The Influence of Higher Education on Working Adults' Anticipated Independent and Self-Directed Learning Activities

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Abstract

As working adults continue to return to college to pursue or complete their college degree it is important to investigate their perceptions of future career roles after graduation. Specifically, it is important to investigate whether or not they feel that they have acquired adequate independent learning and self-directed learning abilities in order to be successful in future career roles. Investigation of their perceptions of these abilities is the first step in gauging how the college experience has transformed the individual and prepared them for their lives after college. Interviews were conducted with working adults during their senior year in order to investigate their perceptions of their abilities to apply independent and self-directed learning strategies in the future. Interview transcripts were analyzed for themes and three primary themes emerged from the data: job-specific independent and self-directed learning plans, career development independent and self-directed learning plans, and plans for personal growth. These themes suggested that working adults have been influenced by higher education as they prepare to transition from college.

Introduction

Working adults motivated by prospects of higher paying jobs, opportunities for job promotion or career mobility, are returning to college at increasing rates to pursue or finish their college degrees. As work-

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ing adults complete their degrees, how they view their career roles after graduation merits investigation. Has the college experience changed the plans they have for their careers? Have working adults recognized new opportunities for lifelong learning related to their chosen professions as a result of the college experience? How will they embrace and approach future learning opportunities as new college graduates in their careers?

The influence and impact of higher education among working adults has been documented in the literature. Baum and Ma (2007) discussed how the benefits of a college education transcend the many areas of one's adult life and how those benefits also positively affect families. Baum and Ma concluded:

> College-educated adults are more likely than others to be open to differing views of others, and the young children of adults with higher levels of education have higher cognitive skills and engage in more extracurricular, cultural, athletic, and religious activities than other children. In other words, participation in postsecondary education improves the quality of civil society (p. 8).

Most working adults in higher education understand the value of these and other benefits associated with obtaining a college education. Likewise, these benefits frequently serve as sources of motivation for college attendance. Kasworm (2003) identified three adult life-context motivators that prompt initial and continued enrollment in college. These motivators include "internal life developmental changes, external planning to create a different future life in their adult world, or a mixture of the two life-context motivators" (p. 6).

Working adults who remain motivated and who have persisted in order to complete a college education find themselves in a state of transition. According to Merriam (2005) all life transitions "hold the potential for learning and development" (p. 4). The transition from college for working adults is challenging as they attempt to compete for higher paying jobs, apply for promotions, or change careers. Arrival at this point of transition begs the question of how prepared working adults are to apply the skills and competencies that they developed in college, specifically, skills and competencies related to independent learning and self-directed learning. Investigation of how working adults plan to engage in independent learning and self-directed learning activities after graduation provides important insight for college administrators, faculty, and other

stakeholders regarding the influence of a college education on working adults who are preparing to pursue new career roles.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe future plans for engagement in independent learning and self-directed learning among working adults as they prepare to transition from college. The primary research question for this study was: What roles will independent learning and self-directed learning strategies have on the future career plans of working adults who are completing their baccalaureate degrees? The secondary question for this study was: How do working adults plan to apply independent learning and self-directed learning concepts in both professional and personal areas of their lives in order to become or remain lifelong learners?

Working adults find themselves at a point of transition upon completion of their college education and may find it challenging to progress toward becoming the *possible self* that they envisioned upon enrolling in college. Higher education faculty, administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders can benefit from understanding working adults' perceptions about how higher education has prepared them to engage in independent and self-directed learning activities after college. This is because it will be necessary for working adults to apply these strategies in order to refine or develop new skills and competencies so that they can compete for higher paying jobs, apply for promotions, or make career changes. Understanding of working adults' perceptions about the influence of higher education can also serve as the initial method to determine if undergraduate degree programs are adequately preparing working adults to be competitive in their careers. Finally, the findings of this study are transferable to similar settings, specifically other accelerated degree programs designed to meet the educational needs of working adults.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study was the concept of *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) which provides a method to explain the change that working adults are hoping to experience as a result of completing their college degrees. The concept of possible selves

was chosen for the theoretical framework because it provided a lens for analyzing interview transcripts about working adults' future career roles. Markus and Nurius described possible selves as follows:

> Possible selves derive from representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future. They are different and separate from the current or now selves, yet are intimately connected to them. Possible selves are, for example, not just any set of imagined roles or states of being. Instead they represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies… These possible selves are individualized or personalized, but they are also distinctly social. Many of these possible selves are the direct result of previous social comparisons in which the individual's own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others. What others are now, I could become (p. 954).

Furthermore, Markus and Nurius stated that possible selves are important because "they function as incentives for future behavior" and "provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self" (p. 955). Finally, possible selves could be considered "cognitive bridges between the present and future" (p. 961) and no matter what feelings they promote, *possible selves* can "provide a direction and impetus for action, change, and development" (p. 960).

Research Setting

The working adults (students) who participated in this study were pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Education degree at a research university in the mid-south. The degree is an accelerated baccalaureate degree program for working adults which required completion of 43 semester hours of general education courses and at least five or more years of full-time work experience prior to admission. All working adults were employed full-time while pursuing their degree. The degree is offered entirely via the Internet.

Working adults participating in this study were seniors enrolled in the *Professional Development Strategies* course which was required for the degree. Theories of independent learning and *self-directed learning* served as the foundation for course content. The definition of *independent learning* which was adopted for this course stated that "independent learning, in the context of the workplace, is learning that takes place

apart from other people" (Tobin, 2000, p. 12). The definition of self-directed learning stated that "self-directed learning implies that you are deciding for yourself what you will learn and how you will learn it" (Tobin, 2000, p. 12).

The decision was made to conduct the interviews in this course because it offered an opportunity for reflection among working adults as they approached completion of their baccalaureate degree. The interviews were conducted at the end of the semester after students had studied theories of independent and self-directed learning. The researchers were purposeful in scheduling interviews at this point as they wanted to provide an opportunity for working adults to fully understand those theories. The interviews provided an opportunity for working adults to reflect and consider plans for career growth and further education as they prepared to transition from college.

Literature Review

Academic Development for Adults in Higher Education

Donaldson (1999) offered a "Model of College Outcomes for Adults" based upon a review of the literature. His model grew out of the fact that most models which explained college outcomes focused on or were designed around developmental outcomes of traditional-age students. Donaldson's model included six components:

1. prior experiences;
2. orientating frameworks such as motivation, self-confidence, anvalue system;
3. adult's cognition or the declarative, procedural, and self-regulating knowledge structures and processes;
4. the "connecting classroom" as the central avenue for social engagement and for negotiating meaning for learning;
5. the life-world environment and the concurrent work, family, and community settings; and
6. the different types of learning outcomes experienced by adults (Donaldson, 1999, para. 1).

Donaldson (1999) stated that his model and its various components "suggest that adults may engage in new knowledge obtained in college in different and perhaps more immediately useful ways than do traditional-age students" (Donaldson, 1999, Conclusion, para. 1).

There has been considerable focus in recent years on the "interface, and transition, between education (including higher education) and the world of work" (Candy & Crebert, 1991, p. 589). Educational institutions have been called upon to place more emphasis on learning strategies designed to promote self-directed learning among students. Strategies for doing so include problem and project-based learning, open-learning strategies, and exposure to real or simulated situations from the workplace. Reconciliation of the two worlds, higher education and the workplace, must occur in order to ensure a smooth transition for students and graduates (Candy & Crebert, 1991).

A recent study by Makoe, Richardson, and Price (2008) investigated the *conceptions of learning* among adults who were new to the Open University, new to distance education, or new to a particular subject. Their factor analysis of a 60-item instrument yielded six factors regarding conceptions of learning among adults, including personal improvement, remembering information, active processing, increasing one's knowledge, seeing things differently, and critical thinking. Makoe, Richardson, and Price acknowledged that four of the conceptions (personal improvement, remembering information, increasing one's knowledge, and seeing things differently) had emerged in other studies. Therefore, they concluded that "adult learners embarking upon distance education hold distinctive concepts of learning, and this supports the idea that concepts of learning are culturally and contextually dependent" (Makoe, Richardson, & Price, 2008, p. 317).

Dynan, Cate, and Rhee (2008) found that courses which were designed to enhance student readiness for self-directed learning could in fact do so. Their students, like many others, entered courses unprepared for engagement in self-directed learning. However, when students modeled professor inquiry in a structured learning environment, their readiness for self-directed learning improved. Dynan, Cate, and Rhee concluded that the "skill of self-direction in learning is one that is essential for students and workers to remain lifelong learners" and "it is, at least in part, up to professors to encourage and develop this skill in their students so that they will be equipped for educational opportunities and challenges beyond their formal education" (Dynan, Cate, & Rhee, 2008, p. 100).

In order to determine if there were general areas of adult academic and intellectual development in college, Graham and Donaldson (1991) analyzed data from the ACT College Outcomes Survey for students age 27 and older. They identified five factors which related to adult students' academic and intellectual development, including broadening one's in

tellectual interests, critical thinking skills, enhancing study skills, understanding and applying science and technology, and career development. Graham and Donaldson stated that these five areas suggest outcomes of coursework by adults that could be used by faculty in developing programs and curriculum. Finally, Graham and Donaldson called upon faculty to look for methods to connect learning in the classroom with real life experiences in order to foster adult student development in college.

Adults in Transition

Transitions are not linear by nature, and adults tend to move in and out of transitions over their lifespan. Developmental and transformative transitions require active engagement by adults. Perhaps what contributes to the difference or difficulty associated with the transition from college to the world of work is the concept of the *possible self* for adult students (Merriam, 2005). In building upon the previously cited work by Markus and Nurius (1986), Rossiter (2007) stated that "possible selves are an individual's conceptions of future selves, including the selves that are ideal and hoped for, as well as those possible selves that one fears or dreads" (pp. 5-6). In relating possible selves to career transition, Plimmer and Schmidt (2007) stated:

Career theories need to shift toward more holistic approaches that focus on adaptability rather than decision making and to recognize such features of adult career change as the need to consider both obligations to others and the search for meaning. (p. 63)

How do we know that students have identified their personal selves and are ready to make decisions regarding their career? According to Super (1983), individuals must reach a level of readiness in order to make vocational and career decisions. Requirements for this level of readiness include:

1. sense of autonomy, time or future perspective, and self-esteem;
2. commitment to work or to a self-actualizing career (work salience);
3. career maturity in the sense that the term now is used bycounselors and career development specialists; and
4. search for a good match of developing interests, values, and aptitudes with those characterizing a field of work and other life career roles (Super, 1983, p. 562).

The four requirements above are presented in a logical order; however, from a psychological perspective they may occur in any order (Super, 1983).

Lifelong and Workplace Learning

Members of each profession have a "distinctive style of lifelong learning influenced by an individual background, a unique combination of character traits, and the special circumstances of his or her immediate environment" (Houle, 1980, p. 77). Patterns of engagement in lifelong learning or continuing education are affected by professional work settings, changes in career line during one's lifetime, quality of formal and informal work life, and the individual's age. Lifelong learning for professionals cannot be planned ahead as a basic curriculum with "course following monotonously upon course" because "patterns of individual life and personal desire are far too varied and lengthy for any such master plan to be useful" (Houle, 1980, p. 122).

Methodology

For this study, working adults (students) were invited to participate in a structured online interview regarding their future plans for engagement in independent and self-directed learning. Interviews were conducted during the fall and spring semesters during the *Professional Development Strategies* course. A total of 21 working adults participated, a number that equates to an overall response rate of 48% of working adults who enrolled in the course during the two semesters.

The online course management system provided a survey feature that was used to conduct the interviews with working adults. The interview questions were posted in the online course management system and working adults were sent both an email and course announcement inviting them to participate in the study. Working adults were told that participation in the study was optional and that they could withdraw at any time without it affecting their standing in the course or the degree program. The online course management system was password protected and, therefore, access to individual interview responses was available only to the participants and the instructor (lead researcher). Working adults could see only their own responses through the password protected online course management system. Working adults were given the opportunity to preview the interview questions and then return to the survey in the online course management system to provide their responses.

Anderson and Kanuka (2003) described the advantages that online interviews have over traditional face-to-face interviews. Those advantages included less time and expense to administer, simplification and improvement of accuracy for the data transcription process, and accessibility to geographically dispersed participants. However, Anderson and Kanuka cautioned that online interviews require greater skill because the interviewer and interviewee must communicate exclusively in a text-based environment; they must also have prior experience and be comfortable communicating via the Internet. Further, a degree of trust must exist between the interviewees and interviewer (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003).

Communication issues were minimal in this study because both the instructor (lead researcher) and working adults were accustomed to communicating exclusively in the text-based format of the online class, which also served as setting for the interviews. The researchers elected to conduct the interviews electronically given that the participants in the study were geographically dispersed throughout the state where the study was conducted. Likewise, the decision to complete interviews electronically is reasonable given Creswell's (2007) observation that new forms of qualitative data are appearing in the literature. The data collected through the online interviews conducted in this study contributed to the new forms of qualitative data that are emerging.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of the interviews, responses were downloaded from the online course management system and uploaded to NVivo 8 for qualitative data analysis. Moustakas' (1994) *Modification of the van Kaam Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data* was used to analyze the data after open coding had been conducted. This method was chosen because it incorporated investigator triangulation into the data analysis process. The researchers initially undertook the following steps in order to begin data analysis:

1. List and identify preliminary groups of the codes related to the development of independent and self-directed learning strategies among working adults.
2. Review each code to determine if it exemplified the development of independent and self-directed learning strategies among working adults. Label the code if it was found to have exemplified the experience.

3. Cluster or group codes by similarities.
4. Check codes against the entire transcript of each interview in order to determine that they were expressed explicitly in the transcript. Codes which were not explicitly expressed were reviewed to determine if they had some representation of the development of independent and self-directed learning strategies. Codes that were neither explicitly stated nor represented in the transcripts were removed.
5. Create descriptions of the development of independent and self-directed learning strategies by identifying excerpts in the transcripts.

The researchers then compared codes in order to determine consistency. Codes that were found to be inconsistent by the researchers were removed. Codes were then sorted into three primary categories of themes which provided the meaning and essence of the experience to represent the experience of developing independent and self-directed learning strategies among working adults.

Results

Three themes emerged from the analysis of data concerning students' plans for future engagement in independent learning and self-directed learning:

1. job-specific independent learning and self-directed learning plans,
2. career development independent learning and self-directed learning plans, and
3. plans for personal growth and development.

Job-Specific Plans

Three working adults spoke about how they planned to apply independent learning and self-directed learning strategies in their current job. One working adult indicated that she had developed plans to become a trainer in her field because her employer must have credentialed trainers on staff in order to retain accreditation. She also hoped that her company would sponsor attendance at the necessary institutes to become a trainer. Another participant referenced job duties and spoke about the necessity to stay current with applicable laws, standards, and regulations related

to her profession. She stated, "Self-directed learning will become the avenue for learning." These working adults seemed to identify and understand the necessity to be engaged in future independent learning and self-directed learning activities. Likewise, these working adults seem to be motivated to seek out and participate in such activities that related to their current jobs.

Career Development Plans

Some working adults viewed independent and self-directed learning in a broader sense and focused on their intended career paths rather than their current jobs. One working adult mentioned the necessity to stay current with software and legal processes in management in order to remain "marketable" to employers. Two other working adults seemed to be more global in their approach. One working adult discussed plans to use technology in order to participate in independent and self-directed learning activities. She stated, "I plan to continue my education online and I plan to be involved with conferences and webinars that help in the field [in which] I am employed." Another working adult focused on the desire to improve his professional presentation skills and even mentioned the possibility of joining Toastmasters or taking a specialized training program that would improve his skills for making executive presentations. These working adults appear to have plans for independent learning and self-directed learning linked to opportunities for career mobility. They plan to use independent learning and self-directed learning as vehicles to acquire and develop new skills that would improve their employability in their chosen professions.

Plans for Personal Growth and Development

Interestingly, some working adults did not focus on their current jobs or career plans when discussing their future plans for independent learning and self-directed learning. These working adults chose to focus on their own personal growth and development. One working adult said that she planned to read for her "own enjoyment," while two other working adults made statements which appear to focus on the application of knowledge to improve their quality of life. One working adult said that he planned to use the knowledge daily "to make progress and be successful." Finally, another working adult said, "I will continue to challenge myself to learn and apply the things that I have learned. I'm always reading and looking to learn something new." The plans of these working

adults speak to their desire to improve their quality of life; however, those plans may or may not have a direct influence on their current job or career plans.

Discussion

The three primary themes which were identified in interviews with these working adults included job-specific independent and self-directed learning plans, career development independent and self-directed learning plans, and plans for personal growth and development. All three plans were indicative of the possible selves that working adults hoped to become and included examples of the hopes, fears, and fantasies which Markus and Nurius (1986) described which must be managed when moving from one's current self to a possible self. The results of this study suggested that working adults in this study will utilize independent learning and self-directed learning strategies in order to realize and become the possible self that they envision. Likewise, the themes identified in this study suggest that the higher education experience has to some degree prepared working adults to transition from college. This is emblematic of the statement from Markus and Nurius (1986), "What others are now, I could become" (p. 954) which suggests that the higher education experience has served as a mechanism for enabling adults to transition from current self to possible self.

The data collected in this study represents the challenges and decisions that working adults face as they begin to transition from college. The data in this study indicates how working adults plan to apply independent learning and self-directed learning strategies in order to become competitive in their future career roles. Although this study indicated specific intentions among working adults related to job-specific, career development, and personal development plans, it does not entirely explain the total impact of higher education on working adults. However, the results of this study illustrate why it is important for higher education faculty, administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders to monitor the curriculum of undergraduate degree programs, specifically accelerated degree programs designed for working adults. This must be done in an attempt to ensure that course offerings promote the development of independent learning and self-directed learning skills that promote competitiveness in future career roles. The ability to ensure competitiveness will be critical as Collins (2006) stated that "self-directed learners are likely to be the clear winners in the 21st century economy" (p. 225).

A tendency toward lifelong learning is an acknowledged outcome of higher education. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated that the net result of a college education is crystallization of lifelong learning and intellectual development tendencies. For the working adults in this study, the crystallization of personal dispositions related to lifelong learning and intellectual development will be realized in various aspects of life and career. Integration of independent learning and self-directed learning strategies will assist students in recognizing and taking advantage of future job and career-related training opportunities, pursuing further education, and ensuring the improvement of the quality of life. Inclusion of the theories of independent learning and self-directed learning in the *Professional Development Strategies* course allowed working adults to both understand their current selves and develop future plans for lifelong learning and thus become their possible selves. Working adults must be able to develop their own disposition toward lifelong learning and embrace its use in both the career and personal areas of their lives.

The interview process provided working adults an opportunity to consider the benefits associated with a college education and refocus efforts toward becoming the *possible self* which they imagined upon enrollment in college. The interview process allowed working adults the opportunity to obtain what Markus and Nurius (1986) described as "an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self" (p. 955). Hopefully the working adults in this study will remain focused on becoming the possible self which they have imagined and over time successfully navigate the transition from college in order to realize the benefits of a college education. Courses within academic degree programs, specifically accelerated degree programs for working adults, can create reasonable expectations of the *possible self* that one envisions.

Conclusion

Accelerated degree programs designed for working adults meet a distinct need in American higher education. The success of these degree programs is demonstrated in part by the ability of working adults to manage the period of transition following college, their ability to transfer skills and competencies acquired through a college education, and finally their potential to make progress toward becoming the *possible selves* who they imagined upon enrollment in college.

As working adults prepare to transition from college they need opportunities to reflect on how they will apply the skills and strategies

which were developed through coursework. Many working adults enter college with the goal of completing a degree so that they can realize the benefits associated with a college education. Ideally working adults will indicate that they intend to engage in independent learning and self-directed learning activities after leaving college in order to realize those benefits. However, the degree and context in which working adults will engage in independent learning and self-directed learning activities remains unique to the individual.

Working adults must be prepared to transfer the skills and competencies obtained through college classes to future endeavors, specifically in the areas of their current job, their career, and personal growth. Lifelong learning should always transcend the areas of adult life and working adults who are college graduates should possess a tendency toward engagement in lifelong learning activities. The degree to which working adults can apply independent learning and self-directed learning strategies is indicative of their ability to apply the skills and competencies that they developed in college as well as their tendency toward becoming lifelong learners.

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