



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING BY ADULT STUDENTS AT THE  
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT UNIVERSITI  
TEKNOLOGI MARA, SHAH ALAM**

**FAZIMAH HAYATI HJ. HASSAN BASRI.**

**FPP 2005 9**

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AT THE INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT  
UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA, SHAH ALAM**

**By**

**FAZIMAH HAYATI HJ. HASSAN BASRI**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science**

**June 2005**



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science

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**FAZIMAH HAYATI HJ. HASSAN BASRI**

June 2005

**Chairman : Shamsuddin Ahmad, PhD**

**Faculty : Educational Studies**

This is a qualitative study on the conceptions of learning held by adult students enrolled in the distance education program the Institute of Education Development (InED), Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Shah Alam. Conceptions of learning can be defined as the beliefs and ideas people have about what learning actually means. Specifically the objectives of this study are to describe the meaning of learning as perceived by students in the distance education program at InED, UiTM and to identify the relationships between their conceptions of learning and the learning approaches and whether these conceptions were in congruence with those established in previous studies. In line with the objectives above, this study takes on the qualitative research method that is deemed appropriate when the intent of the researcher is to understand a phenomenon. For this purpose, this study adopted the qualitative research approach known as phenomenology. The purpose of this approach is to determine what an experience means for the person who have had the



experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. The sample for this study consisted of 15 students involved in the distance education program at UiTM and the individual interview become the predominant method to gather data. A micro cassette and a guide interview list were used to aid in capturing the conversation during the interview sessions. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and translated. From the data analysis, themes were developed which described the phenomena.

Findings showed that four themes were identified among the students. These conceptions of learning consisted of as 1) acquiring knowledge, 2) applying the acquired knowledge, 3) constructing meanings and new understandings and 4) changing as a person. This study also revealed that from the themes uncovered the students were more closely bound to the deep approach to learning while the surface approach was not evident.

Basically this study concluded that four different themes of conceptions of learning were identified with all of the themes linked to the deep approach. This study also concluded that the results concurred with previous research in the same area. Finally it is recommended that a follow up study be conducted to explore the relationship between these conceptions and approaches to learning with the outcome of learning and with lecturers' conceptions of teaching with the hope that educators would be able to better facilitate and help students gain maximum benefits from the process of learning.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**KONSEPSI PEMBELAJARAN OLEH PELAJAR DEWASA  
DI INSTITUT PEKEMBANGAN PENDIDIKAN  
UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA, SHAH ALAM**

Oleh

**FAZIMAH HAYATI HJ. HASSAN BASRI**

Jun 2005

**Pengerusi : Shamsuddin Ahmad, PhD**

**Fakulti : Pengajian Pendidikan**

Kajian ini merupakan satu kajian kualitatif tentang konsepsi pembelajaran yang dianuti oleh pelajar-pelajar yang mengikuti program pendidikan jarak jauh di Institut Perkembangan Pendidikan (InED), Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Shah Alam. Konsepsi pembelajaran boleh didefinisikan sebagai kepercayaan dan ide yang dianuti seseorang tentang apa sebenarnya yang dimaksudkan dengan pembelajaran. Secara spesifiknya objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menghuraikan makna pembelajaran sebagaimana yang dipersepsikan oleh pelajar program pendidikan jarak jauh di InED, UiTM dan untuk mengenalpasti hubungan diantara konsepsi pembelajaran dengan pendekatan pembelajaran dan samada konsepsi ini sejajar dengan kajian-kajian sebelumnya.

Seiring dengan objektif diatas kajian ini menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan kualitatif yang dianggap sesuai apabila tujuan penyelidik adalah untuk



memahami sesuatu fenomena. Untuk tujuan tersebut kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan penyelidikan kualitatif yang dikenali sebagai fenomenologi. Pendekatan ini bertujuan untuk menentukan makna sesuatu pengalaman bagi mereka yang telah mengalaminya dan dapat memberikan deskripsi yang komprehensif tentangnya. Sampel dalam kajian ini terdiri dari 15 orang pelajar yang terlibat dalam program pendidikan jarak jauh di UiTM dan kaedah pengumpulan data yang digunakan adalah temubual individu. Pita rakaman mikro dan panduan temubual telah digunakan bagi membantu mendapat maklumat jitu dalam sesi temubual. Temubual yang telah dirakam ditranskripsi secara verbatim dan diterjemahkan. Daripada analisis data beberapa tema telah dibentuk yang menerangkan pengalaman dalam fenomena yang dikaji dari perspektif peserta.

Hasil penemuan kajian menunjukkan empat tema konsepsi pembelajaran telah dikenalpasti dikalangan pelajar-pelajar tersebut. Tema tersebut menunjukkan pelajar memahami pembelajaran sebagai 1) memperolehi dan menambah pengetahuan, 2) mengaplikasikan pengetahuan yang diperolehi, 3) membentuk makna dan pemahaman baru, dan 4) membawa perubahan keatas seseorang. Kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa pelajar-pelajar ini adalah hampir kepada pendekatan mendalam (deep approach) terhadap pembelajaran berbanding dengan pendekatan permukaan (surface approach).

Secara asasnya kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa empat konsepsi pembelajaran yang berbeza tetapi berkait telah dikenalpasti dimana kesemua tema adalah

dikaitkan dengan pendekatan mendalam. Kajian ini juga menyimpulkan bahawa hasil penemuan adalah bersamaan dengan kajian-kajian lepas dalam bidang yang sama. Akhirnya kajian ini mencadangkan supaya kajian seterusnya dibuat untuk melihat kaitan diantara konsepsi dan pendekatan pembelajaran dengan hasil pembelajaran yang diperolehi dan juga dengan konsepsi pengajaran pensyarah dengan harapan ianya dapat membantu memberikan perkhidmatan memudahcara yang lebih baik serta menolong pelajar-pelajar mendapat faedah maksimum daripada proses pembelajaran mereka.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### IN THE NAME OF ALLAH THE MOST GRACIOUS AND THE MOST MERCIFUL

Praises Be to Allah, The Almighty and Peace Be Upon the Prophet Muhammad, The Messenger of Allah. *Syukur* to Allah the Almighty for giving me the opportunity and the strength to complete and submit this study. Several parties were involved in making this study possible by giving me their assistance, cooperation and encouragement. Let me start by extending my utmost appreciation and gratitude to my committee members who have given their assistance and guidance throughout this study, especially to my supervisor and chairman, Dr. Shamsuddin Ahmad, who has patiently and relentlessly given his time and energy in guiding and encouraging me from the very beginning until the completion of this study. To Professor Dr. Hj. Azimi Hamzah and Professor Dr. Hajjah Aminah Ahmad, your thoughtful guidance is highly appreciated.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to Cik Zanariah Mohd. Noor who has played an important role not only in the process of editing and formatting this study but also for being a friend and a source of encouragement. A special thanks also to my colleague and good friend, Pn. Rohaya Abd. Wahab for her assistance and support throughout this study. To InED and UiTM, also to all the students who willingly became my respondents and all the others involved in making this study a success, thank you.





Finally, I would like to extend my special debt of gratitude and appreciation to my beloved family: my wonderful and loving husband, Hj. Jaafar Hj. Abd. Rahman who has always been there for me through thick and thin, through the good times and the bad times and to my sons, Najmuddeen Rabbani, whose understanding and prayers are always with me and of course, Muhammad Zidni 'Ilman who certainly is a bundle of joy and my source of inspiration, I love all of you with all my heart. A special thanks also to my parents, brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces. Only Allah would be able to repay my debts to all of you.

*"Alhamdulillah and thank you for all the thank yous that have not been said"*



I certify that an Examination Committee met on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2005 to conduct the final examination of Fazimah Hayati Hj. Hassan Basri on her Master of Science thesis entitled "Conceptions of Learning by Adult Students at the Institute of Education Development, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

**MAZANAH MUHAMAD, PhD**

Professor  
Faculty of Educational Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairman)

**WAN ZAH WAN ALI, PhD**

Associate Professor  
Faculty of Educational Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal Examiner)

**KHAIRUDDIN IDRIS, PhD**

Lecturer  
Faculty of Modern Language and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal Examiner)

**SHARAN MERRIAM, PhD**

Professor  
University of Georgia  
Athens, USA  
(External Examiner)



---

**ZAKARIAH ABD. RASHID, Ph.D.**

Professor/Deputy Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: **25 OCT 2005**



This thesis submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee are as follows:

**SHAMSUDDIN AHMAD, PhD**  
Lecturer  
Faculty of Educational Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairman)

**AMINAH AHMAD, PhD**  
Professor  
Faculty of Educational Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

**AZIMI HJ. HAMZAH, PhD**  
Professor  
Institute for Agricultural Extension  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)



**AINI IDERIS, PhD**  
Professor/Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 17 NOV 2005



## DECLARATION FORM

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations that have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.



FAZIMAH HAYATI HJ. HASSAN BASRI

Date: 30/9/2005

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DBS	-	Diploma in Business Studies
DPA	-	Diploma in Public Administration
EDC	-	Education Development Centre
E-MAIL	-	Electronic Mail
E-PJJ	-	Elektronik Pendidikan Jarak Jauh
InED	-	Institute of Education Development
ITM	-	Institut Teknologi Mara
KLK	-	Kajian Luar Kampus
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organizations
NMU	-	Natural Meaning Units
PhD	-	Doctor of Philosophy
PJJ	-	Pendidikan Jarak Jauh
PPL	-	Pusat Pendidikan Luar
UiTM	-	Universiti Teknologi Mara
UPM	-	Universiti Putra Malaysia





# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of Study

Learning is an integral aspect of education. Students, be it young or adult embark on learning in order to gain knowledge and skills in various fields. However, learning takes on different meanings for different individuals. Students come into higher education with different beliefs about what learning actually means (Entwistle, 1998). To learn means different things depending on the students' values, beliefs and intentions. Thus, the students' learning is influenced by their views of knowledge and other related personal presage factors which include students' conceptions of learning and approaches to learning (Campbell, Brownlee and Smith, 2000).

Studies have shown that adults from a range of ages and educational backgrounds have contrasting conceptions of learning which can be seen as a hierarchy, increasing in both sophistication and complexity (Entwistle, 1998). Some adult students view learning as the result of building up separate bits of knowledge thus increasing one's knowledge. Closely allied to this is the idea that learning consists of memorizing facts. However, in order to be useful the information obtained needs to be applied and reproduced. At a higher level students try to develop an initial understanding and make sense of the facts learned, hence initiating a process of transformation. A more sophisticated view of learning see the students being more active in



making sense of the information and in the process, changing as a person (Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty, 1993; Saljo, 1979).

Hence this shows that students differ greatly among themselves in their views of what is meant by learning. In fact they may also see learning differently from their teacher or educators (Rowntree, 1997). These different conceptions of learning may become a barrier to the process of students learning as the students' views and beliefs towards learning may not be up to the educators' expectations. In turn, this may limit or hinder the process of an education program. Therefore it is of the utmost importance to find out what students think of as learning and even help them to acquire more sophisticated conceptions of learning.

The unique characteristics of distance education programs and the adult students involved in it makes the endeavour of finding out the students' conceptions of learning all the more important. Distance education refers to the various forms of study which makes use of print and/or electronic communication media to instruct students who are engaged in planned learning but are physically separated from the instructors or educators (Stewart *et al.*, 1988). While adults are characterized by Smith (1982) as having,

... a special orientation to life, living, education, and learning; a relatively rich experience base to draw on and cope with; different developmental changes and tasks than preadults; and their own brand of anxiety and ambivalence (Smith, 1982:47).



Adults participate in educational programs with specific motives in mind. Courtney (1992) wrote that education is pursued by adults for practical or vocational reasons which are connected to their world of work and as a means to occupational and social advancements.

However our country seeks a society which is knowledgeable, skilled, innovative and progressive and not only individuals who are engrossed with their own private lives. Hence students should not enter educational programs just for their own career advancements but also for intellectual growth as this will help in creating a society that is tolerant, scientific, progressive and with a vision for the future. Thus, institutions of higher learning have the responsibility of churning out quality students in line with the needs of the country.

With this in mind steps must be taken to achieve this aspiration. Therefore a study should be undertaken to understand the students' conceptions of learning which in turn will help educators to develop learning strategies that would facilitate meaningful learning by the students and encourage them to achieve higher level learning outcomes. With this is hoped that better quality students can be produced in tune with the country's aspirations.

## **Conceptions of Learning and It's Importance**

Conceptions can be defined as specific meaning which are attached to a phenomena which then mediate our response to situations involving those phenomena. Conceptions are formed virtually on every aspect of our perceived world, thus the world is viewed through the lenses of our conceptions, interpreting and acting in accordance with our understanding of the world. Significantly conceptions will influence the perceptions and interpretations of events, people and phenomena surrounding us (Pratt, 1992).

Learning, as perceived in psychology, on the other hand, is defined as a transformation which occurs in the brain. It is an internal process leading to behavioural change and a process of changing insights, outlooks, expectations or thought patterns. Basically learning is the activity of the individual who learns be it intentional or at random and may involve acquiring information or skills, new attitudes, understandings or values (Smith, 1982). Learning will result in change in behaviour and goes on throughout one's life.

Conceptions of learning is defined as the beliefs and ideas people have about what learning actually means (Steketee, 1999). People often have the notions that learning means the same to everyone, however based on Svensson's assumptions the phenomenon of learning has not one, but several meaning. Conceptions of learning are anchored in cultural, social, historical and personal realms of meaning. Svensson's assumptions stated



that the meaning people ascribe to the phenomenon of learning are influenced by the inter relationship that occurs between individuals, contexts and cultures (Svensson, 1979 cited in Pramling, 1983). That is the context within which learning takes place will influence in individuals conceptions of learning as will their cultural and familiar beliefs (Steketee, 1999).

Research into conceptions of learning has been approached from a range of perspectives. However in 1970 a group of researchers began to explore the nature of learning using the qualitative research method where a phenomena was looked at through the eyes of the people and reveals how things look from their point of view. Here, researchers takes a second order perspective where their concern is not their own interpretations but of the peoples' conceptions of a phenomena. Pratt (1992) described this second-order perspective as an attempt made by people to give an interpretation of their experiences. The expected outcome of these studies was to categorized the distinct characteristics of the range of experiences and how they relate to one another.

Students' conceptions of learning were first reported by Saljo(1979). In his study, Saljo characterized the different ways in which students experience learning. They were:

1. The increase of knowledge
2. Memorizing
3. Acquisition of facts and procedures which can be retained or utilized in practice

4. Abstraction of meaning
5. An interpretative process aimed at understanding reality

Since then a range of studies supporting Saljo's findings have been conducted such as that carried out by Van Rossum and Schenk (1984). Like Saljo, Van Rossum and Schenk found five distinguishable conceptions of learning being:

1. Learning as requiring knowledge
2. Learning as memorizing
3. Learning as knowledge to be used at a later date.
4. Learning as an abstraction of meaning
5. Learning as a process which helps us to interpret and understand reality

Another study conducted by Marton et al. (1993) on students enrolled in the Open University identified a sixth conception of learning being changing as a person.

These studies also uncovered that the conceptions of learning held by an individual or student will influence his or her approach to various learning tasks, which will then ultimately affect the quality of the learning outcome (Van Rossum and Schenk, 1984). When students are asked to carry out learning tasks, such as preparing for a tutorial or writing an essay, the way in which they tackle the task depend on why they are taking the course and on what they believe learning requires of them (Entwistle, 1998). This means

that when tackling the task, different students have different intentions. These intentions are closely related to how they go about learning and the quality of learning achieved. Thus, the students' intentions when tackling the task will influence their approaches to learning. In this matter Marton and Saljo (1984) and Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) distinguished between two distinct approaches to learning namely the surface and deep approaches to learning.

Studies conducted on students epistemological beliefs have found a developmental sequence which progresses from a reproductive position where knowledge is viewed as absolute and imparted by authority, to a constructivist stance whereby students reflect on alternative perspectives and evaluate knowledge claims for themselves (Campbell, Brownlee and Smith, 2000). Investigators of students' conceptions of learning have also showed similar developmental sequence. Marton *et al.* (1993) uncovered that university students conceptualized learning in six different ways which ranges from (a) increasing one's knowledge, (b) memorizing and reproducing, (c) applying, (d) understanding, (e) seeing something in a different way, and (f) changing a person. These then can be categorized further into quantitative (reproductive) and qualitative (constructivist) dimensions which relate to particular epistemological portions and influence the students' approaches to learning (Biggs, 1989). The first three conceptions represent a quantitative orientation to learning where knowledge is viewed as absolute and learning involves surface strategies while the second three conceptions reflect a qualitative which involved deep approaches to learning (Campbell *et al.*,



2000). However these concepts mentioned will be dealt in detail in chapter two.

The discovery of a relationship between students' conceptions of learning and their approach towards learning tasks highlights the importance of identifying conceptions of learning. As mentioned earlier the conceptions of learning held by a student will influence the way in which he or she approaches tasks in class which then affects the quality of the learning outcome. Because of this fact, it is therefore imperative that educators become aware of the students understanding of learning. Hence in doing so the educators may be able to facilitate meaningful learning by the students and help them to achieve higher and better learning outcomes. This in turn will aid in producing students of high quality in line with the interests of a nation.

### **Adult Learning in UiTM**

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) has evolved and developed to become an establishment which provides opportunities for Bumiputras to be educated and equipped with skills to become professionals who are dynamic, dedicated, learned and spiritually strong. These are considered essential elements to enable Bumiputras to compete in the world of business, trade, science and technology (Ahmad Zaidee Laidin, 1995). In realizing it's mission to be the center of higher education committed towards achieving academic





excellence and providing opportunities for life-long education, UiTM has played an integral role in offering courses in the professional and semi-professional field whether in the form of full-time programs for fresh school-leavers or part-time programs for working adult Bumiputras. In its commitment towards providing opportunities for working adult Bumiputras to pursue higher education, UiTM has developed the Distance Education program which is coordinated by the Institute of Education Development or InED.

InED, initially known as Kajian Luar Kampus (KLK) was established in 1973 with the campus situated at Jalan Othman, Petaling Jaya. Its name was changed to the Centre for Continuing Education in 1990 to suit its added responsibility of not only offering off-campus programs but also the Distance Education program. The centre was again renamed at the beginning of the new millennium to the Education Development Centre (EDC) and recently the centre was upgraded to the status of an institute namely the Institute for Education Development (InED) in recognition of its success in widening its scope to offering programs through e-learning, short courses and managing the franchise colleges. From the very beginning the institute was set up to achieve the objectives of (1) producing more Bumiputras in the technical, professional and semi-professional field, (2) helping them to upgrade their work and career and (3) providing opportunities for Bumiputras to pursue life-long education through a flexible method (PPL, 1994).