

**HOW DOES BLENDED LEARNING MOTIVATE ADULT
LITERACY LEARNERS?**

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**Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the MEd in Adult
and Community Education**

Department of Adult and Community Education

National University of Ireland Maynooth

2011

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge all the help and support that I have received from my colleagues at Warrenmount Community Education Centre over the past three years, as well as from my thesis supervisor Brian Sheridan. Thank you, I could not have done it without you.

Abstract

This piece of work looks at how adult literacy learners in the context of an urban Dublin community education centre are motivated by using a blended learning approach to improving their literacy skills. Chapter one introduces the thesis and gives some background to why this topic was chosen. Chapter two presents a review of the literature looking at the debate around critical theory, key adult education theorists, such as Habermas, Freire, and Mezirow as well as publications focussing in on the area of information and communication technologies (ICTs). I also look at the policy in this area. The findings of this piece of qualitative research are presented in Chapter three. The research involved participants, both learners and tutors, in the weekly literacy session and are presented in a case study. Five areas of motivation are presented. In Chapter four the analysis looks at how the theory relates to the practice and examines the findings in view of the literature review. In the final Chapter I review the implications for the future theory and practise of adult education, make some suggestions for further research that could be undertaken, and present a conclusion for the thesis.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Just over a year ago the centre where I work as literacy co-ordinator agreed to take part in a project for the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) to pilot a new online learning platform called Write On which they had developed for literacy learners. This is a particularly focussed programme as it allows learners to complete a nationally recognised certificate issued by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), at level two, called the Certificate in General Learning, if they wish to do so. Learners can complete the certificate at their own pace and in their own time or simply use the programme as a resource on which to practice literacy and numeracy. The content is well thought out and relevant to people's everyday lives.

My experience of working with the literacy learners is that whilst some of them are quicker than others, for the most part it can take some time for them to get used to using a computer and they generally need to have some assistance and direction at the beginning. While the content of Write On is good and it certainly was a positive development I wondered whether there was any real learning being experienced by the learners. I also wanted to explore how best to integrate it into the literacy scheme at the centre. The natural response was to ask the one to one tutors to work with their learners on the online platform Write On and to review and evaluate how this worked. This thesis sets out to understand how this approach motivates the learners as well as to capture how the tutors work with the learners to use technology in general and the Write On programme in particular.

This thesis looks, from a critical theory perspective, at how the literacy learners who come to the adult community education centre where I work are motivated in their learning by using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in a blended learning approach. The thesis tries to find out what it is that is motivational about blended learning and in doing so to explore the social, philosophical and theoretical roots for these motivations. I look at a group of learners who are attending the literacy session at the centre where I work in the spring of 2011, along with tutors who are involved, and try to understand whether they are simply subscribing to the current dominant discourse, that which either compels people to want to use ICTs or leaves them feeling that they are stuck ‘in the stone age’ (quote by research participant) and unlikely to leave any time soon.

The question this thesis sets out to explore is how using ICTs in a blended learning way motivates literacy learners to work on their literacy and how the tutors and others involved approach doing this. I am exploring this by using a case study to illuminate the findings.

A Definition of Blended Learning

In attempting to find the definition of blended learning that I thought appropriate for the purpose of this thesis I have been surprised at the variety and range of definitions and their applications. So it seems to me that the best thing is to keep it simple and to put it into context. Littlejohn & Pegler (2007) are often quoted in this regard and their book provides a good overview of the blended learning debate, however in the context of community education in an urban setting the definition of

blended learning is more than a simple mix of technology and face to face learning as the following example may suggest:

Learning that combines different technologies in particular a combination of traditional (face to face instruction) and online teaching experiences and media.

(Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007, p. 226)

Therefore, I have added to Littlejohn and Pegler's definition of blended learning, quoted above, another piece that aims to reflect the context as it happens in community education by adding my own words to their definitions so that blended learning also allows the learner to be self directed in his or her engagement with technologies in a reflective, supportive and encouraging environment. Thus, the aim of blended learning in this context is to support the learner where needed (expertise / self directed learning workshops / classes etc) but ultimately to empower them to use technology, alongside other means, in order to critique the world in which we live, alongside providing what seems to be a motivational resource to use in order to improve their literacy.

A Definition of Motivation

The Oxford Dictionary of English (2010) states that motivation 'is the reason or reasons one has for acting or behaving in a particular way' and 'the general desire or willingness of someone to do something'. Jarvis (1983, 1995, pp. 51 - 52), quoting Wlodkowski, says that 'motivation, a concept which ... is most difficult to define but which relates to the reasons why people behave in the manner that they do' and that the factors that need to be taken in account are 'attitudes, needs, stimulation, emotion, competence and reinforcement'. However this relates to

learning rather than participation. So while it may be difficult to pinpoint a precise definition of motivation, I will use the definition that seems to be most illuminating for me, that is that motivation is made up of the reasons that create the urge in people to do something, which in this case is desire or willingness to continue with their literacy studies which using a blended approach to their learning may help to inspire.

This is an interesting area for me because technology has the potential to be a tremendous aid to literacy learners and can transform the lives of many people who do not already have access to it. And while I do not think that everyone should have access for the sake of it, there are a great many positive aspects to understanding technology and being comfortable using it. Apart from the practical applications of using the internet to find anything from bus timetables to taking advantage of discounted deals, the innovative application of technology in adult education can help to shorten the aforementioned divide and give people a sense of being a part of a wider community, as well as a way in which to build the literacy learners confidence as people. It is relevant to adult education in general because I think that the future direction of adult education will be to use technology to facilitate a more productive learning experience. The findings suggest that the people who come to the centre where I work are highly motivated by the social interaction that they have, however many of them do use the online learning programme to a greater or lesser extent outside of class, so this would indicate, as Maugher (2009) suggests, that adult education in general will move more towards blending off campus access to content with on-campus access to fulfil the more human need to have social interaction.

Methodology

I have identified my research with aspects of a reflexive social constructivist and post-positivist approach. This mainly qualitative approach, 'which allows for ambiguity as regards interpretive possibilities, and lets the researcher's construction of what is explored become more visible' (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), relates to my own ontological perspective as an adult educator, who currently works with second chance learners, as well as from previous professional and personal life experiences. It is a reflection of my genuine attitude towards the research as well as sensitivity 'to the social context in which data are produced' (Mason, 2002, p. 3).

My research falls broadly within the scope of social constructivism because I am researching what people think about their own lived experience in their own words and I believe that there is no one truth; truth is subjective and what I seek to discover may only be part of the story. Furthermore I respect the potential diversity and complexity of viewpoints that my research subjects, as any group of people, will have. I acknowledge that I, as researcher, will have my own subjective opinions on the research process. Also the context of the research is relevant; I work with the research participants on a weekly basis so they know me and I know them; this should hopefully mean that our interactions in the research process are as authentic as possible.

Epistemologically I think that aspects of post-positivism sit well because I agree with the concept that through carrying out research we are able to find new knowledge that is 'probably true' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 193), whilst at the same time acknowledging that 'we cannot be positive' about our claims of knowledge when studying the behaviour and actions of humans' (Creswell, 2003, p.

7). I include reflexive in my paradigmatic approach as I can see that the limits to qualitative research, that it can be criticised for being ‘merely anecdotal’ (Mason, 2002, p. 1), means that I need to be explicit in my use of reflexivity in order to counter that criticism in some way.

A reflexive, post-positivist, social constructionist approach is relevant because it will allow me to develop a framework so that I can understand how using a blended learning approach for second-chance learners can motivate them as well as possibly help them to become self-directed and develop critiques of the world in which they live. I want to find out how blended learning can help. In other words what is important is the subjective meaning people bring to their own lived experience and the richness that is contained within it. As I have been working towards carrying out this piece of research, through reflection, I have been becoming more aware of the complexity of finding out the information that I require as well as how best to approach it and make sense of the end results.

I like both the social positivism and post-positivistic approaches. The post-positivistic approach allows us to form some kind of meaning from the research results (even if it is not what we thought it would be), with the caveat that it may, or may not, be true, we can never be sure. We can make some assumptions that what we find out is more true than not. The drawback with both social positivism and post-positivistic approaches is that the respondents may feel they should say what they consider to be the right thing and not what they actually feel to be true; because they may feel that they have to tell me what they think I want to hear. However, because they know me, I would hope that they will be honest in their responses in the semi-structured interviews, and I will endeavour to make this clear, so that the findings in some way reflect this relationship of trust that I have with the people

involved in the research. In contrast, an external researcher carrying out the same research might not have that same relationship of trust.

Methods

I have chosen to present the research findings as a case study in order to fully explore the complex set-up and ‘because they focus on a single case they are useful for examining levels of complexity that might otherwise be difficult to reveal’ (Ryan, 2006, p. 71). The case study will present the findings that resulted from the research process which involved semi-structured interviews with all the relevant players; learners, tutors, and the key centre personnel; along with a short qualitative survey for the learners in the research group. In order to ensure triangulation in the research findings I will also refer to the information that came from the final focus group at which a selection of the research participants gave their views on the main areas of motivation that were highlighted to me by the participants involved in the initial research interviews.

I have chosen to do a case study because it allows me to better understand the ‘ways of knowing’ (Ryan, 2006, p. 71) of those who are involved with the literacy session: the one to one tutors, as well as assistants, and myself, as the literacy session co-ordinator. Thus, I will be able to create a picture of the complexity of the session, which is seemingly quite straightforward until one goes about trying to explain it, and, in doing so, perhaps reveal some sense of what benefits blended learning may bring to the learners.

The case study will allow me to understand more about the uses of technology in the literacy sessions. Government and European Union (EU) policy, along with

NALA's body of published research reports and policy around literacy suggest that literacy now includes digital literacy as a core competency and 'there exists an opportunity now to integrate 'both' of these areas by providing literacy learning opportunities through the medium of ICT' (O'Mara, 2010, p. 11). What will hopefully emerge is a picture of how useful blended learning is in a pedagogic sense – can it help learners to become more self directed and critically conscious? Can it provide transformative experiences for adult learners who engage actively with new technology? Is it simply another resource, albeit an important and attractive resource? Can it be considered a step in the direction of creating a new public sphere which can, as we have seen in Egypt and other countries involved in the so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011, be used as a revolutionary tool where people were using social media to interact and subvert the power of the autocratic regime.

The impetus for this research was a reaction to NALA's online learning environment for literacy learners at FETAC level 2 (and now also at level 3), Write On. This was created as a distance learning opportunity for people to begin the journey to updating their literacy skills. Initially I wanted to understand how a typical person with literacy issues could be expected to use a computer without assistance. This developed from my experience in the literacy group and as part of NALA's pilot group for the online system. Thus, we found that while the NALA materials (amongst others) are very useful as a resource, the learning that was needed in order to successfully complete the courses was greater than simply the content of the courses. Therefore, learners need to have support in order to simply use the computer and understand the way the programme works before they even came to using the online learning programme. Moreover, while the Write On website appears to give the learners confidence and a practical ability to use the

computer (moving the mouse, understanding basic functions etc) how much of an educational ‘learning’ experience the programme offers is open to debate.

Limitations of this Study

This study is limited in that it looks at people who I work with so there may be some unintentional subjectivity. Furthermore, the study is restricted in that it is looking at people from a particular socio-economic section of society. In addition, I have not researched people who do not use ICTs to compare their attitudes with those who do.

Thesis Layout

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first one introduces the thesis, and gives an overview of the methodology and methods used. I also give an overview of why I chose this particular area and the limitations of the study. The second chapter reviews the literature relevant to the research topic, looking in particular at Critical Theory as a lens through which to view the research and analyse the findings. I also examine the relevance of some of the key adult education theorists, Habermas, Mezirow and Freire, as well as discussing the debate around self-directed learning. This section also presents an overview of Irish and EU policy in the area of ICTs and adult education.

The third chapter presents the research findings in the form of a case study on the adult literacy session that I researched and outlines the five areas of motivation that stand out from the findings. The fourth chapter draws on the literature review and

gives an analysis of the findings through the literature reviewed. The final chapter looks at how the piece of research confirms existing knowledge, departs from existing knowledge and looks at the conclusions that can be drawn based on the findings. It reviews the implications of this study for the theory and practice of adult education and I make some suggestions as to further study that could be undertaken as a result of my research findings.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the literature that is relevant to the research. I start by assessing Critical theory and the relevance that this theory and its key players have to my field of research. I then present an overview of some of the main theorists in this area, Habermas, Freire, and Mezirow and analyse their relevance to the area of motivation for adult literacy learners. After that, I consider the argument around self-directed learning and its significance to the area of motivation. The next section provides a synopsis of the literature that relates to ICT usage and adult learning: Selwyn, Gorard and Furlong's study *Adult learning in the digital age: Information technology and the learning society* (2006), Clarke's work *Online learning and social exclusion* (2002), Maugher's IFLL NIACE Thematic paper 2 (2009) and Hegarty and Feeley's Evaluation report on NALA's distance learning service (2011). Finally, I look at the Irish and European policy in the area of ICTs and adult education.

Section 1: Critical Theory

Brookfield (2005) provides a good overview of critical theorists and where they stand in the debate. It puts into perspective from an adult education point of view the debates that make critical theory a valuable lens through which to view this world. He examines Gramsci's idea of hegemony, that is the accepting as natural or in one's best interest something that is of an unjust social order or 'manufacturing consent' (Chomsky & Herman, 2008), and how it is a versatile and powerful current

that removes the need for the state to use coercive forms of control in order to maintain social order and keeps the process of negotiation between oppressor and oppressed in 'constant flux' (Brookfield, 2005, pp. 43-45). There are obvious connections to Freire in this idea in his adult education theories of the oppressed becoming the oppressor (Freire, 1996) and the complexities surrounding the possibility of breaking this cycle in order for the oppressed to liberate themselves. According to Brookfield one of the aims of critical theory is to 'reclaim reason' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 55), something that has become instrumentalised, people do not have the same opportunities to discuss small and large matters of mutual concern (Brookfield, 2005, p. 56), which comes from Habermas' writings on the loss of public sphere.

I think the arguments put forward in this book helped me to clarify the thread that ties together much of the writings on adult education in the critical tradition. It explains the theories in relation to adult education and in relation to the theorists involved like Foucault, Gramsci and Habermas amongst others. It demonstrates why we must constantly question the obvious, the taken for granted, our 'apparently intuitive ways of experiencing reality' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 42) that is in fact socially learned, in order to see beyond the unequal structures that exist and that are accepted as the 'natural order' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 30). Critical theory exists to understand and challenge the continuous reproduction of social and political and economic conditions.

I can relate to the ideas that the Critical theorists put forward as I work with many people who do not have much power in our society and are in effect 'alienated', in the Frommian sense that they have a fear of freedom (Brookfield, 2005, p. 51). My observation of many of the people I work with is that their choices are often made

for them, whether by the state in the form of social welfare rules, where they live, or by the media, or by others in their communities. The need for them to make real choices in their lives is limited and the real value of adult education can be seen when you see people taking responsibility for their own lives, whether it is by voting in an election or deciding that a particular course is not what they want. As an educator it can be hard to resist telling people what they need to do instead of trying to find out what they would like to do. Where I work we try to link in with popular demand so we are providing courses that might just connect with the would be learner to bring them back to education.

Brookfield discusses Marcuse's theory on 'temporary estrangement from everyday life' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 54) and how it can avoid the development of 'group think'. This is relevant to my research as online instruction can perhaps provide this 'temporary estrangement' in which the learner might 'possibly experience a degree of separation from the mainstream body of learners, necessary for the development of rebellious subjectivity' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 55). In other words, the solitude of working by oneself in front of a computer, an experience that may be new to many of these learners, combined with the communication between learners and tutors that is an intrinsic element of blended learning, may be one reason why blended learning is a motivates adult literacy learners.

Section 2: Key Theorists (Habermas, Freire, Mezirow)

Habermas

In the context of my research on the opportunities offered by blended learning to literacy learners Habermas is a key theorist. His theory of communicative action

underpins the community education ethos in which I work in that its aim is to ‘inoculate lifeworld values of caring, ethical concerns and democratic principles into the system, and so resist and reverse colonization’ (Murphy & Fleming, 2006, p. 52). In other words, we are working for the common good of society and the only way to do this is by ensuring that we value people and respect their opinions, even where they differ from our own.

According to Murphy and Fleming (2006, p. 55) Habermas’ ideas are contained in texts that are ‘complex and abstract’. They are theories that encompass his thoughts from a broad sociological and philosophical perspective (Fleming & Murphy, 2010, p. 203). Although it is also pointed out here that other theorists, like Bourdieu, also dense in content, have been widely accepted. Thus, while Habermas’ ideas have had a wide influence in a diverse range of areas, Critical theory in general, has also been criticised for ‘asserting domination and reproducing a culture of silence in educational settings’ due to its ‘technical jargon, obscure references and ambiguous phrasing’ (Pietrykowski, 1996) quoted in (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 253). Therefore, while Habermas’ ideas are, without doubt, pertinent to adult education they are often overlooked by researchers in favour of material that is more specifically relevant to adult education.

Mezirow was one of the first adult education theorists to highlight the importance of Habermas’ work to the field and is widely held to have been instrumental in Habermas’ increasing importance as a key theorist in adult education (Fleming & Murphy, 2010, pp. 202-203). Other observers have pointed out ‘as an adult educator Plumb ... raises the possibility that Habermas gives a better foundation for critical education than Freire’ (Murphy & Fleming, 2006, p. 55). Mezirow highlights the distinction that Habermas makes between ‘instrumental and communicative

learning’ and that ‘discourse leading to consensus can establish the validity of a belief’ (Mezirow, 2006, p. 25). Fleming asserts that Mezirow ‘appropriates the idea that justification of beliefs is done through collaborative discourse ...’ leading to the ‘process of debate Mezirow calls transformative learning’ (Fleming, 2010, p. 122). In other words Habermas provides a robust rationale for the theories put forward by theorists in the adult education tradition.

Habermas’ views are convincing because they ‘adapt and reconstruct Max Weber’s “loss of freedom” thesis’ (Murphy & Fleming, 2006, p. 50) and present an insightful view of the key phenomena of contemporary society; along with a response to those phenomena, such as the instrumentalisation and systemisation of our world, by our maintaining a democratic society through communicative action which means unearthing key arguments and reaching consensus by meaningful debate or ‘deliberative’ communication. With reference to the literacy session that I am researching this is particularly important as critical theory gives a framework that allows the practitioner to critique the system that ‘functions to reproduce the status quo, in particular the existing class structure’ (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 253). The weakness is that in practice the theory is quite often difficult to implement in practice.

Freire

Freire was working in a particular time and place in the context of poverty and oppression and focuses on ‘radical social change’ and presents us with a ‘social-emancipatory view of transformative learning’ (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 131). His critical pedagogy theory, whilst not as

straightforward and perhaps all encompassing as Mezirow's, is clear and understandable.

The criticisms are that the very specifics of the conditions in which Freire worked limit the overall validity of his theory. In other words it is culturally specific and whereas Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has the criticism of being too individualistic Freire's theory assumes a steep learning curve with social action at its summit as opposed to critical reflection in a broader sense without being so specific with regards to radical social action.

Freire's work is relevant to the topic which I am examining as he was working with people who were illiterate. In a very vivid, and in my view extreme, way he showed us how these people needed to shift their mindset in order to take their place alongside the ruling elite, and showed us the real challenges that such a cohort face in order to do this. Freire's critical pedagogy provides us with a framework that is specifically directed at people who are socially disadvantaged and gives guidance on the particular issues that education can throw up for them as opposed to Mezirow whose original research was based on the experience of white middle class women returning to education. Therefore, whilst criticisms exist about the relevance of a Freirean approach in democratic societies the essence of his approach is relevant to my piece of research.

In addition, Habermas and Freire were contemporaries, and while there does not appear to be much influence by Habermas on Freire's theory. We can see perhaps a symmetry between those two voices; Habermas' voice is less specific but appears to reach a similar conclusion on the need for communicative action in the context of democracy and its continuing existence, whereas Freire's much more specific

reaction to the poverty of the people in his native Brazil and the need he saw for them to become ‘conscientised’ in order to play a more active role in their undemocratic context..

Some of the views that Freire has to offer are more convincing than others. For example, my research focuses on people who have been failed by a system that did not provide them with an adequate education in their formal school years. However, they are not so absolutely failed as those people with whom Freire worked; the people I work with have access to the basic requirements to survive. Thus, the struggle for the people with whom Freire worked was more one of survival than the equivalent people with whom I work. Despite this, there are many aspects of his theories that resonate with me and are observable in the detail of the way people interact when given an opportunity to gain an education as an adult. So perhaps it is the detail of the observations and their applicability to other contexts that make Freire relevant. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory may be more applicable to the people who have had some sense of their own worth instilled in them, without necessarily being not disadvantaged, whereas Freire’s points more to the cohort who are really without much ‘capital’ at all. Habermas hovers over the two of them with his broader view of society.

Mezirow

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory is directly related to adult education and was influenced by Habermas’ reflective discourse (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, pp. 254-255). Mezirow and his followers have written extensively on transformative learning theory in a way that makes the arguments clear and easy to understand.

One of the contradictions of the theory of transformative learning is that it is for 'ideal conditions' (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 255), and does not necessarily work in practice, but can be seen as a standard. Mezirow continues to reply to issues that have been raised over the years since he first put forward the theory, such as the 'role played by emotions, intuition and imagination in the process of transformation' (Mezirow, 2006, p. 28); in this case he admits that more work needs to be done. Another area he responds to is the criticism that the theory leads to a 'decontextualized' (Mezirow, 2006, p. 29) view of learning which he defends firstly by arguing that adult education should veer away from being the 'rationalization of a vested interest to give it the appearance of a cause' (Mezirow, 2006, p. 30) and that transformative learning is 'a meta-cognitive process of reassessing reasons supporting our problematic meaning perspectives' (Mezirow, 2006, p. 30). In my opinion this is a valid argument. The process of learning should be prioritised in order to enable learners to have the capacity to question the established 'truths' in any sphere of their lives.

According to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007, p. 153) another major criticism of Mezirow's transformative learning theory is that it fails to emphasize social action. Mezirow addresses this by reflecting on the role that critical thinking plays in creating the 'essential foundation in insight and understanding essential for learning how to take effective social action in a democracy' (Mezirow, 2006, p. 30). I agree with Mezirow in this regard as ultimately the goal, in my opinion, of adult education must be to awaken a critical awareness in the participants whether they are second chance learners or third level students. In this context Mezirow refers to the 'Socratic undermining' of the 'taken-for-granted habits of mind' and promotion of a 'disposition of critical reflection' as 'a condition of public life' (Mezirow,

2006, p. 30) as being what we as educators should be aspiring to achieve. Furthermore he makes reference to Habermas who ‘suggests that critical reflection on assumptions and critical discourse, based on reflective judgement – the key dimensions of transformative learning – are characteristics of the highest level of adult maturity’ (Mezirow, 2006, p. 30). In my opinion, Mezirow is highlighting the aspirations he has for his theory on transformative learning. Whether those objectives are attainable in practice is a matter for adult education practitioners to seek to understand.

Further criticisms that Mezirow responds to are Stephen Brookfield’s challenge to the breadth of transformative learning. The argument that Brookfield (2005) puts forward is that the theory only allows for critical reflection on capitalism; this Mezirow refutes, arguing that the point of transformation theory in adult education is to critique all relevant ideologies, and that it does not single out capitalism (Mezirow, 2006, pp. 30-31). In my opinion, the critical tradition, stemming as it does from a Marxist perspective, promotes the idea that we reflect critically on capitalism as dominant discourse in the Western world. However, I would argue that the ability to critique in itself allows people to form their own critical opinions on the system in which we live, rather than promoting an agenda that assumes people will naively criticise capitalism. I agree with Mezirow in that this is surely the point of having a critical awareness in the first place.

Critical pedagogy, as espoused by Freire, is tied in with transformative learning theory in as far as its practitioners encourage an ‘analysis of how ideology, power and influence specifically impact upon and disadvantage the immediate lives of illiterate learners’ (Mezirow, 2006, p. 31). Mezirow highlights the weakness of critical pedagogy in as far he claims that ‘the process and problems involved in

taking informed, collective, political action in a functioning democracy are seldom addressed in the literature of critical pedagogy' whereas transformative learning theory 'involves how to think critically about one's assumptions supporting perspectives and to develop reflective judgement in discourse regarding beliefs, values, feelings and self-concept. It is not primarily to think politically; for ideology critique and critical pedagogy, this is a false assumption' (Mezirow, 2006, p. 31). Therefore, as discussed earlier, the ability to think critically will provide the learner with the necessary 'reflective judgement' to form their own critical opinions on any subject.

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning contributes to the topic I am examining because it provides a concrete, albeit idealised, framework for adult educators to work around. In particular with the literacy group that I co-ordinate I can see the value of working with people to aid them to develop 'reflective judgement' (Mezirow, 2006, p. 31) on their lives (for the most part disadvantaged). In addition Mezirow's contribution to the adult education debate over the last thirty years or so cannot be overestimated. He is continually in dialogue with other adult education experts through his vast range of publications. As a result, we can interact with the debate, which gives real insight into the person behind the theorist, which is not the case with Habermas, due to the enormous range and aforementioned complexity of his work.

Mezirow has brought us his interpretation for adult education of Habermas' writing. Habermas' theory of communicative action, which is addressing far broader sociological and philosophical thinking, has been refined for adult educators by Mezirow which gives weight to Habermas' more wide reaching theory. Mezirow

also names Freire's 'conscientization', amongst others, as influencing the development of the theory of transformative theory.

I find Mezirow's arguments convincing because while they are to an extent idealised, they are also closer in many ways to the reality. In other words the theory of transformative learning seems to actually allow people to have differing points of view. Mezirow makes it clear that it forms the basis, a Socratic vision if you like, for the ideal citizen of a democracy. It can give people the tools to be free to make up their own minds and move towards self-determination. I think that many of the arguments against transformative theory have been successfully addressed (if not resolved altogether) by Mezirow in his ongoing reflections by way of articles and books.

Section 3: Self-directed learning and motivation

Brockett and Hiemstra's book *Self-directed learning* (1991) looks at self directed learning and its relevance to adult education. I would agree with the authors when they assert that self-direction in learning is nothing new (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 8) and indeed statistics offered elsewhere (Mauger, 2009) suggest that informal learning, which in essence is self directed learning, accounts for the vast majority of adult learning. Therefore, despite theoretical debates about the validity of self-directed learning and the over-emphasis it has on the self, it sits well, in my opinion, with Mezirow's transformative learning theory and its ultimate aim to provoke adult learners into critically reflecting. We may learn better and more effectively in groups in formal education but if we are to aid our literacy learners to

continue beyond the formal programme and integrate their literacy studies into their lives I would argue that we must promote self directed learning in practice.

Another factor that may contribute to the debate around self-directed learning is the Marcusean idea that we need time to reflect on our own in order to avoid ‘group think’ (Brookfield, 2005, p. 55) and as a ‘step into, rather than a retreat from, the real world’ (Brookfield, 2005, p. 196) and in so doing people can develop enough distance to challenge rather than support the system. Adult education classes and group work, in my opinion, have many positive attributes; they provide the basis for much common understanding between people who come to the sessions. And, while providing an online programme for adult literacy learners may not produce the ‘rupture with present day experience’ (Brookfield, 2005, p. 199) that I understand to be the ultimate aim from Marcuse’s perspective, there is the possibility that it will provide this cohort of learners with a resource that might help them achieve this isolation, to a certain degree at the very least.

Self direction will obviously suit some people and subjects more than others and it is not advocating that learners need to be isolated or not facilitated in order to be a self-directed learner (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 11); what is important is the learner ‘assumes primary responsibility for and control over planning, implementing and evaluating the learning experience’ (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 12) and if ‘being able to assume greater control for one’s destiny is a desirable goal for adult education ... then a role for educator’s of adults is to help learners become increasingly able to assume personal responsibility for their own learning’ (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 27). In addition, in reply to the argument that this promotes individual learning while ignoring the social context they state that ‘someone who assumes personal responsibility as an individual is in a stronger

position to also be more socially responsible' (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 27), which is a valid and realistic position, in my opinion.

There is some value in the argument for self directed learning and for accepting the Marcusian suggestion that there is some need for internal reflection to occur. Brookfield argues that 'to me critical learning is a social process in which we depend on others to be critical mirrors reflecting back to us aspects of our assumptive clusters we are unable to see' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 196) and gives the example of the Freirean learning circles as well as the group assignments he gives to his graduate class. I agree with Brookfield for the most part, however, I would observe from myself and from the people with whom I work that people need time to gather their thoughts in order to come to have their own views and understandings. I would also refer back to the previous comment that the vast majority of adult learning is informal and outside of the classroom. Are all these people introverted and isolated? Probably not, if we presume that at least some of this learning involves groups or clubs or people coming together with common interests.

Over the past few months I have been working as a self-directed learner for the most part and while at times it has been difficult to keep up the momentum to complete this thesis it has in general been a satisfying process. I would reflect that the impetus to keep going lies in the fact that I am very interested in the subject matter and that it is related to my professional career. It is perhaps due to having the time and space that not having too many classes allows, that means that I have had the necessary space to analyse the findings as well as place the small piece of research into larger theoretical debates. I do not feel that this would have happened in the same way if it was necessary to have more contact time.

Section 4: Review of literature in the area of ICTs and Adult Learning

Adult Learning in the digital age: Information technology and the learning society (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006)

The views in this book are clear and easy to understand. It is based on a two and a half year study of the computer use of 1001 people in rural and urban communities in England and Wales. They also interviewed people who did not use computers to understand better why they did not use them. They explore the reality of ICT use as well as access in comparison to UK government policy saying that the ‘initial impetus for this book was our observation that the topic of adult learning in the digital age was being much talked about but little investigated’ (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006, p. x). Speaking about the UK policy on increasing access to ICTs the authors state that there is ‘little objective reason to expect that the present-day “knowledge economy” and “information society” to be any less divided and unequal than economies and societies have always been. In short we should not let the allure of new technologies cloud our critical faculties’ (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006, p. ix). The research findings in this book raise many questions around the dominant discourse that assumes everyone should access ICTs and if they are not they are disadvantaged and ‘left behind’.

This book is of interest to my research topic for a variety of reasons. It is reasonably up to date (2006) which means that the research findings are relevant in a practical manner. I can relate to the research because it is obvious from working in a disadvantaged urban community that there are still a large many ‘have-nots’ who do not access ICTs despite Irish government policy over the last number of years and the assumption by many, in the media and society in general, that everyone in the

country is online. The research suggests that while the socio-economic status of the participants is the major factor that determines who accesses or does not access ICTs, it also points to there being far more complex reasons involved in the lack of participation rather than it simply being a case of socio-economic status that is creating the 'digital divide'.

The other factors which effect individual motivations and dispositions towards ICT are according to Selwyn, Gorard and Furlong 'entwined with an individual's ... age, gender and life circumstance' (2006, p. 186). They raise the issue of place in that it is the most disadvantaged who tend to be the most 'locally oriented' in their 'perception of opportunities and services beyond the immediate locality' (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006, p. 187). This is an interesting point because it may illuminate why people from disadvantaged social areas tend to not have a particular need to use ICT. They avail of services locally and are often born into that area; in many cases living near to relatives and lifelong friends. In the conclusion Selwyn, Gorard and Furlong advocate that 'any parties concerned to increase engagement in ICT-based adult learning to first set about addressing the many non-technological issues which underpin non-engagement, such as poverty, housing, quality of employment and the family reproduction of inequalities' (2006, p. 191). Without a doubt accessing ICTs is not a fundamental priority for anyone, I would argue, however, that increasing people's awareness of technology, if it motivates them to return to, or continue, learning, is an activity that may also contribute in some way to them challenging the system in which they live.

Another relevant finding is that those people who have made an effort to learn ICT often attend multiple classes to learn the basics but have little or no use for them in their day to day lives. This is summed up by a research participant's quote at the

start of the book ‘I’ve learnt to use computers properly now... but I’ve got nothing to use them properly for.’ (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006, p. viii); this highlights that we, as adult educators, need to make people aware that ICT is a tool that opens up a world of knowledge, as well as one that helps us to do everyday activities. An awareness of what is out there seems to be a problem. Thus, it makes sense to me that one of the suggestions for practitioners at the end of the book is to ‘refocus formal educational provision away from learning about ICT and towards learning with ICT’ (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006, p. 201). Therefore, my research focuses on using blended learning, which I think moves towards the idea of learning with ICTs and making the connection that they can be integrated into everyday life in a meaningful way.

The findings in this book (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006) are convincing because they echo much of what I have observed in the community education centre where I practise as well as investigating the rhetoric around ICTs in general. The findings also show that there is a connection between informal learning and the use of ICTs, which can also be related to the theoretical debates around transformative learning theory and self-directed learning. This shows, in my view, that there is a huge potential to develop how we use ICTs in adult education because they are here to stay.

Online learning and social exclusion (Clarke, 2002)

This book looks at online learning, specifically in the area of disadvantaged learners. This is relevant because my cohort of learners would generally fall into this category. Clarke observes that it is only with sustained action that online

learning has the potential to overcome many of the barriers that socially and economically disadvantaged adults face (Clarke, 2002, p. 7). He advocates that learning skills are very important and gives an informative list of practical suggestions with regard to the design of suitable learning programmes that will support the development of skills (Clarke, 2002, pp. 37-38).

I would agree with much of what it offered in this book. He remarks that ‘most adult tutors would probably claim that a large element in a learning course is the opportunities it provides for adults to leave their homes, enjoy the social interaction with their peers and to establish new relationships’ (Clarke, 2002, p. 45). Also he points out that ‘the major challenge for online learning in such a [disadvantaged] community is to convince the people within them that it is relevant and beneficial to them’ (Clarke, 2002, p. 53). I agree with this and, although issues such as access to broadband for the disadvantaged are pertinent, things like Facebook and other social networking websites can help to mitigate to some extent the isolation that some people might feel, like single parents who cannot get out much.

NIACE IFLL Thematic Paper 2 (Mauger, 2009)

This report outlines the potential advantages that technology can bring to adult education and lifelong learning while also acknowledging possible downsides. It is clear and easy to understand. It examines trends in education and looks at where technology can facilitate our educational journey. For example, it says that currently ‘technological developments are profiled through informal, business, domestic and personal contexts rather than within government or public sector education’ and that

we ‘need to understand the tipping point’ in technological pervasiveness, especially where they are occurring outside education itself’ (Mauger, 2009, p. 7).

This report contributes to the other literature as it offers a contemporary analysis of the ways in which technology may go with regard to education and lifelong learning. According to the report 10-15 per cent of adult learning is formal, which ties in with the Irish statistics for literacy learners (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011), it says that while most learning does not take place in formal learning centres ‘those engaged with lifelong learning in any capacity need to better understand the implications of this, so that future societies are the ones we seek rather than the ones we end up with’ (Mauger, 2009, p. 8). I think this means that creating the lifelong learning mindset within the general population and having relevant resources and programmes that tap into what people will learn themselves informally is a much smarter way of promoting lifelong learning and in its turn the literacy learners than relying on traditional teaching methods and learning strategies. A more dynamic and flexible approach becomes necessary.

The arguments offered are convincing, in my view, because they offer an idea of how adult educators need to understand the potential of technology in the future, so that the learner is able to say that they are ‘writing a poem’ on a computer rather than ‘using a computer’ when asked what they are doing (Mauger, 2009, p. 14). However alongside this view of technology as a seamless extension of the self, it also offers the potential for people to use it to ‘learn differently’ (Mauger, 2009, p. 34), which I think is an area that will become increasingly important over the coming years. Finally, the report refers to how the development in educational institutions of implementing online student forums is in itself a useful enough idea. However, it has been shown that the imposing on people does not work and take up

has not always been successful. Whereas unofficial learner created forums, based on 'bottom-up ownership' (Mauger, 2009, p. 32), and more in keeping with online social behaviour, work well.

NALA report on DLS (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011)

The report is an evaluation of NALA's web based learning platform for literacy learners called Write On. It offers an evaluation of the first year or so of use by literacy learners and centres. The views are clear, easy to understand and coherent. As NALA commissioned the report, albeit by independent researchers, it offers a limited and possibly slightly subjective evaluation of the website. As I have mentioned earlier it has undoubtedly been a positive advance for literacy learners in Ireland. From my experience in this area there are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, it allows learners to use appropriate content on the computer, whereas up until then we were using a random selection with no clear path. Linked to this is the fact that more and more frequently the learners are coming to the centre to learn how to use a computer, and not with the overt desire to improve their reading and writing. Therefore, having some kind of structured programme has been a great help in ensuring that the dual purpose of developing literacy and numeracy alongside ICT skills is accomplished.

Another area that I have also noted is that while the literacy service would not exist without the numerous one to one volunteer literacy tutors, they are frequently not in a position to guide people through using a computer as they are lacking in basic ICT skills themselves. This has meant that there has been a pot luck approach to using ICTs, if the learner happens to be put with a tutor who has good technological skills

then it is more likely that they will be at an advantage than the person who works with a tutor who does not have these skills. If the tutor is not confident around ICTs this will influence the learner's approach to using ICTs, in my opinion.

The Write On website is simple and clear, and even a tutor with minimal ICT skills will be able to work with it. The programme provides graded content for learners to work on their literacy and numeracy and by using the website the learners are improving their computer mouse and navigational skills. The tutor is not expected to have expert ICT skills in order to be of assistance and facilitate the learner. Thus, the website is a positive development for the literacy session and gives a good focus to using ICT and a progression route if so desired.

My main observation is that the evaluation provides us with a relatively simplistic review of the website. The researchers are obviously coming from a learner centred approach; for example, it is observed that the 'relationship between learner and tutor or volunteer tutor is equalised as everyone learns together about the potential of www.writeon.ie' (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011, p. 7), whereas the ideal of learner and tutor discovering the power of the website is slightly negated when they also say that the 'tutors need to learn about the practice issues relating to using Write On in a blended learning environment' (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011, p. 7), which in my opinion contradicts and shows up flaws, not so much in the theory, but in the reality of the interaction of the tutor and learner where human weakness, and perhaps a lack of a thorough teacher training for volunteer literacy tutors to see the value in not always knowing more than the learner.

This evaluation report confirms some of my own observations on the learner interaction with the website. For example it highlights that, despite being developed

as part of NALA's distance learning strategy, it is far more effective in a blended learning environment. What they do not explore in any great detail or with regard to theory, is why this might be the case, and possibly should have been the impetus for the website's development in the first place. From my own experience web based learning can be extremely tedious and isolating unless the course is particularly suited to this form of interaction. For example I completed a creative writing course with the Open University, where much of the interaction involved reading other people's creative writing and commenting on these on the online forum. Thus, there was a sense of being part of a group. Whereas, other courses, whether computer or soft skills training, are often tedious exercises to tick the box to say they have been completed that leave us with no sense of achievement, as well as no social interactions with fellow learners.

A good blended learning environment can provide the right mix of ICT usage mixed with relevant discussion and critiquing of the content, so that we can 'pinpoint those aspects of technological influence that are particularly resonant for lifelong learners' because '... if the curriculum is defined as referring to both the content (the material to be learned) and the process of learning (the actions involved in teaching and learning), then technology privileges process rather than content' (Mauger, 2009, p. 13). Therefore, the blend of tutor and learner interacting around the content seems to re-establish the equilibrium that should exist between content and process.

Although it is limited in scope, this evaluation of the Write On website offers a good overview of how it has been received. The report pinpoints areas of Irish and EU policy which it will help to achieve such as the 'achievement of the National Skills Strategy ETO2020 and the reduction of persistent educational disadvantage'

(Hegarty & Feeley, 2011, p. 8) without presenting and hard facts as to why that should be the case. In addition, while it is a positive aspiration to reach the 90 per cent of the estimated 500,000 adults with unmet literacy needs in Ireland, and with only 10 per cent actively seeking to improve their basic skills (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011, p. 11), can a website that the evaluation reveals is far more effective when used in a blended learning environment actually make any inroads into this number, particularly in light of the findings from the UK (Mauger, 2009) that only 10-15 per cent of people will ever take part in formal adult learning? In this regard I remain unconvinced.

Section 5: Review of Irish and EU Policy

The Irish Government White Paper (Department of education and science, 2000) impacts on the area that I am examining as it sets out policy for all areas of adult community education, including second chance education, and the promotion of digital literacy amongst this cohort of learners. Some areas have been acted upon, however, it does seem that the White Paper was an aspiration and many, if not most, of its objectives have not been achieved in the ten plus years since it was published. A lack of cohesion in the adult and community education sector may be part of the reason why these policy objectives were not achieved; unlike the formal school system the adult education sector is made up of many diverse groups who are not natural allies of the system – this might mean that the system finds it easy to overlook a naturally anti-systemic and un-cohesive group.

Nevertheless, the White Paper (2000) contains many policy statements relating to the promotion of ICTs. However, it is hard not to wonder that over ten years after

the paper was published, much of the stated policy has not been implemented, and is beginning to feel slightly out of date. There have been many developments around technology in the intervening years, as well as the discussion earlier in the chapter that highlighted how adults will adopt technology when and if they have a need for it. Thus, the pull for people to want to use technology seems to be influenced predominantly by relatives and friends and to a certain extent by widespread media referencing, rather than through computer classes where learners learn how to use the computer but not much about what to use a computer for.

Thus, we can see that the policy around promoting technology in general in adult literacy education is fraught with challenges, in part due to the fact that it is difficult to promote an area that is evolving at an ever increasing rate. EU policy in the area of technology and education is more up to date and the following statement illustrates the European Commission's understanding of the issue surrounding low take up of ICT learning: 'There has been substantial progress in the use of ICT in education and training in Europe in recent years. However, it has not yet had as significant an impact as expected' (Commission, 2008). The report goes on to say that 'effective integration of ICT into education must go beyond replacing, streamlining or accelerating current practices. It should help to create new and more effective ways of operating and support teaching and organisational innovation'. Furthermore, 'ICT is now embedded in our social and economic fabric; it should be similarly integral to education and training'. Another European Commission report on adult literacy indicates that a more practical approach saying that:

Actions are not about developing technology itself, but about its use to enhance learning environments and experiences. This includes areas such as the use of simulations, discovery learning, attracting drop-outs back to education, enabling learning outside school

environments and bridging the 'digital divide' between those with access to technologies and skills, and those without.

(Peer learning activity on adult literacy, 2008)

It is welcome that from a European perspective the policy appears to be progressive and open to new developments. The Irish Government Adult Education White Paper will need to be reviewed to ensure that the 'most effective' ICT ways in teaching and learning are supported by policy.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

I wanted to find out if using ICTs in a blended learning context motivates adult literacy learners and, if so, how this can be best understood. I decided to do a case study on the literacy group as this appeared to be the best way to capture the layers of complexity that exist as I shall outline. The case study is a result of semi-structured interviews conducted with key participants in the literacy session, learners, tutors and assistants. I interviewed fifteen people for the semi-structured interviews, either individually or in small groups of two or three. I followed this up with a final focus group in order to triangulate the initial research with some of the original participants along with others who were not interviewed individually. This took the form of a brainstorming workshop and participants worked in small groups of four or five with a mix of learners and tutors. In total seven learners (three female and four male), three assistants (two female and one male) and five tutors (one male and four female) were interviewed individually. The final focus group had four tutors (three female and one male) and ten learners (five male and five female).

Case Study

This case study presents the research findings into how blended learning motivates adult literacy learners in the context of a weekly adult literacy scheme in an urban community education centre.

Context

The adult community education centre is located in an urban disadvantaged area of Dublin city. It serves the local area and states in its mission statement that it ‘aims to meet the needs’ (Warrenmount CED Centre) of second chance learners providing a variety of courses to that particular cohort of learners. In order to aid learners who are identified as needing assistance with their literacy and numeracy learning there is a weekly session at which learners either work with a volunteer one to one literacy tutor or in a small group, mainly using computers with the assistance of work experience trainees.

The group works in a large room and the centre encourages an open and supportive approach where there is no great distinction between the learners and the tutors. A relatively high level of support is required for the volunteer tutors as they only come to the centre once a week and are not qualified tutors (although they are qualified as one to one literacy tutors and most have a good deal of experience). My role is to co-ordinate the learners, tutors and trainees, as well as ensuring the smooth running of the session by providing support (technical and practical) and working with learners who do not have a tutor. It runs for three hours each week.

People Involved

The literacy group consists of about fourteen learners, some of whom work with one to one volunteer literacy tutors, and others who work in a small group and who need less support; the latter group are concentrating on using computers with the help of the online learning platform Write On that gives a structure to their session.

The one to one learners are a mixture of people who have the common aim of improving their literacy and numeracy. ICT use is now considered a core part of this. The tutors use a mixture of traditional and new technologies when they are working with their learners. The sessions are learner centred in so far as the learners have an active say in what they wish to learn. The sessions last for two hours and the participants take a break in the middle and have a coffee and an informal chat in the centre cafe. Tutors and learners mix in these breaks which are considered by all as an integral and important part of the sessions.

Technology

The centre has fourteen laptop computers for use during this session, due to a government grant for ICT equipment and a donation of four laptops for taking part in a pilot project run by NALA. The centre took part in a pilot project to work on the Write On online literacy learning platform. We undertook to pilot this platform and encouraged our learners and tutors to use the system as a resource in a blended learning context. NALA conducted follow up interviews with learners and tutors.

This proved to be a timely project for two major reasons. Firstly, the centre had just started to develop a FETAC level 2 programme, which was proving to be a time consuming activity for a small community education centre. Secondly, it was proving a challenge to both centre and tutors to know what to do with learners at this point in their literacy learning from an ICT point of view. By this I mean that while we had a variety of resources to use with the learners they were a bit piecemeal and reliant on the tutors having a greater level of understanding of ICT than they necessarily had; whereas the Write On programme is dynamic in that it

allows literacy learners to log in (in the centre or at home) and pick up where they left off instead of repeating the same thing, more or less, each time they use the computer. NALA developed this online programme as part of their distance learning initiative and have in their evaluation (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011) acknowledged that it works best in a blended learning scenario rather than solely used by learners with some remote assistance.

The reaction to NALA's online learning programme at FETAC levels two and three has been overwhelmingly positive. The learners enjoy the content, it develops their motor skills in using a computer (using a mouse to click and drag, using drop down menus, clicking to enter text and to move on to the next page etc) in a simple but effective way so that the learners are inadvertently learning these basic but essential skills. At the same time they are moving through the literacy based content at a personalised rate so if they are stronger in one part than another it will concentrate in areas where they need to improve. There are technical improvements that could be made, and some have been made, but for the most part it is well designed learning website. The learner has a password which they enter each time they use it and progress is mapped out and updated at the end of each learning module so the progress is very visible. Apart from some negative comments about the glitches, for the most part the learners were happy to use it. My observation is that the learners initially enjoy using it, however after a few weeks or even months, the novelty factor wears off and people become a bit bored using it all the time. One of the assistants mentioned that she enjoyed just chatting about the questions with the learner.

Over the past two years we have grown the literacy session from about four one to one learners and tutors to having approximately fourteen learners and seven literacy

tutors, along with three assistants who come together in what we call the General Learning session each week. This has only been possible because of the access we have to internet ready laptops for the participants to use, and relevant content for them to use. While we endeavour to match tutors and learners it is not always possible to have tutors for all learners. Having access to ICTs therefore allows a degree of flexibility where a learner can come to the centre and ‘try it [the session] out’ for a few weeks. Also, there are learners who are not able to come some weeks and do not contact the centre to tell us in time for us to let the tutor know. For all these reasons, and more, having access to a relatively self-directed programme enables us to provide access to a programme for more people than would otherwise be the case.

Further to the practical possibilities that having access to quality ICT programmes allows, we are also finding that people who come to the centre specifically want to learn how to use a computer and are not primarily interested in improving their reading, writing and numeracy, but who are clearly in need of some assistance in this area. Some of our tutors are more computer ‘savvy’ than others so it can also be useful for those tutors who feel less confident to have this programme that helps them to know what to do with their learner.

The one to one learners are a mixture of people who have the common aim of improving their literacy and numeracy. They all live in the catchment area for the centre which is south inner city Dublin. The group of learners who were interviewed as part of this research consists of the following: a man in his late fifties from Serbia, resident in Ireland for nine years, but with low levels of English; an Irish man in his late thirties; a man from Ireland in his early sixties, all of whom were working in the construction industry until recently. Another is a man from

Sierra Leon in his mid thirties. Two of the women, in their twenties and thirties, interviewed are on a local FAS Community Employment scheme, and the other woman is in her sixties and worked until recently being made redundant. The e-learning group of learners work together with the assistance of myself and the trainees, who offer computer related support and guidance under my direction, using the online platform Write On as a core focus as well as studying the areas of interest that the learners have indicated they wish to pursue.

As I discussed in chapter one ICT use is now considered a core part of literacy and the tutors are encouraged to use a mixture of traditional and new technologies when they are working with their learners, as long as the learner wishes to do so. In order to illustrate the research findings I will now present an overview of the motivations for the use of ICTs in a blended learning environment that the research findings indicate.

Five Key Motivational Factors

Motivation 1: The Social Aspect

The most consistent finding across all of the key players interviewed, as well as in the final focus group, was that they viewed communication and the social aspect as a fundamental motivational factor in attending the centre. This was highlighted by all of the learners and tutors alike. This idea of the social, in terms of meeting other learners who have similar issues, or discussing content on the online learning programme with the tutors, having a coffee at the break with other learners and tutors in a relaxed atmosphere was pinpointed repeatedly. People from different

backgrounds and with different skill levels are finding themselves in a ‘public space’ of sorts that they otherwise would not encounter.

With regard to blended learning and communication it appears from the research that people interact around the content on the computer so it seems to form a link between learner and tutor, an area that they can all relate to, which may also aid learners and tutors to find common ground in which to form a relationship. While it may be argued that the same can be said for books, they too can be used as a bond, I think the very interactive, dynamic and up to date nature of the online content provided by Write On, perhaps makes it quicker and easier for people to find an area of mutual interaction.

Motivation 2: Not being Left Behind

A second consistent finding in relation to motivation is that by learning how to use technology the learners feel they are ‘keeping up to date’ or not ‘being left behind’ with what is going on in the world around them. This view was also expressed by the tutors who felt that it was important for the literacy learners in particular to be using technology as a way to avoid the double impact of lack of literacy compounded by a lack of computer skills. Learners interviewed said that they wanted to learn how to use a computer from a desire to ‘get out of the stone-age’ and that it is a necessity like ‘learning to walk, run, play’. Another learner described using a computer as a ‘buzz’. The research data is peppered with quotes from all the key players that indicate a strong sense of ‘catching up’ along with an impressive awareness of internet related terminology and references gleaned from family, in particular children, and in many cases the media.

Motivation 3: Increasing Self Confidence

Most of the one to one tutors referred to what they perceived to be increased self-confidence that they noted in the learner with whom they work. One tutor described a learner who she observed initially thought the computer could not be wrong. It transpired that some of the questions in the Write On programme had been set with the incorrect answers, which was confusing for people. This turned into an unintentional learning point that gradually after a few weeks this particular learner accepted that the programme could be wrong and that she should go with what she thinks is correct, even if the machine is telling her otherwise. A subtle and perhaps unintentional learning point but one that illustrates in some way the role of blending ICT learning with other types of learning such as the discussion with the tutor that can lead on to a more critical general understanding as well as taking away the fear of using technology that was expressed by some of the respondents.

One learner has had a turbulent history of using ICTs and struggles to make sense of the computer. He is from Sierra Leone and his first language is not English, although he was taught in school through English where writing was emphasised over speaking. Whilst he does use email to keep in touch with family and the internet to find out local and international news he is very uneasy about using the computer in general and lacks confidence in using technology. This was compounded by doing a course that was too advanced for him prior to coming to our Centre, which seemed to cause him to doubt his abilities even further. The Write On programme appears to have provided a space for him to develop his skill levels, as well as confidence, in a semi self-directed environment.

I would also like to add my own observations around the motivational effects of learner confidence given my integral role in the literacy session as co-ordinator. It has become apparent to me during the course of the last few months that the learners enjoy the dynamic nature of using an online programme. They get a ‘buzz’ from using it, even when they are not able to answer all the questions correctly. As they are simultaneously learning a new skill in using the computer it in some way appears to compensate for making mistakes in the content in so far as they do not seem to mind too much and will readily repeat the lesson. In addition, the learners are corrected at the end of each short section so they know then and there if their answer is correct and have the opportunity to review and correct it, if necessary, before moving on. Learner comments in the research indicates that if they make a mistake when they use the programme at home they become frustrated with it whereas when they come to the literacy session they receive the support and guidance of the tutor which adds an important dynamic to the learning experience.

Motivation 4: A Reason to Want to Use a Computer

Another motivational factor that seems to increase the desire of the research participants to use a computer is an underlying reason that they have for themselves. Some of the respondents mentioned that they had seen their children use computers and they wanted to learn how to use them so they knew what they were doing and could help them. In addition, the increasing reach of social media sites like Facebook appears to be an incentive for some people to use the computer. One participant said that they thought they were a bit addicted to Facebook, staying up until the middle of the night using it. From a practical point of view this means that

the learner is using literacy skills to interact with other people online. Another learner had recently set up a Facebook profile which was allowing her to connect with her friends locally as well as cousins in the UK. She has used it to communicate her grandchild's christening celebrations as well as expressing an intention to create invitations to post out. It is also worth pointing out that this learner works in a Community Employment scheme and that part of her work is to use a computer for heritage research. She was also keen to know about using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies to use the video conferencing facilities that it offers. She had observed a friend's daughter using this and was intrigued. Another reason for using technology that this learner found was to help out a friend by filling in a form and submitting it online, saving time for her friend.

A number of the participants indicated that they had what could be called an informal learning reason to use the computer outside of the literacy session. The tutors in general, even where they were relative new comers to using technology, would use it outside of class for researching materials as well as for their own personal use, while the learners who used it for themselves and wanted to improve their use of ICT had ideas about what they want to use to computer for. One learner, for example, had an interest in horse racing and keeping track of form. He had spent many years buying computer related magazines and reading books on using spreadsheets but could never quite get to grips with it. After doing a basic IT course previously he has since bought a computer to use at home. The Write On website provided him with content to use on the computer at home at first, in addition to coming to the centre, but his main aim is to be able to track the horse racing form on a spreadsheet instead of by hand. This seems to be giving him a strong

motivation to continue coming to the Centre as well as continuing to work through the FETAC level 3 content.

Three learners do not have a computer to use at home and appear to be reluctant to avail of the public access computers in the library to practice outside of the class. They are, however, very enthusiastic to learn how to use the computer with the aid of their literacy tutors and express a wish to have a home computer when they feel confident enough at some point in the future. These three learners would have dipped in and out of using a computer with their tutors before starting to use Write On, using NALA developed CD ROMS or BBC Skillswise website, although without any consistency or much of a plan in place. Thus, having an online learning platform, in my view, allows them to follow a plan which is useful for them and for their tutors. Even tutors with high levels of computer literacy themselves can find that it can lack focus if there is not a programme of some type to follow to learn to use ICT. While it is not ideal for learners not to have a computer at home to practice on, and it also perhaps reflects their slower rate of progress, working with a tutor and talking through what they are doing may help them find a reason to use a computer if they so choose.

Motivation 5: Life Changing Events

One learner returned to education mainly due to having an accident. He stands out as going from knowing nothing to being a proficient ICT user in the space of ten weeks. He bought a computer second hand and used the online course every evening as well as attending another class in the centre three sessions a week. He was motivated to use a computer, seeing it as a way to ‘get out of the stone age’

however admits that he would probably not have returned to learning were it not for the accident. Apart from three learners who come to the session via their community employment training scheme, the other learners appear to have had experiences in their lives that may have influenced their decision to return to education as well.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the findings from my research as a case study in order to illustrate the relatively complex interactions between learners and tutors or assistants, and what it is that they do when they come to the centre, on the one hand, as well as the ways that learners are motivated, on the other. I have outlined the five main areas of motivation and have related them to the research findings. These factors are multi-layered and overlapping in many ways. The economic downturn in Ireland over the last couple of years may be one reason why some learners are returning to learning. The work opportunities for people who have poor literacy levels are fewer than for people who do not. This is exacerbated where people lose their confidence. All five of the motivational factors, the social aspect, not being left behind, increasing self confidence, a reason to want to use a computer and life changing events, highlight that a major underlying issue is that people want to be given a chance to improve, and that the blend of interaction between technology and people appears to hit the tight note for many.

CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

As I reflect on the learning journey I have undertaken over the past few months, I am thinking about how my learners have also undergone a similar journey. My research sought to understand how the adult literacy learners with whom I work are motivated by blended learning. The weakness in this research is that it was beyond the scope of the research to find out how to make it more attractive to the people who do not take part in formal learning, so I can only report on the people who have managed to take, what is for most literacy learners, a huge step. These are people who have already shown great motivation in coming to the centre. Here I present an analysis of my findings with reference to the review of literature in Chapter two.

Section 1: Critical Theory

Critical theory is a good lens through which to analyse my findings as it provides a strong theoretical base for exploring the research. If critical theory is a way to challenge the continuous reproduction of social, political and economic conditions, then technology can be viewed as a practical way to undermine our taken for granted or 'intuitive' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 30) acceptance of the order of things. The adult literacy learners who took part in the research are all there, in part, because of the system that allowed them to fail during their formal education. No one I spoke to had an extremely bad experience during the formal (obligatory)

schooling, however, while from some of them I sensed a feeling of regret when they spoke about the period, for the most part there was a quiet acceptance that they left school early because they wanted to and that it was not forced on them. I suppose the question that it leaves me with now is why they accepted this inequality, why did their families not understand the value of a basic education. This acceptance by people of authority, in education and other facets of life, a fear of questioning that limits people in their ability to reach their full potential, echoes Gramsci's idea of hegemony and its powerful yet subtle hold on all our lives.

The research also reveals examples of Foucault's disciplinary power and self-surveillance. For example one learner assumed that the online learning programme was in some way recording his reactions when he happened upon an error in the programme that meant he had to choose an incorrect answer. Another tutor wondered if the programme was being monitored. This perhaps highlights the awareness people have of the possibility that they could be monitored in this way, which is not so far-fetched, and indeed all their work is recorded for evidence in the FETAC accreditation process.

The relationship between tutor and learner is another area that should be commented upon in regard to the power relationships that exist in this area. As with most adult tutors I espouse a learner centred approach and would hope to provide an atmosphere conducive to learning and to treat people with respect. The volunteer tutors in the research findings also expressed similar feelings towards working with their learners. It cannot be denied that tutors exercise power in their role, and on a personal note I am one of those people who find large circles quite intimidating (Brookfield, 2005, pp. 129-130).

As far as possible the power, subtle and nebulous though it is, can be acknowledged. I think that one pointer to the idea that the power is not overwhelmingly in the tutors' hands in the context of the literacy session is that the learners for the most part take it upon themselves to return each week to what is a long term project for them to improve their basic skills without any external coercion. Perhaps it is in this freedom to choose, alongside their increasing knowledge that even a slight shift in power can be a motivating force for the learners to continue on their learning journey.

Fromm (Brookfield, 2005, p. 51) talks about the fear of freedom that afflicts many of the people in today's society. The research findings are inconclusive, my analysis of my own observations of the learners in the group is that some of them may not have the same freedom to choose in their lives, this is most notable in the learners who attend the centre because they are on a government sponsored community employment scheme and are somewhat coerced to do courses. This is in contrast to the people who attend of their own volition. Not many of the people who come to the centre via these community employment schemes come back to attend a course after they have finished, which is perhaps reason in itself for the community employment to exist, simply to reach people who otherwise are in the 'hard to reach' category.

In analysing the research in light of Marcuse's theory on 'temporary estrangement from everyday life' and its relevance to education and the avoidance of 'group think', I can make a tentative finding that those learners who have made the most rapid progress over the course of the term may have started to develop a realistic degree of 'rebellious subjectivity' (Brookfield, 2005, p. 55) in their choice of what

they want to learn and in simply coming to the centre, alongside seizing the opportunity to work at home on the online learning programme.

Section 2: Key Theorists (Habermas, Freire, Mezirow)

Habermas

My research findings are unambiguous in one area; namely that the social aspect of learning motivates learners to come to the literacy session and is observed to be a motivational force by tutors. While some learners may have expressed an initial reluctance and fear of being part of the group all of them cited this as a reason to keep coming. Habermas, in his discussions on the loss of the public sphere that is ‘the sphere of private people come together as a public’ (1991, p. 27) and his theory of communicative action (1985) and (1984), is central to the theoretical debate in this area. I found that the respondent tutors had a ‘caring, ethical and democratic’ (Murphy & Fleming, 2006, p. 52) attitude to their work with the learners. They all put a value on the coffee break as a time when tutors and learners interact informally and felt strongly that this was an intrinsic part of the literacy session. We can perhaps see glimpses here of Habermas’ ‘collaborative discourse’ and a move towards regaining the public sphere that we are in danger of losing as a society.

My findings also indicate that both the learners and tutors talk about the content on the computer, it seems to create a common ground for people. It is a type of neutral territory where the participants are free to search, in a way that might be interpreted, ‘often intuitively, for themes and metaphors by which to fit the unfamiliar into a

meaning perspective, so that an interpretation in context becomes possible' (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 9). The computer content is not more than that, a resource like any other. However its dynamic nature, the way that the computer tells the learner if they are correct or not as they work their way through it, combined with the natural inclination of people to express an opinion on what they are doing, may help to make it a more useful resource than the traditional workbooks and readers. The tutor in this context is possibly a conduit to 'rational and reflective' discourse (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 10) that may makes the learners' motivational inclinations stronger.

Freire

Freire's theoretical writings on adult education and in particular working with the illiterate poor of Brazil in the middle of the twentieth century give him a key role in any discussion of literacy work. As I discussed in the chapter two, his arguments are weakened by the fact that he was working with people in a more extreme environment than the one in which I conducted my research. However there are aspects of 'conscientisation', albeit subtle, in the research findings, where respondents are becoming more critical in their world views, such as where the learner began to question the validity of the 'correct' answer that the online programme was telling her was right. It may also be as a result of increasing confidence that learners are more willing to question the presumed correct answer.

Furthermore, Freire theorises that the oppressed are in danger of becoming the oppressor given the opportunity of education. The most evident example of this is where the assistants, who have gone through adult education courses themselves,

start to critique the learners with whom they are working in a manner which reflects their own learning journey and highlights a kind of selective memory corresponding in some ways to Freire's oppressor theory.

Mezirow

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning and its accompanying 'disorienting dilemma' is important in the discussion of extrinsic motivation for learners to take part in the blended learning literacy session. As I discussed in Chapter three there appears to be strong evidence of this in the research findings. I think it is important in understanding why certain people turn up each week, when others do not, and I think that the common denominator is that many of the learners have undergone a life changing situation to a greater or lesser extent and their attendance is not enforced by an outside agency; it is an internal urge or motivation that makes them come to the session. This disorienting dilemma or 'disequilibrium' (Kitchener & King, 1990, p. 168) appears to be a strong motivational force for adults to return to education as well as an approach that can be applied through the various reflective stages of adult development.

The other strength in Mezirow's theory is that the main premise behind it is that adult education should help learners to come to think critically by 'questioning the assumptions underlying their structures of understanding or in realizing alternatives to their habitual ways of thinking and living' (Brookfield, 1990, p. 179). This is the ultimate aim of any pedagogic learning activity in my opinion. The research findings support this in that the learners and tutors all appear to place a value on the interaction that takes place both informally during the break but also in the dynamic

interaction that the Write On programme promotes which might allow them in some small way to start thinking ‘critically’ about their ‘assumptions supporting perspectives and to develop reflective judgement in discourse regarding beliefs, values, feelings and self-concept’ (Mezirow, 2006, p. 31). The findings suggest that some learners have increased self-confidence in general as a result of their attending the literacy session. In my opinion this may be in part a consequence of the complex interaction between the novelty of using modern technology, supportive and open tutor as well as a general sense of individual well-being that appears to stem from coming to the sessions.

Section 3: Self-directed learning

Self-directed learning is another area that is evident in the research, seen as the underlying reason or hidden agenda that motivates the learners to come to the weekly session. In my view, it is of value to the adult literacy learner to be working towards a degree of self-direction. Not only does this tie in with the general area of critical thinking but it is also practical in that we can only provide a limited amount of learner contact time. The debate around self-directed learning also links in with the findings in Maugher (2009) that only ten per cent of adult learners actually attend formal learning classes, whereas the vast majority of learning happens informally outside of the classroom, so in essence this is self-directed. In my opinion, a balance is important so that people have the support of the tutor and other learners to reflect back to the learners ‘aspects of our assumptive clusters we are unable to see’ (Brookfield, 2005, p. 196). In other words when we are not challenged by other people we learn less.

Some of the learner respondents do not have a computer to use outside of the weekly session and this is evident in the speed of the progress they make in the online programme and may also reflect the stage of progression at that time. Other factors, though, may make the learner hesitate to purchase or use a computer outside of the classroom. It may be that these learners do not have the support, particularly from family, seen as an important influence in helping adults to become confident home users of ICT (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006), that other people do have. This is not an area that I researched in any great detail so it remains open to further inquiry.

One of the learner respondents in particular has made swift progress over the course of term when this piece of research took place. He has shown a high degree of self-direction and motivation in general towards his learning that could be described as assuming 'primary responsibility for, and control over planning, implementing and evaluating the learner experience' (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 12). From my observations, I think that this learner is reflecting internally as he works most evenings using the Write On programme. So while there is no overt evidence of a Marcusean style internal reflection, this may be inferred from this learner in particular.

Section 4: Reports and Reviews of ICTs and Adult Learning

Adult learning in the digital age: Information technology and the learning society
(Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006)

As discussed later in the section on policy and previously in the literature review, Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong's book (2006) provides many comparable findings from

a large scale research project. They start from a point of view that reflects my own at the start of this research process in that we are being urged to provide technology classes without a clear strategy to use technology in the most effective way that ensures that adults returning to education to learn about how to use a computer, in particular, can be adequately provided with relevant course content. In effect they are questioning the dominant discourse that is put forward by government policy as well as educationalists that learning about ICTs is an urgent imperative that can help solve many of the shortcomings of the people who are not up to speed in this area.

My observations of learners coming to the centre to complete ten week courses on computers is that they are re-appearing every so often to take the same class over again. And while it is not realistic or particularly desirable that all the learners who come to the centre have a one to one tutor (or near enough), there appears to be something in the interaction of tutor and learner that maintains an interest and made a more integral aspect of people's everyday life without taking over. Without overstating the case, though, because from examining the data collected in the research I think that the people who are most enthusiastic and who progress quickly are the ones who have that external drive, whether from family or work or a critical life incident.

Online learning and social exclusion (Clarke, 2002)

The research data would support the opinion of this author that a major motivation for learners is the 'social factor' (Clarke, 2002, p. 45) that learning courses provide. It is less clear how to convince people that the learning, online, blended or

otherwise, is 'beneficial to them' (Clarke, 2002, p. 53). This is the challenge that centres like the one where I work face. Our remit is to provide second chance education to people in the local community, convincing them to take part is a time consuming and ongoing issue that is not an easy one to resolve. The research findings indicated, however, that many of the participants, both learners and tutors, were engaging with social networking websites. If this is the direction that our web-based interaction is heading in generally, a sphere where there is social interaction happening in real time; it may represent a more interesting learning experience at some point in the future that can tap into the very real, and human, learner desire for sociability.

NIACE IFLL Thematic Report 2 (Mauger, 2009)

The research findings, as well as my observation of the literacy sessions, support the premise that we, as adult educators, need to understand the direction that technology is taking and use it to improve the learning journey. The report (Mauger, 2009) suggests that as little as 10-15 per cent of all adult education in the UK is formal. This is reflected in the Irish statistics for literacy learners (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011). So the participants in the study are part of the 10 per cent of people who actively seek assistance with their learning.

The research suggests that all of the participants who have a computer at home use it quite frequently for things like looking at Youtube videos, connecting with relatives and friends on Facebook and to make invitations. One learner reported that she helped her non ICT literate friend fill in a form online. Some of them advised that they used the NALA website at home. So while they many people appear to

have some reason to use a computer they are not really doing anything hugely different on it than they would say watching TV.

The social networking website Facebook is a prime example of the desire of people to connect, as I discussed previously in this chapter; once again we are going back to the social as motivating force. In my opinion, using an online learning platform as a way to improve literacy is not going to influence the people at whom it is aimed to suddenly start learning. It is more likely that a practical reason will persuade people not familiar with ICTs of their benefits. For example, one learner told me how she helped her friend to fill out a form online and that her friend was impressed with this. Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong (2006) refer to this idea of the local champion as being the most effective way for the technological 'have nots' to tap into and cross, if they so wish, the digital divide.

Perhaps it is the influence of social networking websites where we will see the most innovative learning going on. For example Facebook appears to have a tremendous pull on people once they overcome the initial fear of public profile. The educational sector would benefit greatly from a similar idea that fulfils again the most basic of human needs, to be social. In a small way even the interaction that people have on the chat rooms and playing interactive games gives them an informal avenue to improve areas like typing skills and, to a certain degree, literacy. This more bottom up approach is an area that should be thought about in order to maximise the learner experience and develop our educational practise in this area.

NALA Report on DLS (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011)

I think my research findings correspond with the findings in the NALA report on Write On. It is a positive development and the learners all appear to enjoy using the programme. Although it was developed as a distance learning tool, it is clear from what the learners and tutors have said that the platform works more effectively when it is used within a blended learning context. Learners are generally at the start of their ICT journey and find navigating around the computer a challenge in itself so having tutor support was seen as being important. It is for this reason, as well as the boredom factor that sets in with a relatively static, albeit relevant, content that the programme provides. It may be a new way of learning, for people new to technology, however it still requires a high degree of learner motivation to carry on until the end of each section or through the entire course.

The findings suggest that the tutors are pleased to have a programme that they know is relevant and that provides a structure to the approach to ICT learning. From a learner motivational point of view it helps that they have a clear structure to follow, with the additional benefit of home access if they so wish. However, I would also observe from the findings that the learners are not motivated in particular to use Write On, it simply happens to be the only suitable resource available to them at this time. And, while it is unlikely that there will be too many other online resources developed in Ireland specifically for literacy learners, what the report does not reveal is that centres like the one where I work were already using ICTs in a blended way, the web site simply provides an easier path for us to facilitate literacy learners to gain ICT skills. They make reference to the fact that literacy learners can find using a computer a challenge and that this is a reason why the blended approach appears to work well, which is a valid point in my opinion. However,

where I found the evaluation lacked much analysis was of the background situations of the participants involved. It would be interesting to know how many other classes they have taken, how long they have been involved with adult learning, what was their family situation, or their socio-economic situation, as, what might be perceived to be a result of using Write On, might well be the culmination of many months or years of work by the learner, which happened to coincide with the introduction of the programme. In my experience people are genuinely very positive when something new comes along, however, without much to compare it with, it was unlikely that they would find out many negatives; nor try to find out why people are not using it as I discussed earlier was a feature in Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong's (2006) work.

Section 5: Irish and EU policy

Irish Government policy in the area of adult education is contained in the White Paper (2000). ICT usage and digital literacy are core concepts contained in the White Paper. What my research findings suggest is that, while part of this policy has been implemented, albeit only in the last three years in the case of the centre where I work, through provision of funding for equipment and infrastructure, in particular the provision of laptops and interactive whiteboards. However, the development of ICT resources is lagging, given that the White Paper is over ten years old, the development of Write On web site was hardly a timely response to the literacy issue in Ireland highlighted by the OECD (1996) report. Furthermore, as I discussed in Chapter two in relation to more recent EU policy in the area of technology in adult education in general there is a general feeling that the full

impact that technology could have, has not as of yet been achieved. This is an area that, in my opinion, could be further researched.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed my research findings in light of the literature review in Chapter two. The five sections on Critical theory, the key theorists (Habermas, Freire, Mezirow), self-directed learning, reports and reviews of ICTs and adult learning, and, finally, Irish and EU policy I have presented an analysis of what I feel to be the main theoretical as well as practical implications that my research findings into how adult literacy learners are motivated by blended learning have highlighted.

CHAPTER 5 IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

In this chapter I will present an overview of the main implications of the research study. I make some recommendations for further study. In the conclusion I reflect on thesis and what the main applications of the findings suggest to me.

Implications

I will now outline what are, in my opinion, the main implications of this study for the theory and the practice of adult education. Firstly, I believe that creating an atmosphere of trust and openness for the learner is important because they are entering the ‘public sphere’ and working alongside tutors where being honest with each other is important for the communication and learning experience to be meaningful.

Secondly, while learning about computers is a motivational force for many coming to the centre, adult educators need to be wary of transposing the views of the proponents of technology as a panacea for all of societies’ ills and put it into some perspective. Everyone, in my view, should be aware of the benefit of ICTs because they can help us become more informed and active citizens; people should be encouraged to not be fearful around technology. Just as we talk of the ‘digital natives’, the young people who have smart phones as extensions of their hands and

who intuitively use technology, adults learning have a lifetime of inhibitions to overcome, and so are unsurprisingly suspicious of many aspects of technology. Adult educators need to be able to view this from the adult perspective and review how we 'teach' technology. A more enlightened approach and one that is used by adults in a more informal, somewhat organic, way, is to use technology, the internet in particular, for their informal learning projects; to tap into the interests rather than to learn about the names of the computer hardware components as would be the case in a traditional computer course.

Thirdly, it should be acknowledged that learning a new skill allows access to a whole new world and appears to increase learners' confidence. Adult educators are generally aware that a by-product of taking part in any learning programme is that it tends to improve people's self-esteem. This is due, in part, to the confidence and subtle power that new knowledge brings, but can also be related to making connections with other people informally at breaks and before and after class. Thus, while the system does not always approve of relaxed time keeping, we should look at it as a shift in the power relations that helps to make it more evenly distributed through informal chat.

Further study

As I mentioned in Chapter four, ICT policy in adult literacy provision from an Irish and EU perspective, would be a worthwhile area for further research. This is an area that was beyond the scope of this particular research project to thoroughly address.

As a result of this study I think that it would be interesting to create a longitudinal study to research the same learners in a couple of years time in order to understand

what effect this particular part of their learning journey has had on their lives, if any, with regard to continuing use of ICTs. And if they do not still use ICTs, why not, and if they do, what they use them for then.

I would also suggest that it would be useful to investigate how we can create a learning environment that suggests a not only a genuine need to learn in general but also a genuine need to use ICTs (Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006, p. 204)

Conclusion

This thesis builds on and expands existing knowledge. The findings support the fact that a blended learning approach motivates adult learners from a number of different perspectives and in a variety of ways. The study departs from existing knowledge in the way that it is focussing in on a particular context and with a particular group of participants.

The research has illustrated to me how complex a task it is to research and understand people and their motivations. The research lets me take a more critical and reflexive view of the complex systems that are at play in the context of community based adult education and how we can best motivate our literacy learners. The research has allowed me to understand that there is no simple way to motivate literacy learners, with or without blended learning. Before I completed this piece of research I did not realise just how motivated the literacy learners are in simply turning up each week, never mind the impetus that they then need in order to learn a totally new skill on top of the literacy skills that inhibits their progress in this arena, despite the enthusiasm that they do show to learn how to use ICTs.

It has also become clear that learners need to have a context or reason to use ICTs. Many learners repeat the same basic computer course. I met a learner from another course one day who had to complete a project for a cultural studies class I was giving. Despite some initial trepidation around doing this project she said that she was delighted in the end because she finally had something to do on her computer. The research gives me some confidence to continue in what would have been my intuitive approach to teaching computers and other subjects; to encourage the learners to explore their own area of interest. Thus, I see a need to build on the generally positive attitude of the learners towards using ICTs to give them the tools to go on and use it with confidence in their day to day lives.

Word Count: 19,448

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Appendix 1: Research participant consent form

Research Consent Form

Title of Study:

How does blended learning motivate adult literacy learners?

Contact Details:

Researcher Name: Lia Clarkson

Work Tel: 01 4542622

Work Address: Warrenmount CED Centre, Mill Street, Dublin 8

Supervisor Name: Brian Sheridan

Work email: brian.sheridan@nuim.ie

Work Address: Department of Adult & Community Education, NUI Maynooth, Co. Kildare

Purpose of Study:

The purpose of this study is to investigate how adult learners who are using a blend of web based learning combined with traditional teaching methods are motivated by this combination. I will interview both learners and tutors for this study.

Confidentiality of Data:

The data will be used for the purpose of this research only. Myself and my supervisor, Brian Sheridan, will be the only people with access to the data you supply. All names and any identifiable details will be removed from the final thesis. The results will be analysed and will form part of a Masters of Education thesis for NUI Maynooth.

What will happen to the study results?

The data you supply is confidential and will be kept secure at all times. You may access this data at any time (either the recording or the transcripts).

Withdrawal from study:

Up until the thesis is submitted you may withdraw from this study at any time, including any data you have submitted.

Reading transcripts:

You will have the opportunity to read the transcript of your interview.

The interviews do not constitute any kind of counselling. Should you feel any distress after the interview please contact:

NUI Maynooth Ethics Statement:

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Signature: _____

Date: _____