

Adults as Learners - From Anxiety to Empowerment

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Introduction

Anxieties associated with the inability to learn are, in my experience, widespread amongst adult students. Some groups are more vulnerable to this than others. McGivney (1991) cites women, ethnic minorities and students with special needs in particular. In my student group (Adults with Mental Health Need) I come across particularly high anxiety levels, caused by illness and poor self-image as well as by other factors common to us all. This tendency is mirrored to a lesser degree in my classes for the general public. Why is this, and what can be done about it?

By combining research and practical experience, this short paper will examine some of the factors which can cause anxieties, and suggest ways of working towards an empowering educational environment.

The Anxiety Trap

Why is anxiety damaging? Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) put it succinctly: 'Anxiety causes students to consistently underperform. They fall back on earlier, cruder ways of seeing the world. Concentration and memory are impaired, and hence all the tools for learning are gone.'

Anxiety in adult learners stems mainly from their previous life experiences, and expectations / assumptions they make as a result. Adults tend to fear failure, yet conversely can have high, even unrealistic expectations of themselves. They may have had negative experiences of education in the past, and assume that Adult Education will provide the same disempowering learning environment as that experienced by many at school. This expectation of disempowerment is cited by Saddington (1992) as one of the key issues in feelings of anxiety and poor self-confidence. Construct an environment in which a student can feel in control of her learning, and much of the stress is reduced.

Towards Empowerment

First Impressions

First impressions can do much either to allay or exacerbate anxieties. Creating a pleasant physical environment is the first step - room-layout, temperature, light levels can all make a difference. Decor, music and scented oils add extra ambience and I have found these to be especially helpful with nervous students.

A welcoming, relaxed social environment is equally important. Allowing time and opportunity for social interaction to occur and build is helpful in boosting the 'comfort zone' for students and encourages the group to bond. McGivney (1991) also shows that it is vital to establish a 'safe environment in which students can formulate and express new thoughts and opinions, try out new skills, take risks.' Providing a sensitive level of support and intervention, and being watchful to discourage prejudicial or aggressive behaviour within the group will help in achieving this.

Learner Experience - the hidden resource

Adult students' life experience provides them with a rich source of knowledge which can help them in achieving successful learning in new fields. Ignore this hidden resource and the teacher risks alienating her students and undermining their ability to learn, thus increasing stress and anxiety. As Knowles (1970) writes: 'To an adult, his experience ... defines who he is, establishes his self-identity... he has a deep investment in the value of his experience. When he finds himself in a situation where his experience is undervalued or ignored, it is not just his experience that is being rejected.'

Thus new ideas or skills can be referred to within the context of existing knowledge. This not only anchors and contextualises the new information, but also improves the student's understanding and memory retention.

Finding familiar points of reference for students reduces anxiety and makes the subject accessible, encouraging students to feel a sense of ownership. Once an access point is established, learning will be more likely to take place. As a teacher of Eastern Dance in my leisure time, I often use well-known Western rather than Eastern music as a practice aid in teaching interpretation, because students can more easily utilise rhythms and emotions in music with which they are familiar.

The Negotiated Learning Experience - Empowerment at work

When adults are in a situation over which they have neither input nor control, their anxiety levels will naturally rise. Establishing an effective dialogue - i.e. negotiating - with students over the direction, content, and aims of a course, as well as the way it is delivered, will allow a more equal division of power and responsibility between student and tutor. This is helpful to the anxious student, who is likely to feel more confident, empowered and motivated as a result of such consultation.

Negotiated learning also has other advantages:

'Negotiating with the adult learner as much as possible of the content and process of their learning ensures that previous experience and present intentions can be integrated in a coherently planned educational process.' (McGivney, 1991)

Thus getting to know your students, their existing knowledge and future aspirations, ensures that course content is relevant, its goals appropriate. This is vital, as evidence suggests that performance improves in adult learners when they can clearly see the relevance of a programme of study. (McGivney, 1991).

In my workplace we have recently introduced a tutorial system to encourage students to be involved in all aspects of their learning. Motivation and application have improved as a result, and are reflected in higher standards of work, suggesting that learning is more effective in this negotiated environment. It has also helped me to target my own teaching delivery (pace, style, etc) more effectively.

Learning by Doing - an Antidote to Anxiety

It is particularly important for the nervous student to be fully engaged in his or her studies, as this will leave less room for anxious thoughts to distract and worry. Most sources agree that active involvement produces the best learning results in all students, and recommend using teaching methods which promote participation, interaction, and experiential learning. Learning from experience, or learning by doing, is a complex process requiring theory and practice to be combined and interrelated. As Gibbs (1988) explains: 'It is not enough just to do, and neither is it enough just to think. Nor is it enough simply

to do and think. Learning ... must involve links between the doing and the thinking'. In practical terms, this means that all concrete experiences benefit from being backed up by theory, and these two need to be linked by a stage of discussion/planning beforehand, and then reflection/extrapolation afterwards.

I frequently use demonstration as a method of teaching, but I have found it of limited use unless combined with practical application (and this must be as soon as possible after the demonstration) and critical reflection. My students' understanding is enhanced by being actively involved in the demonstration through questions, problem-solving, and discussion. Moreover, I find that the inclusion of theory via worksheets, books etc alongside a demonstration, allows the students to become informed observers and participants rather than uninformed bystanders. The end result of linking doing and thinking in these ways is better learning. Students feel more confident because they are learning from several different angles at once, rather than having to rely on memory alone, and are able to gain as much practical experience as they wish, and at every relevant stage.

Signposts to Achievement

All students, and particularly anxious ones, benefit greatly from being able to see where they are going, and whether they are getting there. Thus, at the beginning of a course, clear and appropriate goals and intermediate targets should be set, preferably in negotiation with the student; at the same an appropriate system of evaluation should be designed to measure and evidence progress. For a student, assessment is vital to consolidate the learning process. It provides her with both milemarker (how far have I come? how far have I to go?) and signpost (where to now? which route do I take?) from A to B. Without this overview, students will lose their way, and, with it, their motivation.

Assessment methods should be enabling, providing students with opportunities to demonstrate what they can do and what they know (Gibbs and Habeshaw). Students need to be as involved as possible in its implementation. There are many methods of student evaluation. However, McGivney recommends personally-referenced assessment systems as being best for motivating and enabling adult students. These systems are related to individual starting points and are integrated with personal action plans. They therefore allow an opportunity for all students to achieve success, because goals will be relevant to each person's abilities. Students are involved in measuring their own progress through such methods as self-assessment sheets, course diaries and tutorials. Norm-referenced methods (i.e. where progress is measured by comparison to a set standard of achievement) such as exams are more anxiety-provoking and less empowering, and therefore do not serve anxious students well. Certainly students in my workplace respond well to being involved in their own assessments. Since the introduction of our tutorial system they have commented on feeling more in control of their education and better able to recognise themselves as learners.

The Fear of Feedback

Within any assessment method, it is important to pay attention to when and how feedback is given, as receiving feedback can be perceived as a fearful experience. Gibbs and Habeshaw point out that feedback needs to be prompt if it is to be useful, and also needs to be anchored in a practical context - i.e. what might be done differently another time. Encouraging students to give feedback first, observing tact and respect, being specific rather than general, descriptive rather than judgmental, balancing positive points with constructive advice, and restricting comments to spheres which are within a students' control are all points which will reduce the students' worries of being disempowered and undermined. These are points which I have tried to build in to the tutorial system in my work place. Each

tutorial is based around a series of questions which are designed to draw positive comments from students and tutors alike, leading to a mutually agreed action plan. I feel it is most important for students to share responsibility and control of their assessment if they are to come to terms with receiving feedback as a useful experience. This shared power-base will also help to differentiate the process from less positive experiences of assessment which a student may have had in the past.

In addition to tutorials, I am currently designing simple questionnaires to gain student-feedback on my own teaching styles and workshop practices - after all, we are all learning together, and it is helpful and reassuring for students if they understand this.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that student anxiety is a key cause of failure to learn, and has shown that there are many ways to tackle this problem. Adapting teaching environment, teaching methods and class structures, involving students in planning and negotiating their own learning, encouraging self-assessment, and establishing equality between teacher and student will all help towards empowering the student and improving the classroom experience for all concerned.

The uniting factor in all these points is a shift in emphasis from the teacher to the learner, from the process of teaching to that of learning. Adult educators must increasingly encourage their students to exert control over their learning, and emphasise the important role that learning through experience plays in allowing students to 'transform external facts into internal understanding.' (Mulligan and Griffin, 1992) Learning to share power more equally within the classroom environment, to mix 'facilitator authority with learner autonomy' (Heron 1970) is the key to moving adult learners from a position of anxiety and failure to one of empowerment and achievement, an aim which is surely desired by students and teachers alike.

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