

Continuing Professional Education: A Framework of Participation

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

This paper explores the nature and context of students' participation in Continuing Professional Education, focusing on the experiences of those engaging in a Masters level, professionally accredited, HR management qualification. This study presents a single open framework that considers the reasons for, the challenges to, and the enablers of participation across defined contextual dimensions (psychological, professional, practical and personal), in order to understand the context of post-experience participation. Viewed through the lens of an original matrix framework, findings demonstrate that participants chose to engage and continue with the learning activity as a result of a diverse range of influencing factors. The transferability and usability of the framework and its potential to contribute to wider practice is explored. It is proposed that the exploratory framework can be applied to a variety of learning activities and disciplines, as a means of identifying areas of improvement or change in post-graduate learning support practice.

Full paper

This paper provides an overview of research into the nature and context of participation in learning with a focus on the experiences of students engaging in a Masters level, professionally accredited qualification (MSc Human Resource Management). The research was founded upon the seminal literature on adult learning (Merriam,

2010; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Bandura, 1977; Kolb, 1984; Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1971 cited in Tight, 2002) and participation in adult learning (Houle, 1961; Rubenson, 1978; Cross, 1981) and guided by the definition of 'Adult Learning' presented by Jarvis et al that it is 'a combination of processes whereby whole persons transform episodic experiences into cognitive, physical and affective outcomes and integrate them in to their biography' (2003, p104). Notably, Jarvis develops this definition by outlining the existential nature of learning as an activity that continues life long and life wide and which is never complete. This research, therefore, considers a multi-dimensional view of participation and focuses upon three key areas of interest: reasons for participation, the challenges of participation, and the enabling factors relating to participation. The purpose of the research was to expand our understanding of the nature and context of participation to enhance and improve learning support practice in higher education. This reflects Giddens' (1999) view of adult learning as being a social imperative; created by a blend of political, economic, technological, and cultural factors that influence the act of learning. Giddens suggests that, because of the inevitability of change in this modern, globalised society, individuals have become, or have been forced to become, custodians of their own intellectual and professional development. This notion is illustrated through the evolving and popular constructs of lifelong learning, the learning society, learning culture and the learning organisation. They exemplify a notable shift in language from the descriptive use of the term 'adult education' to the more holistic remit of 'adult learning', which represents the wider range of developmental interventions and opportunities that adults now participate in as investment in their on-going personal and professional development (Rubenson, 2010).

A review of the key literature revealed a lack of a single open framework of participation across defined contextual dimensions. This research presents an original conceptual framework matrix which affords two key opportunities. Firstly, as a theoretical device by which to organise and review current literature in the field and secondly, as a means to identify, explore and present the dominant factors relating to participation in adult learning. To achieve this the matrix identifies the three key areas of interest: i) reasons

participants have for joining the learning activity; ii) challenges they have faced in doing so, and finally; iii) elements and influences that enable them to successfully participate in the learning activity. These areas are reviewed further across four dimensions of the participants' life world: psychological, professional, practical and personal.

Utilising a critical realist ontology and a post-positivist epistemology the conceptual framework matrix is used to structure the research instrument design. The study adopts a linear, mixed methods approach to collecting data using types of thematic analysis (quantitative and qualitative), achieved using an online questionnaire, and followed up with one-to-one semi-structured interviews with a sample of the target population (Part-time MSc HRM students).

Viewed through the lens of the conceptual framework matrix, findings from within the research setting demonstrate that participants chose to engage with the learning activity because of a wide range of influencing factors. Reasons for participation were dominated by professional and psychological factors. Challenges to participation were dominated by psychological factors, alongside issues of a restrictive learning environment and difficulties in achieving work life balance. The dominant enablers were people, deriving from all aspects of the participants' life-world.

From this study key recommendations were made to aid successful participation, including the creation of learning communities and, in the case of professionally accredited programmes, the development of links and networks with current and potential employers in the field. In addition, consideration was given to the level of transferability and usability of the matrix and its potential to contribute to wider practice. It is proposed that the open, exploratory framework can be applied to a variety of different learning activities, across a variety of disciplines, as a means of identifying targeted areas of improvement or change in learning support practice. The specific results contained within the study may be of interest to those associated with programmes and activities at a similar level (PG) and mode of delivery within a broader range of university

faculties and similar HE institutions.

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