

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. Finishing the program takes time, effort, discipline, and self-motivation (Hossain, N. et al., 2021). 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 finish putting all those elements together to complete the process, which will result in 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

3

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; obtaining my graduate degree was no walk in the park; the work and outside pressures were almost too much to overcome. Also, finding a master's program at an institution aligned with my moral values was daunting. (Bloom, A. 1987). Furthermore, carving out the time to complete the coursework was undoubtedly more than challenging once enrolled. 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!

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 (to quit the program) I received from them was only second to the pressure from within. Based on a case study by Baharan (2013), which concludes that the biggest challenge faced by adult learners comes from within, this pressure was not abnormal.

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

4

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. 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.” (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. When I re-enrolled several years later, I did not have that same support system. I was somewhat on my own. Returning to school several years after finishing a bachelor's program. I had more responsibilities, making attending school in the traditional sense impossible. I needed flexibility, which could only be accessed by attending school online. Online learning, as defined in my research, is an open and distributed learning atmosphere that utilizes the pedagogical tools that are enabled by Internet and Web technologies to assist learning and knowledge building through meaningful interaction (Manoharan, R. et al.).

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

5

was as if I were a foreign student in an unfamiliar land feeling somewhat isolated (Kara, M. et al. 2019). 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, 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. Studying research methods is partly about acquiring the practical skills that will allow you to conduct your research, which is essential to the adult learner (Clark, et al., 2021). I recall when my research was conducted via encyclopedias, other written material, books, magazines, etc. 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

6

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.” (Broughton, P et al., 2023 p. 60). In the above statement, Broughton (2023) touches on several components essential to maximizing the adult self-directed learning experience. Although all the comments are viable, the need for relationship-building (trust and support) between the faculty and student is paramount “amongst other things” (Williams, P. et al.).

Acquiring a graduate degree as an adult (self-directed) learner can be challenging. 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!

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