authors (Kasworm, 1990; Mathews, 1994; Delahaye & Smith, 1995; Lankard, 1995; and Devlin, 1996). Phase I of the study was quantitative and used three survey questionnaires – the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ), the Study Orientation Questionnaire (SOQ) and the Learning Preference Assessment (LPA) – which were completed by 448 youths (male =197 and female = 251) studying for certificates, diplomas and degrees in the Vocational Education and Training and

the university sectors. The subjects were from metropolitan and rural tertiary institutions.

The SPQ, based on extensive work by Biggs (1987) uses a model that examines a motive-strategy combination to differentiate between surface, achieving and deep learning approaches. Biggs (1988) and Watkins and Hattie (1990) have confirmed acceptable levels of reliability and validity for the SPQ. The SOQ was used to examine learners' preference for pedagogical (dependent) and andragogical (independent) orientations for learning. Christian (1982) and Delahaye, Limerick and Hearn (1994) have reported acceptable levels of reliability for the instrument. The LPA was designed by Guglielmino and Guglielmino (1991) and originally called the Self-directed Learning Readiness Scale. A large number of studies support the validity and reliability of the instrument (see Delahaye & Choy, 2000 for a review).

The second phase of the research project used the qualitative method of focus groups of youth learners who had completed the survey questionnaires. Five focus groups, comprising between three and ten volunteers, were conducted. A total of 53 youth participated, 32 from TAFE institutes and 21 from universities. The prime interest of the researcher in these focus groups was to explore youths' perceptions of the factors that contribute to their learning. The aim was to understand the multiple realities and utilise the tacit knowledge to reconstruct those realities from the participants' perspectives. Data was sought during the focus groups to also confirm and provide explanations of the survey results from Phase I.

Key findings and discussion

As reported in Choy and Delahaye (2003), the youth learners in this study indicated a strong preference for surface learning and a surprising preference for unstructured learning. They also reported a pragmatic response to role conflicts and a healthy scepticism for claims by educational institutions of encouraging self-directed learning in formal settings.

Surface learning

The quantitative results of the study showed that most youth were surface learners (SPQ) with a low level of readiness for self-directed learning (LPA). The qualitative study showed that there were four principal reasons for this preference:

- They perceived deficiencies in their skills and abilities to undertake self-directed learning.

- Youth believed that the educational institutions pushed them towards surface learning on two fronts – firstly, the sheer volume of what they were expected to learn and, secondly, the assessment practices in their view mainly emphasised and rewarded surface learning.

- Youth indicated a high respect for their teachers' professional knowledge and experience and therefore felt that the teachers were better positioned to be in charge of, and responsible for, their learning. However, there were two strong qualifications – the learning must be relevant and the subject content must be made explicit.

- They saw that society values credentialism and therefore the most important goal was to pass assignments and examinations.

These four points, the youth learners felt, gave a strong incentive to follow surface learning strategies and techniques.

Preference for unstructured learning

Given the findings on surface learning, a preference for high andragogy and high pedagogy on the SOQ was surprising. One would expect that surface learning would equate with low andragogy and high pedagogy (that is a preference for highly structured learning). During the focus groups, however, the youth learners reported a preference for the 'feel good' aspects only of andragogy – for example, being able to address the teacher by her or his first name. They were not keen on taking responsibility for what should be learned, how it should be learned or even how it should be assessed. This ambivalence towards responsibility and an acceptance of the 'feel good' aspects of andragogy resonate well with a preference for surface learning.

Role conflicts

Youth learners saw their life world made up of at least three dominant roles – their social, working (usually part-time) and formal learning life. Their perception that formal learning is only one part of the life world of youth, clashes with the typical systems and culture in most educational institutions which assume that formal learning for youth is their main and only occupation. As an aside, youth treasured

their work experience because such experience enhanced their credentials and increased the chance of employment. It was also interesting to note the puzzlement of youth - that the educational institutions did not formally acknowledge their work experience more in the formal learning contexts.

Scepticism for self-directed learning

While educational institutions make statements about the desirability of self-directed learning, youth found only limited opportunities for such types of learning. Moreover, they did not show much appreciation for self-directed learning, critical thinking or reflective thinking because such tasks did not form a significant part of assessment.

Analysis of findings against adult learning principles

The analysis of the findings against Knowles' (1990) six principles for adult learning:

1. The need to know

Adults like to relate their learning program to their lives. They prefer active forms of learning to be able to contextualise the content for their own meaning structures. The reasons for learning something and the consequence of not learning are important for them.

Youth appear to have limited opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in real life contexts largely because they are still in the process of acquiring these. The

immediate consequence for not learning for them is mainly failure in their program of learning, whereas for adults it is not only failure in their educational pursuit, failure could have other repercussions in their work and life contexts. Most youth have the opportunity to repeat their learning courses, whereas for adults this may not be so convenient due to time, costs and life commitments. While most adult learning needs arise from within the individuals, the same is not necessarily true for youths as they have to follow a prescribed curriculum.

2. The learners' self-concept

Adults have self-concepts of self-responsibility. They see themselves as individuals who have the capacity to make decisions for themselves and not being led or manipulated by others – perhaps a reflection of their social maturity. Although many demonstrate self-responsibility and are self-directing and independent in various aspects of life, some who undertake further education after a break from formal learning experiences tend to be dependent learners (Knowles, 1990). Knowles (1990) acknowledged this and urged adult educators to create learning experiences that would assist individuals to move from a dependent to a self-directed learner.

While most adults have well developed personal identities many youth are still in the process of establishing self-concepts of self-responsibility while pursuing tertiary education.

3. The role of learners' experience

Adults have a range of life experiences that impact on their learning. These experiences are used to express their self-identity and are valuable learning resources. In contrast, the life experiences of youth are comparatively limited not only by their age, but also their experiences in activities other than formal learning. They do not have the level of 'maturity' that adults have gained through life experiences.

4. Readiness to learn

Readiness to learn emerges from the need to learn. It is mostly voluntary. Such needs can be created through models of superior performances, career counselling, simulation exercises, and other techniques (Knowles, 1990, p. 61). Youth have less choice in terms of not learning. That is, if they don't learn, their pathways are restricted. Before they take up full time jobs and other responsibilities typical in adulthood, they are required to learn and gain a qualification in or acquire competencies for a chosen vocation. Learning for youth could be seen as a priority as opposed to a voluntary activity.

5. Orientation to learning

Unlike school children, adults' orientation to learning is towards real-life situations. They are motivated to learn because they are able to realise the worth/value of learning in terms of enhancing their abilities to address issues and problems in their daily lives.

Youth have an orientation towards assessment and grades. They explained that they would place more value on self-directed learning, critical thinking and reflective thinking if these became a significant part of assessment.

6. Motivation

While most adults are intrinsically motivated to learn, some are extrinsically motivated. In an era with rapid changes across all aspects of life, with on-going creation of new knowledge and ever growing access to information, learning has become significantly important for adults (Heimstra, 1994). According to Heimstra (1994) the demand for acquiring information and learning new skills is increasingly becoming the key to success. Learning has now become a lifelong process. The urge to succeed and survive in itself is an intrinsic motivating factor for adults.

The findings of this study show that the key motivating factor for youth is to gain a qualification that will enable them to secure a job. That is, youth are generally extrinsically motivated.

The above analysis of the study data against the principles for adult learning highlights some limitations in facilitating youth learning. A profile of youth learners derived from the research findings substantiated the need for a separate set of principles for youth.

Profile of youth learners

The research alluded to a range of observations that informed the profile of youth as learners. These observations were grouped into three broad categories that are interrelated: priorities, motivation and learning attributes.

Priorities

While the formal institutions develop processes and operate predominantly on the notion that learning is the only occupation of full-time students, youth learners have their own sets of priorities that are in conflict with those of the institutions.

Although youth value the outcomes of formal learning, they also have priorities that exist outside the learning environment. Formal learning is not their main occupation nor is it necessarily the highest priority for most youth. A majority of youths participate in part-time employment for economic reasons and to gain work experience that has the potential to enhance their chances of recruitment after graduation. Their dual roles (learner and earner) place constraints on time to learn. In order to gain a level of balance they focus on the economy of time and effort to complete specific learning tasks within set timeframes. This, they say, is conveniently achievable using surface learning strategies.

Motivation

Youths' learning is mainly extrinsically motivated. Their need to learn arises from their main goal to obtain credentials that are valued by society and particularly employers. Youth value what they learn outside their formal learning institutions,

although these are not formally recognised and rewarded by their institutions. They are prepared to submit time and effort into such learning because they are able to see the immediate relevance of the knowledge and skills acquired during such experiences. Youth would like their non-formal learning experiences, through part-time employment or other activities, to be recognised and rewarded. Considering the value of such learning to their overall development, they would like such learning to be integrated into the formal learning program. However, they were not able to provide examples of how integration could be done.

Youth have an orientation towards assessment and grades. Youth said they would place more value on self-directed learning, critical thinking and reflective thinking if these became a significant part of assessment.

Learning attributes

Youth are mostly surface learners and use surface strategies to successfully complete their assessment tasks. Although they prefer a pedagogical orientation to study, they also show preference for the 'feel good aspects' of andragogy. They expect teachers to treat them like adults - with respect, trust and concern for them as individuals. Youth prefer a teacher-directed learning situation and like teachers to be responsible for most of their learning. Although they have preference for certain aspects of andragogy, they are not willing to take responsibilities that complement teachers' roles and functions in an andragogical environment.

Youth have low levels of readiness for self-directed learning. They are comfortable with their teachers and institutions making system-related decisions about the learning content, method of delivery, pace, resources and assessment. Many have limited awareness of their own capabilities and wish to maintain a passive learner role. Youth also expect their teachers to motivate and maintain their interests in learning.

Principles for youth learning

Given the findings of the study, this paper suggests eight principles for youth learning. These principles are meant to provide broad guidelines to structure learning environments and design practices to enhance facilitation of youth learning. The principles may also provide direction for future research. These are presented under two major areas – principles for delivery and principles for skilling for higher learning.

Principles for delivery

1. Enhance equilibrium in lifeworld

Learning programs designed for youth should consider a range of factors from their lifeworld that interact with and impact on youths' learning. Formal learning is one of the means for maintaining and enhancing equilibrium within youths' lifeworld. Integration of relevant experiences outside the learning institutions could be processed through recognition of prior learning processes.

2. Relevance and application

Relevance and immediate application of what is to be learned needs to be made explicit to youth. The content of learning programs should be relevant and explicitly visible in terms of the vocational outcomes and assessment requirements.

3. Intrinsic and extrinsic rewards

The rewards of formal learning need to meet the intrinsic and extrinsic goals of youth and be cumulative to maintain their interest and motivation.

4. Moderation of content

The volume of content that youth are required to learn needs to be moderated by either decreasing it or increasing the time frames for the coverage of such materials.

Principles for higher learning

5. Orientation to learning

Facilitation of youth learning should be based principally on pedagogical practices, although aspects of andragogy should be introduced gradually. A directive, but highly supportive approach by a motivator and guide is suggested. However, youth could be encouraged gradually to take a more active role in the teaching and learning process and assume increasing responsibilities for their own learning, just like adults do. The

use of learning contracts, active learning situations and forms of negotiated learning are recommended approaches.

6. Learner responsibilities

Youth should be taught to increasingly assume responsibility for their learning. The roles and responsibilities of learners should be made explicit to learners and they should be assisted in acquiring skills and attributes for these.

7. Assessment

Self-directed learning, critical thinking and reflective thinking tasks should form an integral part of assessment tasks to encourage youth to develop skills and attributes for these and subsequently appreciate their significance for lifelong learning.

8. Self-concept

Workshops to create self-awareness of capabilities and to build self-confidence in learning should be organised for those who need this type of assistance.

Conclusions

Youth experience their world as a relatively complex phenomenon. Any attempt to view them in univariate terms will do youth learners a disservice. While some

educators may espouse ideals of self-directed learning and lifelong learning, youth learners see themselves as being forced somewhat into credentialism and surface learning. They hear the espousal of self-directed learning ideals, but the few opportunities that they have been given are marginalised by time limitations and lack of recognition. They are also perplexed that institutions do not formally value learning they undertake beyond the curriculum prescriptions.

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