

# Motivation and Adult Learning

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## Abstract

Understanding motivation and how it impacts on adult learning styles is crucial to all educators in colleges, training institutions and universities in Papua New Guinea. The objective for this research is to encourage reflection, research and development of adult learning strategies to effectively facilitate teaching and learning for adult learners. The research looks at adult motivation and learning based on current literature and empirical data from the PNG context. It is revealed that adults are motivated to learn in different ways and for different reasons. For educators and teachers to obtain optimum results from their input, it is suggested that a systematic approach and thorough understanding should be developed and adopted.

**Key words:** adult learning styles, reflection, research and development, adult motivation and learning, motivation types, intrinsic and extrinsic factors, expectancy x value theory, andragogy, expectancy–valence, force-field-analysis

## Introduction

This is a focused analysis of the current understanding of motivation and adult learning as it could be applied to Papua New Guinea (PNG). The analysis will include some empirical data derived from personal practice and also from the literature. The basis of the analysis is to gain some understanding and insight into how best to approach adult learners in terms of teaching and learning in higher education institutions in PNG. To achieve this objective, a number of issues will be covered under these broad headings: current understanding of motivation, current understanding of adult learning, application of adult learning to PNG and a conclusion.

## Current understanding of motivation

To understand other issues related to motivation, you cannot go past knowing what it is. Motivation is an influence or a stimulus. This stimulus, whatever it might be, drives people towards the achievement of something in their lives. People's efforts are expended on a given task in which their behaviour simultaneously changes towards reaching the goal.

Motivation is hard to understand (Arends, 1994). The fact is that people are motivated to learn in varied ways (Vallance & Mansfield, 2004). Some people

are motivated by extrinsic factors while others are motivated by intrinsic factors. No two humans are motivated in identical ways. Nevertheless, this concern can be demystified to some degree.

Learning without understanding the effect of motivation is a recipe for disaster. McKeachie (1978, p.221) points out that teachers need to understand motivation first before they engage students in learning in order to facilitate effective learning. For example, if teachers are aware of factors that influence students' learning, this will help them to prepare their lessons and delivery in a manner that brings out maximum output – or learning.

### **Theories of motivation**

Some theories have been developed in an attempt to help our understanding of motivation. One such theory is called an expectancy x value theory. Feather (1982) developed this theory in which he advocates effort investment. Expectancy x value theory describes the value people put on goals and what effort and behavior they use to achieve those goals. This explains that to achieve something successfully depends on exerting effort on doing the task and valuing it (Barry & King, 1998). For example, a student who values learning will put energy into the necessary tasks to achieve it.

### **Types of motivation**

There are two types of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic. Banks (2005, p.270) explains that extrinsic motivation is the idea that all behaviour is the result of some type of external reinforcement. For this, students work hard and learn in class because there is a reward in store. A reward can be a prize, higher marks, a commendation from the teacher, recognition from other students and so on (Cohen & Marion, 1983). Some students are motivated to learn in this way. This implies that if there is no reward, students are less motivated to expend effort and learning will take place at a superficial level.

The other type is intrinsic motivation. With intrinsic motivation, students are motivated to learn simply because they 'love' the intellectual activity involved in gaining new knowledge and skills. Something inside them makes them have a strong desire to learn. External factors are not the reason for their learning. Students who are motivated this way are willing to spend enormous amounts of time and effort on a task and go through deep learning.

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors also apply to adult learners. With extrinsic motivation, adults are motivated to learn because of getting a promotion, receiving a higher salary, acquiring a higher qualification, or transferring out of a current job and venturing into a new domain that is anticipated to give greater rewards or better conditions. For example, an adult learner, who intends to leave a salaried position to pursue self-employment, might be motivated to engage in studies that provide the necessary knowledge and skills to run a successful and profitable business.

On the other hand, intrinsic motivation applies to adult where they develop high 'self-esteem' (Biech, 2004). For adults who have an intrinsic motivation to learn, the task of learning becomes a joyful and exciting experience. People with intrinsic motivation are more likely to be independent learners and less reliant on the teacher for further help than people who are motivated to learn by extrinsic factors.

### **Current understanding of adult learning**

#### **Andragogy**

Andragogy is about adult learning as opposed to pedagogy which focuses on children's learning. The theory of adult learning was developed by Malcolm Knowles (1984). For Knowles, andragogy was premised on at least four crucial assumptions, with a fifth one being added later, about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners, on which traditional pedagogy is premised.

1. Self-concept: *As people mature their self concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being*
2. Experience: *As people mature they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.*
3. Readiness to learn. *As people mature their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles.*
4. Orientation to learning. *As people mature, their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and, accordingly their orientation, toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centredness.*
5. Motivation to learn: *As people mature the motivation to learn is internal.*

(Knowles 1984:12)

#### **Theory of adult learning**

The theory of adult learning is typically based on four assumptions (Jarvis, 1987). One of which is adult is self-concept. This means adults need to know why they need to learn something (McKeachie, 1978). Second, adults bring with them a wealth of experience which they utilise during learning process. For them, by sharing an experience relative to a subject lesson, this motivates them and other learners to learn. Galbraith & Fouch (2007:37) highlight that adults benefit from reflecting and sharing insights with other students. Third, adult are ready to learn. This is in situation where they are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life. Fourth, adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented (orientation to learning). Adults need to be given tasks or problems for which they could work around to solve. This motivates them to work through thereby

learning takes place. The fifth assumption that was added later is that as a person matures their motivation to learn is intrinsic rather than extrinsic.

### **Models of adult learning**

The literature reveals various models of adult learning of which two will be discussed in this paper: the expectancy–valence model and the force-field-analysis model.

Expectancy–valence is one model that applies to adult learning. This theory was proposed by Victor Vroom (1964) and has two elements, expectancy and valence. Expectancy relates to different expectations and levels of confidence adults have about what they are capable of doing. The challenge for teachers is to discern the needs of the adult learners in order to provide appropriate resources and training to meet expectations. Valence refers to the emotional orientations people hold with respect to rewards. The depth of the want of an adult for extrinsic [qualification, promotion] or intrinsic [satisfaction] rewards. The challenge for teachers is to discover what the adult learners value and provide for this in their course delivery. The assumption is that learners' motivation will increase if they feel their expectations and values are being met.

Force-field-analysis is another model. This model was developed by Kurt Lewin (1951) who is often called the 'grandfather of behavioral sciences' for his research on, and insights about, how people make changes in their lives. Lewin suggested that if learning was directed at bringing change to learners' lives or ways of thinking, teachers need to first concentrate on what the learners were most comfortable with. He visualised adult learners functioning within a force field that was full of both positive and negative forces. Some of the forces would be supportive of change and some would be to leave things just the way they were. For example, as teachers in PNG are being taught about changing to an outcomes based approach to education, there will be both driving forces and restraining forces (Bartol et al., 1995) affecting their motivation to adopt the ideas for change. The person who is trying to facilitate change can conduct a force-field-analysis to determine what positive and negative forces are pressing on the adult learners. Positive forces need to outweigh negative forces for learners to be sufficiently motivated to consider the ideas for change. If negative forces outweigh positive forces, learners will not be motivated to consider the ideas for change.

### **Patterns of adult learning**

There are patterns of adult learning. Adults tend to slow down physically in learning. For example, after leaving school many people cease to take an active part in formal learning. Their intelligence quotient (IQ) remains the same for a long time. Foley (1995:21) confirms that intelligence does not decline with chronological age, but relatively late in life the learning styles of older adults change. Brookfield (1986:31) points out that during their life-span, adult learners learn in different ways, at different times and for different purposes.

They go into deep learning as opposed to surface learning. They move through the life-cycle where their personality matures along the different phases.

### **What adults learn**

Research has shown that adults in many countries take up educational activities (Wolfgang & Dowling, 1981; Blair et al., 1995; Kasworm, 1993). Coker (2003) reported that adult black women, especially African Americans, were undertaking study and learning at higher education levels. This is also true for women in Papua New Guinea who, although outnumbered by males, participate in both full-time and part-time studies in higher education institutions.

Brookfield (1983) found that the subjects adults take often differ from those in formal schooling and were non-credit, non-academic, vocational and recreational courses. This is not a generalisation that applies to adult learners around the globe. Coker (2003) stated that adult African American women are now taking degree programs, which are academic programs, at universities. This is also true for Papua New Guineans, where both male and female adults actively participate in professional upgrading programs when they have the opportunity or are sufficiently motivated and can afford the fees or be sponsored. What adults learn and their motivation for learning are impacted upon by different reasons and various influencing factors.

Ramburuth and McCormick (2001:346) found that there is diversity in adult learning styles after undertaking a study of international and Australian students. Smith (1992) points out that adults go through various methods of learning such as group discussion, public lecture, correspondences, private instruction and on-the-job learning.

### **Application of adult learning in Papua New Guinea**

#### **Adults are self-directed**

One of Knowles' (1984) assumptions is that adults know what they need to learn. They select to learn what is relevant and applicable to their situation. In this process, they go about collecting, analysing and matching the course to their requirements before deciding to attend the training program. Boulton-Lewis et al. (1996:90) argue that this is not always the case

In PNG, choice is often affected by whether the adult learners are self sponsoring their studies or whether they are being sponsored. If adult learners can pay for their own learning (self-sponsored) they will obviously have the liberty to decide what course they will apply for, where they will study and whether to be full-time or part-time students. However, if the adult learners are sponsored by their employer to undertake a training program, they do not get to choose what course they will take or where they will study training, but the relevant authority in their organization makes that decision for them. Another alternative is where adult learners apply for a scholarship from a sponsoring

agency. In that case they may be able to choose what program they want to take (for example, at diploma, bachelor, masters or doctoral level) and the institution they would like to attend.

It is argued that adult learners who self-sponsor their studies are highly motivated to successfully complete their studies; otherwise the money they spend on fees would be wasted. This is not to imply that sponsored students are not also highly motivated. However, the degree of motivation could vary significantly depending on whether the sponsored adult learners are driven by extrinsic or intrinsic factors. Examples of extrinsic influences could be if an employer indicated that a promotion or higher salary might result from sponsored studies or whether there would be punitive measures such as refunding the cost of fees should the sponsored employee withdraw. Examples of intrinsic influences could be if the sponsored student truly valued the opportunity and felt it was a privilege to be selected for further study. That could prove to be sufficient incentive for the adult learner to be highly motivated. On the other hand, sponsored adult learners may have low motivation if the training was not one they would choose and they were simply participating because the opportunity was there.

### **Adults are responsible for own learning**

An assumption of Knowles (1984) is that adults are responsible for their own learning. While parents often feel accountable for learning success or failure of children, this is not so for adult learners. Prior to joining the staff at Divine Word University (DWU), I worked with the Department of Police in PNG. My experience was that officers who sponsored their own studies were more highly motivated to complete assignments by due dates and successfully complete programs. If the employer is responsible for funding, this may not always be the case. The Police Department had sponsored a lot of police officers and members on training programs over the years but some of them did not make a serious commitment in completing training programs.

I have had the same experience since joining the staff of the Faculty of Flexible Learning at DWU. Many of the sponsored students do not appear to make a serious commitment to their studies and this is reflected in non-submission of assignments by due dates. Adults are responsible for the choices they make about time management and it is very disappointing to have adult students, who are fortunate to be sponsored, not demonstrating the commitment expected of them. On the other hand, adult learners who are self-sponsoring their own studies, usually demonstrate a strong commitment to the submission of required assignments in a timely manner.

### **Adults bring experiences to learning**

Adults do bring a wealth of life and workplace experiences to the classroom. Adult learners who share their experiences freely with other students in the learning situation enrich discussions by contributing real-life examples. However, some students are reticent or reluctant to share, despite

encouragement from the lecturer. It was my experience with a class of 22 adult learners taking a unit of study on conflict resolution, that only five of them were willing to relate personal or workplace experiences of conflict situations. This could have been because of the sensitivity or confidentiality of cases, but I was disappointed about the number of students who were not willing to share. It was anticipated that all the students would have had an experience of some kind in a conflict situation that could have led to class discussion about causes, effects and alternative ways of managing similar situations for acceptable outcomes.

Whether or not adult learners verbalise their experiences in a learning context, they undoubtedly have life or workplace experiences to which the learning matter can be related. For example, in another class I facilitated for a budgeting topic, although only a minority of the students had budgeting roles in their workplaces, they could all appreciate concepts of income, expenditure, savings, needs, wants and priorities from managing their personal incomes.

### **Adults learn what they need to know**

It is quite true that adults are strongly motivated to learn what they need to learn. One can easily imagine that if an adult needed to use a mobile telephone, a computer or Internet services, they would be motivated to exert the time and effort needed to gain the necessary knowledge to master the skills. If someone needed to learn how to drive a vehicle or change a flat tyre, the motivation would be there to learn what they needed to become competent.

Obviously some topics in a formal program of study will be more relevant than others to individual students in a group and consequently the motivation and participation could vary according to the relevance of topics to learners' needs. As a case on point, a group of students recently participated in learning about performance appraisal and time management. There was active participation by the adult learners during the time spent on the time management topic as this had relevance to both workplace and everyday activities. However, with the same group of students, there was less active participation during the time spent on performance appraisal as not all of them were supervisors and the topic had minimal relevance to everyday activities outside of work.

### **Conclusion**

To summarise this paper, it is argued that motivation is a key force in understanding adult learning. Motivation is inherent in humans and is the driving force for people to behave in certain ways to achieve objectives. The expectancy x value theory (Feather 1982) proposed that adult learners are motivated when they see value in doing something which drives them to exert the effort to achieve the expected outcome. Two types of motivation are extrinsic and intrinsic. With extrinsic motivation, learners are motivated to learn to achieve rewards or avoid punitive actions. With intrinsic motivation, learners are motivated to learn because of the personal satisfaction gained from acquiring new knowledge or skills.

Knowles (1984) identified five factors that distinguish andragogy (adult learning) from pedagogy (children's learning). These factors were, as people mature, they (a) become self-directed learners, (b) bring a wealth of experience to learning, (c) have a readiness to learn according to their roles in society, (d) like to engage in problem-based learning and (e) become more internally motivated to learn. Two models of adult learning were presented: the expectancy-valence model (Vroom 1964) and the force-field-analysis model (Lewin 1951). The assumption of the expectancy-valence model was that learners' motivation would increase if they felt that their expectations and values were being met. The basis of the force-field-analysis model was that positive and negative forces exist in the mind-set of learners and the push and pull effect of the forces will affect a learner's motivation to learn about things that require changes in their thinking or practices.

In some contexts, it was suggested (Brookfield 1983) that adults are more focused on learning in non-credit, non-academic, vocational or recreational fields. However, it was also argued that both male and female adults actively participate in professional upgrading programs when they have the opportunity or are sufficiently motivated, and can afford the fees or be sponsored. This latter category is evident in the hundreds of adult learners who participate in flexible learning programs offered by Divine Word University each year. In conclusion, this paper has attempted to contribute to what is known about the inter-relationship between motivation and adult learning and is of value to all who are facilitate programs for adult learners.

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