**Final Capstone Project**

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At the beginning of this course, in my initial Capstone Project, I have articulated some of my thoughts regarding the population I will be dealing with from September. In this paper what I am aiming for is to be more specific in articulating the population of adult learners I am going to deal with soon through the lens of the content that I have studied in this course.

From September 2014 I have been accepted as a PhD student in the United Kingdom. As a PhD student I will do my research and work as a lecturer as part of the program. My whole practice setting will be based on teaching adults. Students who have left Secondary School (High School) and entered Higher Education will be my main area of expertise. After finishing this program, then, I want to continue my academic career as a Professor; moreover, examining the profile of my future students- in this paper- is of great importance.

It can be deciphered that the population I am focusing on is undergraduate students enrolled in Social Science courses at Derby University, UK. They will be from various ethnic, cultural, religious and economic backgrounds. Some of them may know exactly what they want from their studies and some other would just searching what they like more (politics, anthropology, sociology, economics).

Identifying attributes and characteristics that I have studied and are applicable to my group of learners is a good starting point of analysis on my research throughout this course. The educational environment that I will be working on is becoming increasingly diverse and in a society like the United Kingdom, is tending to be more representative of a global society.

The young adults that I will be working on are included in the category of adult learning since they have characteristics in their learning that distinguish them from the traditional ‘well- established’ school format of didactic teaching. Coming from various cultural backgrounds, our definition of adult will be seen as a culturally and socially constructed term. That is the primary reason I have just written ‘young adults’ who left school and entered University and not a concrete definition of their characteristics.

My purpose is not to place them under a single category but rather explore the magnitude of their attributes and characteristics. Therefore, the individuals that I am focusing on are young adults you have made their choices on what they prefer to study at the University level and have just entered it. They are anxious to learn more on their subject of interest but they need more guidance so as to understand clearly the expectations and rules that University has and the differences from the school format.

On their previous educational environment (in school), the assignments and readings were predetermined and were given with clear details to the children. On the other hand, in an Undergraduate degree level, students should learn to search the readings by their own, use the library and its resources and organize their program in order to fulfill the program requirements.

This entails that frequently young adults either have had no experience with higher education, i.e. University. In this case, they may have problems adjusting to the University setting, with understanding academic procedures and in developing study skills (Polson J. C. 1993: 2). That’s why educators should spend time with them clarifying the rules, responsibilities and laws surrounding the environment within University. The factors described above stand as possible inhibitors impacting these individuals to fully engage in learning.

Nonetheless, it must be taken into account that sometimes, young adults enter the learning environment with little interest or motivation. In such cases, their motivation can be diminished if the educator does not have the appropriate knowledge and expertise of strategies in capitalizing upon these inhibitors.

Motivation can be improved and channeled by the instructor who provides clear instructional goals and learning activities that encourage and support strong learning interest. To best capitalize on this high level of interest, the instructor (myself) should explore ways by which the needs of each learner can be incorporated into each class session. The use of challenging and exciting learning experiences and learning activities that are self- pace to each individual learner are some among the many strategies.

The context under which will be the focus of my Capstone Project covers learners entered in adulthood who want to learn more on what they want to pursue in their lives. The methods and techniques that would be used for better education of those students should include more active learning rather than passive. For example, techniques such as peer assessment, group discussions, and problem solving activities are some among the many methods covering the notion of active learning. Such matters will dominate the scope of the Capstone Project.

In Lesson 3, I have been introduced to various educational developmental theories, which helped me understand more the theories underlying various educational/ teaching techniques. It is not that each and every theory suits my context of teaching but knowing some of them help me comprehend better the theories in relation to my working context.

Moving on, the approaches and theories will be explored together with the most appropriate types of learning to use when constructing learning opportunities for this population. This part of the paper will explore the main developmental theories (Humanism, Behaviorism, Constructivism, Cognitivism) and will reflect as to which suits the most for the explanation of the causes and effects of the given population and University context.

Constructivism has been selected as the first to be analyzed since it is the most applicable theory for analyzing the context of my teaching practice from September. It is worth noting that Constructivism is not a single unified theory but rather various perspectives all of which support the notion that learning is how people make sense of their experience (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 36).

Learning is the construction of meaning through experience. Undergraduate students are seeking knowledge through experience and research in their subject of interest. Constructivists see knowledge as ‘constructed by learners as they attempt to make sense of their experiences’ (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 36).

Learners, in this developmental theory, are active organisms that seek meaning. Precisely, this theory helps determine the objectives of students when entering University in an Undergraduate level. They want to explore the subject of their interest with guidance in terms of ‘how’.

Constructivism is foundational to understanding much of adult learning theory and practice (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 37); a chapter that should be known by educators. This theory and its notion of social construction of knowledge is central to Experiential learning that has been also mentioned above.

On the other hand, Behaviorism describes the format and teaching scheme existing within school. More accurately, based on Behaviorism, the instructor delivers material and at the end certain exams will take place to assess what has been learnt (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 29).

Learning, for them, is defined as a change in observable behavior. Behavior for them is a result of the arrangement of particular stimuli in the environment. If it is reinforced it will remain, if it is not it will be disappeared. In more practical terms, the student in school selects one response instead of others because of prior conditioning and psychological drives at the moment of action.

Humanism, as well as Cognitivism, are both developmental theories that assist the reader to understand better the nature of the students entering the undergraduate level of education. Popular depictions of undergraduate students often paint them as young adults feeling their way through post adolescence. A large amount of them leave home at 18 to live on campuses, some of them are commuters, parents and/ or full- time workers.

For Humanism, human beings have the potential for growth, development and are free to make choices and determine their behavior (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 29). Learning is seen as a personal act to fulfill one’s potential. A primary purpose of Humanism could be described as the development of self- actualized, autonomous people.

It is a good theory to take into account when it comes to first year Undergraduate students. In Humanism, learning is student- centered and personalized, unlike, Behaviorism, which preconditions instruction and supervision. The educator’s role- therefore my role from September- is that of a facilitator (Huitt W. 2001: online). Affective and cognitive needs are key, and the goal is to develop self- actualized people in a cooperative, supportive development.

Lastly, Cognitivism analyzes the mental processes of the learner. It focuses of the insight, problem solving, memory and the brain (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 32). In this paper, Cognitivism will be only referred epigrammatically since it has been seen as very simple theory, which does not see individuals as distinct people.

It acts as a response to Behaviorism, which states that people are not already programmed and merely respond to environmental stimuli. People are rational beings that require active participation in order to learn, and whose actions is a consequence of thinking. Cognitivism uses the metaphor of the mind as computer; information comes in, is being processed, and leads to certain outcomes.

It, also, views the mental processes as predetermined in humans without taking into account the various external factors that may contribute and alter the cognitive process of a person. Family, religion, stress and many more are factors that cannot be undermined by a single theory. Especially when examining a particular population of students who are shifting from school environment to University, external factors must be part of the analysis.

The right support cannot be given if the underlying perspectives are not revealed that’s why careful consideration of all the perceptions would be beneficial. Once teachers have a better idea of the variables affecting the many ways of knowing when talking about adult learners, they can construct a more effective range of instructional approaches that will meet all of the students’ needs (Silverman L. S. Casazza E. M. 2000: 33).

Consequently, it is highly helpful to view the population studied from multiple perspectives. Even with those that they do not match with the case, they help the educator come closer to his conclusions and exclude that has been examined and not fitted to the working environment.

The significance of viewing the problem from multiple perspectives is, also, evident in the students’ part- not only from the educators. More accurately, adult learners feel much less frustrated and confused if they find that their experiences are part of a process that has been described and studied (Taylor K. 1996: 59).

This, also, helps them become more ‘learning oriented’ as they tend to be more relaxed, collaborative and less anxious (Silverman L. S. Casazza E. M. 2000: 52). Students coming from a ‘safe’ environment- like school- and taking full responsibility of themselves within University may be a source for extra anxiety and worries.

Up until now, we examined theories/ approaches that took primarily psychological and social cultural perspectives on how adults develop learning. Now, I will examine the types of learning existing and how they can be used to explain my population of students.

Knowles introduced the term andragogy, which can be applied as an approach to learning in my population. Human beings have always been engaged in learning (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 47). They have learnt how to survive, live peacefully with each other and many more. While the pedagogical model emphasizes content, which is determined, organized, delivered and assessed by the teacher, the andragogical emphasizes process (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 47).

Pedagogical model can be used to explain the teaching and learning method existing in my population few months before entering the first year of Undergraduate degree. Then, andragogy comes to illustrate the shift from pedagogy and traditional learning format to something more immediate that will enhance the students’ self-concepts.

I believe that andragogy is a valid perspective of adult learning and very contemporary I would say. It depicts and/or represents the model of the educator as facilitator that sets climate for learning of students and assessing their own learning. In andragogy there is no any traditional form of school teaching (pedagogy). Many contemporary theories of Progressivism and Developmentalism are emphasizing what andragogy strives for.

Students should be more independent and self- directed. Students are not waiting the instruction by their teacher but they are planning, delivering and evaluating their own learning (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 47). The teacher just acts as a initiator in the above learning procedure. People in young adulthood- as my prospective students- are expected to be responsible for their own lives and choices.

An additional term originating from andragogy that can be used in this paper to expand our research on young adults entering University is ‘readiness to learn’ (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 51). Much of the learning of children in school is subject- centered, while adults are engaged in multiple social roles apart from being only students. A young adult, for example, may be preparing for or experimenting with various career options whereas a middle-aged worked may seek to change career or supervise others. What I am intending, here, to say is that different ages represent different responsibilities and priorities in terms of learning (readiness to learn).

As I have argued above, I strongly believe in the validity of andragogy as many educational institutions and contemporary theories have stressed the need for a global shift in education from direct instruction to self- directedness and experience, which is what andragogy strives for.

Up until now, I have examined the well-known theories and approaches to learning. Now, in the last part of the Project, I will go a step further by analyzing theories that consider learning in broader terms. Experiential Learning, Spiritual Learning and Embodied Learning will give food for thought about types of learning and the nature of learning in young adults appropriate in my population of prospective students.

Prior knowledge and experience undeniably contribute to what and how we as adults learn. Learning and experience cannot be used synonymously but there is an evident overlap between them (Jarvis P. 1987: 17). In other words, experience is coming as an outcome of conscious living and the reaction to such result is learning. Moreover, the role experience plays in learning is evident in each and every aspect of education.

Apart from prior knowledge and experience, sometimes, immediate experiences are change- making in the moment of their happening. In other words, students find themselves during class in a place, time, context and event of extraordinary intensity (Newman M. 1999: 10). What I mean, here, is that by acknowledging such model, I can apply it in my prospective students. More accurately, meaning will flow immediately from the experience without having students exercise their memory or reflection.

Two activities that I can think of enhance such model. The first is question on a topic after its presentation during class. For example, after the tutorial the students will be assigned to present each one a topic for each week. After presenting the topic, answering the unknown questions of their fellow students will cause them direct learning through immediate experience.

The second activity has to do with the lecturing of each week’s topic. Before starting exploring the week’s module, it would be beneficial to have an exchange of thoughts on what this topic would cover. This will cause to students to get involved in immediate experience.

The crucial point, here, is the efficient way that educator should use prior knowledge and experience of his/her students to produce effective learning. In other words, Dewey recognized that ‘… all genuine education comes about through experience, although this does not mean that all experiences are equally educative’ (Jarvis P. 1987: 16).

To conclude, prior knowledge and experience is a resource and a stimulus for learning but should be used with attention from the education because they can act as an obstacle of effective learning. Why this may happen? Because we, as learners, accumulate experience by developing biases and presuppositions that tend to close our minds to new ideas and alternative ways of thinking (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 106). Prior knowledge and experience should be used mutually with new knowledge and should not, in any case, limit the perspectives of learners.

Moving on in the last section of the paper, the approaches of ‘Embodiment’ and ‘Spiritual’ Learning will be explored in order to effective construct learning opportunities for my prospective population.

In my target population of adult learners (first year Undergraduate students) the implications for the design and delivery of educational programs are found, first, in the embodied learning. Embodiment and embodied learning refer to a broader, more holistic view of constructing knowledge that engages the body as a site for learning (Freiler T. J. 2008: 39). Direct involvement in an experience of guided imagery and visualization that connects mental images, bodily sensations and reactions can be related to other domains of knowing.

Price and Shildrick (1999) refer to embodiment as an interrelated essence; instead of the body being positioned as a bar of knowledge, knowledge is produced through the body and embodied ways of being in the world (Freiler T. J. 2008: 38). It can be seen, in general terms, as an evolving awareness of bodily experiences as a source of constructing knowledge through engaged, lived bodily experiences (Freiler T. J. 2008: 39).

For example, assigning to my prospective students to make their own research on a given topic and then present it to the whole class illustrates what embodied learning is trying to pursue. The nature of experience (research in library and oral PowerPoint presentation) and the learning drawn from the experience (actual presentation in class) are closer to subjective meaning (Freiler T. J. 2008: 39), which consequently implies embodiment. To fully engage and depict what embodied learning involves- "being attentive to the body and its experiences a way of knowing" (Freiler T. J. 2008: 130)- after the presentation of students, I should engage them in a self reflection of what it felt like for them to be in front of a group of people.

A short questionnaire on ‘How did their body react to this situation? They felt anxious or not? Did the eyes of their audience made them nervous or they did not even look at them? Did they find eye- contact useful? How they were aware of whether individuals were following or understanding what they were saying? Did they feel a sense of connection with others when talking about their subject of interest?’ Those are some among the many self- reflective questions that may be included to a questionnaire to enhance embodiment.

Group discussions within class are another form of embodied learning. More analytically, embodiment in-group discussions presents a way to construct knowledge by incorporating unity of mind and body in the process of knowing through both objective and subjective realms of knowledge construction (Freiler T. J. 2008: 40). Again, separate meetings on how they felt engaged in those group discussions can be placed in order to apply embodiment within learning.

As far as spiritual learning is concerned, my prospective students and the programs that are registered with in the University enhance spiritual learning. More precisely, spiritual learning occurs often among learners who are open to new experiences and new ideas and who are willing to risk by participating in learning activities (MacKeracher D. 2004: 178).

Most recent discussions in adult and higher education specifically focus on the role of spirituality in teaching and learning. A common theme is the focus on meaning- making in adult learning as complexly related to the spiritual request of adults (Tisdell E. J. 2001: 2).

Lerner (2000) focus on an approach to spirituality that he calls an ‘emancipatory spirituality’ (Tisdell E. J. 2001: 3). An emancipatory spirituality, in contrast with ‘reactionary spirituality’, recognizes the value of pluralism and the many manifestations of spirit within various cultures, religions and social contexts. Religious pluralism and spiritualism may be used to enhance dialogue among groups of various ethnicities without pushing a religious agenda (Tisdell E. J. 2001: 3).

A strategy useful for my population that may be used to effectively enhance my teaching practice with young adult learners is dialogue. In other words, dialogue is a strategy that not only develops different perspectives within classroom but also foster spiritual development. The use of dialogue is key in focusing on issues of central importance, assisting in the dissolution of barriers and promoting collaboration and partnership (English M. L. 2000: 34).

Interpersonal connections and interchanges among people that encourage and promote their spiritual development may act as an effective means for fostering learning. Dialogue, especially, when the population of students are young adults who just left the school teaching/ learning scheme is of high importance for their education development.

In addition to the arena of dialogue, spirituality has played a major role in adult education’s historic mission of social justice and action (Merriam B. S. Bierema L. L. 2014: 139). Although the title that I will acquire by completing the PhD program would be Professor, this does not entail that I would act like that. I believe that students need someone more like a mentor. Such notion is found in the literature of spiritual learning scheme.

Mentoring is the personal and professional assistance that one adult (the mentor) provides to another, less experienced adult (the mentee) (English M. L. 2000: 30). According to Levinson (1978) stated that a mentor, in adult education, is the one that helps in realizing students’ life inspirations. Daloz (1986) has described the mentor as a guide and companion (English M. L. 2000: 31).

First year Undergraduate students in a rather multicultural UK University accept their cultural diversity and want to move away from traditional learning and education. In other words, they want to study in depth the subject of their interest and get engaged in chaotic and non- rational class discussions (MacKeracher D. 2004: 178). After all, spiritual learning does occur more readily when learners share their experiences through interactive dialogues (MacKeracher D. 2004: 179).

To summarize, spirituality, here, is not used synonymously with religion but as a way that people construct knowledge and meaning. Spirituality should not be ignored in any case. If it is to be ignored, then, human experience and avenues of learning and meaning- making must be ignored too (Tisdell E. J. 2001: 5) resulting to insufficient design of educational programs.

As it can be understood, all of the above are stating attributes and characteristics surrounding the population of adult learners that I will teach from September, but this should not make us ignore certain concerns and unknowns regarding this ongoing research on this population. The first unknown is that I have considered, in order to undertake the above analysis, that my prospective students would be first year Undergraduates who have just left High School. This excludes a significant number of population who, in their process of self- directed learning, have left their current vacancy and decided to change subject of interest.

Therefore, the population I am analyzing in this paper targets a particular type of young adults who left High School. Even though all students enter the same educational program; past experiences, social, and cultural background determine their variation in terms of their learning styles.

Professor Arnold mentioned in a thread of EAD861 something quite valuable that I have chosen to close the analysis of this research; ‘there are a variety of variables that may be influencing the learning environment’. Moreover, me as an educator should be acquitted with the most varied knowledge around adult learning theory in order to cover the greatest possible learning styles and strategies of my prospective students.

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