

# Learning Experiences of Post Graduate Students Completing A Course at the Hellenic Open University

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**Abstract** – The present study focuses on adult trainees' reflection upon their personal course of action and development on completing the five-year long post graduate program: "Adult Education" at the Hellenic Open University. Reflecting back, students were asked to evaluate their experience. It seems that learning within the research context is positively experienced. The positive aspects are relevant to how participants in this study managed to communicate with others when they were asked to express their own assumptions and reflect feelings and thoughts in a context of critical thinking and open dialogue.

**Keywords** – Adult Education, Coping, Critical Reflection, Incentives, Learning Experience, Self-efficacy, Stress.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since 2000 the Hellenic Open University offers programs for adult students, using the blended methodology – partly distance learning along with classroom meetings every 40 days during the academic year. One of the post graduate programs is 'Adult Education', a five years program consisting of four modules/ courses and a thesis. Courses are supposed to lead to a positive appraisal, should promote positive outcomes and good morale by facilitating effective problem-focused solving [10]. A threat appraisal, with its distressing emotions, may impede problem-focused coping, thereby increasing the possibility of poor problem solution. When faced with the academic demands of a post-graduate degree after several years of absence from formal educational settings, adult trainees report experiencing stress and coping, as an experience leading to two decision-making processes. When the appraisal is threatening, they tend to dropout of the training course, especially during the last year of the research and thesis submission. On the other hand, if the appraisal is positive, they complete their training course, submit to the program demands, and transform their attitude.

Post graduate students often report that *stress* and *coping* are usually part of the learning process, even though programs addressed to adults should be designed according to their availability to manage assignments and focused on reducing their stress. However, adult trainees' stress seems to originate from educational demands and environmental events, psychosocial processes and physiological responses. Stress is conceptualised as the relationship between the person and the environment, when the person appraises that the environment exceeds his/her resources and endangers his/her well-being [10].

Stress results from change, uncertainty and imbalance between posed demands and the individual's response to them [18]. Worrall and May [27] argue that the present emotional state can be understood as being influenced by four sources: a) situational disturbances being generated in an episode, b) anticipatory stress associated with imagined scenarios of the event to be experienced; c) the day to day or ambient life stresses and d) the core stress which can be defined as comprising the unresolved residues of past negative experiences from all ages of the person's life history.

*Cognitive appraisal* and *coping* are critical mediators of stressful, person-environment relationships. Cognitive appraisal is a process during which a person evaluates how a particular encounter with the environment relates to his/her well-being [9]. Coping is a mechanism employed in dealing with stress, designed to reduce its aversive qualities while serving two major functions: problem solving and regulating emotions [1; 9; 10]. Problem-focused coping includes aggressive interpersonal as well as rational efforts to problem-solve. Emotion-focused coping includes distancing, self-control, social support, escape avoidance, accepting responsibility and positive reappraisal.

Fishbein and Ajzen [8] argue that *attitudes* are defined as the sum of the beliefs about particular behaviours and the corresponding evaluations of the consequences of that behaviour. The subjective norm consists of the expectations of other important persons' opinions (normative beliefs) and the degree to which an individual is inclined to agree with these opinions, meaning his/her motivation to comply with [7]. Measurements of attitudes and subjective norms can take different forms. In attitudes measurement all the advantages and disadvantages of a given behaviour are included. In social norms a distinction is made between direct social influences, that is what other people expect, and indirect influences, meaning what other people do themselves (modelling). These psychological constructs are directly linked with Mezirow's [22] theory of assumptions and dysfunctional beliefs.

According to the Transformative Learning Theory during our development (from early childhood through adulthood and up to mature age) our experiences, social norms, stereotypes and interaction with our social and cultural environment, assist us in integrating values, attitudes and standards. We adopt the beliefs and attitudes that we consider as our own choices and ideas, when in fact they are a gradual and rather uncritical or 'convenient' construction of 'borrowed' cognitive, socio-cultural and

psychological assumptions. Mezirow [22] points out that the assessment of our views, beliefs, values – in other words of our certainties – as well as our emotions, depend on the context - biographical, historical, cultural - in which they are embedded. However, adults are often confronted with the realisation that a particular belief or practice which has been proved as effective, it may fail to provide a solution when we need to deal with a sudden experience, a *disorienting dilemma* as defined by Mezirow [22; 23; 24]. Such a dilemma can be a great starting point for critical reflection, in order to determine whether our beliefs are still valid and functional, or whether our values, perceptions and attitudes towards new events and experiences need to be reviewed and placed in new contexts [19].

Therefore, Mezirow [24] supports that the transformative process of beliefs and perceptions begins directly with a disorienting dilemma, which Kokkos et al [15] define as an internal crisis of individuals, a sense that "something is wrong" in how they add meaning to situations, which forces them to reassess their assumptions. Thus, during a learning process, which does not only aim in instrumental but also in transformative learning, it is primarily needed to be detected whether learners are facing a disorienting dilemma, which they themselves recognise as such and therefore are willing to engage in a process of critically reflecting upon it. The following step is the reassessment of their assumptions in order to transform the "reference framework", meaning the entire thinking structure. Their coping appraisal over the course of study will be affected by adult trainees' *self-efficacy*, defined as the estimation of the effectiveness to reach a desired goal [15]. Self-efficacy expectations are based on previous experiences, on observation of others, on persuasion by others (verbal persuasion, e.g. tutor positive feedback and encouragement or encouragement by fellow students) and on physiological reactions (e.g. stress exhibited in exam situations). Performance accomplishments are the most influential sources of efficacy, followed by vicarious experiences [3].

Expectations, stress level and self-efficacy estimation may affect an adult trainee's decision to dropout of a training course as a response to the disorienting dilemma. Bandura [3] would argue that the decision over the course of action would be determined by *expectancies and incentives*. Expectancies can be environmental cues (beliefs about how events are connected-what leads to what), outcome (that is consequences of one's own actions), and efficacy expectancies about one's own competence to perform the behaviour needed to influence outcomes. Incentives are defined as the value of a particular object or outcome, in this case being the educational achievement and the appraisal and approval of others. Consequently, the behaviour of the trainee adult as a response to the disorienting dilemma will be regulated by consequences or else reinforcements, but only to the extent that these consequences are interpreted and understood by the individual [26].

In order for an adult learner to successfully complete a course (Behaviour) for professional reasons (Outcome),

he/she must believe both, that his/her career will benefit (Outcome expectations) and that he/she is capable of completing the course (Efficacy expectations). Self-efficacy relates to beliefs about capabilities of performing specific tasks in particular situations and it does not refer to a personality characteristic or a global trait that operates independently of contextual factors. Individuals' efficacy expectations will vary greatly, depending on the particular task and context, which confronts them. It is therefore inappropriate to characterise a person as having "low" or "high" efficacy, without reference to the specific behaviour and the circumstance with which the efficacy judgment is associated. Bandura [3; 4] argues that perceived efficacy influences all aspects of behaviour, including the acquisition of new behaviour, inhibition of existing behaviour and disinhibition of behaviour.

Self-efficacy also affects people's choices of behavioural settings, the amount of effort they put on a task and the length of time they will persist in the face of obstacles. Finally, self-efficacy affects people's emotional reactions, such as anxiety, distress and thought patterns. Efficacy expectations vary along the dimensions of magnitude, strength and generality. Magnitude refers to the ordering of tasks by difficulty level. Strength refers to a probabilistic judgment, of how certain is one of one's ability to perform a specific task. The generality dimension concerns the extent to which efficacy expectations about a particular situation or experience are generalised to other situations [15]. Bandura [3] underline that "*convictions are determined by one's own actions and they can have any kind of effects on self-efficacy and behaviour. People who regard outcomes as personally determined but who lack the prerequisite skills, would experience low self-efficacy and view activities with a sense of futility*".

The interesting interpretation of the trainee's self-efficacy, as presented by Krumboltz, complements the theory of Social Learning described by Bandura. The learner's feeling of self-efficacy is influenced by: a) genetic origins and special abilities, b) environmental conditions and c) past learning experiences [16]. Thus, adults construct self-observing generalisations, which according to Krumboltz et al. [17], are of three kinds: 1) related to the project adequacy, i.e. whether they have the necessary skills to carry out a project 2) related to interests e.g. "I am interested in literature," which are considered to be products of learning experiences which connect previous learning situations with subsequent ones 3) related to personal values. Krumboltz [16] believes that values, habits, norms and standards have indeed shaped the adult's self-observing generalisations who tends to act based on these assumptions, which, however, they continually adjust by linking past experiences and situations with subsequent ones and with their personal values. Therefore, adults are in a constant process of revision and adaptation of the self-observing generalisations, hence, a lifelong developmental fermenting process (synthesis or compromise) amongst the individual and the social / labour factors, amongst self-perception and reality.

Another relevant concept is that of self-esteem [12]. *Self-esteem* refers to the liking and respect for oneself that has some realistic basis and is based on the evaluation of one's self-worth obtained from the feedback on the effectiveness of behaviour from childhood forward. Self-esteem is positive when the perceived and ideal self are a good match. High self-esteem is a healthy view of the self, one that realistically encompasses shortcomings but without being harshly critical of them. Low self-esteem exhibits an artificially positive attitude to the world, in a desperate attempt to prove to others that the person is adequate. Self-esteem derives from at least five components: social, academic, family, body image and global self-esteem.

Adult trainees often return to the academic arena after many years of absence. They have once more to assess themselves as students. In this process, they have to meet or exceed their own standards for academic achievement. Family, work and professional demands come to interplay with the new challenges of academic work. Most psychologists view positive self-esteem as a central factor in the process of social and emotional adjustment [25]. Positive self-esteem is related to more effective functioning and serves as the foundation for the individual's perceptions of life experiences. Praise and recognition seem to play an important role for adult trainees. Empathy and understanding by the adult trainer can help learners develop valuable skills, for tolerating their frustration when they critically discuss dysfunctional assumptions. For Bandura [4], people through self-reflection question on their experiences, explore their own assumptions and self-beliefs, engage in self-evaluation, and therefore, can change their thinking and behaviour accordingly.

However, radical thought transformation rarely and hardly occurs as a result of an educational program [24]. Hence, the change in one or more *habits of mind* (a set of assumptions regarding an issue,) related to one or more of the participants' "points of view", is considered to be a satisfactory learning outcome. According to Mezirow [22] the adult educator plays a "catalyst" role during the learning process: the facilitator is the one to support and guide the adult learners in order to develop their critical awareness of the origin, characteristics and consequences of their assumptions, so that they can be able to transform their beliefs and become actively involved [5].

## II. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research, which took place in September 2016, is the analysis of the post graduate students' - adult trainees - reflection upon their personal experience on the five-year long post graduate program in Adult Education at the Hellenic Open University. The research aim was the detection of the most important areas which seem to affect their learning process they have gone through during their post graduate studies. The research question was: What would they consider as significant regarding their learning experience as adult trainees? The qualitative approach has been chosen, since it allows a

deeper analysis and interpretation of feelings, experiences and behaviors. The research tool used was the self - descriptive interview. The fifteen students chosen to take part in the research were picked up randomly among 115 who graduated in 2016 and they were asked to orally comment on their learning experience after successfully completing the post graduate program on Adult Education, by answering to the open question: "*How would you describe your learning experience as an adult trainee, now that you have just completed the program?*". Students who took part were interviewed at the final stage of their post graduate program - that is right after their thesis submission, so to make sure that original and "fresh" feelings were caught. Data was selected through recorded answers, next turned into texts and processed by the content analysis method, which led to four distinct areas that seem significant in this learning process: a) incentives, b) self-efficacy, c) self-esteem and d) stress.

We note, though, that this is a small scale research and by no means do we intend to generalize its conclusions, but we only seek to reach a deeper understanding of the adult trainees' reflection and feelings after completing a post graduate program.

## III. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

In the process of reflecting on their experience during the post-graduate course, most participants revealed the *incentives* defined as the *value* of a particular object or outcome:

*"...I feel that I can keep improving, that I have now been given the ways to do so, to become better...I feel filled up with knowledge that I can use, that I have the motive to do so..."*

*"... An extremely fascinating year. I really enjoyed it ... it was very intriguing to see how people reacted when they were asked to participate in a survey, how they responded, some tried to avoid me. ... It flowed effortlessly, in other words I enjoyed the topic. And when you love something you do it well, so I enjoyed every stage of the research ... never got bored not even for a moment ..."*

*"... it has generally helped me develop many skills, particularly professional ones, I radically transformed me as a teacher and an educator ... I'm far richer and much more delicate in the way I try to apply and transmit knowledge ... I have experienced this through action. "*

*"... The sense of creativity. What changes, apart from developing knowledge, is the concept of creativity, that you start from zero point and manage to create something, which may have absolute no value to some, but significant value to others, and maybe regarded as greatly important by us. This is invaluable. There are things in life that have a price, have certain value. This is of mythical value, on a personal level of course. The concept of creativity, that I created something."*

*I started my postgraduate course five years ago and I believe I have gained a lot ...I had to “de-learn” my so far knowledge and wanted to “kill” the tutor since whatever I was thinking or writing seemed wrong... I had no idea of the “un-learning” process; I did not know what it was... I have discovered many things, through the assignments and my reading, some of it was executed in a “careless” manner and had no idea why I had to do it... spending your time creatively is obviously beneficial, not on a material level but it “broadens your mind” and takes you to a higher level. Looking back five years ago and comparing with the present you see things differently...”*

Some adult trainees reflect on the experience as a way of developing their own **self-esteem**, a way of closing the gap between the ideal and the perceived self, a way of respecting oneself on some realistic basis and on the evaluation of one's self-worth obtained when the *perceived and ideal self* are a good match:

*“I did this post-graduate course for personal reasons...I had two babies and was fed-up with babysitting and all those duties which were not mentally stimulating...”*

*“It was a challenge for me to be able to come in contact with some people, convince them to speak to me, to devote my time to them and work with them ... If I did not make them trust me, they wouldn't talk to me... .. When I interviewed them I was so thrilled, I even shiver now just by thinking about it. You meet some people who had a hard time and share personal things. I believe this is the liveliest part. To apply in practice what you have learned in theory, at university”*

**Self-efficacy** was also mentioned as having affected people's choices, the amount of effort they put on a task, the length of time they persisted when facing obstacles and thought patterns. Their efficacy expectations were more relevant to *strength, meaning* their probabilistic judgment; of how certain they were of their ability to perform a specific task:

*“... I would probably do it again...I mean I really enjoyed it... The actual research stage, I liked it very much ... I adopted the researcher's role and surely this is of benefit, you feel that you are doing something important, it's not just one more assignment that you submit in order to complete your degree. ... ”*

*“...Suffering... sometimes frustration, the feeling that I won't make it. Despite the supervisors' efforts and their assistance, this is a lonely journey ... the amount of work you put into it ... it really needed long hours, it is difficult, stressful and I was deprived by many things.*

*“I enjoyed it ... I came closer to the educators ... I was astonished .... I learned new things and got inspired ... it opened me up as a person ... It developed me the desire to study the issue of art ... I've now put rationality aside and*

*try to use more emotion in particular situations. ... Nevertheless, it is different to experience various situations and not being able to interpret them than to being able to put them in a good order. I think I have arranged a few things in my personal life as well, on a personal level.”*

**Stress** was another variable that was reported in this process of change, uncertainty and imbalance between the demands made on adult trainees and their ability to respond to them. *Situational disturbances, anticipatory stress, the day-to-day or ambient life stresses and core stress* were all mentioned in the process:

*“... I struggled a lot ... It was a completely different and new situation to me ... It was stressful ... Sometimes I was questioning myself why I chose to do it ... I believed I couldn't do it, that I will find it very difficult to complete...”*

*“... The final year was quite troubling... This is when I appreciated the value of non-formal education even more ... the experience which I gained ... There were times I was disappointed ... The courage, the first night, the second night, fatigue was building up. ... There were moments when I thought I could not do it, followed by those in which I managed to complete the task and then I would set the following goal... ”*

*“... During its course I would say: Oh God, I want it finished, I am so tired... adversities and personal obstacles where too many and I was exhausted. ...”*

*“... During undergraduate studies I didn't have the chance to do any research, so right from the start I was stressed about how a research is done ....”*

*“... I have experienced all this with difficulty; I had to be still in bed.... It was demanding...”*

Therefore, since the purpose of this small scale research was to identify the critical reflections and concerns of adult learners in relation to their educational experience in a five-year post-graduate program, results could be grouped in four main significant areas which seem to affect their learning process:

<b>Incentives</b>	The <i>value</i> or outcome paid on the educational experience: to gain a post-graduate degree leading to professional development but also to personal achievement in regards to the learning process, besides difficulties and obstacles experienced but common for all adult learners.
<b>Self-efficacy</b>	How certain they were of their ability to perform this specific task, thus graduate, which nevertheless seemed to increase through the impact of positive standards projected, opportunities and expectations offered by the educational framework for the successful practice of their role as learners.
<b>Self-esteem</b>	The reflection on the learning experience in closing the gap between the ideal and the perceived self, of respecting oneself on

	some realistic basis and on the evaluation of one's self-worth obtained when the <i>perceived and ideal</i> self become a good match.
<b>Stress</b>	Caused by obligations, commitments and "adult" responsibilities -such as lack of time and financial efficacy, child care and mobility difficulties, and general barriers alleged by the professional, family, social, and/or their cultural environment, as well as by their anxiety whether they can manage their fears of failure to graduate, all in relevance to the turbulent external environment, due to the severe socio-economic crisis in Greece since 2010.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Research findings show that the post-graduate students who were interviewed at the final stage of their course completion ('Adult Education', a five-year post-graduate using the blended methodology program at the Hellenic Open University) evaluate themselves positively in relation to self-efficacy and self-esteem as they have managed to achieve their original goals. They reported that their incentive when initiating their studies was to gain a post-graduate degree, while they had given intentions in regards to the learning process. Nevertheless, the program's requirements and the level of stress they have experienced during the course of their study and during exams raised doubts whether they considered themselves able to complete the course, made them feel inadequate and willing to drop out, while feeling both guilty and stressed towards their families. Some were motivated by the satisfaction of an, often, unconscious need, or by acquiring knowledge or participating in learning processes, while others wished to develop particular skills in order to cope with social and professional roles. This confirms Jarvis' position [11] according to which the most common motivators for learning in adulthood are professional development, skills' development, the need to adjust to changes in the work place, the need for socializing, the pursuit of knowledge in order to satisfy particular or repressed desires that failed to be met during one's youth. On the other hand, the difficulties and obstacles experienced by adult learners are classified in three general categories: the ones which derive from the educational context, others arising from the duties and responsibilities of their life conditions and thirdly, internal obstacles [11].

Research participants greatly value the knowledge acquired during their post graduate studies, as well as the indirect knowledge they acquired through their participation in the educational process. It seems as if participants view the course as an educational model incorporated through their social learning, and have characterised it as "good" while it has become some kind of "filter" through which they try to explain the fact that they achieved a particular learning outcome: the acquisition of a postgraduate degree [4].

Self-efficacy seems to have played an important role in the completion of this demanding project. Self-efficacy

increases through the impact of positive standards projected, opportunities and expectations offered by the educational framework for the successful practice of the role as a learner, as well as through the acceptability of their "significant others" - the educators, i.e. Tutors/Advisors of HOU in our case. It also develops through encouragement, praising and affirmation, elements received by the participants for their efforts [15]. Jarvis [11] reports that when adults come to a training course they bring along a smaller or larger experiential and cognitive load which can work either positively if the educational process acknowledges it, or negatively if ignored by the educational context. However, in this particular case, it seems that the learning environment has acted positively towards the learners' success, a key fact for adult learning as noted by Knowles et al. [13]. Moreover, despite the difficulties recorded, this learning experience is characterized as being a positive one, since the learners felt capable of completing their task, motivated by the intense interest caused by the new knowledge and their fulfilled personal values. This confirms the importance of Krumboltz's [16] self-reflective generalisations who interprets self-efficacy as a key factor for the successful completion of the task they had undertaken, i.e. the completion of their Master degree.

Education in adulthood can be hindered by situational factors caused by obligations, commitments and responsibilities which adults confront, such as lack of time and financial efficacy, child care and mobility difficulties, and general barriers alleged by the professional, family, social, and/or their cultural environment [6]. In the current study, the above mentioned factors were reported by the learners; however, they have not been able to demotivate them in relation to completing their Master's degree.

It is worth noting that this research was implemented during the harsh financial crisis experienced by Greece which has also impacted the learners. Therefore, the four sources which influence the emotional state [27] were all present in the current study. Due to the economic crisis, followed by income reduction and high unemployment rates situational disturbances and day to day life stresses were present together with the anticipatory stress associated with imagined scenarios relevant to the difficulties of the present course of their study. In addition, core stress [27] which can be defined as comprising the unresolved residues of past negative experiences from all ages of the person's life history, was also present in relation to managing the learning material as well as in relation to fears of failure in completing the program due to the turbulent external environment. However, despite pragmatic and psychological stress, many participants reported that they had employed significant coping mechanisms, regarded as transactional in a dynamic, mutually reciprocal and bidirectional relationship with the external environment. Cognitive appraisal was a critical mediator of stressful, person-environment relationships and a process through which most participants evaluated whether the completion of their studies could work as a benefit to their self-esteem.

This cognitive appraisal reinforced their efforts to complete their course of study. Despite situational disturbances and day to day life stresses such as financial and family obligations, cognitive appraisal together with personality characteristics including values, commitments, goals and beliefs were employed to overcome obstacles. Secondary appraisal [9] which includes what can be done to overcome or improve the prospects for benefit was also employed in the process of achieving satisfaction and enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy in accepting and coping with the situation. In this process, most participants reported that they used rational efforts to problem-solve as well as emotion-focused coping that included self-control, seeking social support in family or fellow students, accepting responsibility for their initial decision and positive reappraisal of the situation. Positive reappraisal helped adult trainees to feel satisfied despite their experienced stress and fear of failure [6] and difficulty in revising their views and perceptions about the requirements of a Master's Degree [21]. Learners indicate stress generated by the academic requirements of the postgraduate course and lack of self-efficacy and self-esteem in relation to their ability to cope with program demands. It seems that personal incentives, persistence and focus on a certain goal, accompanied by the need to fulfill their original aims and achieve a high level of education, contributed and strengthened their original decision.

It seems that adult students dealt with a sudden experience, that is the academic demands of this post graduate program along with the personal obstacles they faced during their studies, and this experience could be a disorienting dilemma for them, as defined by Mezirow [22; 23; 24]. What is interesting is that despite stress and their personal restrains and difficulties, they managed to turn this dilemma into critical reflection on their ability to cope with academic as well as personal challenges, thus, this learning experience was a great starting point to reconsider on their beliefs, values, perceptions and attitudes [19].

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it seems that learning which occurs within the environmental context in which this study took place, could be considered as positive. The positive aspects are relevant to how participants in this study managed to communicate with others when they were asked to express their own assumptions and reflect feelings and thoughts in a context of critical thinking and open dialogue. It could also be considered as positive since within a turbulent environment and during a prolonged crisis, it managed to sustain adult trainees and assist them in their personal course of action. In this context the adult educator seems to play the role of a "catalyst" during the learning process by offering support and guide to adult learners. A future study could focus more on how adult educators can help adult learners, so that they could be able to become actively involved in a coping process which turns life stresses into developmental opportunities.

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