Supporting academic persistence in low-skilled adult learners

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The current literature review explores the factors that contribute to academic persistence for adult learners. The aim of the study is to identify current research-based strategies aimed at supporting learner persistence, particularly for low-skilled adults. Elements of three theoretical frameworks, namely, expectancy-value theory (EVT), goal theory (GT) and self-determination theory (SDT) are conceptualised in a new, melded cognitive model to explain better the constructs that contribute to academic persistence. These theories are used to frame and explain the challenges that adult learners face when returning to school and to understand better the psychosocial demands on adult learners, based on social cognitive theory. This study is particularly significant in the light of current national attention directed towards redesigning adult basic education programmes to include more workforce development and strategies aimed at accelerating the progress of adult learners through basic skills and into post-secondary education and/or career training. Questions guiding the current study include identifying research-based strategies that instructors can use, and elements of programme design that support student persistence.

Key words: persistence, self-efficacy, adult education, at-risk students, retention.

Overview and context

Understanding academic persistence is of great importance to those who work as educators, particularly with low-skilled adults. As practitioners, we find this population returning to school to complete unfinished high school diplomas in order to bolster their job prospects or increase their earning capacity by training for a new career. They have a short-term goal, but need information and support in how to achieve that goal. These adult learners bring with them low academic self-efficacy beliefs based on past experiences, or lack skills necessary to navigate an academic environment that is significantly different from what they have experienced in the past (Martin and Marsh, 2009; Barbatis, 2010; Schreiner et al., 2011; Cho and Karp, 2013). There is a tendency to attribute any want of persistence to the individual’s lack of motivation or interest because they are adults, rather than to understand the crucial role that the instructor and the instructional environment play in supporting adult learner achievement. Compounding this problem is the fact that instructors in adult education programmes have not always been trained as educators, particularly in adult education (LINCS, 2011). Malcolm Knowles (1970) drew attention to the differences in adult learning with his theory of andragogy, prompting a great deal of discussion but very little actual research into instructional strategies and approaches that specifically support adult learners.

Current economic and workplace pressures have focused a great deal of attention on the low-skilled adult. Industry has changed markedly over the past decade, putting more low-skilled adults out of work who now require education, training and the credentials to build or evidence their abilities in order to earn family-sustaining wages. Many national initiatives are now in place to address this skills gap, and it is crucial that future initiatives be based on sound educational research (NCAL, 2008; Chisman, 2011; JFF, 2011). This means that current findings must become more accessible to practitioners and programme administrators in order for them to plan and deliver quality instruction effectively.

Academic persistence for the adult learner is a complex phenomenon. Current research has generated multiple theories and theoretical models to help explain the interrelationship of factors affecting students’ motivation (Zimmerman et al., 1992; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). Some initiatives have seized on one particular theory or just one aspect of a theory to the exclusion of others with sometimes deleterious results, so finding a way to view these related theories in a more holistic way may lead to better student outcomes. Much current research is based on expectancy-value theory (EVT) of motivation and emphasises the individual’s ability beliefs (or self-efficacy), interest and task value as the primary factors that influence motivation (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). In order to understand adult learner persistence, however, we need to understand what factors help learners sustain motivation and effort over time.
Study purpose

The purpose of this study is to review the current literature that explores the main factors influencing motivation in adult learners with a specific focus on academic persistence. We will also seek to identify effective, research-based strategies that might be employed to support learner persistence by instructors and in programme design. Increasing retention for students enrolled in community colleges is currently driving a great deal of research in an effort to increase institutional effectiveness and completion rates.

Early work in social cognitive theory has paved the way for the development of comprehensive models like EVT, which explains the complex relationship between a multitude of factors influencing motivation (Pajares, 1996; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Bandura, 2006). In the current study, we will pay particular attention to the construct of self-efficacy and the role it plays since multiple studies have shown that self-efficacy is predictive of persistence in academic environments (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Bong and Skaalvik, 2003). Research has also demonstrated that self-efficacy is susceptible to influence by a variety of external factors (i.e., peer pressure, past experiences) and contributes to the development of an individual’s self-concept (Pajares, 1996; Margolis and McCabe, 2004; Schunk et al., 2008). If self-efficacy is predictive of persistence and is also evidenced as malleable by research, it is important to identify and implement effective strategies to build self-efficacy, thereby increasing students’ likelihood of achieving their academic goals.

Relevance

Low-skilled adults often find themselves moving from job to job, displaced due to their lack of academic training or academic credentials (NCAL, 2008; Hilliard, 2011). Attaining a level of post-secondary education or occupational training could have a significant impact on their job security, economic stability and earning power (Hochlander et al., 2003; Kirsch et al., 2007; JFF, 2011). The minimum wage has not increased to keep up with inflation and is currently well below what is considered to be a family-sustaining income (NCAL, 2008; Chisman, 2011). Perhaps it was never intended to be a wage that would sustain a family, but in an increasingly uncertain economic future the fear of unemployment drives many adults to reconsider their career options (Friedman, 2007; NCAL, 2008; Hilliard, 2011; JFF, 2011). It has been shown that career exploration and career planning can contribute to a stronger sense of self-efficacy (Lent et al., 1986; Sitzmann and Ely, 2011). From a more global perspective, developing a skilled workforce builds strong communities which are of critical importance to governing bodies, especially during difficult economic times. With the number of low-skilled adults struggling to find employment with family-sustaining wages, and a clear disparity between available jobs and the lower skills of the unemployed (NCAL, 2008; JFF, 2011; BLS, 2013), there is an urgent need for those who work with adult learners not only to assist in removing barriers to academic success but also to be strategic and intentional about encouraging learner persistence.

Younger adult students (age 18–24) seem to have greater difficulty with academic motivation than their older, non-traditional peers (Lepper et al., 2005; Cohen and Brawer, 2008), but non-traditional students struggle with other aspects of higher education, particularly developments in technology, gaps in academic knowledge, institutional processes (or ‘college knowledge’) and competition with life responsibilities (Hochlander et al., 2003; Margolis and McCabe, 2004; Hooker and Brand, 2010). Struggling to persist is common to both, but may need to be considered differently. Understanding how persistence might be influenced by instructional strategies or changes in the academic environment could have a significant impact on student success.

For instance, many adult education programmes in the United States require only a Bachelor’s degree for instructors, and not necessarily a Bachelor’s in education. This is gradually changing across the United States as credentialing programmes are being developed which will require evidence of a higher level of training in education theory, methods and instructional strategies (Chisman, 2011; LINCS, 2011), but the field is vast and primarily staffed by adjunct instructors, so the transition will be slow. Thus, the need to have current educational research more immediately accessible to those in direct contact with students is most important. Ongoing professional development in educational psychology, understanding the adult learner and developing sound instructional practices will ultimately support greater student achievement.

Research questions

The following research questions have guided the current literature review in understanding persistence primarily through the lens of EVT, but also including research into some of the constructs pertaining to extant goal theory (GT) and self-determination theory (SDT):

1. What role can the instructor play in building adult students’ self-efficacy and encouraging persistence?
2. What are some programmatic characteristics that strengthen student persistence?

Theoretical framework

Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT)

The expectancy-value theory of motivation emerged from research with children in the 1980s by Eccles, Wigfield and their colleagues, building on the study of motivation and
motivational determinants by Atkinson in 1957 (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Wigfield and Cambria, 2010). This theory seeks to explain people’s choice of achievement tasks and their persistence on those tasks. The model maintains that expectancies and values directly contribute to achievement-related choices and explains the relationship between the factors contributing to motivation. In the context of this review of the literature, this means that students’ expectancies for academic success (returning to school to earn a high school degree or diploma) and their perception of how much they value this achievement directly influence the choices they make. Expectancies are influenced by many things, perhaps the most important being the individual’s belief in their ability to achieve the task (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). EVT incorporates many of the same or similar constructs from social cognitive theory as developed by Bandura (2006). EVT calls this construct ability beliefs (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000), while social cognitive theory refers to it as self-efficacy beliefs. Because of the similarity of these constructs, these terms will be used interchangeably in this review.

Self-efficacy is influenced by many factors including gender roles, cultural stereotypes, prior successes or failures, whether internal or external factors control the outcome of the situation, and a person’s locus of control (Pajares, 1996; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Lepper et al., 2005; Hong et al., 2012). These factors contribute to the development of one’s self-concept, but are more easily influenced by experiential and environmental factors (Bong, 1998). Studies have also shown that self-efficacy is predictive of persistence in adults (Lent et al., 1986); thus it is important for those who are working with students to understand how this occurs.

In defining the achievement values part of the EVT model, Eccles et al. (1983) identify four different components: attainment value (or importance), intrinsic value (personal enjoyment), utility value (or usefulness) and the cost (the level of effort or emotion) it will take to accomplish the task (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). Utility value and cost play a significant role for the adult learner, as we will explore.

An increase in effort is also often necessary for academic persistence, but attempting to invoke greater effort by increasing the value of the goal or task may be counterproductive. It has been suggested by Bong (1998) that when the value of the goal becomes greater than the person’s belief that they can achieve that goal, such anxiety increases, which may actually interfere with learning or performance, as in test anxiety. Much work has already been done to understand the impact of test anxiety in high-stakes testing situations. By inference, this would indicate, then, that when value (at least extrinsic) is increased without an increase in self-efficacy, anxiety will result and potentially interfere with the learning process. This discussion is outside the scope of this review, but it is important to be mindful of the internal relationships between the constructs in the model.

**Goal theory (GT)**

Goal theory suggests that when students have set individualised, clearly defined academic goals they will be more motivated to sustain their efforts in order to attain their goal (Meece et al., 2003; Lepper et al., 2005; Wigfield and Cambria, 2010). Early research dedicated to understanding the impact of goals on student persistence debated the relative merits of mastery goals (eliciting intrinsic motivation) versus performance goals (providing extrinsic motivation) as opposite ends of the same spectrum. Performance goals were originally only thought to drive ‘extrinsic motivation that is associated with low persistence, interest and involvement’, while mastery goals were the drivers of deep, effectual learning (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 56). Current research challenging these perspectives is exploring ways in which performance and mastery goals work together to promote student motivation towards academic achievement, especially when the extrinsic goal is internalised. What practitioners have also observed and researchers have confirmed, however, is that setting goals is not always enough (Lent et al., 1986).

**Self-determination theory (SDT)**

Self-determination theory has many similarities with both goal theory and expectancy-value theory, and builds on understanding the impact that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation have on learning. It also explains that extrinsic motivation can be a positive motivator for learning when ‘the extrinsic goal is self-endorsed and is adopted with a sense of volition’ (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 55). SDT holds that autonomy, competence and relatedness contribute to students becoming capable, independent learners (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Sitzmann and Ely, 2011). To understand persistence better in the current study, we have attempted to link this literature together using a melded cognitive model. As more instructors are attempting to access current research, effective models relating some of the different theories surrounding academic persistence may be useful to help bridge the gap between educational psychology and other disciplines.

**Melded cognitive model**

Motivation is described as the willingness both to initiate and to sustain effort towards a goal, but persistence is a quality that supports and increases effort as the initial motivation wanes. As motivation wanes, volition or will takes over to support motivation and bolster persistence in pursuit of a goal. Resilience is another term that defines the personal quality of employing persistence in overcoming obstacles to achieving one’s goals. The model presented in Figure 1 is an attempt to link predominant education theories to understand better and discuss the complexities of student persistence for adults.
In Figure 1, self-efficacy, interest or engagement and task value are seen as the primary factors contributing to motivation, represented by $M$ with contributions also being made by feedback from both mastery and performance goal orientations. The symbol for vector over the $M$ for motivation demonstrates a directionality component to motivation or moving towards a goal. The factors contributing to motivation act as a ‘pushing’ force while the goal or the desire to attain the goal represents a ‘pulling’ force, but also feeds back to motivate the individual towards attaining the goal. This representation also shows that goals can be of two natures, mastery or performance. An individual’s goal will likely be a combination of the two, but there are very different ways in which instructors support the development of these two goals. Along the journey from motivation to achieving the goal, the student’s personal effort plays a large role. External stimuli can increase the sense of urgency affecting the amount of effort applied and increase the rate of goal attainment. Hence, the level of persistence depends on multiple factors: the strength of an individual’s motivation, the personal value of their goal, the amount of effort the individual is willing to apply towards achieving the goal and the urgency affected at times by external stimuli.

Affect is the underpinning for the entire educational process, having an effect on many aspects of learning. According to Kasworm (2008), the process of learning is described and seen as an act of hope; thus in the learning process individuals invest a great deal of emotion. An awareness of how student emotions affect learning, both positively and negatively, allows the instructors, staff and the students themselves to mediate the effects. An explanation from the perspective of SDT helps in understanding this model. If an individual has set the goal for him or herself there is a sense of relatedness to the goal. As the individual moves forward towards their goal with their initial motivation, a sense of confidence is being developed which will further support motivation and effort, but will also build a sense of competence or belief in their ability to achieve the goal. If the extrinsic motivator becomes internalised, volition is also engaged which will not only encourage additional effort towards achieving the goal but also build autonomy. Taken together, developing a sense of competence and autonomy built on relatedness all contribute to the innate psychological needs of the learner, which is the foundation of SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

**Methods**

The current literature review was accomplished using EBSCO Host and a series of keywords in various combinations. These include persistence, self-efficacy, resilience, community college, adult education, at-risk students, retention, goal setting, interest and GED (general education degree). Additional references were gleaned from Schunk et al. (2008). Care was taken to identify as many resources as possible pertaining to adult learners, but there were very few that addressed combinations of keywords including adult learner. Additional resources pertaining to current state and national initiatives and reports from policy organisations were gathered from the Internet and personal experience. Progress in the debate about credentialing for instructors working in basic skills programmes in adult education was also identified from Internet sources. Synthesis of the conceptual model of various theories was an attempt to relate common components of these theories in order to develop a more unified model for practitioner accessibility. Further exploration of these theories is recommended, but a holistic approach might prevent programmatic development with too narrow a focus.

**Findings**

**Persistence and self-efficacy among students**

Much of the extant educational research has been carried out with children in a compulsory education environment; this research has helped to develop educational theories regarding motivation and learning in order to guide the use of instructional strategies, but awareness of some of the differences between learners of different ages is important in understanding how best to meet the needs of the adult learner (Bong and Skaalvik, 2003). Children are immersed in an education environment for most of their day, and the degree of autonomy in choosing what they want to learn is limited. The priority of educators of children in compulsory
education settings is engagement and generating interest in order to stimulate motivation for learning, especially with novel content. In older children and teens, the task of the educator shifts towards demonstrating relevance and relatedness to increase engagement and motivation (Pajares, 1996; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Nakajima et al., 2012). Low-skilled adults often have family and work responsibilities outside school and very little contact time with adult educators. They have also returned to school by choice so engagement and a degree of motivation are already present. This degree of motivation can be very high, and multifaceted, since numerous positive outcomes may be dependent on successful completion of their studies.

Adult learners, however, often experience considerable anxiety and apprehension in returning to school, especially if individuals consider the value of their goal to be higher than their belief in their own ability to achieve this goal, setting up a ‘high-stakes’ environment (Bong and Skaalvik, 2003; Kasworm, 2008). What they often lack is a sense of academic self-efficacy. While adults may have a strong sense of self-efficacy in tasks or knowledge related to their daily lives, feelings of academic self-efficacy are often weak for low-skilled adults based on past academic experiences and the fact that they did not finish high school (Kasworm, 2008). Because sense of academic self-efficacy is predictive of persistence (Bandura and Schunk, 1981; Lent et al., 1986; Pajares, 1996), building this up in adult learners is crucial. What begs further research is to understand how malleable self-efficacy continues to be as individuals age. According to Bong and Skaalvik (2003), sense of self-efficacy contributes to the development of an individual’s self-concept which is considered to be more stable and, thus, less susceptible to influence once it has been established. It remains in question whether the same strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective for children are as effective for adults, and this calls for further research.

Initially, adults will express a high motivation to enrol in programmes to earn a high school degree or build English skills, with many fully intending to continue their post-secondary education. Boesel et al. (1998) found that only 50% of students finishing the GED (general education degree) earned an associate’s degree and only 2% actually earned a Bachelor’s degree. Despite the fact that students’ grade points were the same as high school graduates, they were less likely to complete a degree. Students’ initial motivation is sometimes short-lived as the academic load becomes more difficult and family, work or financial concerns arise. Persistence is what keeps them moving towards their goal despite hardship. Building a sense of academic self-efficacy is essential to the degree that self-concept does not interfere.

**Goals and interest in persistence for adult learners**

Important discoveries in recent goal theory research contribute to a better understanding of how both mastery goals and performance goals provide feedback to motivate students towards achieving their goals by generating interest, increasing desire, building knowledge and stimulating the use of learning strategies (Pintrich, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Lepper et al., 2005). Mastery goal orientation has been considered to drive intrinsic motivation and promote the optimal pattern for learning, while performance goal orientation has been thought to drive extrinsic motivation, which is an external, rewards-based pattern of motivation through competition with others. Although performance and mastery goals have commonly been viewed as opposite ends of the same spectrum, research has demonstrated that there is little correlation between the two (Lepper et al., 2005) and that, in fact, ‘students hold multiple goals in classroom situations’ according to Meece et al. (2003, p. 459). They found that ‘adolescents reported stronger mastery and performance goals when they perceived their teachers as using learner-centered teaching practices that involved promoting positive relations, encouraging higher order thinking, and adapting instruction to individual needs’ (Meece et al., 2003, p. 457), and that ‘mastery and performance goals were positively correlated with students’ self-reports of academic efficacy and active learning strategies’ (Meece et al., 2003, p. 469). This is significant when considering effective instructional strategies (Corno, 2008). Since Corno’s (2008) study was a broad-based research carried out with middle and high school students parsed by level, it is relevant to considerations of instructional strategies with adults in a community college setting.

A second consideration in goal setting is the difference between short-term or proximal goals versus long-term goals. Work done with middle and high school age adolescents by Bandura and Schunk (1981) found that children who were very low-achieving in maths progressed rapidly and developed a sense of personal self-efficacy when using proximal sub-goals. This also fostered an increased personal interest in maths for which they had demonstrated little interest initially. Setting short-term goals also provides learners with the ability to measure or monitor progress towards their goals, which was identified as significant in developing self-directedness and building a sense of academic self-efficacy (Kasworm, 2008; Sitzmann and Ely, 2011).

Lent et al. (1986) also demonstrated that students who had participated in career counselling demonstrated higher academic persistence as they were better able to set both short-term and long-term career goals and envision themselves in those roles. Career exploration and planning is a valuable tool, since adult learners are often unfamiliar with new career opportunities. They are also often unaware of skills they have which may be transferable (Oesch and Bower, 2009). As they move through a series of classes or academic credentials, they can, in fact, be building their sense of academic self-efficacy, but may need the prompting of an educator to call attention to their progress and to help them make positive attributions for their success (Schreiner et al., 2011; Capps, 2012; Hong et al., 2012). Many goal-setting
strategies have recently been introduced into adult education from business, including the SMART goal model and other goal-setting strategies which are often tied to career exploration and planning (Comings et al., 1999; Oesch and Bower, 2009). Assisting individuals to identify specific long-term goals and strategies to attain those goals can be significant in sustaining motivation and helping adults persist through adversity. Setting realistic, attainable goals is also important for building a sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence.

Interest is one of the most variable factors for adult learners. Low-skilled adults who enrol in adult education programmes express their primary goal as earning their GED, high school-level academic skills, and thus are initially more interested in the credential than in what they will need to learn to achieve this goal. Engagement and generating interest in the academic content for this population is just as important as it is for high school students when the content is predetermined or established. Adults, however, tend to be wary and shy away from unfounded enthusiasm and do not exhibit as much zeal in learning for the sake of learning, but tend to be more pragmatic. Their interest and engagement are more closely tied to relevance, relatedness and practical application (Knowles, 1970; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Kasworm, 2008). These characteristics of the adult learner require different instructional approaches but ultimately will contribute to a higher degree of self-directed learning.

Developing the learner’s sense of confidence and competence is a crucial aspect in fostering self-determination for adults. Sharing many constructs with expectancy-value theory, self-determination theory focuses primarily on the three pillars of competence, relatedness and autonomy as well as the ability to measure progress toward a goal (Knowles, 1970; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Schunk and Pajares, 2002; Sitzmann and Ely, 2011). Confidence in their competence to function effectively in an academic setting is closely related if not identical to the academic self-efficacy beliefs of EVT. These constructs from SDT explain some of Knowles’ (1970) beliefs in understanding differences in the adult approaches to learning. While setting goals related to employment provides a focus for the efforts of adult learners, it is also important to be mindful that career goals are not the only goals that motivate adult learners. A full 52.6% of adults taking the GED test reported that they were taking it for personal reasons: to be a positive role model or for personal satisfaction (GED Testing Service, 2011). This reflects the involvement of an individual’s self-concept and how they want to be perceived by others as a factor in motivation and academic persistence.

Positive and negative effects of task value

The young adult who has left high school without graduating and enrols in an adult education programme solely to earn a GED is most closely related to research with high school students, relative to task value and persistence. In addition, as part of alternative correctional plans, the judicial system still frequently compels youth to earn a high school equivalency. These students would greatly benefit if one could develop in them a sense of value for what is being taught (Brophy, 2008). When their motivation to learn is solely based on fulfilling a legal requirement or is tied to punishment, there is little in the way of interest, goals, task value or self-efficacy to contribute towards effort or persistence.

Adults who return to school by choice, however, perceive value in the achievement of their academic goals and may already have overcome significant obstacles just to enrol. Building on the work of Pintrich (2000), Wigfield and Cambria (2010, p. 2) state that ‘when individuals believe they have the capability to succeed at different activities they will be more likely to engage in them, persist in the face of difficulties and do well on those activities’. This nicely encapsulates the foundational concepts of EVT (Bandura, 1997; Pintrich, 2000; Schunk and Pajares, 2002). Eccles et al. (1983) have identified four major components of achievement task values which can be useful to this discussion: attainment value or importance, intrinsic or interest value, utility or usefulness of the task, and cost (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Wigfield and Cambria, 2010). Cost is a significant consideration for adults because it refers to potential sacrifices the individual will have to make in order to achieve an academic goal. These might include time from family and other adult responsibilities, lost wages, and potential risk to self-worth if fear of failure is present, in addition to the financial cost. Wigfield and Eccles (2000) mention that attainment value carries with it identity issues if the outcome of the task is related to their sense of self. Higgins defined value in a broader sense; for Higgins, valuing something includes ‘the psychological experience of being attracted to [it]’ (cited in Wigfield and Cambria, 2010, p. 3) and thus wishing to attain it. In this way, he explains value as more of a motivational force, not just a belief. Utility value ‘refers to how a task fits into an individual’s future plans’ (Wigfield and Cambria, 2010, p. 4). Here it is unknown whether domain specificity of task value applies to various classes within a programme as it does for high school students or whether task value is associated broadly with the achievement of the academic goal in its entirety (earning a degree, for example).

External stimuli, urgency and effort

The symbol for external stimuli in the melded model connotes ‘heat’ as represented by a triangle in chemistry equations. Hence, ‘turning up the heat’ is the effect that external deadlines and exigencies can provide which cause an increase in effort towards a goal. A current example is the expiration of the existing GED test in the United States and Canada at the end of 2013. It is being replaced by a computer-based test tied to the Common Core standards.
which is expected to be markedly more difficult than the current tests. This has significantly increased the rate of completions and decreased the length of time students are spending in the programme preparing for the tests as they reprioritise their commitments. EVT is the only theory in the discussion that considers the impact of external events and a sense of urgency (deadlines) on motivation. They fit under the umbrella of achievement values, and any adjustment in priorities could be considered under the cost to the individual of achieving that particular goal (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000).

The effect of affect

Awareness of affect, or the effect that individuals’ emotions play on learning, is echoed in many different forums of education. It is firmly grounded in social cognitive theory and the three theories discussed above, but it is also part of learning theories in other disciplines, such as language acquisition theory (Krashen, 1981) and literature referring to the negative cognitive impacts on learning experienced by victims of bullying. What may be surprising to some is the degree to which academic outcomes for adult learners are still impacted by emotion (Kasworm, 2008). Based on years of experience with adult learners, Kasworm (2008, p. 27) evidences a sound grasp of the ‘courage and fragility’ of adult learners when discussing the challenges to personal identity and the conflicts in priorities that can occur. She explains that adults often seek re-entry to education as a result of a life crisis such as losing a job, divorce or another significant personal need and display a level of emotional chaos as they seek to develop their identity as a student. This is most certainly true in adult education programmes and applies to students of all ages.

Many low-skilled adults who must first earn a high school credential also carry the burden of low academic self-efficacy, so it is important for educators to identify ways to support these students, yet empower them to regain and even further develop their sense of competence and autonomy. Porath and Bateman believe that the ability to self-regulate may be the greatest asset adults bring to their educational experience, perhaps because they have experienced it in another aspect of their adult lives and actively seek to re-establish that sense of self-directedness and a ‘stable self’ in their educational experience (in Sitzmann and Ely, 2011).

Building on this understanding and other research supporting persistence, a consortium of adult education institutions from five New England states carried out an action research project entitled ‘The New England Adult Learner Persistence Project’ (NELP) to identify strategies that would be effective for adult learners. Working with 755 students and 18 adult education programmes, this project produced both qualitative and quantitative outcomes. It identified six core needs of adults and the drivers of persistence as ‘a sense of belonging and community, clarity of purpose, agency, competence, relevance, and stability’ (Nash and Kallenbach, 2009, p. 1).

The three core constructs of self-determination theory are reflected in these six core needs as is the construct of ability beliefs from EVT when identifying agency. Their goal was to identify key supports for fostering persistence specific to these needs, and to develop practitioner training to help put this research into practice (Comings et al., 1999; Garet et al., 2001). The approach contains a strong element of critical pedagogy, as expressed by Friere and Giroux, but trends in recent social cognitive theory are also focusing on this aspect of human agency (Bandura, 2006). Most importantly, designing a method and process to get current educational research into the hands of practitioners is novel and timely.

Discussion

The strength and breadth of the research done on self-efficacy and in particular academic self-efficacy is compelling. Particularly for adults, the process of building a sense of academic self-efficacy may take much longer since adults’ self-concept has been built on more life experiences and has become more firmly established. Teaching adults to make facilitative attributions for their academic success may help to change their self-perception relative to academics, but will likely take more time and intentional feedback from instructors. Academic self-efficacy also needs to be well substantiated and well calibrated in order to become internalised and affect the adult learner’s self-concept. While this does not rule out the potential impact of transformational change, it is more likely built with consistent feedback, reminders of transferable skills and helping students to understand that their efforts in applying study skills, learning strategies and attending to pertinent information play a direct role in their academic success.

One important finding from this study is that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation can be used in positive ways to feed back on and increase motivation. While career goals are most salient to adult learners, they are not their sole focus or motivation for achievement. When just over 52% of adults report that they are pursuing a high school equivalency credential for personal satisfaction or to be a positive role model, supporting this aspect of motivation must be an important part of their educational experience. Setting long-term goals, but also short-term goals as steps along the way, is important in helping adult learners stay on track as well as measure progress towards their goal. This becomes an important measure of ‘investedness’.

Initial interest is present in adult learners who return to school by choice, but their interest begs expansion, calibration and sometimes an evaluation of relevance. Being able to visualise themselves in new roles, even the new role of ‘college student’, is important and the foundation for strategies such as campus tours, college for a day, videos of workplace scenarios and site visits to local businesses in their programme of study. Adults need to be able to see
themselves in these roles in order to anticipate how best to evaluate their readiness to make the change, and prepare accordingly.

Building self-directedness in the academic realm includes learning how to navigate the processes and the culture of higher education in order to develop confidence in their ability to function effectively in a new environment. Students should be reminded that the flexibility they are developing in behaviours and thinking processes is transferable to new situations so they can continue to build confidence in their ability to make future life changes. This is building their global sense of self-efficacy which is important in many aspects of adult life. Reinforcement of these attributes is necessary to having a positive effect on self-concept and ultimately builds a stronger sense of self-determination.

Implications

From the action research on which the NELP project was based, Comings et al. (1999) found that adult students mentioned more positive factors affecting their academic persistence, and that building up positive supports such as supportive relationships inside and outside the classroom, clear goals and a sense of self-determination are critical to increasing academic persistence (in Nash and Kallenbach, 2009). This is a significant change from current approaches to providing student support. In response, the action research of the NELP project engaged a very diverse mix of adult education programmes from rural, urban and small town settings, those sponsored by school districts, community-based organisations, community colleges and a church, each investigating the impact of one context-specific intervention. Of those tied to the influence of the instructor, key findings including multi-sensory interactive lessons, modelling assignments in the classroom, providing regular feedback to students about their progress, daily reflections on learning, providing group and individual tutoring and providing persistence awards were among the classroom strategies with the greatest qualitative outcomes. Supporting self-directedness is a common theme in working with adult learners (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Nash and Kallenbach, 2009; Sitzmann and Ely, 2011), but understanding the challenges of adult learners and meeting them from a psychosocial perspective is also important (Meece et al., 2003; Kasworm, 2008). Scaffolding is necessary in this regard and is just as important to developing students’ persistence as scaffolding of academic content is important to learning.

Another finding of this study which is a common theme in the literature is the quality of the faculty–student relationship (Margolis and McCabe, 2004; Schreiner et al., 2011; Nakajima et al., 2012). When students believe that their instructor has a genuine concern for them and their academic success, it has a positive effect on their persistence regardless of the amount of actual contact time. Other important instructional characteristics are organised and clear instruction (Pascarella et al., 2011), relating curriculum to students’ lives (Margolis and McCabe, 2004; Kasworm, 2008), providing instruction at the appropriate level of difficulty (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Margolis and McCabe, 2004), building academic self-efficacy through reminding learners of prior accomplishments to help them make facilitative attributions (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Lepper et al., 2005; Wigfield and Cambria, 2010), using learner-centred teaching practices (Meece et al., 2003; Nash and Kallenbach, 2009) and goal setting, particularly with career exploration and planning (Lent et al., 1986).

With such importance resting on student–teacher interactions, it must be noted that as community colleges and four-year institutions rely more heavily on adjunct instructors and teacher turnover increases, Jacoby found that ‘as the percentage of part-time faculty on campus increases, it is associated with lower graduation and retention rates’ (cited in Nakajima et al., 2012, p. 605). From personal experience, this is not due to the quality of instruction provided by adjunct instructors but the level of time that they are accessible to students plus the level of knowledge that they possess regarding support options and processes at their institution.

Programme design

Adult education programmes support a variety of academic objectives from English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to low literacy instruction, academic content required to achieve a high school credential and vocational and college-transfer courses of study (Gleazer, 1994; Cohen and Brawer, 2008) and serve these comprehensive educational needs with an open-door policy (Cohen and Brawer, 2008; Mellow and Heelan, 2008). Learning how to navigate in a college environment and developing a college-going identity is important for students and has been shown to affect students’ persistence and academic success (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Hooker and Brand, 2010). ‘College knowledge’ is an understanding of the language, processes and peripheral skills necessary for post-secondary study, and includes knowledge about processes like registration, financial aid and deadlines, the ability to use a computer for online class components, effective study skills and knowing how to access available resources.

The NELP project identified a number of programmatic structures and instructor behaviours which support student persistence. These include providing clear and accessible information about course options, involving other students in the orientation of new students, managing enrolment and building cohorts (to reduce classroom turbulence and increase peer support), providing tutoring and providing individualised counselling (Nash and Kallenbach, 2009). With the understanding that many students who stop attending do not view themselves as ’drop-outs’ but ’stop-outs’ planning to return when time allows, designing programmes...
to provide an easy re-entry process will support student success according to Belzer (in Nash and Kallenbach, 2009).

As always, professional development also plays a tremendous role in building skills for improved instructional practice, particularly in the light of teacher turnover due to the limited availability of full-time positions. This is coupled with the fact that many adult education instructors nationally do not have a background in the field of education. Keeping up with current workforce development changes, technology advances, increasing academic rigour as content standards are developed relative to a common core, and institutional change requires a platform for ongoing, professional development at every level. In addition, when programmes engage in national or state-level initiatives, additional professional development is needed to have everyone in a department speaking with the same voice so that the message to students is clear and accurate.

Limitations and future research

One limitation of this study is the scope of the project. EVT, in particular, is extremely comprehensive and much research has been done on the many individual aspects of this theory. Most importantly, most of the studies to understand motivation and learning theory have been done with children rather than adults. Many variables can affect the application of these findings to adult learners and have resulted in theories that define motivation theory and instructional strategies within a framework of developing characteristics in students over time. This is not to say that the impact of the instructor for adult learners is not significant given the limited contact time that they have, but that the time spent can have an even more profound effect due to its limited nature.

A tremendous amount of research has been done in order to better understand student motivation and to develop and test the models of EVT, GT and SDT. Specific attention to exploring the characteristics of persistence or resilience in the adult learner could yield surprising information which could be used in a variety of adult education arenas to increase learner persistence and achievement of their goals. Making applications of educational or motivational strategies developed after studying children may not produce the desired effect with adults. This is an area for ongoing study, which will continue to be problematic due to the tremendous diversity in academic preparedness, reasons for returning to school and variety of educational goals (Kasworm, 2008). In addition, research into learning for adult education has historically been addressed from a deficit model (Schreiner et al., 2011). Attention to adult education programmes, however, has prompted national interest and research into identifying the strengths as well as the needs of adult learners to develop strategies to utilise their strengths in addressing their needs. As more research is done, particularly with low-skilled adults attempting to gain access to higher education, more clarity will evolve.

Recent national initiatives are attempting to address the challenge of persistence through programme redesign (Accelerating Opportunity, 2010), with the hope of increasing students’ persistence through contextualised instruction of basic skills geared towards occupational training, based on aspects of relatedness and relevance. These strategies have demonstrated a great deal of success in increasing student completion rates of credit-bearing certificates (Accelerating Opportunity, 2010) and will undoubtedly continue to generate interest for workforce development in the future.

Conclusion

Becoming more effective as an instructor or a programme is a never-ending process. Being willing to learn and rework original notions about best instructional practices in the light of research is something that adult educators are being challenged to do in an ever more high-stakes environment. As the economic landscape changes and programmes are being held more accountable for funding based on student outcomes, effective instructional strategies supporting student persistence will benefit not only the students but the programmes designed to serve them. Many changes are on the horizon for adult education and much is at stake for the US as it struggles to meet the vast educational needs of its low-skilled adult population. Identifying the needs of adult learners and developing strategies to support their persistence towards academic goals is an ongoing process, but must be grounded in research and sound educational practice. Finding ways to make important findings in educational research accessible to practitioners as quickly as possible will make a tremendous difference.

References


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