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BRC (Biro Penyelidikan & Perundingan), Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam

Biro Penyelidikan dan Perundingan
Universiti Teknologi MARA
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor
Malaysia

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Sila majukan sebarang pertanyaan kepada:

Penolong Naib Canselor(Penyelidikan)
Biro Penyelidikan dan Perundingan
Universiti Teknologi MARA
40450 Shah Alam
Selangor, Malaysia

Tel : 603 5544 2094 / 2093 / 2092
Fax : 603 5544 2096
e-mel : azniz132@salam.uitm.edu.my



Jawatankuasa Penyunting

Penaung	:	Y. Berbahagia Datuk Prof. Dr. Ibrahim Abu Shah Naib Canselor Universiti Teknologi MARA
Penasihat	:	Yang Berbahagia Dato' Prof. Dr. Abdul Halim Mohd.Nawawi Timbalan Naib Canselor (Pembangunan dan Penyelidikan Universiti Teknologi MARA
Ketua Penyunting	:	Prof. Dr. Azni Zain Ahmed Penolong Naib Canselor(Penyelidikan) Universiti Teknologi MARA
Penyunting	:	Prof. Madya Dr. Zainon Mohd. Noor Koordinator Penyelidikan (Sains dan Teknologi) Prof. Madya Dr. Rosmimah Mohd.Noor Kooordinator Penyelidikan (Sains Kemasyarakatan dan Kemanusiaan)
Lembaga Penyunting:		Prof. Madya Ir. Dr. Hj. Abdul Rahman Omar Dr. Rashidah Abd. Rahman Cik Dapeah Ahmad

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SUCCESS FACTORS AS PERCEIVED BY ADULT DISTANCE LEARNERS OF UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

Jayati Roy
Szarina Abdullah
Pusat Pengajian Siswazah

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand individual perceptions of how 'success' is achieved in the context of distance education. In seeking greater illumination, as opposed to investigating causal factors, this study adopts a learner-centred orientation, which synthesises a critical qualitative framework.

In using a case study approach and a purposive sample, the experiences of 34 distance learners (20 men and 14 women) of Universiti Teknologi Mara (Perlis and Shah Alam campuses) were studied over a one and a half-year period. Two groups of students participated in the study and 46 semi-structured interviews were carried out. Here elements of grounded theory, phenomenology-hermeneutics and the critical incident technique underscore data collection, analysis and interpretation.

The study concludes by drawing on the principles of interpretive validity and hermeneutics to further our understanding of the essences of success, which relate to personality factors; appropriate learning strategies; and socio-cultural factors associated with employment and the family and friends. The critical incidents related further endorse the credibility of the essences established. This highlights the premise that certain theoretical and practical issues in distance education are better understood as socio-cultural phenomena. Furthermore, as the ever--widening 'hermeneutic spiral,' remains opens, this enlarges the dimensions of our understanding of the questions investigated.

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to understand the factors that contribute to learner success within the penumbra of distance learning in Malaysia. It aims at investigating individual learner perspectives, and hopes to garner a greater understanding of the achievement of success in this context. It is this imperative that has heralded the need for individual perspectives of adult distance learners, to be adopted as the main thrust of the research. Unlike more abstract constructs, perspectives are set in the concrete world of actual situations and 'lived' experiences, where particular actions and events concretise the dimensions of individual perceptions. Fundamentally then, this study hopes to enhance our understanding of the questions researched, and does not in any way explicate or measure causal relationships.

The questions that are addressed in this study primarily focus on the adult learner and learning. This stance has been found to be in tandem with a perspective that has long dominated research and practice in the adult learning arena. Adult educators have in this context stress both the 'need' and 'experiences' of adult learners as being paramount; both from a research and pragmatic point of view (Caffarella and Merriam, 2000, 66). Justification for this viewpoint is emphatically linked to the notion, that although we tend to measure success in terms of individual motivations and accomplishments, this perspective is incomplete, *"as it does not take into consideration other influences that affect learning in adulthood "* (Caffarella and Merriam, 2000, 66).

THE RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The Research Problem

The research problem in this study has been formulated in relation to the learner, the question of success and distance education. The learner then is seen at the apex of this study, and Salmon (1980) in this context, has addressed the need to take into account and recognise the personal and social contexts of the learner; or of the tacit knowledge that learners bring to the educational threshold. As such, the research problem is seen specifically in the following contexts:

- The research problem in the context of the learner;
- The research problem in the context of success;
- The research problem in the context of distance education

The Aims of the Study

The general aim of this study is to report research in the field of distance education undertaken in Malaysia, and investigate the perspectives of adult of adult distance learners. It is with the intention of reaching illuminative understanding rather than establishing causal explanations that the aims of the study have been formulated as follows:

- to adopt a student-centred perspective and to develop a detailed understanding of some aspects of the experiences of a number of participants, who are either in the process of completing their diplomas as distance learners or who have already completed it on the last three years;

- to investigate how and in what ways is success achieved in the context of their personal and learning experience?

PROJECT DETAILS

In order to research these questions, the research project focused on the experience of a small number of distance learners from Universiti Teknologi Mara. Two groups of 34 students in total formed the basis of study, which was carried out over a period of about one and a half years. The first group of 9 students comprised those who were in the final semester of their studies and the second group comprised of 25 students who had already completed their diplomas in the past three years (prior to this study).

The first group of 9 students in their final semester comprised of 4 men and 5 women in their final semester. They were interviewed twice, that is, once at the end of their final semester and again about a year after they had graduated. This was to determine whether there were significant changes in their responses between the first and the second interview. The rationale for this was to gather sufficient information on whether time and a change in circumstances (if any) affected their perception of the questions researched. The second group of 25 students who had already graduated was also interviewed and their views were compared with those of the first group. Unlike the first group of students who were interviewed over two time periods, this group was only interviewed once.

The reason for interviewing students during their last semester, and more specifically at a period close to their exams, was because of the commonly held belief that success is related to the completion of a programme. Based on this premise, it was hypothetically conjectured that by virtue of being able to reach the last semester, there was already an inherent element of persistence. This was also the reason to interview the second group of students who had already graduated. Furthermore, in terms of the concept of socialization and 'border crossing' enough time was given to ensure that the students had been acclimatized to the new learning environment and their identification with the new setting and the corresponding acquisition of cultural knowledg. Furthermore, since research has shown that the highest rate of student attrition occurs in the first year of enrolment (Roberts, 1984), it was prudent to focus on students who were near completion or who had already graduated.

The students whose experiences are documented are enrolled in UiTM's distance learning programme mainly in the Perlis campus and the Shah Alam campus. 5 students who had already graduated from the Shah Alam campus were interviewed as well. The choice of a second site for the interviews was tied to the need for variability. The Shah Alam campus in many ways represented a location that is more urban where the students are a little different from those in the northern states. The selection of students who had already graduated was influenced by pragmatic considerations based on geographic location and proximity.

The choice of a case study approach (Yin, 1984), with a small sample of students, was rooted in the need to study the experience of each individual in detail and in depth, by using interviews, rather than resorting to a survey

of a large sample. As such, there was no need for statistical representation. Care and pragmatic considerations however were exercised in the selection of the participants, in order to ensure that some variability was addressed. The distance learning office supplied the names of all students who had graduated and those in the final semester.

In the case of the students who had already graduated, it depended on our ability to contact them, as some of them had moved, changed jobs, got married and left the state. The students interviewed, were more than willing to talk to us, so the question of willingness to participate in this research was never really an issue. The distribution of the 'sample' in terms of social determinants, such as age, occupation or earlier training was therefore, left purely to chance.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY: A CRITICAL SOCIAL ASSESSMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education, which constitutes the context of this study, can no longer be viewed as a mere offshoot of mainstream education. In fact it necessitates a fresh approach, which like the Trojan horse, has brought back into the educational institution the necessity of reviewing the issues about whom we should be providing it for, to what purpose and by what means (Thorpe, 1987).

This rightfully then brings us to the question of 'access' for all individuals in our society, *"who for whatever reasons have been denied encouragement to consider learning opportunities"* (Danarajan, 1999, 1). In assessing the question of whether this is a realism in the Malaysian context, Roy (2002) says that it is necessary to review access in the context of the Malaysian educational system, *"where private, individual agendas have very often to succumb to other considerations; infra-structural, political, financial or personal."*

The approach adopted here views distance education through the lens of critical social science - a stance very much at the heart of this research. Essentially, it begs to view distance education at variance with the spectrum of conventional mainstream education; which most unquestionably has for long been the norm. In its incursion into the invincible stronghold of mainstream education, it has in many quarters been looked upon as a surrogate, very much in the tradition of the 'Other' that feminist theory so ardently invokes.

Attempts to define distance learning in the past have in many instances been a rather disappointing endeavour, mainly because it is *'a phenomenon of diverse manifestations'* (Holmberg, 1980; 1985; Keegan, 1986; Peters, 1989). Furthermore, the fact that many terms used in the context of distance education appear to convey the same meaning as distance education, yet are significantly different, has further compounded the problem. This therefore appears to have added a quotient of confusion,

especially as terms such as correspondence education, home study, independent study, external studies, continuing education, distance teaching, adult education, learner-centred education, open learning, open access, flexible learning, distributed learning and lifelong learning, are used synonymously with distance education.

It is in this context that Keegan's (1986, 49) definition of distance education has in recent years been widely quoted. His list of defining characteristics is nevertheless indicative of the variants of the established norm in education, and incorporates basic features and assumptions in relation to the traditional models. This definition is interpreted here to further elucidate the variance referred to above:

- There is a quasi-permanent separation of the teacher and the learner during the course of the learning process. This essentially highlights the difference between this learning mode and the traditional face-to-face mode of instruction.
- The influence of an educational organization that provides the necessary infrastructure for the planning, organization and the orchestration of the student support system, so vital to the self-study approach that distance learners adopt.
- The use of technology and the technical media; computer, video, audio and print, to put the teacher at the disposal of the learner; thereby taking the 'distance away' from the learning scene.
- The provision of a two-way mode of communication between the teacher and the student. This feature distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education.
- The quasi-permanent absence of a peer group during the course of the learning process. Teaching primarily focuses on the individual learner and not groups of students, as is the case in normal conventional teaching. Occasional meetings with face-to-face interactions take place for didactic and socialization purposes (Keegan, 1986, 49).

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH STRATEGY

The research design and methodology for this study are based on theoretical assumptions of a critical qualitative framework. It was found that a mix of qualitative methodologies best served the needs of this research. It is in response to this, that critical theory as a paradigm; permeates the research design. Its two-pronged approach combines elements of grounded theory and phenomenology, which, together with The Critical Incidents Technique establish the methodology for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

This approach ensures that this research does not fall into the traps of non-theorised or inadequately contextualised approaches that qualitative research of this nature may easily fall into. Qualitative research offers the opportunity to focus on finding answers to questions centred on social experience; how it is created, and how it gives meaning to human life

(Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This conforms to the critical theorist's perspective because *'reality is shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values'* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 109). Critical theory as a paradigm has been described by Habermas (1971), as a way to develop knowledge that is free, undistorted and unconstrained. The justification for adopting a critical approach in this research lies upon the major consideration that the "voices" of the participants will be heard.

Phenomenology is a science that seeks to describe phenomena, or the appearance of things, as *'lived experience'*. As phenomenological inquiry delves into the realm of perceptions of human experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), it has been found to be an ideal methodology for this study. In term of this research this is especially so as it focuses on adult and distant learners' perception of the phenomena of *success*. Furthermore, interpretive frameworks that conform to the phenomenological tradition are used to establish relationships and meanings that knowledge and context have for each other (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The rationale for using grounded theory in addition to phenomenology, lies on the fact that although the phenomenological approach helped in the task of identifying the *essences,* that this research seeks to understand, it did not help to determine emergent theory. Thus, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin; 1990, 1997) was incorporated into the research design. The analytical procedures of grounded theory essentially reconfirms the themes or essences that emerge from phenomenological interpretation, as well as pave the way for an emergent theoretical structure to develop. The essences that emerge from phenomenological interpretation, basically equip the researcher's rationalisation for the development of 'concepts' and 'categories' in grounded theory. A synergestic relationship thus exists between both the theories.

Furthermore, the Critical Incidents Technique (Flanagan, 1954) used in this study can be interpreted as emanating and being very much an offshoot of grounded theory. Even though The Critical Incident Technique is an independent research tool, the method of data collection and analysis adhered to the rules of grounded theory. This Technique in fact endorses and strengthens the base of grounded theory. In interfacing phenomenology and hermeneutics with grounded theory, we've endorsed a multifaceted approach to the research strategy employed, as it fulfills the needs of data and methods triangulation.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Understanding the Profile of Students

A total of 34 students participated in this research. 20 were men, constituting 58.8% of the participants, while 14 were women, comprising of 41.2% of the total number of participants. Of this number, 22, or 64.7% of the participants were those who had already graduated, while 12, or 35.3%, were still in the process of the completion of their diplomas. Of the 22

students who had already graduated, 8 were women and 114 were men. Of the 12 students who had not graduated, 6 were women and 6 were men. As stated earlier, easy access to the students and time considerations influenced the choice and the number of students selected.

The analysis and discussion of certain salient aspects of the profiles of the participants help in our understanding of socio-cultural considerations related to ethnicity, race, religion, family backgrounds and gender considerations. Student profiles are also examined to facilitate an understanding of certain cultural issues, in order to demonstrate the extent to which an element of embeddedness exists in the cultural milieu. Pseudonyms have been adopted in reporting some of the comments of the students.

UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENCES RELATED TO SUCCESS

Recent research in distance education has shown that student achievement can be influenced by a number of factors, and different researchers have viewed this from varied perspectives (Moore and Kearsley, 1996, 159-164). Based on the analysis and interpretation of the data in this study, 3 broad categories related to personality, learning strategies and socio-cultural factors emerged.

Personality Factors

The personality factors, which were perceived by the participants to have significantly influenced their success, were determination, hard work, discipline, self-confidence, and ambition. In ranking these personality factors in the order of the responses received it was seen that determination, hard work, discipline, and self-confidence constituted nearly 90 % of total responses received. A more critical analysis of these personality traits shows that 'ability'- a stable causal factor in attribution theory- was not mentioned at all by the 34 participants, in any of the 46 interviews carried out.

	Personality Factors Categories	Responses Number	Responses Percentage (%)
1.	**Determination**	20	39.2
2	**Hard Work (Effort)**	14	27.5
3	**Discipline**	10	19.6
4	**Self-Confidence**	5	9.8
5	**Ambition**	2	3.9
	TOTAL	**51**	**100**

The Ranking of Personality Factors
(Table 1)

Determination

As seen in Table 1 above, 39.2 % or 20 of the 51 responses, related *'determination'* as the most important factor for success. Viewed in the context of completion, students here used the Bahasa Malaysia term *'semangat'* as an approximation of the term 'determination' to express their self-belief related to it. Its meaning is not straightforward and as perceived by the learners, has a variety of interpretations, such as *spirit, zeal, drive, ability to be strong, to have enough energy, to have the will to succeed and not give up and to be committed to a cause'*. Ideally it means that students think that to succeed, *'semangat'* is the driving force for determination and the need to be resolute.

Hard Work (Effort)

Hard work or effort was the second most important personality factor perceived by the learners and as seen from the Table above, 14 of the 51 responses, constituting 27.5 % of total responses accounted for this. To be hard working was seen in relation to a number of specific issues. Generally it meant that students had to find the actual time to study and complete assignments; to study consistently; and to find a lengthy period of time before exams. Some of them even equated hard work to a 'struggle'.

Discipline

Table 1 also shows that 10 of the 51 responses, corresponding to 19.6% of total responses described *'discipline'* as the key factor for success. Ilmiah Shafie, Zulina Zahari and Mizan Bahari spoke of it as *'self-discipline,'* while the others referred to it as some form of time-management.

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is described as *'semangat diri'* or possessing a strong spirit, as understood in Bahasa Malaysia. Here 5 of the responses, representing 9.8 % of total responses identified self-confidence, as an important criterion for success.

Some students also referred to self-confidence as being *'tabah'* or strong, in Bahasa Malaysia. Astapura Razak and Zamri Zakaria believe that this imparts the meaning of being brave in addition to being strong. Hisham Murad, a graduating student explained that without *'semangat diri'* or self-confidence it is not possible to succeed. He narrated the incident of his brother's failure and his father's subsequent demise as being the spur to his *'semangat diri'*. To him self-confidence means 'self-reliance'.

Ambition

Ambition was rated as the least most important personality factor, corresponding to 3.9% of the total responses. The 2 responses received however provided an interesting insight into this personality trait.

Patrina Daud insisted that it was not enough to be hardworking or intelligent, but that one has to be ambitious as well. Roslan Yahya's ambition petered on the verge of proving to himself that he was better than the others. *" I want to do something that the others cannot do. I can beat any of them,"* he said almost abashedly. This may not be 'vaulting ambition' in the Shakespearean sense, but is akin to an indomitable sense of pride, where the need to excel slices at the human spirit, in its search for achievement.

Learning Strategies

Success finally is dependent on the learner's perception of it and the subjective thought processes, in the context of theoretical principles postulated in these areas. These learning strategies, which are critical to our understanding of how success is negotiated and achieved, are discussed from three different perspectives, as perceived by the students in this study.

The first perspective is from that of *'The Practical Learner'* who primarily seeks completion. *'The Self-Directed Learner'* on the other hand wants more than just completion, and seeks satisfaction. Finally, *'The Pedantic Learner'* who aims for performance, seeks excellence. The discussion of the learning strategies employed by the distance learners in this study, most interestingly conforms to a system of categorization that draws a parallel to Biggs (1978, 1979) research, which also distinguishes three dimensions of study processes, closely similar to the categories that emerged in this study.

Socio- Cultural Factors

Although this study has concentrated on the individual learner, the research findings show that there is an interactive relationship between the conditions of learning and the society in which it takes place. Only recently has attention been given to the societal context involved in the provision of learning opportunities for adults (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, 72). It is in this context that influences related to employment, family and friends, and the concept of change emerged as important factors in this study.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA: DISCUSSION OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS

An Overview of the Critical Incidents Reported

A total of 49 critical incidents were reported by 17 of the participants. This represents a success rate of 50 percent, as there were 34 participants in this

study. In very general terms this represents 2.9 incidents per participant who responded positively to the incidents. An analysis of the incidents shows that 9 critical incidents representing 18.4 % of all incidents were reported on the 'Reasons for Participation,' while 40 critical incidents representing 81.6 % of all incidents, were reported on the 'Factors for Success'.

Critical Incidents Related to the Achievement of Success

10 different categories emerged as related to reasons for success. Interestingly, 10 critical incidents related to 'Negative or Belittling Comments' seemed to have topped all categories, with the largest number of critical incidents reported. Overall this accounted for 25 % of all critical incidents reported. Close to its heels were critical incidents that were associated with the role and importance of the teacher. Here 9 critical incidents, accounted for 22.5 % of all critical incidents. Apart from these two categories it appears that the role of friends and family support are also important categories as motivating factors for success. 5 critical incidents each were reported for these two categories accounting for 12.5% respectively of all incidents reported. The only personality factor that appeared was that of determination with 4 critical incidents reported. This constituted 10 % of all critical incidents reported. Incidents related to learning techniques and strategies focused on group study and study skills. Here, 2 incidents each were reported, representing 5 % of all incidents. Only 1 incident each was reported for private tuition, time management, and managing change, constituting 2.5 % each of the total number of incidents reported.

No	Factors for Success	Incidents Reported	Percentage
	Categories	Number	%
1	Negative and Belittling Comments	10	25.0 %
2	The Role and Importance of the Teacher	9	22.5 %
3	The Role of Friends	5	12.5 %
4	Family Support	5	12.5 %
5	Determination	4	10.0 %
6	Group Study	2	5.0 %
7	Study Skills	2	5.0 %
8	Private Tuition	1	2.5 %
9	Time Management	1	2.5%
10	Managing Change	1	2.5%
	TOTAL	40	100%

Categories of Critical Incidents Related to Success Factors
Table 2

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

In the effort to understand the phenomenon of success in this study, interpretive validity, seen from the perspective of 'analytic integrity' (Silverman, 2000, 289) is discussed in relation to appropriate methodologies such as phenomenology, grounded theory and the critical incident technique, which provided the basis for the systematic collection and analysis of data. In delving upon the question of the 'analytic realism,' therefore, this study has based its views on the social world as 'an interpreted world and not a literal world' (Altheide & Johnson, 1998, 284).

In according the women who participated in this study a rightful place, it is seen that their views in fact represent a firm 'voice' that wants to be heard. In order to do justice to women's issues in the learning context, the implications of the findings from the gender point of view, are discussed from the perspective of recent developments in feminist pedagogy and learning. As seen from the profile of the respondent, 14 women participated in this study, 8 of whom had already graduated, while 6 were in the process of completing their diplomas. In spite of the multiple roles that women play in society, it appears that the women in this study manifest the need for educational improvement for upward mobility, for career advancement and for fulfilling societal roles.

The main concepts that have emerged within the framework developed for this research conform to the paradigm that enhances our theoretical conceptualisation of it. It is in this context that the experiences, the stories and the critical incidents, resonate with our understanding of the dynamics of the innumerable ways in which success is achieved. It is in this sense then that the spiral thus remains open and ever expanding...!

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BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCHERS

Associate Professor Jayati Roy is attached to the Centre for Graduate Studies, UiTM Shah Alam. Her research interests include adult and distance education, open and lifelong learning, self-directed learning, E-learning, qualitative research methods, metacognition, Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and creative writing.

Professor Szarina Abdullah is Dean of the Centre for Graduate Studies, UiTM Shah Alam. Her research interests span a wide arena of areas that include information management, E-learning and self-directed learning, knowledge management, bibliometrics and scientometrics, and open and lifelong learning.