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AUTHOR Rajuan, Maureen
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ABSTRACT

This paper compares and contrasts the author's adult learning experiences with those of another adult learner in order to understand the inter-relationship between the domains of education and "work and love" (Merriam, 1993) imbedded in adult development theory. The author interviewed a female colleague of similar age and place of residence who was enrolled in the same institution of higher learning. The interviewee was a high school and college English teacher. The external dialogue of the interview focused on the positive aspects of her teaching career and educational experiences. Some of the themes of her external dialogue included stages of learning according to age categories (early adulthood, middle age, late adulthood, and retirement). The internal dialogue was composed of the interviewee's personal relationship to education, which she viewed as one of loyalty, constriction, and domination of her life. It noted her fear of being alone and fear of aging. The interviewee perceived education as fulfilling many needs, including self-identity, organization of life structure, enhancement of work experiences, contribution to the profession, social achievement, escape from personal problems, and remaining young. (SM)

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An Interview With A Lifelong Learner

Maureen Rajuan

Teacher Trainer

Achva Academic College

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An Interview with A Lifelong Learner

In accordance with qualitative and narrative methods of research, this interview was carried out in an attempt to contribute to the field of adult education by gaining knowledge from the perspective of the learner. The general framework sought to understand the inter-relationship between the domains of education and “work and love” (Merriam, 1993) imbedded in adult development theory.

On a personal level, my own re-entry into education as an adult has become a significant anchor in my life. I seek to compare and contrast my own experiences with those of other adult learners in order to gain insight into the different meanings this life event stimulates. In addition, the in-depth study of others’ unique experiences can aid me in overcoming the obstacle of assuming the homogeneity of adult learners’ perspectives as a group.

The choice of subject to be interviewed is dealt with by Shepeler. One of our unknown motives, as interviewers, is a “semiconscious reflection on one’s own life when reading about another’s.” We have the choice of choosing a participant who is very different from ourselves and our cultural context, in which case we compare and contrast our own beliefs and perceptions to theirs, or of choosing a participant who is very similar to ourselves, in which case we believe we can more easily understand his/her perspective and where he/she is coming from. My motivation in the choice of interviewee rests on the assumption that a woman colleague of similar age and place of residence, enrolled in the same institution of higher learning as myself can be more readily understood by me. The interviewee is a middle-aged mother of privileged socio-economic background who has completed her M.A. degree and is a successful English teacher both on the high school and university level. This life context allows me to connect on the level of social expectations and roles.

The organization of the interview which resulted can be seen as a movement from positively-assessed, practical aspects of the interviewee's work and educational experiences in the social world to an introspective analysis of personal issues. The interaction was increasingly one of contact between the interviewee and interviewer which led to a deepening of the material presented. The mutual belief that we both share a common social context created the expectation that we could easily relate to and understand one another. Further, the interviewee remarked, after the interview, that she believed my background in educational counseling could aid her in analyzing the material presented. The interviewee was flattered that she had been chosen as a person knowledgeable and experienced in adult education from whom I wished to learn. She, also, saw this as an opportunity to take "time out" and talk about herself with an interested listener, not a common occurrence in her busy life.

These specific conditions created the unique interaction between the two participants.

The External Dialogue

On the practical level of the social world, the interviewee begins by focusing on the positive aspects of her teaching career and educational experiences. She sees these as personally meaningful and fulfilling. She takes pride in socially-evaluated achievements, such as university degrees and diplomas, success as a teacher and the feeling of remaining competent in comparison to others.

"So, umm..., this Master's Degree, what it meant to me... so as I said, it was TESOL and it interested me very much because I had been a teacher already at that time, 6 or 7 years I had taught in high school so everything that we did was really

very practical and I could apply my previous knowledge to what we were studying and vice versa. I finished it quickly. I studied very seriously. I did a lot of work. I enjoyed every minute. This is how 2 years have gone. And it meant to me that I can still, at my age, which was already 45 or so, I could study with younger people and adjust myself to new knowledge, new styles of teachers and I think it helped me feel young but I am actually at the beginning of my career when many of my friends are already retiring. They are counting the years since they started at 20 something in the same job. They are retiring and I felt that I am starting something new and it keeps me young and it keeps me fresh and it keeps me curious and I was reading a lot for this degree, I was writing a lot, I met a lot of new people. I felt that I will never stop again because every time that I restarted studying during those 20, 30 years since my B.A., I always said, "I will never stop! I will never stop!" It's wonderful, it's exciting, etc."

The external dialogue can be analyzed in terms of the **identity-formation status** used by Marcia (1966) and Josselson (1987) for subjects of similar backgrounds, i.e. white, middle-class college graduates. This framework places the interviewee in the group called Identity-Achievers. It seems that the interviewee has made life decisions on her own terms while taking into consideration social and family expectations. Her need for achievement in both the professional and the academic realms is evident in her continuing search and mastery of new degrees, diplomas and career endeavors. Further, her choice to remain a single mother is in awareness of her own needs to give herself fully to the achievement of these endeavors. She can be seen as typical of modern women who have found an "anchor" in their career and education. She appears to have integrated her roles as mother and daughter to an aging father in a

satisfying way in that they do not appear in the interview as roles of major concern. Her dialogue with external factors of education and career is told in the voice of control and self-choice. It is integrated, personally satisfying and used as an organizing principle in which education and career are mutually self-enriching.

In terms of **adult education**, the integration of learning and teaching experiences is what Knowles (1973) describes as the adult learner who has attained autonomy in seeking out and applying new knowledge to life experiences. The autonomous learner also uses his/her life experiences to make meaning out of new knowledge. *"...it's because you have already experienced so many things and you know that everything that you read now and everything that you do now can be applied to something and everything is relevant to this or that extent, so every time you have to select and you have to decide what you're taking and all the things you're NOT taking, and that are not going to be in your thesis, you feel that it's unfair, unjust, maybe even scientifically wrong because everything is connected with everything."*

Schoen (1983) writes of the "reflective practitioner" who has attained the ability not only to reflect upon practice in the classroom before and after, but as an ongoing process during actual practice. Research has shown that beginning teachers seldom attain this ability in the first few years of teaching, whereas not all experienced teachers are able to attain this ability. We can find evidence for the interviewee's ability to reflect on practice in the classroom: *"...doing something which was so close to what I was actually doing in my work actually enabled me to think about the thesis while I was working, while I was teaching, I was thinking, "What are they telling me? What can I learn from what they're saying?... I enriched my concepts and my ideas and my plans even in that theses during my years of work."*

The interviewee not only tells us about her ability to reflect in the classroom, but displays this ability in the interview itself. This is evident in places in which she stops an idea in mid-air in order to clarify or ask herself a question about what she has just said: *“In any case, I got stuck, though, I don’t think it’s because of my age, I got stuck with a thesis itself which took me 6 years to complete after I studied very quickly and very... with great pleasure for 2 years. I finished all my “duties,” as we call it. The thesis itself took 6 years and I don’t think it has anything to do with the fact that I started it late or after many years of interval, which wasn’t the case in any case. It was just a problem of personality, probably, that I kept changing my subject. Maybe because I was interested in too many things and here, maybe, the age could have an effect, I mean, if you ask me which you didn’t, but (laughs) I would assume that you could have asked, it’s because you have already experienced so many things...”* The interviewee here rethinks her original statement that it has nothing to do with age, by bringing up other possibilities (a personality problem or being interested in so many things) and then goes back to reconsider an alternative interpretation of age, which she finally accepts. She perceives the way of learning at this age to be qualitatively different from earlier learning by virtue of greater life experience.

As the interviewee opens up to the interview situation and to the internal dialogue with herself, she increasingly uses the interview to confront and reflect on levels of meaning that had not been apparent to her previously. In summary, it can be said that she utilizes the entire interview situation as a learning experience to make new meanings and connections out of the life experiences she is relating. She also engages in reflection upon reflection when these new insights present themselves to her. They seem to pop up as pleasant little surprises which cause her to laugh. She also catches herself asking questions which she begins by attributing to the interviewer, but realizes

almost immediately that they originated in herself: *"I'm actually thinking about all these things now while I'm talking to you. Probably also because of escapism, I never wanted really to think about it. So by (laughs) I mean, you didn't even ask. I can't say by asking me. By sitting here and talking to you and having to take into account of everything that's happening to me, this is what I manage to conclude."*

Another major theme in the external dialogue is the interviewee's perspective of **stages of learning** according to **age categories**. She has organized different ways of learning into 3 age periods:

The first is the 23-24-year-olds who represent early adulthood. In this period, the interviewee perceives learning to be a naive encounter with *"new knowledge, new styles of teaching,"* uncomplicated by the need to connect them to a multitude of other ideas gained through life experiences and learning (*"So I assume that if I were 24 years old, I wouldn't have had that kind of observation, or that kind of... concepts."*) It is also seen as a period of lack of responsibility for others which leaves the learner free to pursue educational goals. It is a sheltered period in life in which the interviewee envisions the *"the 23-24-year-olds, who have just finished their BA, who come home and find the warm soup waiting for them on the table and mommy's (laughs) washing their things and preparing everything."*

The second period is that of her M.A. degree, which is representative of middle adulthood. This is the period which has just come to a close with the completion of her M.A. thesis. In the beginning of this period, during the first two years, learning is perceived as a serious endeavor: *"I studied very seriously. I did a lot of work."* Studying brings much satisfaction in terms of new ideas, new people and new perspectives: *"I was reading a lot for this degree, I was writing a lot, I met a lot of*

new people.” It is a more mature way of learning in that there is a need *“to adjust myself ... and it keeps me young and it keeps me fresh and it keeps me curious.”*

However, the continuation of this middle period becomes complicated by the need to integrate new learning with old and with life and career experiences. This is the period which was formerly described as the “reflective practitioner.” It is more difficult on one hand, but more relevant and meaningful in terms of the influence it will have on her students, *“I thought it was a good thesis. I thought it was an important one, which also kept me very, I mean, happy all the time. It was important. It can help teachers, help students, it’s practical in its implications.”* At the close of this period, there is a new need to share the knowledge gained and to contribute to a larger audience, that of the professional community of teachers and academics: *“I think it can really serve a lot of people and I don’t want it to collect dust on the shelf. I want it to be alive among people all the time. I want to talk about it. I want to give it, I want to summarize, maybe to translate it into English because it’s in Hebrew, and just make sure that something happens with the teaching of English at university level, etc.”* In Erikson’s terms, it is the period of generativity (1950)..

The third period, representative of late adulthood, is not clearly defined. The interviewee perceives the cultural context of aging as represented by her friends, who are counting the years until retirement, but prefers to see her present life in transition from middle to late adulthood. For this reason, she has recently reached a difficult decision to learn something new, although connected to her previous studies, in order to prepare for her next career. *“At my age, at 56, why does a person have to look for the profession of the future? O.K. It’s a legitimate question. So I don’t know to what extent it’s real. To what extent it’s an excuse. It’s a refusal to grow old because I’m only going to change professions: I’m not going to retire, God forbid, from teaching.*

It is only another stage in my life. I just refuse to admit that I'm approaching the age of any professional career. O.K.?"

The fourth period, retirement, is seen in the distant future as related to old age. The contradiction between the realization that she may no longer be able to teach and the outburst of "God forbid" should she have to retire, shows her ambivalence in dealing with the subject. The conflict is between what is socially expected of a person nearing the retirement age as opposed to the subject's need to remain actively involved in work and studies in order to feel young and overcome this social expectation. The solution is in preparation for a "next career." In dialogue with the external world, she chooses social institutions of study and work. In dialogue with her internal self, she postpones old age and uselessness. For this reason, she seems to idealize the retirement stage as freedom from all responsibility to external demands with a total concentration on the self and its narcissistic needs. On one hand, retirement is seen by her to be an idyllic utopia: *"On the day that I will be able to go to Tel Aviv and walk around in the street just doing nothing, or sit in a cafe and read a women's magazine with a lot of pictures and gossip, this will be the day, you see, when I will feel I can waste my time and enjoy this waste and that it's O.K. That it's chaotic and that nobody asks me to finish a paper until 3 o'clock that day. I can just go on reading that magazine for as long as I wish and go to the movies and sleep and chat with friends and have no plans for the next day and it's O.K."* On the other hand, this life style is seen as wasteful and guilt provoking. The longing for this time of life is juxtaposed to the fear of it. A possible solution is hinted at: the study of music. Again, the interviewee seeks solutions to life choices in the only way she knows, through education. The study of music is a compromise in that it has no relation to the external world of work or achievement, but is truly for her own enjoyment. The super-

ego requires, however, that it be a serious study, *“Look, I’ve been dreaming about music, about learning how to play and maybe to learn more about the theory, about the history of music and things like that, but I really think with this I’m really going to wait until I retire, properly.”* It is a form of integration of the need to study and the need to relax and enjoy.

The interviewee’s perceptions of ways of learning throughout the life cycle can be compared to age/stage theories of adult development.

The Internal Dialogue

The interview, as a whole, moved toward greater degrees of self-revelation and insight. Most interviewees have an agenda of her own. The unfolding of this agenda was made possible by my ability to listen and encourage further exploration. This was conveyed through empathy and non-verbal messages more than through the specific questions asked or comments made by me. My ability to refrain from verbal reaction until the interviewee had totally exhausted the train of thought that she was following, served to convey the message of interest in and importance of everything that was said by the interviewee. When things were unclear, I waited to see if the interviewee would clarify the idea or feeling in the continuation of her narrative. This usually proved to be the case. I also made a conscious effort to overcome expressing disagreement with the interviewee’s perspective. This was especially difficult when I felt that the interviewee engaged in self-criticism to an extreme degree.

In Shepeler’s words, “we are most eagerly interested to reveal in others what we may not know - and may not want to know - about ourselves.” The two main themes which seem dominant are **the fear of being alone** and **the fear of aging**. This came to

my awareness upon reading, “in the language of the unconscious, a deliberately placed negation tends to reveal a double affirmative.” This struck me as the explanation for my difficulty in accepting the interviewee’s self-criticism concerning her perceived neglect of activities related to the personal and intimate realms. My need to uphold the image of the successful modern woman as being independently whole hindered my ability to truly connect with the parts of the interviewee which were painful to her on a personal level. Both my interests and the limits to my understanding are found here in the two themes of which I have no personal experience, but know on a conscious level to be part of the life cycle.

The interviewee used the situation and the presence of another interested person to ask and answer her own questions through the interviewer. An example of the interviewee’s awareness of this process follows:

“This is very frightening. I’m afraid to face my life. You see, it’s escaping in many ways. I dare say it to the microphone, but I suppose it’s a discreet kind of... it’s discreet, probably, this interview. But I think it could be analyzed, definitely, as a kind of escapism from facing reality. You can ask me what I mean by reality. Reality is what do I do next as a single parent. Am I really... am I planning to finish my life in this way? Am I going to find someone to finish my life with and be a little less lonely in my emotional life? These are things that are much harder to confront than what am I going to study next?”

The interviewee is here aware of the interview situation as a safe opportunity for making personal meaning out of her life experiences. This allows her to reveal personal fears and engage in negative self-criticism:

The internal dialogue is composed of the interviewee’s personal relationship to education. This relationship is seen by her to be one of loyalty, constriction and as

dominating her life. She sees herself as having made sacrifices to serve its goals: *“So, I admit that while I was doing it, I, all the time, I felt this burden on my shoulders, I never forgot it for a second and I think I sacrificed quite a lot for it. I couldn’t really afford enjoying myself freely. I couldn’t relax... but I didn’t start anything new, anything fresh in my private life and I didn’t really think about it even...Maybe I really didn’t feel the need at that time. It fulfilled me in many, many ways.”*

Although she questions the worth of having chosen this path in life, she is aware of her inability to choose otherwise. The internal conflict is not as easily overcome as the external one. I believe Shepeler has summarized the main theme of this interview in writing, “The question to be asked is not ‘can intellectual work be personally satisfying,’ but rather ‘what is it that is being sublimated?’”

Education is described by the interviewee as a love relationship with words of endearment and idealization; it is exciting, fresh and causes her to feel in touch with life. It is the central “anchor” of her life around which other things and people take their place. Neglect of this realm causes guilt feelings *“because you’re never free when you’re studying... I like concerts and I go to many performances. I go to Tel Aviv. I go to the opera. I do a lot. But I always feel guilty and I always ask myself, ‘Can I afford it? Do I really have to do it tonight? Oh, I wish I could stay and finish my paper.’”* The relationship is described as one of dependency: *“Maybe my studies helped me to stay sane in the difficult life that I had. I can’t really tell. But it’s something in the middle, a little bit to this direction, a little bit to the other. But I CLING to, I CLING to my studies like something that can save me from getting completely lost or feeling that my life is not worth it. It gives me a feeling of worth, of value.”*

The educational framework defines her boundaries in terms of time, place and activity. There is also a glimpse at the inner “chaos” which she fears would appear were she to attempt to organize her life without this anchor: *“For me, I think it is, but it requires a lot of effort because to stop studying, if I try to visualize it, it’s like chaos in my life. I have to take responsibility for my schedule, for what my day looks like, what my week looks like, what my month looks like, and it looks chaotic and I’m afraid of it. I like other people, and in this case it’s the university, to organize my week and my priorities for me.”* The word “chaos” is repeated here and in the next few sentences three times.

In the interview, the interviewee gradually begins to reflect on this relationship and opens up to the void which she feels she has been trying to escape. The void consists of loneliness, *“ending her life without an intimate relationship.”* This is what she feels she has missed and is still postponing. She feels that it is not too late, but that she hasn’t the courage to make such a drastic change by her own initiative. It would take some sort of “event” or “shock” to move her to it. In her view, the two cannot be combined: *“I probably feel that if I did half and half, I developed, let’s say, my social life, or reconstructed or redid my house, or all kinds of things that give us a lot of pleasure, if I did that while finishing my thesis, both wouldn’t have been as they should.”* She goes on to explain why education and her personal life present a dichotomy which she cannot breach: *“Because the private life is not something that presents itself as a task to be completed, it’s something that you have to devote to in small portions, or doses, all the time.”* The reason for this dichotomy lies in the kind of person she knows herself to be, one who devotes herself fully to the chosen domain in order *“to do it in the best possible way.”* In the chosen educational realm, internal boundaries seem to be unclear and enmeshed. There is a never-ending commitment

that gives rise to feelings of guilt and overtakes any possibility of a personal life. Although this is painful, it is a known way of coping. The educational framework, however, serves to define the external boundaries. Educational frameworks can be relied upon to remain stable over time, backed by the authority of the institution and of society. Possibly, there is a fear of the inability to define internal boundaries and to relinquish the formation of external boundaries to a significant other who may not be as reliable.

Summary

What have I learned from my participant?

Going back to the original framework of my question concerning the inter-relatedness of the work, love and educational domains, my subject has shown clearly that one domain, that of education, is dominant in her life. I can only question now if the context of the interview question influenced this result since I requested her participation in order to learn more about the subject of my interest, adult learners. In addition, I would also question whether this domain became more prominent in her mind during the process of the interview in which new meanings were created by her. Based on this interview, I would seek to discover whether there is necessarily a dominant domain, or anchor, in the life stories of other adult learners. I would like to learn about the possibility of the shifting dominance of domains throughout the life cycle or the integration of domains in which all are seen as equally important in life decisions.

The special relationship of one domain to another also became clear for this subject. The work and educational domains were perceived by her to be totally integrated and

in harmony in a mutually nurturing relationship. In opposition to this, the personal domain was seen to be diametrically opposed to the other two. This dichotomy can be seen as existing between the external and the internal self. Knowledge about different configurations of inter-relationships between the domains of other adult learners can add to our understanding of the life cycle possibilities.

The varied purposes education can serve to adult learners were illuminated in this interview. Education was perceived as fulfilling needs in terms of:

- source of value, self-identity
- framework for organization of life structure
- enhancement of work experiences
- contribution to profession
- meeting needs for social achievement
- escape from personal problems
- remaining young and postponing old age

Remaining questions pertain to the configuration of these needs and others in relation to the domains and the age/stage development of other adult learners. Findings of this kind could then be compared to and contrasted with the theoretical literature on adult development according to accepted models based on Erikson (1950) and newer models based on feminist and postmodern theory.

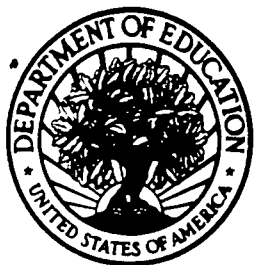
In summary, I have learned that listening to a subject can provide rich material in terms of both understanding the individual life and the theoretical questions they pose. Answers to some of these questions on an individual level lead to new questions and new theories. It is also clear that the researcher, as both interviewer and writer of the interview, chooses which questions and answers to concentrate on and subsequently fashions the original text of the interview into a new text which is her own creation.

This tension between the two texts can only be partly resolved by the attempt to base interpretation on the authentic voice of the interviewee by its inclusion in the final writing, as I have tried to do.

I have learned that the limits to my understanding of the interviewee are based on my personal experiences, expectations and fears in those inner places where I prefer not to enter as a personal interviewing style. I am learning how to identify those places through my reactions of rejection, evaluation, and hierarchical ordering in an attempt to achieve empathy, connection and an understanding and acceptance of individual difference. My personal perceptions of the material presented can then be analyzed as separate and different from those of the subject as an additional level existing in the interview process. The combination of the two levels in the comparison with existing theory and the creation of new theory through organization into a written whole creates a third level in the interview process which is further influenced by the intended audience of readers. The tension between academic requirements and personal meaning-making is an important consideration in the choices made in the final product. It is truly an impossible task to fully analyze the multitude of meanings inherent in even a single interview.

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Organization/Address: *Achva Academic College
M.P. Shikmim 79800*

Telephone: *072-08-9461363*

FAX:

E-Mail Address: *msrajwan@mscc.huji.ac.il*

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Sincerely,

Brinda L. Albert
Program Assistant

