

Learning as an Adult: The Attitudes of Learners in Hull

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Introduction

Learning is often perceived as something to be undertaken in the early stages of life, and completed in early adulthood. However, many adults are engaged in learning, at all stages of the life course. This paper examines the attitudes of adult learners (or 'mature students') in Hull. It offers an insight into the experiences, motivations and barriers encountered by adult learners in the city.

Existing research has pointed towards the benefits of learning as an adult. Feinstein et al. from the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (2003:iii) argued that '*participation in adult learning has positive effects on a wide spectrum of health and social outcomes*', including enhanced social cohesion, health benefits and attitude change (Feinstein et al., 2003; Preston and Feinstein, 2004). In another study on adult education and attitude change, Preston and Feinstein (2004) found that adult education can help a shift towards more '*open-minded*' attitudes; in particular it can contribute to a shift away from an '*entrenched racist-authoritarian position*' (2004: v). This research makes a strong case for the wider benefits of learning, but what of the experience of being an adult learner?

While not designed purely to investigate learning as adults, our research sheds some light on the experiences of adult learners in Hull. The data upon which this paper is drawn was collected by the Learners' Forum in 2003 and 2004. Over 100 qualitative, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a representative sample of Hull residents. 41 people in the sample had returned to learning as adults; their responses form the basis of the analysis presented in this paper.

The sample had undertaken a range of courses of study, from computer courses (like CLAIT) to degrees; often learners progressed from short courses, for example at community centres like the Bransholme Women's Centre, to degree courses. The majority of those undertaking degrees did so on a part-time basis, whether at local universities or through the Open University. Mature students make up 26.3% of the student population at the University of Hull (Sunday Times University Guide, 2004). Typically adults returned to learning in their 30s or 40s; our sample includes adults participating in learning from their early 20s through to post retirement. This paper will examine their experiences of learning, in particular motivations, outcomes and barriers to learning.

Motivations and Triggers for Learning

What motivated adults to engage in learning? There were several motivations to learn surrounding the theme of employment. Many returned to learning following being out of work, either due to unemployment or caring for their family. They hoped that the courses they were doing would help them find a job:

And I've gone back to learn so that, hopefully sometime in the future, I can get myself a job.

Female, 35, full time mother.

Others wanted to learn in order to develop their current career, or in order to change career. Both motivations were often based on perceptions of the changing nature of employment. This is demonstrated by the two following extracts from interviews. The first comes from a 39 year old male interviewee who worked in the financial sector. He felt that a degree would help him to keep his job – about which he felt increasingly vulnerable because of his age:

I would like to get a degree... [In] anything really, just that... something related to what I do in my work, either financial management or something like that, and just so there is something else I can do... my career is now getting to a stage where there is not really much you can do in financial services... There are not many people 50 in my job and I'm coming up to 40 so...

Male, 39, employed full time.

The second extract is an example of someone who is engaged in learning in order to gain a university qualification as evidence of his ability to perform his current role. The participant believed he needed this proof in order to cope with the demands of short term contracts and the need to regularly seek new positions:

...because where I am it's always working short term and you're always looking for your next job. And yet I don't, apart from my nursing qualifications and a few NVQs and City and Guilds type courses, I don't have a piece of paper that says I can do what I can do, erm and so, that was the, that was the hook that got me into it, just to prove that I can do what I can do, when I can, you know go to an interview, I can go and sell it along those lines.

Male, 38, part time employed, part time student.

For some, motivations around employment had relevance in the short to medium term - particular courses were taken to fulfil specific goals. Others took courses with less clearly defined goals, which might have greater relevance in the medium to long term. These interviewees hoped that their learning would help them to be employable yet did not have a specific job or career in mind, or immediate plans about how to get a job. In the following quote, for example, one participant explained how she wanted a job that was interesting, but had no more specific or immediate plan than this; learning was associated with enhancing adults' employability:

I want to do something with my life, I don't want to be a housewife, I don't want to be having a job where I have to have a job, I want to do a job that I enjoy and something that's for me really, so yeah, I would like to do more learning.

Female, 24, full time mother.

Another motivation around the theme of employment was expressed by participants who, initially at least, had enrolled on courses in order to avoid getting a job. For example, one female interviewee had wanted to remain a full time mother, explaining that her daughter was hyperactive and needed a lot of attention and support. Education had provided a route to this, but had also changed her attitudes to employment:

...they wanted me to go to work, and with [my daughter] being hyperactive she's got to be supervised all the time. So it was a case of looking for something that, erm, 'how do I get out of this?' sort of thing. But now my attitude's totally changed to that. It did start out with 'how do I get out of this, so I can still be getting my money on me books?' sort of thing. Now my attitude's totally totally changed, I actually want to go out to work now! It's gone the other way.

Female, 35, full time mother, part time student

Other motivations for adults to engage in learning surround a life change. Three examples of adult learners who participated in the attitude survey illustrate these motivations. In the first example, the interviewee was motivated to do a degree course to help her cope with a divorce:

... I was going through a bad time, erm, I was getting divorced and my friend said, 'do something to take your mind off it'. Even though I was working full time and I had two children to look after, erm, she said you know, 'rather than get depressed do something'.

Female, 62, full time employed.

The second example is of participants who have been to prison. The experience of being in prison had led them to learn, either directly or indirectly. Two participants had entered learning via this route and for both it was their first positive encounter with learning, encouraging them to undertake more learning after their release from prison:

I went to prison and whilst in prison, not for the educational side of it I did it purely for something to do, I enrolled in the education programme and I got me GCSE in English, Maths, IBT2, CLAIT, various other certificates- Health and Safety stuff like that... and I started to get ambition in life from that, and where in life I wanted to be.

Male, 39, unemployed (aiming to train as a counsellor).

A third example concerns participants who did not work due to ill health (and were in receipt of incapacity benefit) who were often motivated to engage in learning. For these adults, as in the example below, learning can provide stimulation and a chance to get 'out and about', combating isolation:

I'm meeting different people; I'm not just sat in the house on me own, no-one to talk to, at the end of the day it's no life really. I'm getting out, alright it might only be for a few hours on a Tuesday morning, you know, but I'm getting out. I'm meeting different people, I'm finding out what they're doing you know, and I am getting to see how other people are as well, so it's good.

Female, 36, incapacity benefit.

As well as the above, certain events in life, principally parenthood and retirement, often motivated adults to learn. Parents often wanted to learn for their children. Some wanted to learn so that they could better support their children with their homework, or because their confidence was damaged when they could not understand their children's school work:

[I want to learn] so I can help my kids. I just want to help them learn. I feel thick.

Female, 35, full time mother and carer.

Additionally, some parents wanted to learn in order to set a precedent or act as a role model for their children. One participant wanted to show her kids that *'you don't just have to be a swot and just read books and not have a life'* in order to succeed in education. She described her ambition to progress through her learning so that she would be at university at the same time as her children, which reveals her motivation to learn in order to support and encourage them,

...I've got this romantic notion that we will all sit round the table and do it together. It probably won't happen like that, but I think that if your kids see you doing things, you know...

Female, 36, part time employed, part time education.

Entering retirement was a motivation to many adult learners. Unlike adult learners who were motivated by employment issues, these learners were motivated by the particular opportunities for learning that this period in life offers. For example, one participant explained how learning was now feasible for her as the tiring demands of full time employment, that left her with little energy for learning, were at an end:

I mean once you have left work and retired you've got time to do these courses. I mean when you are at work, working shifts, erm, Saturdays, Sundays, things like that, you just don't have time. As you get older you just get absolutely tired out, all you want to do is come home and flake out, you know...

Female, 62, retired

Others were motivated to engage in learning after retirement as they felt they had been denied the chance to learn during their early life, whether this was learning in general or a specific subject that interested them. This was based on a perception that people of all ages have more educational opportunities now than in the past:

...years ago we didn't get the chance to do our GCSEs or anything like that, they weren't around and I failed me 11 plus which I should have passed but... I just love learning, I'm getting more chances now than I had then, mmm, we are having a lot put to us that we never thought about in our days you see.

Female, 66, retired.

Erm, well I've always been interested in Geography. That's why I'm doing this course because I never got a chance when I was at high school; I thought I'd give it a try when I retire, so here I am.

Male, 56, took early retirement.

Like some of the adult learners who were in receipt of incapacity benefit, retired people were also motivated to learn as they felt that it helped them remain mentally and physically active, thus combating isolation and health problems:

...so I wanted something to keep my fingers going, you know, cause I couldn't knit at this time cause of the pain in my chest you see I'd given up knitting so I thought, 'well I've got to do something', so I taught myself to type and then my husband's brother said, 'do you want an old computer?' and I said, 'yeah, how much?' and he said, 'you can have it, it's stood there doing nothing'. So I got that computer...and I thought well I had better join a class...

Female, 66, retired

...it's keeping me active and given me something to think about you see.

Female, 64, retired

Motivations and triggers for learning were varied and shifted throughout life. Different learners had different motivations and, therefore, different needs and demands. In terms of planning provision and support for adult learners awareness of this variety of motivations and needs is required.

Outcomes

Having looked at why people learn, the next stage is to look at the outcomes of learning for adults. Existing research has already shown that one outcome of learning as an adult can be a change in attitude or outlook (Preston and Feinstein, 2004). We also found some evidence in our interviews that supports this conclusion. In the following quote, for example, one male participant explained how learning had changed his outlook, opening up new perspectives to him:

I had a meeting with me tutor yesterday about something and they were saying it's like, since going to university its expanded my point of view and context. Whereas I used to be very 'life is black and white, there's no grey!' [Laughs] And I've learnt that there are some grey areas...

Male, 38, part time employed, part time student

We also found evidence of other outcomes or benefits of learning as an adult. One outcome was an enhanced learning experience. Some described how they felt they had had a better experience of learning as a mature learner than they might have had if they had done their course earlier in their lives. In particular, those who had undertaken degrees felt that they had 'got more' out of their courses by doing them later in life:

I think I got more, I think people, I think like mature people will get more out of education because the only reason they're there is because they wanna be there. So you wanna learn and erm, you know, if you've got a bit of life experience then, err, you bring more to it anyway, so, err, you know, I just felt really lucky. It's definitely one of the best things I've ever done.

Male, 34, full time employed

Reflecting this view that 'you get more out of learning as an adult' was a second outcome that concerned how 'learning' was perceived. An outcome for many adult learners was a sense of enthusiasm about learning. Learning as an adult had given many a renewed vigour for learning and a belief in its value. For example, one mature university student– who was taking a social sciences course– explained her enthusiasm both for social science disciplines and university itself:

...social science is the most amazing subject I have ever come across, it's very good and I love it; I always thought that I would but [my tutor] has confirmed it...The world ought to go to university, that's how I see it. I think it's an amazing process. But, on the other hand, not only do I want them to go to university I want everyone to learn social sciences because I think it's fabulous...

Female, 45, incapacity benefit

This enthusiasm about learning is closely correlated with another outcome – more learning. Those who initially registered for one course (perhaps a short course) and have a positive learning experience often went on to take more courses. In this way many adults progressed from short courses to ones which were longer, or more advanced:

... a year and a half ago someone told me about the women's centre and so I took some classes on computers, then another one and then I did an administration course, and now I'm on another one and I've done two more computer courses

Female, 21, full time mother

There were several instances of adult learners who had started out by taking a few short courses who had progressed to degree study. A positive experience of a course was perceived as boosting their confidence as learners. This allowed them to consider progression from short/introductory courses to degree level courses. This was the case with the following interviewee who had lost confidence in her ability to get to university at school, but her experiences of adult education had led her to believe that she could do a degree:

I've done a lot of childcare courses, a bit of sociology, a lot of IT courses, netball training, netball courses. Err at the moment, like I say, I'm working towards the university foundation awards and credits, in there I've got so many and I'm looking at maybe gaining more, 'cause at school I always thought I always wanted to go to university, but I thought, 'no, they won't accept me, I'm not clever enough' due to, like, certain reports from teachers and the put downs and I thought, 'no, I can't make it'. But now I know that I can make it after doing other courses, and having the right tutor, and giving me the feedback and that, so...

Female, 37, full time employed

A final outcome concerns a sense of achievement that adults gained from their learning. As in the above example, a positive learning experience boosted participants' levels of confidence, they felt like they could achieve and gained a sense of satisfaction on completing their course as a result:

I've got the certificates from [the courses I've taken], then erm I got a mark of achievement for art, but a few of us did as well, so not the only pebble there. Oh I don't know, there's just so many [certificates] I just can't remember every one. But it's nice I suppose to look back and say, 'well I can't do anything from these', but it's nice to know you can read back and think 'I got that far'.

Female, 64, retired.

For some, the sense of confidence and achievement derived from learning as an adult was also empowering. As we have already noted, learning often empowered adults to do more learning. It also empowered them to do other things, particularly in relation to their community. One female participant, for example, described how her experience of learning had given her the confidence to contribute to her community, in her case by running a women's group:

Interviewer: What are your hopes and plans for the future?

Participant: Basically to do and get on with what I am doing at the moment, yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think that learning has a part to play in that?

Participant: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Participant: Because it is learning me to do a lot.

Interviewer: Like run your own women's group?

Participant: Yeah, like my women's group yeah, yeah.

Female, 33, voluntary worker

Barriers

There were five key barriers faced by those who were engaged in adult learning, or who had pursued learning as an adult, but had not taken their enquiries any further due to the barriers

they encountered. Therefore, whilst some interviewees talked about the barriers they faced and how they overcame them, there were also those for whom barriers had prevented them from engaging in learning.

A significant barrier revolved around the theme of finance. This affected interviewees in three different ways. Firstly, the fees payable for enrolment on specific courses were perceived as being so costly that they prohibited enrolment:

I went to do an aromatherapy and massage course at Hull College. And I applied and they said I could get it for free, and then on the day I turned up they said it was £500 a module. 500 and something pound a module!
Female, 24 full time mother.

Secondly, the need to retain benefits also acted as a barrier. For some this did not mean they withdrew from learning, but meant they had to be very cautious about the amount of time their courses took up per week so that their benefits were not affected. Additionally, some participants reported being subjected to pressure to find work and move off benefits, which would mean they would have to give up their course, either due to issues of time, or due to the increase in course fees they would encounter:

...I've also got to be careful with me benefits, they're getting a bit, they're starting to get on me back as well. They asked me if I would, if I would give in the course if I found a job. I said, 'no, I wouldn't, no, sorry' I would find a job that fit in with me course– I would not give this course up! ...So I put me foot down, I said no and I don't think they liked it. So...hmmm.
Female, 36, unemployed, part time student

Thirdly, for others the financial imperative to work meant that they were unable to study or had to give up courses. This was particularly significant for adult learners who were parents. The following interviewee, for example, needed more money than that provided by benefits and had given up her course in order to work full-time:

I needed to get a job as well and I went back to work so I couldn't carry on really. I needed the money, so...
Female, 32, full time employed

A second barrier concerned the issue of time. We have already noted how time can act as a barrier for those adult learners who are in receipt of benefits; time acts as a barrier in other ways too. For instance, issues of childcare and the need to combine learning with other responsibilities were often perceived as barriers:

Mmm I'd say no for now [to doing another course]. It would be hard to see where I would find the time to do it at the moment. Maybe in a couple of years' time when my youngest lad starts secondary school, it provides a bit more time, but it's not easy balancing everything out.
Female, 39, full time employed

Time also affected decisions about learning as an adult in relation to perceptions of age. Learning as an adult can often mean commitment to a course for a lengthy period of time; for

example part time degree courses typically last five or six years. This did not deter all adult learners– for many the long duration of courses and the small amount of time they demanded on a weekly basis was an enabler rather than a barrier (this was a view expressed by learners in receipt of incapacity benefits in particular). Others, however, simply felt they were too old to commit to a course of such length:

I don't think [I will continue learning] because I am 43 and a degree would take six years. I don't think I'll do the degree...
Female, 43, part time employed

The barriers described so far have been practical in nature – stumbling blocks that require a practical solution. However, an equally difficult barrier to overcome concerned feelings about learning or being in a classroom situation; some interviewees described how they associated a sense of fear or stress with being in a learning situation. These feelings ranged from a lack of confidence in their ability to learn, to a complete sense of terror about being in a classroom situation that was highly restrictive. As with other barriers, some learners were able to overcome them in some way; for others they restricted their ability to participate in learning. The following interviewee, for example, lacked confidence and found studying stressful, but was able to overcome this enough to complete her course:

Interviewer: Have you worried about the courses you've done here?
Participant: Well yeah, because I took five on at a time and a lot of what I was doing relies on memory and I was worried I was gonna fail my exam, and so I tried to pass them all as quickly as I could.
Female, 21, full time mother

For others a lack of confidence restricted their ability to participate in learning to a far greater extent. One male interviewee had what he described as a 'fear' of learning. He described how he was comfortable with learning from others on a one-to-one basis, but was very apprehensive about the reactions of others in a classroom situation:

I quite enjoy [learning], to me I like doing it if it's more on a one-to-one kind of thing or if its small groups, if it's in big groups then that's where my fear is because I always think I'll do it wrong and be that last one who fails kinda thing, I'm never gonna get it right you know, I'm always gonna fail I don't know what it is. It's like, say, some people have a fear of flying but to me, you know, I love it and I can't understand why they are frightened of that and I don't know why I'm scared of all these groups and learning.
Male, 44, unemployed

Our interviews suggest that adults with such low levels of confidence about their ability to learn or about being in a learning situation have often had negative experiences of learning previously, either at school or as an adult. For example, the male interviewee quoted above had suffered from epilepsy since childhood and had had negative experiences around his disability whilst at school. He had also had a bad learning experience as an adult. He identified these experiences as being at the root of his 'fear of learning':

If I wouldn't have had all these fits at school, I had just been normal like all the other kids, then maybe I wouldn't be like I am now... Eight years ago a good friend of mine who is a social worker convinced me, sort of like bullied me nicely, that I should go to college...They put me on the wrong course, doing something totally different. And then

after about ten minutes I suddenly realised that what the tutor was talking about had nothing to do with what I was supposed to be doing. And then he said, 'right Mr ***** stand up and do this' and I thought, 'oh no!' and then the anxiety starts, my stomach went berserk and I stood up and CRASH! Onto the floor and into a fit... I couldn't go back again, never, never. That was it. That was the end of it.

Male, 44, unemployed

The barriers to learning faced by adults are varied. Those barriers that could be described as practical in nature are complex. However, they are perhaps easier to remove than those barriers that could be described as emotional or psychological in nature, such as a 'fear of learning'.

Conclusion

This paper has had the intention of shedding some light on the experiences of adult learners in Hull. If our sample is representative, a significant number of adults in Hull are engaged in some kind of learning. Reflecting this, we found that the experiences of adult learners were not homogenous. Motivations, outcomes and barriers to learning were multifaceted and complex. Nevertheless, we hope that this report has untangled some of this in order to communicate many issues in relation to adults' experiences of learning in Hull.

Motivations to learn varied throughout life. For adults aged approximately between the ages of 20 to 40, the theme of employment underpinned their motivation for learning. For many, their employment goals were vague (i.e. they were learning with the intention of enhancing employment prospects but had no specific career/job plan); nevertheless employment remained the motivation for learning. Learning was perceived as having the inherent characteristic of enhancing employability.

For older adults, especially those who were retired, motivations for learning were less centred on employment. Older adults wanted to learn for enjoyment or stimulation. This did not mean that they were only interested in the more non-academic courses run by local providers. Many wanted to learn more about academic subjects that they had little opportunity to learn either at school or earlier in their lives, and/or had a long term interest in.

Another significant theme of our analysis of adults' experiences of learning concerned the way in which people's positive experiences of short courses often led to them enrolling on longer or more advanced courses. We identified examples of adults who had progressed from short courses through to degree level study. It seems that a well delivered short course can boost adults' confidence in their ability to learn and act as a trigger for more learning.

We found that the barriers to learning encountered by adults fell into two categories— practical support issues and emotional or psychological barriers. In terms of the practical type of barriers encountered by adults, the provision of accurate information was significant in the context of aiding the learner to overcome the barrier they faced. For those for whom finance was an issue, clear and accurate information about the cost of courses was vital and was often a source of confusion.

Where emotional or psychological issues posed a greater barrier, as in the case of those who expressed a 'fear of learning', for example, accuracy of information and adequate support were equally important. Provision needs to make space for those adults for whom returning to

learning means confronting feelings that might be described as a 'fear of learning'. Our findings about the way in which a positive experience of a short course can lead to more learning indicate that emotional barriers can be overcome with the right support. The experiences of some interviewees suggest that sometimes adults can slip through this net of support, however.

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