

Profile of an adult numeracy learner

Life



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PA is attending an adult numeracy class because he was sent by his employer. His employer completed his Level 2 National Test last year and is now insisting that all his employees follow suit. Non-completion will result in no promotion and no annual pay rise Initial assessment The key implications here are that PA is currently working at Entry Level 3 in most numeric areas. He should be able to increase his ability level and undertake Level 1 without too many problems.

However he needs to achieve Level 2 in order to gain his pay rise and promotion so this will put him under a lot of pressure and additional stress. According to Tennant (1988), PA, as a 36 year old, is in his midlife transitional period and will be "Adopting a changing time perspective and revising career plans"; this can be substantiated as PA is attending a numeracy course because of changes that are taking place at work. His employer has stated that the course must be completed and the Level 2 National Test must be passed or PA will not receive a promotion or his annual pay rise.

This is an unusual situation, as according to Charnley & Jones (1987), "Getting a pay rise as a direct result of tuition is extremely rare". Patterns of adult learning reflect class divisions in society and the different expectations and perceptions resulting from those divisions. Factors such as social class, gender and race impact on decisions to learn, as each is associated with particular cultural pressures and norms. According to Maslow (1973) once physiological needs have been met safety or security becomes predominant.

In other words, there is a need for self-preservation and a common concern for the future e. g. , will we be able to maintain our property and our job in order to provide shelter and food tomorrow and the next day? It is likely that this is the stage PA is at particularly as he knows that if he does not pass the relevant exams he will not get a pay rise or promotion. Peer and reference group influences can also be extremely strong (Evans, 2000). People who are habitual learners tend to belong to groups where education is seen as a normal activity.

They also tend to be involved in other forms of social participation. Non-learners belong to groups for whom engaging in learning is not part of normal behaviour - this is certainly true of PA who would not have engaged initially in numeracy learning through his own choice, and who, until recently would not engage in any social activity e. g. attending a school fund raising evening. Among male manual workers, for example, there is a strong culture of group conformity and solidarity.

To engage in education that is not immediately job-related is seen as what women or children do and is, therefore, not a masculine activity (McGivney, 1996). Social class continues to be the key discriminator in understanding participation in learning. Over half of all upper and middle class (AB) respondents are current or recent learners, compared with one-third of the skilled working class (C2) and one quarter of unskilled working class people and people on limited incomes (Gallup Survey 1996).

However, what and how much is learned can be influenced by the learner's motivation (NIACE, 1997) and, from my own experiences within the

post-compulsory education sector, I would have to agree with this. However, motivation to learn could be, in turn, influenced by an individual's emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking. PA's current, positive, beliefs about himself as a learner and the nature of learning appear to have had a marked influence on his motivation.

It could be said that the rich internal world of thoughts, beliefs, goals, and expectations for success or failure may enhance or interfere with the learner's quality of thinking and information processing. Motivational and emotional factors may also influence both the quality of his thinking and information processing as well as his individual motivation to learn. Positive emotions, such as curiosity, generally enhance motivation and facilitate learning and performance. Mild anxiety can also enhance learning and performance by focusing the learner's attention on a particular task.

However, intense negative emotions (e. g. , anxiety, panic, rage, insecurity) and related thoughts (e. g. , worrying about competence, ruminating about failure, fearing punishment, ridicule, or stigmatising labels) generally detract from motivation, interfere with learning, and contribute to low performance (Evans, 2000). This could be seen during PA's recent Numeracy Level 1 National Test when he experienced mild anxiety, but was extremely motivated and positive about the experience and his ability - and he passed first time!

Motivation is, therefore, not a simple issue, since individual motives and action are strongly affected by where people are located (socially, culturally and spatially) and the constraints or incentives that operate on their choices

(NIACE). PA blames his current lack of knowledge and qualifications in numeracy on his underachievement at school. If we look more closely it becomes apparent that, because of his age, PA would have been attending school during the 1970's and 1980's.

It was during this time that the early underachievement of boys first became evident, as large scale studies of children's achievements at Primary school pointed to the fact that girls consistently out-performed boys (Myers, 2000). Therefore there was a shift away from public concern about girls' achievement to boys' achievement, or underachievement, at school in exams. The concern about 'boys' underachievement' has been characterised in educational policy initiatives at national, local and school levels, most significantly in the imposition of the national literacy and numeracy strategy (Barrs and Pidgeon 1998).

However, overall improvements in achievement are often ignored and gender differences are ascribed to the detrimental effects of 'the feminisation of teaching' (Epstein et al, 1998). The concern for boys' underachievement was highlighted by Murphy and Elwood (1998) who argued that improvement in female achievement is not shared by girls from low socio-economic backgrounds and may not be apparent in some subjects. Similarly, Epstein et al (1998) questioned the global application of the category of boys' underachievement' by asking, '... hich boys? At what stages of education? ... according to what criteria? ' We could say that by definition, gender roles are the social norms that dictate what is socially appropriate male and female behaviour (Tobias, 1997), and are part of the socialisation process of human beings. These roles are also influenced by <https://assignbuster.com/profile-of-an-adult-numeracy-learner/>

each individual's cultural and economic background (Tobias, 1997). It could be said that gender roles influence women and men in virtually every area of life, including family and occupation.

This is certainly true for PA, who feels that it is his duty to provide for his family and to have the greater earning capacity regardless of his lack of formal qualifications. Everyone recognises that there are significant differences between male and female, even if they are only physical.

However, others see not only the physical but also the social, emotional and intellectual differences. In addition there is belief that, by the age of sixteen, females have matured more than boys by up to as much as two years (Skelton, 2001).

This could mean that girls have an advantage by viewing exams in a far more responsible way and recognising the seriousness and importance of the academic and career choices in the future. PA agrees with this as he did not take his schooling seriously and, quite possibly due to the fact that PA knew he was underachieving and he was unmotivated, he left school at 16 with no formal qualifications. He has only recently started to regret his actions. The figures from the 1996 Gallup survey could also be used to illustrate this as more adult men (25%) are currently learning compare to adult women (21%).

Now that he is within the adult education sector, PA appears to see learning numeracy as a process of liberation. This may be because PA now feels that the educational process is not static and that his learning is a cultural action for freedom. It no longer involves one person teaching another, but rather

people working with each other to ensure each individual reaches their potential. This was also the understanding of Bruner (1973), who suggested that learning is an active process in which learners construct new ideas based upon their current / past knowledge.

Adult learners also appear to be more receptive to learning if there is a context to the learning. Teaching adults numerical skills which 'transfer' means exposing " students to different contexts which have the same mathematical content" (Rees and Barr, 1984) e. g. electrical work, decorating, shopping or linked to employment. This is certainly true for PA who works better, and appears to have a deeper understanding, when he can see there is a relevance and context to what he is learning.

According to Bruner (1973), the teacher and student should engage in active dialogue and the task of the teacher is to translate information to be learned into a format appropriate to the learners' current state of understanding.

During numeracy there are so many ways of doing and explaining one thing, one example would be the various descriptions used for the actions of 'add' and 'subtract', another example would be the various methods of teaching long multiplication.

In addition, Bruner (1973) stated that the curriculum should be organised in a spiral manner, so that the student continually builds upon what they have already learned, " The concept of prime numbers appears to be more readily grasped when the learner, through construction, discovers certain handfuls of beans cannot be laid out in completed rows and columns" (Bruner, 1973).

When working with PA, as for all my learners, I ensure that I question his

current method and understanding of each numeric topic before I go into the topic in depth.

This way I am constantly building on his current knowledge and understanding. A high percentage of the learners at Rochford Adult Community College are White British and PA falls into this group, 'Rochford has one of the lowest ethnic minority populations, well below half of the national average' (Rochford District Council, 2005). However, according to the Home Office's Commission for Racial Equality, 2002, the United Kingdom is a changing society and these socio-economic changes are reflected in our growing cultural and ethnic diversity.

These changes bring many gains, but sometimes there are tensions and divisions that may lead to fracturing within, and across, local areas and communities. However, whatever the nature of community divisions, the basis of the solution is often the same; community cohesion. The Home Office's Commission for Racial Equality, 2002, suggests that community cohesion may be achieved by raising awareness and understanding and developing shared values with mutual trust and respect.

The Home Office describes a cohesive community as one where there is common vision, a sense of belonging, where diversity is valued and where there are similar life opportunities with "... strong and positive relationships being developed between people from different backgrounds... in colleges and in schools..." (www. homeoffice. gov. uk, 2003). This is also the ethos of Essex County Council and consequently Castle Point and Rochford Adult Community College (www. essexcc. gov. uk, 2005).