

DROPOUT OF ADULT LEARNERS RETURNING TO UNIVERSITY: INTERACTIONS OF MOTIVATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to highlight how motivational and contextual factors interact together to explain the dropout process of adult learners returning to university. From seventeen semi-structured interviews, four main interactions have been identified between entry motives, dimensions of perceived value and expectancy, life and learning contexts. The findings from this study indicated that studying dropout of adult learners with motivational factors enables a deeper understanding taking into account the different commitments of this population and the motivational dynamic.*

Key words: *adult learner, dropout, expectancy-value, life and learning contexts, qualitative interactions.*

1. Introduction

Even if the number of adults returning to university is growing up, [11] a lot of them dropout before diploma completion. Many obstacles, to which this population is confronted, may have an impact on the successful completion of their program: adult learners have personal, family and professional commitments on top of their educational commitment. [29] As few research explored this population, the interactions between these specific contextual and motivational variables used to predict the engagement of traditional students should be examined thoroughly. [33] Moreover, although a lot of researchers showed the relevance of the

expectancy-value model for traditional students, [17] [28] few observed that this paradigm is also relevant for studying motivation of adult learners returning to university. [5] Given these considerations, the purpose of this article is to propose a motivational and environmental modelling built from seventeen semi-structured interviews and to explain the interactions between the different factors leading to dropout.

2. Theoretical Development

Before explaining how the expectancy-value model can be useful to understand the motivational dynamic of adult students, we focus on personal characteristics of

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these adults and the reasons why they engage in a university program. Afterwards, we consider the different contexts in which they are committed and that can act as an obstacle or a stimulus on persistence. Finally, the specific expectations of this population concerning the learning situation are discussed.

2.1. Individual Factors: Personal Characteristics and Entry Motives

The literature distinguishes these adults called 'nontraditional students' [6] from traditional students. The first ones are 25 and older and have interrupted their education for at least one year, [22] [23] They are more likely to be married and have family and professional responsibilities. [3] Given their life trajectory, several authors showed that age, previous educational training, and family and professional status and health can have an impact on the non perseverance in the attended program. [25] Even if dropout may take different forms, it is generally defined as a departure from the university without adult learner achieving his degree. [31]

Adult learners engaged in a program have personal and/or professional goals. Based on the taxonomy of entry motives for nontraditional students [8], researchers showed that epistemic (for the knowledge itself), self promotional (for the self-image), vocational (for a professional project) and professional operator (to acquire professional competencies) reasons are the most quoted reasons to explain their enrolment in an academic program. [35]

2.2. Expectancy-Value Theory

The major concepts of expectancy and value proposed by Eccles and Wigfield, [16] [17] [36] in their model (see those references for a full explanation) were used to understand how motivational and

contextual factors interact in the dropout of adult learners returning to university.

According to these two authors, the strongest determinants of achievement behaviours, namely task choice, self-regulated learning, perseverance and performance, are meaning and value taken by the task (task value) and individual's judgments about his/her likelihood of success (expectancy).

The task value refers to four distinct components: attainment value, interest value, utility value and cost. *Attainment value*, which is closely related to the self-promotional motive, [8] refers to the perceived importance for the self-image of doing well on a task. The task will be considered important if the individual perceives his/her engagement in the task as central to his own sense of himself/herself. In the context of adult learners and according to the identity dynamic theory, their engagement depends on the relevance and efficiency of the educational program to reach their identity goals. [4]

Interest or intrinsic value is the enjoyment or pleasure felt by the individual performing the activity or the subjective interest that he/she has developed in the subject. This component is related to the concept of intrinsic motivation as defined by Deci and his colleagues [14] and to the concept of epistemic motive. [8]

Utility value, the more extrinsic component, is determined by how well a task relates to individual's future goals, such as acquiring a specific competence or degree linked to vocational and professional operator entry motives of the adult student. [2] [8] [34] Even if the individual is not intrinsically motivated for the task, the latter can have positive value because it facilitates important future goals of the individual.

The last component of value concerns the *cost* which is a critical component of value, in particular for adult learners who withdraw their academic program. The cost's conceptualization refers to the

negative aspects of engaging in the task which include the amount of effort needed to succeed in the task, the time required for training that could be used for other valued activities and the emotional aspects such as performance anxiety and fear of failure. [12] Furthermore, in the adult learner's literature, a lot of authors studied costs dimension through the question of barriers, sacrifices, time management, [1] [13] [24] [25] and costs/benefits ratio. [20]

Finally, regarding their expectancy, they have had past experiences of higher education but for most, those experiences are quite old [29] and were not always positive. So, those experiences may raise questions such as "Am I too old to learn?" or "Am I able to succeed?" [7] [26]

2.3. Life and Learning Contexts

Adult learners returning to university are confronted with many obstacles that can have a negative impact on the successful completion of their program. They have personal, family and professional commitments preceding their educational engagement. [29] The balancing between these multiple roles and demands is a source of stress. [21]

A few authors examined the different spheres of life which may constitute a source of support for these nontraditional students. Castles [10] observed three types of support emerging from the adult learner's literature and playing a role in their perseverance: family, friends or colleagues and institution support. As for Kember, [24] he studied coping strategies implemented by nontraditional students to integrate part-time study with family, work and social obligations. Whilst the influence of friends and family seems usually less marked, work is the greatest competitor with study in terms of time allocation.

Other authors studied this question in terms of obstacles. Cross [13] classified barriers in situational (from one's situation in life at a given time), institutional (practices and procedures that cut down the

adult learners' participation in educational program) and dispositional (attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner) categories. McGivney [25] summarised the most frequent reasons quoted by nontraditional students to explain their dropout such as time pressure and time management, a lack of consideration of their skills and experiences and their outside commitments by institution.

In a general way, these obstacles are closely linked to concepts of expectancy and value. In particular, the question of barriers refers to the component of cost.

The perception of adult students on educational practices at the course level is another important factor which may act as a barrier or as a stimulus for learning. Adult learners expect their experiences to be taken into account by instructors [25] and to be able to transfer their newly acquired knowledge to their work [15]. This refers to adequacy between the learning situation and the professional context [19] and is closely related to how much the learning environment enhances the utility value depending on reasons for which the adult engaged in a degree.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how motivational and contextual factors interact to explain the adult learners' dropout.

3. Method

Participants in this qualitative study were selected from a sample of adults from Belgian French-speaking community that had filled in a questionnaire about participation in university programs. After being contacted by email and agreeing to participate to our study, seventeen of them were interviewed on phone. Dropout adult students were interviewed during term 2 of 2008-2009 academic year. Interviews lasted about 45 minutes.

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted from an interview guide containing questions leaned on a literacy review. Then, verbatim transcriptions are

been analyzed with the NVivo8 software which allows a thematic analysis. After several readings, data were mainly coded by deduction. In a second time, with an inter-coder, we developed an analysis guide and we revised the passages interviews and codes which were reduced to avoid overlapping.

Four general themes, each being composed of several nodes, were: individual characteristics, motivational factors, contexts and consequences in terms of motivational behaviors. In this paper, we shall focus on individual characteristics, the interest, utility and cost components of value and expectancy, the vocational, family environments and learning context, and finally the dropout situation and future educational project; each related respectively to the four general themes.

To analyse this qualitative material, we used text research, coding and matrix coding queries in NVivo8. These results were analysed in relation to the verbatim

transcriptions and led to two types of observations. Firstly, the results allowed us to understand thoroughly the content of each node in relation to certain attributes. Secondly, we observed the direct and indirect relationships between all nodes. This leads us to build a modelling for each case and thereafter a general modelling, that will be explained in the next section.

4. A Modelling of Motivational and Contextual Factors in Adult Learners' Dropout

From the analyses of the seventeen interviews, we propose a modelling of the interactions of motivational and contextual factors leading to adult learners' dropout (see figure 1).

As the model of expectancy-value predicts it, [16] [17] [36] we observed that a negative perception of the value and the expectancy had an impact on the dropout's decision.

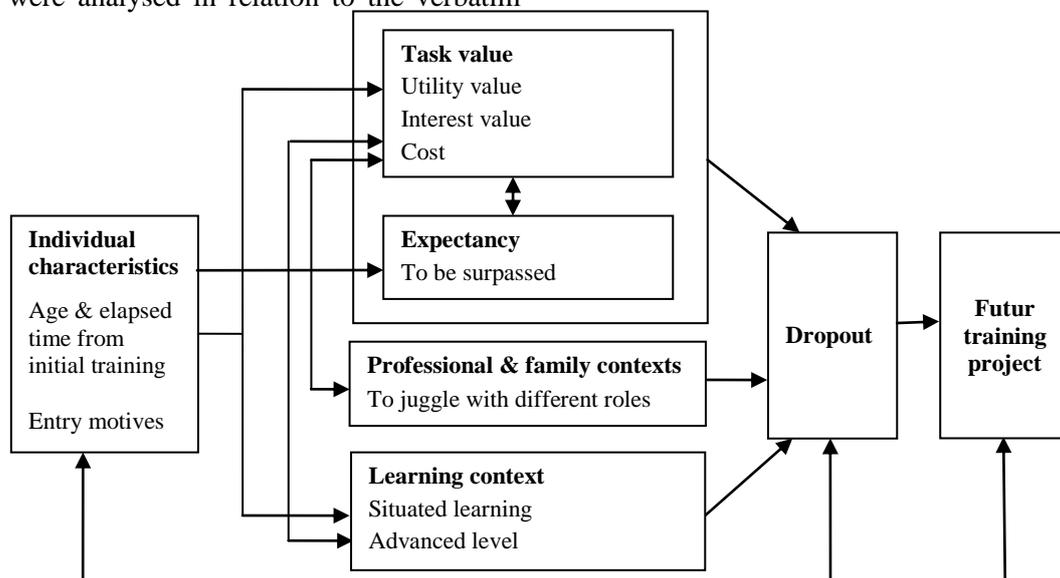


Fig. 1. *Modelling of motivational and contextual factors in adult learners' dropout*

Regarding individual characteristics, the adult students' age and the elapsed time from their initial training constituted a negative influence on their expectancy. We

also found that a low expectancy was partly due to a perception of high cost. In addition, the cost, being related to the barriers in professional and family

contexts, was too excessive and predominant for the interviewed adults regarding the others factors. This observation is in line with the findings of several authors, [10] [13] [21] [24] [25] They showed that adult students who decided to put an end to their engagement in a degree had to cope with many obstacles in different life spheres.

Moreover, the perception that adult has of utility value and educational practices, themselves based on entry motives, was very critical in the observed phenomenon and interact together. Indeed, adult learners expect their experiences are taken into account by instructors [25] and to be able to transfer their newly acquired knowledge to professional context. [15]

Furthermore, the interviewed adult learners were in an advanced academic program which required a great investment in terms of time and effort. Consequently, the learning context represented a high cost for these adult students who were engaged in different roles and had limited time.

Finally, if an adult student can give up his training due to cost it represents for him, it does not mean he achieved his goals. Therefore, according to his entry motives and/or his perception of the task value and his expectancy, he can evoke his intention to reengage later in the educational program.

5. Illustration

The objective of this section is to illustrate how two participants explain these interactions in their discourse

The first was a man aged 42 years, working full-time, married at the time of his engagement in training with two children. He enrolled for a pedagogical certificate to be appointed to a position. Moreover, this certificate is required in the early years of practice.

A first observed interaction implied his entry motives, perception of the utility value and learning context. Once he was engaged into the academic program, these

dictated (by obligation or pressure) and vocational motives influenced partially the perceived value of this program. While the intrinsic value was small, the utility of degree was high. However, his perception of the course's utility value was low as the learning situation did not meet his entry motives. This adult student perceived that theoretical content wasn't relevant to his professional practice: *'But here it did not meet my expectations, because for me it was not in tune with the practical realities, whether the history of rating scales or anything else'* (verbatim lines corresponding to the participants' affirmations). Nevertheless, this need to obtain a diploma despite a lack of motivation led this individual to consider re-engaging in the same program. For the next year, he hoped to have less workload for his job and more free time for his degree.

The second case was also a man aged 54 years working full-time. When he engaged to the degree, he was married. His children no longer lived at home. He engaged in a certificate because he was pushed up by his bosses. He also wanted to acquire professional competences because he had been transferred from units within his company.

The key reason for his withdrawal, which happened before the June session, concerned the professional context. He had a heavy workload and his bosses considered he couldn't take time for training on working time. On the other hand, the individual regretted not having a family support which refused him to take time for training on leisure time. This example points out that the support and the lack of time in family and vocational spheres can imply a high cost for the adult engaged in a degree. As the perceived cost was excessive, he chose to drop out his training. With those contextual characteristics, the person said *'At an advanced age and with my commitments in a lot of things, it's a big challenge to say that I will pass exams and'* (verbatim lines

corresponding to the participants' affirmations). In other words, the expectancy can be low because adult learner felt too old and had the impression to be surpassed with his responsibilities in live contexts.

One last interaction took place between the learning context, cost and expectancy. The course material being of an advanced level, he judged it too difficult. His age and the years elapsed from initial training had also a negative impact on his expectancy. About the learning situation and his expectancy, he said *'I had this exam period and I know very well that we need a kind of mental gymnastics [...]. I think when we gave it up and we start it again 30 years later, we no longer have the gym [...]. But I think the exam that I took, I managed to do half the points or I had a 12 or something like that. And I was already very happy because it was well beyond my expectations'* (verbatim lines corresponding to the participants' affirmations). Finally, this specific learning context required to spend time and effort, which was not possible for the person, this fact reinforced his low expectancy.

6. Conclusion

Until now, a lot of authors focused on the factors that can be a stimulus or an obstacle on the perseverance or dropout of adult engaged in a training program. The objective of this research was to study the dropout phenomenon of adult learners to university starting from motivational processes involved and including the barriers met by this population. In other words, we wanted to understand how those obstacles interfered in the motivation of adult students towards their academic degree. Through the identification of interactions, we saw how the entry motives and contextual variables modulated the training's value and therefore the motivation of the nontraditional student.

In a general way, the seventeen interviewed adult learners who dropped

out said they were engaged for extrinsic reasons. Some authors stressed the importance of the instrumental nature for the adults' training. [2] But knowing the positive effect of intrinsic motivation on perseverance, we can wonder if both an intrinsic and extrinsic motivation would not be beneficial for the perseverance of this population, especially with the cost required by an academic program. An intrinsic motivation could also modulate the cost perception and have a positive impact on learning behaviours.

In the illustration section, the importance of professional and family contexts related to cost on the dropout have been emphasized. The personal characteristics have been less discussed by adults. They might have unconsciously used the self-serving bias which consists in attributing our success to internal factors and failures to situational factors to maintain a positive self image. [27] Shields [32] also observed that adult learners resorted to an external attribution bias to explain their withdrawal.

Despite this latter consideration, the obstacles faced by adults returning to university are indeed real. Thenceforth, why do some adults overcome these difficulties and succeed in their degree and others not? The first ones use probably more coping strategies in their life contexts and reappraise thus differently their educational engagement.

More research is needed to answer those questions. It would be interesting to compare the results of this study with those obtained from adults who successfully completed their degree.

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