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Youth learners: The authentic neglected species learning for an unknown future

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Abstract: *This paper reports on a major research project that investigated youth learning. Specific parts of the project have been published in other literature (Choy, 2000; Choy & Delahaye, 2000; Choy & Delahaye, 2001), and this paper provides an overview of the findings. The Study Process Questionnaire, the Student Orientation Questionnaire and the Learning Preference Assessment were completed by 448 youths (aged 18 to 24 years) from TAFE (59%) and university (41%). Fifty three youths participated in five follow-up focus groups. Generally, youths studied in this project were found to be surface learners with low level of readiness for self-directed learning but, surprisingly, they showed a high preference for a combination of structured and unstructured learning. Youth comments on formal learning, the learning institutions and role conflicts are discussed. Finally, the paper suggests that learners progress through a four stage development sequence and that youth learners are at Stage 2.*

Key Words: *youth learning; self-directed learning; adult learning.*

Perhaps more than ever, our future depends not on the present movers and shakers of the world, but on that infinitely richer and more valuable resource, our pre-adults. While there are numerous texts and research findings on how children learn, that unique group of pre-adults, youth, has received scarce attention. Yet, this group is of paramount importance to our immediate future. A clearer understanding of how youth learn is critical to the design of changes in teaching or facilitation practices that will enhance their learning.

A number of researchers (e.g., Kasworm, 1980; Labouvie-Vief, 1982; & Lankard, 1997) have argued that youth are a different group of learners compared with children and adults. More recent literature about Generation X and Generation Y highlights differences in youths' thinking, learning, values and general approach to life. Notwithstanding this recognition, the precise difference between youth and adult learners, for instance, has been acknowledged only superficially.

Traditionally, in tertiary institutions, youth are identified as the stereotypical undergraduates who join after completing high school and whose main occupation is to pursue a qualification

in order to prepare for a chosen vocation (Kasworm, 1990). Dwyer, Harwood, Costin, Landy, Towsty and Wyn (1999) contend that assumptions about youths' main occupation being students-as-learners are based on old biographies. These old biographies assumed a two-fold supposition of linear and predictable norms as the old biographies were developed within a social context shaped by predictability and assumed permanence of a career or vocation (Dwyer et al., 1999, p. 48). It is doubtful that such stereotypical descriptions now apply to most youth learners undertaking tertiary studies in Australia.

There is also an assumption that youth learners are similar to adult learners and should be treated as such. Indeed, a total lack of theories or principles of youth learning highlights the disregard for youth as a special group of learners. This deficiency occurs despite there being a long held recognition that youth learners are different from, and transitionally between, adults and children (Allman, 1983; Lankard, 1995, 1997; Perry, 1968). Further, although youth make up the larger portion of learners in tertiary institutions, research about their learning has not attracted as much attention as is evident in the field of adult learning. With apologies to Malcolm Knowles, it appears that youth learners are the authentic neglected species.

The purpose of the research reported in this paper was to examine whether youth learn in a manner similar to adults and, if not, to identify factors that contribute to the uniqueness of youth learning.

Youth learners –are they different?

Three researchers - Perry (1970), Kasworm (1980) and Lankard (1995, 1997) – have considered youth learning specifically.

Perry's (1970) longitudinal study (four years) of undergraduates identified nine stages of intellectual development during their learning period. These stages commenced with Stage 1 (there is a correct answer to everything and teachers should provide this answer) and finished at Stage 9 (accept responsibilities and commitments and identify themselves in various situations that reflect their lifestyle).

Perry (1970) acknowledged that one of the limitations of his study was that the sample came from youth (mainly male) entering Harvard University. It should also be recognised that youth learners entering tertiary institutions now, some 40 years after Perry's study, experience a different learning environment, especially in the use of information technology. Further, Entwistle (1977) and Wilson (1981) argue that the stages of learning are subject-specific and therefore, learners could be at different stages in each subject area. The nine stages do, however, provide an interesting initial insight into youth learning.

Kasworm (1980) compared the learning characteristics of youth and adult learners and focused mainly on the socio-emotional perspective. Kasworm's list of characteristics included quasi-dependent learners, seeking out self-identity, limited awareness of own capabilities, minimal self-confidence, developing sense of maturity, impulse decision making and minimal analytical/critical problem-solving skills.

Kasworm's study was conducted some 20 years ago and it is interesting to consider her findings in the contexts faced by today's youth learners. Both Perry (1970) and Kasworm (1980) suggest that tertiary learning environments encourage youth to mature into adults. They also recommended that adult learning approaches would be better suited to those youth learners approaching graduation.

Lankard (1995, 1997) was influenced by the sociological approach of sub-culture theory and suggested that Generation Xers have higher levels of education than the previous generations, are better equipped with knowledge about technology and have abilities to perform a number of tasks at a given time by using gadgets at their disposal. Lankard (1997) lists five characteristics of Generation Xers that provide insight into new ways of learning for youth:

1. Having grown up with both parents working/furthering their education, Xers are used to getting things done on their own. They want support and feedback, but do not want to be controlled.
2. Because many grew up with computers, Xers are technologically literate.
3. They are conditioned to expect immediate gratification, are responsive, crave stimulation and expect immediate answers and feedback.
4. Xers do not want to waste time doing quantities of school work: they want their work to be meaningful to them.
5. Knowing that they must keep learning to be marketable, so they view their job environment as places to grow. They seek continuing education and training opportunities: if they do not get them, they seek new jobs where they can.

The most influential writer in adult learning has been Malcolm Knowles. Delahaye (2000, p. 31) summarised his assumptions for adult learners as the learning experience should be relevant to real-life situations and problems, it should incorporate the rich experiences of adult learners and involve the learner to increase the sense of self-responsibility.

The assumptions suggested by Knowles (1990) equate with Perry's ninth and final stage of intellectual development. This final stage of intellectual development is, in reality, the achievement of becoming an independent learner. Certainly, the andragogical assumptions are the direct antithesis of the characteristics listed by Kasworm (1980) especially those of seeking out of self-identity, limited exposure to strategies for learning and limited prior life experience. However, Lankard (1995, 1997) suggests that Xers are life long learners, who expect to keep learning to be marketable and who tend to be independent problem-solvers and self-starters.

The research questions investigated in this project were:

1. Do youth learn in a similar manner to adults?
2. If not, what are the unique characteristics of youth learners?

Methodology

The project used both a quantitative and qualitative research design and specific results have been reported in other papers (Choy 2000, Choy & Delahaye 2000,2001). The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the results of the project.

The definition of "youth" was based on the recommendations of several authors as being between the ages of 17 and 24 (Delahaye & Smith, 1995; Devlin, 1996; Kasworm,1990; Lankard, 1995). For the quantitative phase of the study, three survey questionnaires – the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ), the Study Orientation Questionnaire (SOQ) and the Learning Preference Assessment (LPA) – were completed by 448 youths (male =197 and female = 251) studying for certificates, diplomas and degrees in the vocational education and training (59%) and the university (41%) sectors. The subjects were from metropolitan and rural tertiary institutions and were studying for trade certificates and in the professional areas

of business and education. The learning experience was face-to-face in a class room environment, usually of two to three hours duration. No online learning was available to the students.

The SPQ, based on extensive work by Biggs (1987) uses a model that examines a motive-strategy combination to differentiate between surface, achieving and deep learning approaches. Biggs (1988) and Watkins and Hattie (1990) have confirmed acceptable levels of reliability and validity for the SPQ. However, recent research questions the validity of the achievement learning factor (for a detailed examination of the SPQ see Jones 2002). The second questionnaire, the SOQ, examines learners' preference for pedagogical (dependent) and andragogical (independent) orientations for learning. Christian (1982) and Delahaye, Limerick and Hearn (1994) have reported acceptable levels of reliability and validity for the instrument. The third questionnaire, the LPA, was originally called the Self-directed Learning Readiness Scale. The LPA (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1991) has a more user-friendly feedback scoring system and, as the original name suggests, purported to measure the learner's readiness for self-directed learning. A large number of studies support the validity and reliability of the instrument (see Delahaye & Choy, 2000 for a review).

The second phase of the research project used the qualitative method of focus groups of youth learners. Youth who completed the survey questionnaires were invited to participate in the focus groups. Five focus groups, comprising between 3 and 10 volunteers, were conducted. A total of 53 youth participated, 32 from TAFE institutes and 21 from universities. The prime interest of the researchers in these focus groups was to explore youths' perceptions of the factors that contribute to their learning. The aim was to understand the multiple realities and utilise the tacit knowledge to reconstruct those realities from the participants' perspectives. Secondly, data was sought during the focus groups to confirm and provide explanations of the survey results from phase one.

Discussion

Overall, the results from phase one, the questionnaires, indicated that youth learners were surface learners (on the SPQ) with low level of readiness for self directed learning (on the LPA). Surprisingly, their orientation to learning showed a high preference for a combination of structured learning and unstructured learning (high pedagogy/high andragogy on the SOQ).

This rather schizophrenic result – using surface learning approaches, low level of readiness for self-directed learning as well as a preference for structured learning combined with a preference for unstructured learning – gives the first glimpse into the complexities of youth learning. It appears the world of youth learners consists of conflicting pressures originating from a variety of intra-personal and external sources.

Preference for unstructured learning

When examined closely during phase two (the focus groups), youth learners' preference for unstructured learning became qualified. Youth learners indicated a preference for the 'feel good' aspects of unstructured learning (andragogy). They preferred their teachers to be friendly, to respect and value their contributions to class activities and to be concerned about them as a whole individual, not just as a student. However, they were not keen to accept the responsibilities of being a self-directed learner, such as making decisions on what should be learned and how it should be learned.

Formal learning

Youth learners expanded further on their inclination for surface learning being achieved by structured learning experiences. Firstly, there was a general acknowledgement by youth that they respected their teachers' professionalism. Therefore, they wanted the teachers to be responsible for, and in charge of, their learning. They expected their teachers and institutions to make the decisions about what would be learned and how it would be taught. However, there were two strong qualifications – the learning must be relevant and the application of the subject content must be made explicit.

This respect for teachers' professionalism combined with a recognition that learning and gaining credentials was essential for enhancing or maintaining equilibrium in their life world. Further, they believed that society valued credentialism and that employers value such credentials by placing a high premium on these when making hiring decisions. In addition, youth learners felt that the institutions forced them towards surface learning by imposing a high volume of content to be learned and the assessment practices of the teaching institutions.

Finally, youth learners perceived deficiencies in their skills and ability for self-directed learning and critical thinking. Together with their perception of having low self-confidence in learning situations, this constrained their ability to undertake more self-directed learning and critical thinking.

Role conflicts

Youth learners perceive that formal learning is only one part of their life world. This perception clashes with the typical systems adopted in learning institutions that are organised on the premise that formal learning for youth is their main and only occupation.

Youth learners perceived themselves as complex wholes and wished to be accepted as a whole person – not defined by one role or another. To complement formal learning, youth learners saw at least two other significant roles in their life world. The first of these was their social life. Interacting with peers, friends and family was given a high value in their life style. Interestingly, many youth learners included activities using information technology in this social role. Many commented on the informal learning that took place in these social episodes and that contributed to their development as a member of society.

The second ifeworld role that was important to youth learners was part-time employment. While earning money was an issue, youth learners treasured the value of work experience gained through part-time employment. Their motivation to gain work experience concurrently while studying was driven by expectations of employers. Employers favoured graduates with work experience when making hiring decisions. Youths' parallel participation in study and work created conflict between their role as full-time students and part-time employees.

There were two specific issues that were important to youth learners in these role conflicts. The first was a time conflict. Balancing time investment in the three roles – formal learning, social life and part-time work – was considered a vexing task. The second issue was the lack of acknowledgement by teachers and learning institutes of the self-directed learning that took place in these other roles.

The Learning Institutions

A desirable goal for most institutions of higher learning is to create deep learners who are self-directed, can think critically and develop into lifelong learners. Youth in this study did participate in self-directed learning, critical thinking and reflective thinking tasks. However,

according to them there were only limited opportunities for such types of learning. Moreover, they did not show much appreciation for self-directed learning, critical thinking and reflective thinking because these tasks did not form a significant part of assessment.

While youth claim that their institutions ignore the influences of external factors from their lifeworlds, interviews with teachers indicated that they (teachers) were aware of the factors that youth described. However while they try to give some consideration to these unofficially, teachers too are bound by the parameters of the institutional system. Individual teachers had little control over the nature or volume of the content, and the nature of the assessment.

Conclusions and implications

Youth experience their world as a relatively complex phenomenon. Any attempt to view them in univariate terms will do youth learners a disservice. While some educators may espouse ideals of self-directed learning and life-long learning, youth learners see themselves as being forced somewhat into credentialism and surface learning. They hear the espousal of self-directed learning ideals, but the few opportunities that they have been given are marginalised by time limitations and lack of recognition. They are also perplexed that institutions do not formally value appropriate learning they undertake beyond the curriculum prescriptions.

While adult learners have come some way since Malcolm Knowles first penned the text, *The adult learner: A neglected species* in 1973, this project has some indications that youth are the forgotten species of learners. When examining Perry's (1970) nine stages, elements of the youth learners' world can be seen in the first eight, suggesting that a sequential series of stages is a far too simplistic representation of the challenges facing the youth learner. Several of the characteristics identified by Kasworm (1980) appear to be confirmed. They appear to be quasi-dependent learners, are seeking out their self-identity, but are developing a sense of maturity. However, there does not seem to be a major time focus on academic activities. While on the surface, there may be some evidence of minimal analytical/critical problem-solving skills, their decisions to target rewarded learning outcomes and look for efficient alternatives in learning options suggests problem-solving based on realistic criteria. Certainly, a number of Lankard's (1995) propositions have been supported. Youth learners want support and feedback but do not want to be controlled. They are also focused, thereby sharing one of the Knowlesian andragogical characteristics of wanting their study and work to be meaningful to them. However, concomitantly, they do look for immediate gratification and expect immediate answers and feedback.

Perhaps one place to start understanding youth learners is to examine the first surprising find of this project. Youth learners saw themselves as having a learning orientation of both high pedagogy (structured) and high andragogy (unstructured). Delahaye et al. (1994) report that pedagogy and andragogy have an orthogonal relationship (at right angles to each other) and go on to suggest that becoming an independent learner is a journey that progresses through four stages. Grow (1991) made a similar suggestion.

Combining these ideas, and based on the findings of the study reported in this paper, the four stages that youth learners may pass through are:

Stage 1 **High pedagogy/low andragogy.** The student is a dependent learner with the teacher as the authority who provides relevant information and immediate feedback.

- Stage 2 **High pedagogy/high andragogy.** The teacher sets the goals and makes curriculum decisions. The student is encouraged to contribute ideas and is given guided, semi-structured learning experiences. However, the student is still motivated by efficiency.
- Stage 3 **Low pedagogy/high andragogy.** The teacher takes on a more facilitating role and manages the underlying learning process. The student concentrates on the content to be learned and makes all the decisions on how this content is to be learned. The student is motivated by a deep interest in the topic being learned.
- Stage 4 **Low pedagogy/low andragogy.** Being low on both pedagogy and andragogy indicates that a teacher or facilitator is not present. The student is a fully self-directed learner, making all curriculum decisions. The Stage 4 learner fully accepts Rogers' (1983) exhortation that self-assessment is far better than other-assessment.

Under this model of four stages, the youth reported in this study would have left Stage 1 and entered Stage 2. As they progress into adulthood, they may choose to enter Stages 3 and 4 or may prefer to stay at Stage 2. Undoubtedly, this choice would depend on a variety of situational and personal variables and it is recommended that such considerations be the focus of future research.

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