Hermeneutics and Communication

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**The cultural practice of adult (self-directed) learners obtaining a graduate degree can be very challenging!**

Acquiring a graduate degree as an adult (self-directed) learner is no easy task. Successfully finishing the program takes time, effort, discipline, and self-motivation. As an adult learner, attaining a graduate degree was akin to assembling a complex puzzle.

Ever since my daughter Rose, who is now thirteen years old, was five, she had the gift of looking at the picture on the puzzle box, spreading out the various pieces, and putting them together to resemble the image on the box. As she grew older, I presented her with (more giant puzzles) higher-level challenges, and she always embraced them and went through the tedious process, which led to completing her work.

 Attending graduate school consists of being presented with a conglomerate of advanced-level academic challenging coursework containing various components. The scholar's goal is to embrace and finish putting all the elements together to complete the process of earning a graduate degree. Completing the process is similar to assembling a world-size puzzle. This is no easy task, which causes some students to struggle and drop out. (Townley et al., 2022).

“Graduate school is not a walk in the park. Faced with many issues, both in and out of the classroom, some graduate students struggle and leave school without completing their degrees. An extensive longitudinal study that investigated college graduates who pursued graduate degrees over ten years showed that frequently cited reasons for dropping out of school were “changes in family status (30%), job and/or military conflict (17%), dissatisfaction with the program (16%), the need to work (14%), personal problems (13%), and other financial reasons (12%). Only 1% of the study’s participants cited academic reasons for leaving their graduate programs. More recent studies reflect similar findings. Many online students have full-time jobs, families, and financial obligations that present multiple challenges and mental stress, such that some students require additional course support to be successful.” (Townley, 2022, p. 1.1).

As a graduate student, I concur with the researcher. When I started my master's program, carving out the time to complete the coursework was undoubtedly more than challenging. Although my family agreed that pursuing a graduate degree was good for me and pledged their unwavering support, I am not sure they thoughtfully weighed the cost. They expected me to be present at every social event, keep up with my responsibilities around the house, work two jobs, and minister at church, all while attending graduate school full-time. Unsuccessfully attempting to Adhere to all those unreasonable expectations was taxing, and it took years for them to see things from my perspective.

Committed to the cause and determined to finish the graduate program, I soon learned that attending graduate school was exhilarating, demanding, and highly time-consuming. I also realized that those who graduated from the program quickly learned to manage their time well. This also included managing (others) expectations. When discussing managing expectations, my family could not grasp why I returned to school after landing a good job and starting a successful business. It was hard for them to understand that I sought knowledge and self-improvement. The pressure I received from them (based on their perspective of life) to quit was unreal. However, I understand their interpretation of why a person should pursue a college degree; I do not believe it is limited to that.

As if attending graduate school was not challenging enough, I attended several years after receiving my bachelor’s degree and was therefore classified as an adult learner.

My research suggests that adult learners are generally life learners with a burning passion for embracing a constant self-improvement process (Townley, 2022).

Unlike younger students per se, our (adult learners) goal is not so much to pursue a degree. We often seek to gain knowledge to become “world-changers.” This is well-stated in the following reference (Townley,2022).

Adult learners are often life-long learners. “Life-long learning can take various forms: informal, non-formal, self-directed, and formal. Self-direction is a crucial feature of the learning environment in formal graduate and post-graduate studies. Students are responsible for navigating and making sense of the concepts and requisite skills, with the instructors acting as facilitators of the process. Self-directed learning is a critical element of andragogy, the fundamental study of adult learning. In formal settings at the advanced degree level, there is a convergence of traditional epistemologies of learning/learners with more specific ecologies of adult learners—those who are over the age of 25, come from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences, and pursue continuing education for various personal and professional reasons. As such, adult learners come to the table with more life experience and often with diverse expectations, needs, and levels of preparation for formal study.” (Townley 2022, p. 1.2).

As Townley (2022) stated, self-directed learning is a critical component of adult learning. While attending college in my teenage to early twenties, I relied heavily on my professors and upper-level students to hold my hand and carefully guide me through the tumultuous process.

Upon returning to school several years after finishing a bachelor's program, a lot had changed in my life and the academic arena. I had more responsibilities, making attending school in the traditional sense impossible. There was no time to travel to an institution daily, sit in a lecture hall, and do my homework in the library. I needed flexibility, which could only be accessed by attending school online. Although there was a small hurdle to overcome regarding getting reacclimated to collegiate work, I quickly realized that the schoolwork was not nearly as challenging as learning how to navigate the technological world effectively to complete and submit my assignments; it was as if I were a foreign student in an unfamiliar land.

Furthermore, a significant part of attending graduate school consists of conducting research. Research Competency (RC)has become a priority in higher education. It is the vehicle graduate students use to understand their subject matter better (Stan M. et al., 2022).

Conducting research requires the student to be technologically astute or committed to learning to become technically established. Research and technology go hand in hand. I recall when my research was conducted via encyclopedias and other writing material. Today, the modern student must embrace technology and learn to utilize it efficiently and effectively for research and connectivity.

Not only was technology a challenge but at times, disconnecting my life experiences from the theories taught during lectures was just as hard to overcome. For example, during one of my business courses, the professor discussed various methods for launching and operating a successful business; some were practical, while others were questionable.

As a multiple (successful) business owner, it was glaringly apparent that the professor had never started or operated a business before but was limited to “book knowledge,” which would have been great if I had no real-life experiences. However, since I do, I would have loved to participate in the lecture. In doing so, although we may have respectfully disagreed, we could have had a conversation that would have undoubtedly led to a Fusion of Horizons (Shuang, L. 2020). Boughton (2023) also captures my position well by writing. “Graduate program faculty may need to consider course assignments that allow Baby Boomer learners to exhibit skills and knowledge fully in sharing their experiences in life. To do so and better meet the needs and goals of these learners, increased engagement of adult students throughout the program is recommended. Recognizing the skills and knowledge of adult learners, engaging them in discussion, and building relationships based on empathy and shared goals will more fully support adult learners. Baby Boomers bring to the classroom different histories, life experiences, preferences, and values, as well as an appreciation of the skills of others and learning overall. It is clear from this research that these Baby Boomer learners, while recognizing that every stage of life has its own stressors, especially when adding graduate school to the list, appreciated the intrinsic value of education, relationships developed, and knowledge gained that transferred into the reality of their lives.” (Broughton, P et al., 2023 p. 60).

In the above statement, Broughton (2023) touches on several components essential to maximizing the adult self-director learning experience. Although all the comments are viable, the need for relationship-building is paramount. Trust (between the faculty and student) and good communication are usually prevalent when relationships are managed well, creating an environment conducive to learning and growing academically (amongst other things).

Acquiring a graduate degree as an adult (self-directed) learner can be challenging. For me, it was similar to going to a foreign land and being engulfed in that country’s culture. Some things made sense; others were learned by indoctrination. One of the significant keys to completing the program was to trust and embrace the process. Sometimes, that giant academic puzzle appeared to have too many pieces to be correctly assembled. Still, if the scholar learns to trust and embrace the process, there is a good chance that he can complete it. It worked for me, a baby-boomer, self-directed adult learner who took on and overcame the challenge of acquiring a graduate degree!

Works Cited

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