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The impact of fun and enjoyment on adult's learning

Dorothy Lucardie^{a*}

^a*Federation University, Ballarat, 3350, Australia*

Abstract

An exploration of the literature has shown that fun and enjoyment are often discussed in relation to the learning of children and older adults and are rarely mentioned in relation to the learning of adults. This paper explores the role that fun and enjoyment plays in adult learning programs and the impact that this has on an adults learning. The focus is on data gathered in 2012 from interviews with adult learners and their teachers in Victoria, Australia. These conversations found that both groups could identify the fun and enjoyment in their adult learning experience. The findings have been analysed firstly as an overall experience, with adult learners talking more freely about fun and enjoyment and teachers talking about engagement, social relationships and safety. Learners identified a number of elements that are part of their experience of fun and enjoyment: the activities they undertake, the process established by the teachers, interacting with others, humour, achievement, their emotions and well-being and personal benefits. Both adult learners and their teachers also believed that fun and enjoyment impacted on adults learning and they were able to articulate the role that fun and enjoyment plays in adult learning programs. Firstly both having fun and experiencing enjoyment were perceived by both learners and teachers as a motivator to attend classes and learn the knowledge and skills. Secondly fun and enjoyment were considered a mechanism that encouraged concentration by learners and helped in the absorption of learning. Finally having fun and experiencing enjoyment were identified as a proven way to build a socially connected learning environment. The research indicates that a greater focus on the affective domain of adults learning experience, in particular fun and enjoyment could prove to be as beneficial and important as it is currently considered in children's learning. A different approach to the design of adult learning experiences and methods that incorporates greater use of fun may mean that more adults are encouraged and motivated to participate in learning with enthusiasm for the journey and optimism for the outcomes.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: 61 0409449157.

E-mail address: dorothy.lucardie@bigpond.com.au

1. Introduction

This research has aimed to discover the role fun and enjoyment plays in adult learning programs. In particular what do adult learners identify as fun or enjoyment and what was the impact of the experience of fun or enjoyment on their learning. The research included teacher's perspectives on the role of fun and enjoyment in adult learning programs and aspired to tease out what the implications might have on the field of adult education practice.

The perspective adopted in this research does not reflect a focus on work and jobs and measurable aspects of adult education rather it comes from the affective domain focusing on difficult to measure feelings to consider the learning experiences of adults. It has taken the opportunity to consider the relevance and importance of concepts such as fun and enjoyment in an adult learning context.

2. Literature review

An exploration of the literature shows that fun and enjoyment have been discussed in relation to the learning of children and older adults. Creativity in children is thought to be stimulated by fun and humour, when the brain is more relaxed and is less bound by rules (Light, 2002). The role of fun and enjoyment is seen as a natural and important part of the learning process for children. Hromek and Roffey (2009) explain that there is a 'natural affiliation between children, play, and the desire to have fun' which makes games an ideal vehicle for teaching' (p. 626).

The role of fun and enjoyment has also been identified as important in the learning for older adults. In 2005 Lightfoot and Brady found that older 'people talked about the new and exciting ideas they were learning and the joy it provided' (p 230) when describing their learning experiences. In particular a woman in her late 70's reported, "The first word that comes to mind is fun" (Lightfoot & Brady, 2005, p 230). Bowman and Kearns (2007), when investigating E learning for the mature age worker, support this as they found that using a variety of approaches to learning helps to make learning interesting and fun. Davis (2001) also recommends that a focus on creating programs that emphasize fun in learning is needed for older adults.

Armstrong (2002) has identified the lack of literature on the use of humour in adult learning or the process of making adult learning fun. He quotes Cathro's (1995) argument that 'humour has often been unrecorded, and perhaps silenced, within and by academic disciplines' (p 2). Armstrong considered the use of humour in the curriculum (comedy, creative writing, drama), in teaching and learning and in research (Armstrong 2002). He identifies humour as a key teaching quality and quotes Stock's (1970) research into teaching styles and learning. Stock (1970) found that student evaluations rated teacher characteristics 'warmth, humour and responsiveness, concern' (p. 3) as higher than learning gain.

Humour and fun are linked with laughter and play and do affect us as human beings. Panksepp (2000) tells us that human laughter is a primitive reaction but it is also psychologically sophisticated. The ancestral antecedents of social joy are within the human brain and laughter is fundamentally a social phenomenon. Joy lowers the neural threshold for perceiving life events as being positive and hopeful, while raising the threshold for perceiving events as negative and hopeless. Fun and enjoyment can be, and perhaps has been, perceived as frivolous and entertainment rather than as essential to an ideal learning experience. But the experience of fun does not necessarily mean that it is an easy or comfortable experience. Barrett (2005) explored problem based learning (PBL) and hard fun. Barrett's central argument is that 'hard fun is an illuminative threshold concept for understanding learning in PBL' (2005, p 113). He draws upon the work of Papert (1996) to suggest further that:

'Learning can be fun because it is hard, challenging and stretches participants.....The fun in hard fun is a fun with laughter, freedom, creativity and enjoyment'. (Barrett, 2005, p. 114).

For Papert, (1996) learning is not fun in spite of being hard, but because it is hard. He defines hardness as level of difficulty and that with a high level of activity learning can take on a transformative nature and produce attitudinal change. 'Fun without hardness is frivolity; hardness without fun is drudgery' (Barrett, 2005, p. 121). The notion of hardness and challenge has also been applied to the concept of joy. Montuori (2008) views joy as a complex phenomenon and that it does not come easy. It arrives through hard work and requires psychological risk (Montuori,

2008).

While fun has had limited attention in the literature on adult learning there has been some focus on the role of enjoyment. Adults, who have not experienced success in education and are returning to learning do gain a range of benefits from participation, such as increased confidence and new friendships (Clemens, Hartley, & Macrae, 2003). They also identify that they enjoy the experience. Preston and Hammond (2002) found that ‘Students who have experienced failure previously in the education system often described as “second chancer’s” benefit particularly in terms of esteem and efficacy’ (p 22). Research by Bassett-Grundy (2002), into family learning support Preston and Hammond’s findings, where participants identified few disadvantages and ‘the overall feeling was incredibly positive with participants enjoying it very much indeed’ (p. 26).

The reports from research into the Wider Benefits of Learning in the United Kingdom identify a number of areas where enjoyment is produced: the social focus; the range of activities; and the supportive and friendly atmosphere (Preston & Hammond, 2002). Those who reported enjoyment most often were those who were in basic education classes and were returning to education. The results were not skewed by previous experience in education as research has shown that in initial education there was a weaker relationship between success at school and enjoyment, with ‘some people enjoying school in spite of not achieving qualifications, others achieving qualifications but leaving with a distaste for education’ (Schuller et al., 2002, p. iii).

A number of key concepts have emerged from the literature that help to illuminate why fun and enjoyment may have an impact on an adult’s learning. Firstly the role that motivation plays in adult learning (Wlodkowski, 1997). Fun and importance are considered classic motivation variables and fun is proposed to increase motivation, with importance underlying intrinsic motivation and goal directed activities (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Secondly the influence of emotions on how adults experience positive educational experiences through positive emotions (Dirkx, 2001). The final concept, that of well-being, that proposes that adults who feel happy, ‘tend to function better in life’ (Oishi & Diener, 2001).

3. Methodology and method

Previous research in adult education have used a variety of methods, with examples such as quantitative surveys (Bassett- Grundy, 2002), case studies (Bowman & Kearns, 2007), interviews with teachers (Hromek and Roffey, 2009 Penman and Ellis, 2009) and interviews with learners (Walters and Turner, 2001). This research employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the affective experiences of fun and enjoyment. Qualitative research is interpretive, theory building and descriptive in nature (Sarantakos, 1998, Dowling & Brown, 2010). It uses communicative processes to reflect upon experiences and perspectives. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) propose that interpretive approaches focus on the individual, “interrogating and critiquing the taken for granted” and have a practical interest in the “continuously re-creation” of social life (p. 42).

The research methods draw upon the traditions of phenomenology, the descriptive study of lived experience (phenomena) in an attempt to enrich lived experience by exploring its meaning. Sarantakos (1998) describes the interpretive perception of the world as:

Created by people, the notion of natural attitude or natural standpoint, the process of getting down to the essence of people, the perception or reality through the minds (consciousness) of the respondents (p. 49).

Questions about fun and enjoyment in adult learning were explored through verbal interviews that were recorded in with 40 adult students and nine teachers who were participating in the Certificates of General Education for Adults in Australia, in 2012, and who self-selected to participate in the research. The Certificates of General Education for Adults (CGEA) are learning programs for adults that provide basic reading, writing and numeracy skills across a range of domains such as leisure, work and computers. Participants in these programs were chosen to participate in the research as they are more likely than other adults to have had poor schooling experiences (Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010). CGEA programs need to be engaging for each individual to persist in building their foundation skills and teachers are typically adept at seeking ways to establish and maintain this engagement (Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010 Falk & Guenther, 2002).

Participants were invited through an approved approach from the education organisation that they were enrolled

in or employed by from across the state of Victoria. The four organisations that participated were drawn from rural, regional and metropolitan locations and included one Adult and Community Education (Community based adult education centres) and three TAFE (Technical and Further Education) Colleges. The research methods received ethics approval from the University of Ballarat (now Federation University Australia) and participants acknowledged in writing their understanding of the use of their responses in this research.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. *The experience of fun and enjoyment for adult learners and their teachers in the CGEA*

Overall learners were readily able to speak about how they liked to have fun or experienced enjoyment in their lives and in the courses they were participating in. They approached these conversations primarily from a positive perspective and although a small number did not speak of experiencing fun, all were able to give examples of enjoyment in their courses.

When Ally*, a CGEA student, was asked about whether she experienced fun in her course she responded that “You can enjoy doing work but you can also have fun at the same time but you can have fun and enjoy the process as you go along”.

Teachers were less likely to talk about adult learners experiencing fun or enjoyment and spoke more often of engagement. In their conversations about fun or enjoyment they identified other factors that they were striving to establish for learners such as safety, social relationships and a relaxing environment. Janet*, a teacher in the CGEA, saw that injecting fun into the learning environment enabled the engagement of learners as this enabled them to feel happy.

“They have a light hearted approach and I guess that’s the sort of culture and the atmosphere that we’ve established and...it’s walking...we tend to sort of walk a line of keeping it not hysterical, keeping it sort of structured and calm and offset their learning that it’s a good learning environment for people who have some learning challenges”.

Not all teachers saw fun as an objective that they were aiming for. Nancy* considered safety was a more significant goal. She said that “if people are feeling safe and comfortable and accepted, then they are probably willing to give something a little try, a go, because the fun we had is just about the human interaction”.

Teachers found it much easier to talk about enjoyment rather than fun. Enjoyment was spoken about as motivation and also reflected in the social aspect of the learning environment.

“It takes the edge off what they’re doing. Adults — I would strongly believe that adults are very focussed on their learning. They tend to want to learn...it’s much more specific. I need these skills to do this. And so the element...I think the element of enjoyment...I don’t know about the word fun, but the element of enjoyment is really important because it keeps them going” (Nancy).

Janet could see that students were enjoying their learning through the social aspects of making friends and building relationships with each other. She described the students coming early to class because they wanted to spend time with each other and that this was significant in their motivation and engagement. She described it as “the hook that pulls them in and then the learning takes place because they, you know, they’re obviously enjoying it, its meeting different sorts of needs”.

4.2. *What elements of fun and enjoyment do adult learners talk about?*

Adult learners interviewed in this research all mentioned that they experienced either fun or enjoyment in their learning during CGEA classes. Eighty five (85%) per cent talked about fun and fifty (50%) per cent spoke about enjoyment. Two (2%) per cent said that they did not experience fun but that they did experience enjoyment.

Fun was often described as being about the activities that they participated in. Some of the activities that were seen as fun related directly to their learning such as: a project on Easter Island; cooking; flashcards and bingo all seen as activities made learning fun or different way of learning. Others spoke of having a break from learning or

break from the topic that they were studying. Activities that were seen as fun were in addition to their learning program such as: abseiling; rock climbing; sports; excursions like going to the zoo. From these two perspectives either as a different way of learning using different techniques such as quizzes or having a break from the classroom they were seen as ways of having fun.

When adult learners were saying they were having fun they also spoke about the process they were participating in. Teachers were contributing to the fun and enjoyment felt by adult learners from the approaches and strategies they adopted. For example one student said:

“Here they sit down and show you step by step how to do it ... it is easyit's quite fun and I enjoy it...you can enjoy doing work.... that you also have fun at the same time... have fun and enjoy the process as you go along”.

Some learners also talked about fun as humour; having fun when something is funny; everyone laughing together; having fun and can have some hilarious times; having a giggle; fun little things; laughter is relaxing, it is a good thing. This is also reflected by Penman and Ellis (2009) in their exploration of the love of learning. They found that love of learning had an element of fun/curiosity, which is not forced. They concluded that incorporating humour and laughter and an informal atmosphere can help ensure study environments are fear free, minimising anxiety and encouraging deep learning.

For learners the fun was also about interacting with others. They used words such as: everyone laughing together; fun when people do presentations; interaction with people makes it fun; and this indicated that being with other people was a contributor to having fun or enjoying the learning experience. When adult learners spoke about enjoyment it was also often linked with being with others.

“We're talking each other and with each other that means we learn each other right. So we are talking together laughing together she (teacher) gave us free to talk like freedom. Our relationship is also very important everyone laughing together you feel very close”.

For some learners fun could also be seen as something that could be distracting and in this case it is not fun. The distraction stops fun and enjoyment, particularly when people were talking and not enabling them to concentrate. Where things were identified as not fun it was most often spoken about in terms of the mundane, dragging on, boring or not being able to comprehend. One of the interesting things in talking to adult learners about fun in learning is their description of having fun when they're actually achieving something. In the literature this has been referred to as hard fun; where it is fun because it is hard (Papert, 1996). One learner described this as “When you actually achieve something you get it done and, you're like, yes I did it. I get quite a bit of enjoyment out of that I think it's great to get a bit of a kick”.

Adult learners also spoke about other aspects of their learning when prompted about fun and enjoyment. Fifteen (15%) per cent spoke about being interested in what they learnt. They liked what they were learning; they found it different and interesting. For these students learning could be boring if they weren't interested.

Jamaica and it was so interesting... and that's another thing that would make the interesting part of the stuff we are learning... It's so amazing I've learnt not just the island, but the actual history, also about what sort of dancing that they do and the music they have, some of the dancing and the music is unreal and I actually find it quite relaxing. You actually take notice of what you're learning, you actually get an interest in your learning, you actually enjoy it.

In the literature interest is described as a transient, affective state and interests are defined as stable enduring traits or dispositions (Savickas, 1999; Silva, 2001). Interest is also proposed to be part of wellbeing; pleasant feelings, similar to emotions of enjoyment and surprise (Izard, 1977). Affective interest is pleasant and positive and thus a form of wellbeing (Silva, 2001). For Silva, there seems to be good reason to distinguish between enjoyment and interest ‘wanting to know’ and ‘liking what is known’ and how they play different roles in the economy of experience (Silva, 2001, p. 276). Wlodkowski (1997) also endorses interest as a motivation for learning. Although Wlodkowski says that an adult will learn while in a state of continual boredom, he describes this as an experience of pain and stress (p. 136).

In the discussion of fun and enjoyment thirty-three (33%) per cent of adult learners spoke about their emotions. They spoke about feeling good about themselves, working together and getting to know other people better. The emotional side of this was that they felt happy, they felt close with others and a few used the word love to describe their feelings. Adult learners also spoke about how experiencing fun and enjoyment in their learning environment impacted positively on their well-being (14%) and fifteen per cent (15%) identified other positive benefits such as better understanding of the learning content, helping to de stress, getting away from external pressures and to be themselves.

Enjoyment has also been discussed in the literature as a benefit for participants in terms of the adult learning environment or the social experience. One of the non-market (private) benefits for participants in adult learning is enjoyment of the environment which participants often report as being informal and supportive (Bowman, 2006; Clemens et al., 2003). A significant benefit for many participants was found to be making friends (50 per cent) as an associated benefit and also the ‘enjoyment of the learning environment’ (Allen Consulting Group, 2008, p. 41). A survey into Men’s sheds in Victoria has also found that the sheds allowed ‘men to regularly meet and happily socialise’ (Golding & Harvey, 2006, p. 1). Volkoff’s (2007) research into the experience of learning in the Adult and Community Education sector also found that 98 per cent of respondents from both metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions reported learning as enjoyable.

4.3. *What do adult learners and their teachers believe is the impact of fun and enjoyment on their learning?*

Sixty three per cent (63%) of adult learners said that fun and enjoyment did impact on their learning. Firstly having fun and enjoying the experience meant that adult learners were not bored and were more likely to pay attention. They also reported that they were more likely to “have a go” at something new if it was fun or that they needed it to be explained in a “fun way”. Being able to concentrate was also identified by other adult learners as a learning outcome from experiencing fun and enjoyment. This was variously described as making it easier to remember, easier to focus, makes the learner want to learn and makes them “take things on board”.

“You absorb information better actually having fun. You're less likely for your mind to shut off shutdown. If it's not fun I find that it doesn't absorb as well as if I'm interested in does. Probably easy to remember when you're more focused on something that is more fun or interesting... especially if you come across something that you find really challenging”.

Having fun and enjoying the experience was a strong motivator for most adult learners and impacted on their learning outcomes. This reflected the interest mentioned earlier but also the removal of stress as learners wanted to be in the class and expressed more confidence in their learning.

The teachers interviewed did see that fun and enjoyment assisted adults learning in three areas. Firstly they agreed with the adult learners that fun and enjoyment did provide a great motivator for participation and learning. Adult learners were participating because they wanted to rather than having to, they became engaged and wanted not only to come back to class but to learn more. Teachers also saw that the relaxed atmosphere provided an impetus for learners to “have a go”, act more spontaneous and move out of their “comfort zone” in the learning environment.

Better concentration by adult learners and greater absorption of the learning content were outcomes that were also echoed by the teacher’s responses. They believed that adult learners demonstrated greater retention of learning; that a fun experience resonated deeply with the learners and resulted in learning that was more enduring. Fun experiences were seen as a great way to help learners to associate with the content to be learnt, to encode it and to retain the learning.

The third area that teachers saw fun and enjoyment impacted on and assisted adults learning was the social aspect. Teachers believed that experiencing fun and enjoyment meant that many learners built relationships and friendships that may have been lacking in their lives outside the classroom. This sense of belonging and connection was also a motivator to participate and to take new ideas on board. One teacher said that experiencing fun and enjoyment “encourages them to take that from here and into their own lives as well”.

Conclusions

The research has found that fun and enjoyment does play a role in adult learning programs. The conversations with adult learners and their teachers found that both groups could identify the fun and enjoyment that is experienced by learners in their CGEA course. These have been viewed firstly as an overall experience, with adult learners talking more freely about fun and enjoyment and teachers talking about engagement, social relationships and safety. Learners have identified a number of elements that are part of their experience of fun and enjoyment: the activities they undertake, the process established by the teachers, interacting with others, humour, achieving, their emotions, their well-being and personal benefits.

The research also found that both adult learners and their teachers believed that fun and enjoyment impacted on adults learning and they were able to articulate the role that fun and enjoyment plays in adult learning programs. Firstly both having fun and experiencing enjoyment were perceived by both learners and teachers as a motivator to attend classes and learn the knowledge and skills. Secondly fun and enjoyment were considered a mechanism that encouraged concentration by learners and helped in the absorption of learning. Finally having fun and experiencing enjoyment were identified as a proven way to build a socially connected learning environment.

The analysis of responses indicates that experiencing positive emotions such as fun and enjoyment link with successful learning and self-perception of increased well-being. These three outcomes are also linked with achievement of competence, increased learner autonomy, improved relatedness with others, intrinsic motivation and goal achievement. The research proposes that a greater focus on the affective domain of an adult's learning experience, in particular fun and enjoyment, could prove to be as beneficial and important as it is currently considered to be in children's learning. A different approach to the design of adult learning experiences and methods that incorporates greater use of fun may mean that more adults are encouraged and motivated to participate in learning with enthusiasm for the journey and optimism for the outcomes.

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