

*Mattering & Marginality: A Study Among Non-Traditional Learners at A Higher Learning Institution*

## **Mattering & Marginality: A Study Among Non-Traditional Learners at A Higher Learning Institution**

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### *Abstract:*

*The theory of Mattering and Marginality was first formulated in 1981 by Morris Rosenberg and Claire McCullough. It is a form of acceptance of an individual by other people. Mattering is divided into two and they are Interpersonal Mattering and Societal Mattering. Interpersonal Mattering is where a person feels that he or she matters to their siblings, spouse or parents and Societal Mattering refers to a community, learning institution, workplace and others. In this pilot study the Societal Mattering is the focus. This is because the study was carried out at a higher leaning institution. The two objectives of this study looked into Mattering and Marginality among non-traditional learners with regards to their perception towards their peers and faculty at their univeristy. A number of 30 non-traditional learners from a public university took part in this online survey. Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Postsecondary Education was adapted and used to measure the variables; peers and faculty. Interesting implications in the field of Education was found in this study specifically under the concept of Mattering.*

*Keywords: Mattering, Marginality, Non-traditional learners*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The theory of Mattering was coined by Rosenberg and McCullough in 1981 who defined mattering as a form of acceptance of an individual by other people. There are two types of mattering and they are interpersonal mattering and societal mattering (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981 as cited in France, 2011). Interpersonal mattering is where an individual matters to specific individuals like their siblings, parents and spouses. On the other hand, societal mattering would refer to mattering to a bigger societal entity or community such as learning institution, workplace, team or club.

Mattering is seen to have significance in learning institutions from primary to higher learning institutions. Elliott et al. (2004) stated that mattering is important to humans because it dictates human behaviour. France (2011) further added that if university students feel that they matter to their university, they will be motivated to behave in a certain way. However, when one does not feel so, he or she will feel marginalized and will behave differently. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to share the results discovered on Mattering among online non-traditional learners at a local public university.

## **STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

Understanding students' feeling of mattering is important at learning institutions. This is because some of the outcomes of the studies could help institutions to look into factors that lead to learners' academic success and better learning engagement in the learners (Hayter, 2015), reduce the number of attrition (Mullen, 2016), and to understand the underlying reasons on why the online traditional learners stay to finish their course of study (Tovar, 2013). Marginalization on the other hand, is the feeling that one does not matter and is insignificant to others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981 as cited in Schlossberg, 1989). Phillips (2001) pointed out that support network plays a crucial role in helping non-traditional learners to not feel marginalized at higher learning institutions. She further added that

some examples of support network would refer to professors, lecturers, and advisors. Hence, when one does not feel that he or she matters to his or her learning institution, it could lead to the feeling of marginalization, which then could lead to unfavourable outcomes.

## **OBJECTIVES**

Based on the statement of problem, the purpose of this paper is to shed light on a pilot study conducted on non-traditional learners' sense of Mattering at a public university as well as to look into the sense of Marginalization among these students with a specific focus on peers and the learner's faculty. The objectives of the study are as below.

1. To investigate non-traditional learners' feeling of mattering towards their peers
2. To investigate non-traditional learners' feeling of mattering towards their faculty

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Defining the Dimensions of Mattering**

The term Mattering was coined by Rosenberg and McCullough, consisted of 4 dimensions - awareness, importance, ego-extension and reliance. Awareness is the feeling where an individual requires the attention of another person. Importance on the other hand is described as other people's concern towards us : they care about our thoughts, doing and our future. In other words, we are seen as important in other people's eyes. Ego-extension is when other people share the same emotions as us. For instance if we feel proud and happy on our accomplishments, other people will also feel the same too. Lastly, reliance is where we see other people depending on us. It is where we matter to other people because they need us [Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981].

## **Mattering and Its Importance to Non-traditional Learners**

According to Pozdnyakov (2017), distance learning is defined as a form of education for adult learners who have priorities other than learning. Pappas (2020) further defined adult learners as learners who have to juggle between work, family responsibilities as well as set their own personal quality time. Hence, it can be inferred that these learners have a different learning schedules and learning platforms compared to their full-time counterparts. Since adult learners have to manage and organise a complex schedule and responsibilities, it is essential that their higher learning institutions offer sufficient assistance so that they feel that they matter to their learning institutions as it brings out a number of positive outcomes.

On the other hand, a number of setbacks could be seen among adult learners if they do not feel that they matter to their learning institutions. Brito and Rush (2013) highlighted that if adult learners do not feel that they matter to their learning institutions, there is a possibility that the number of attrition could rise. Other than that, adult learners need to feel that the sense of inclusion in their academic setting in order for them to be motivated to complete their courses.

## **Experience of Mattering with regards to Peers**

A number of related studies have looked into mattering with regards to peers. Schlossberg (1989) pointed that integrating mattering into students learning experience could foster a positive learning community for the students which then can improve students' personal growth and development.

Based on a study conducted by Klug (2008) on the phenomenon of mattering that accurately reflect students perceptions of mattering and also to better understand on students' actions, behaviours and practices at their higher learning institution, it was discovered that students felt that they matter when they are recognized by their peers. Other than that, students felt that they matter especially when they are seen as the go-to person when in need and when they are able to help their friends. This made them feel appreciated. In another study

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carried out by Hayter (2015), it was discovered that when students feels that they matter to their peers, it helped them to succeed in their course of study. Besides that, it also created lifelong friendships and community of learning. The feeling of mattering towards peers has also enhanced collaborative learning environment. Another study conducted by Spaid- Ross (2015) highlighted that when students have a positive experience with their peers, it encourages them to have a better relationship with others.

On the other hand, a number of studies have also mentioned on the feeling of marginality in higher learning institutions. It was noted in a study by Spaid –Ross (2015) that, although students do mention that they matter to their peers some didn't feel likewise. It was highlighted that age factor was one of the reasons on why some students were not invited to work together in projects.

### **Experience of Mattering with regards to Faculty**

A number of studies have looked into the aspect of mattering with regards to the faculty. In a study carried out by Klug (2008), based on the interviews conducted, it was found that students felt that they matter to their faculty when their instructors/ lecturers invited them to participate in academic conferences as well as to work on research projects. The respondents felt that they matter as they feel that they are part of an entity and that receiving feedback from their instructors/ lecturers showed a sign that they matter. In another study conducted by Hayter (2015), it was found that the respondents agreed that relationship between students and lecturers is important and extremely valuable for them. Furthermore, they felt that real learning takes place when one gains enough trust and respect from the main classroom figure. Besides that, some respondents mentioned that the bond that they developed with their lecturers strengthens over time.

### **Marginalization Among Non-traditional Learners**

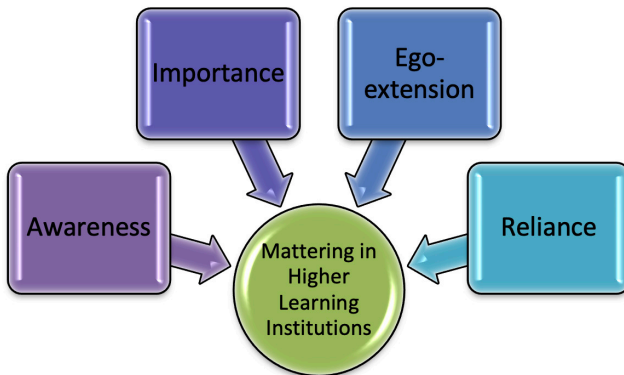
Marginalization has been linked to the success and failure of an individual's educational experience (Schlossberg, 1989). As described in the earlier sections, mattering deals with individual's perceptions

that they are important, significant and are of concern to others. Marginalization on the contrary is the feeling that one does not matter and is insignificant to others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1989).

Non traditional learners or adult learners can be characterized as those who are independent and engage in self-directed learning, have some life experiences like work-related knowledge, family responsibilities and previous education. Hence, based on the characteristics and barriers that are mentioned with regards to adult learners, it is the responsibility of the staff at higher learning institutions regardless of whether they are academic or non-academic staff, to take into consideration on the aspects that make these learners feel marginalized.

According to Phillips (2001), a support network plays a crucial role in helping non-traditional learners to not feel marginalized at higher learning institutions. She further added that some examples of support network would refer to professors, lecturers, co-workers and advisors. On the other hand, the teaching and learning require learners to have a sense of familiarity in order for them to retrieve assignments, read materials prepared by their course lecturers and communicate with their lecturers (Phillips, 2001).

### **Underpinning Framework of the Study by Rosenberg and McCullough 1981**



## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used the quantitative method for data collection. Creswell (2009) highlighted that quantitative survey design is useful when a researcher wants to learn more about a population. Creswell (2009) stated that using quantitative survey design allows for a numeric explanation of trends, opinions and attitudes.

A number of 30 online adult learners took part in this pilot study. The 30 respondents came from a public university. The simple random sampling was applied in this study. Data were collected by using online survey. The survey instrument was adapted from The Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Higher Education by Nancy Schlossberg, Ann D. Lasalle and Rennie R. Golec. The survey consisted of three different sections. Section A focused on the respondents Demographic Profile and contained three items. Section B of the survey looked into Mattering under the aspect of the Peers and Section C on Faculty. Each aspect consisted nine and eight items respectively.

Under Section A, respondents were required to tick in the appropriate boxes based on their personal details. The items asked were on gender, faculty and the semester that they were currently enrolled in. Section B and C of the survey required the respondents to choose an appropriate answer based on the items given that best reflect their feelings at the university. The respondents provided their responses in Sections B and C using the following Likert-type scale; Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4) and Strongly Agree (5). The 8 items under Section B looked into the respondents feeling of mattering towards their relationship with their peers. Under Section C, the items include the respondents relationship with their faculty specifically with their class lecturers.

Data collection method was done via Whatsapp. Respondents were given a link, which led them to the survey. Once a sufficient number of responses had been received, the data were then analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### PART A: Demographic Profile

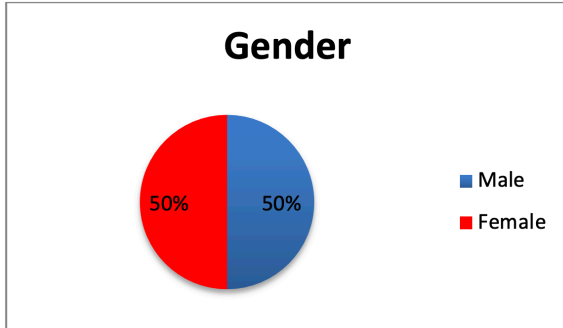


Figure 1

Figure 1 above shows the percentage of respondents in this study. Both genders showed an equal amount of 50%.

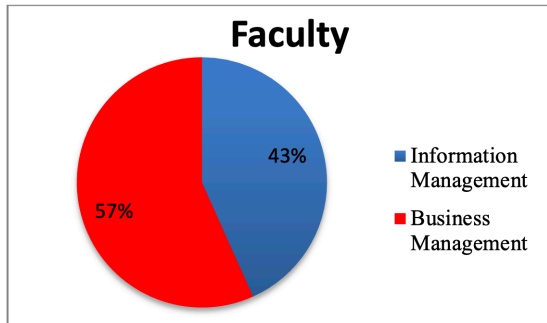


Figure 2

The bar chart above shows the programme that the respondents were enrolled in. Based on the bar chart above 43.3% were from the Information Management Faculty and the remaining (56.7%) were from the Faculty of Business Management.



## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1:

To investigate non-traditional learners feeling of mattering towards their peers

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I get support from my classmates when I need it.	4.33	.711
2. I sometimes feel alone and isolated at the university.	2.67	1.241
3. The classroom atmosphere encourages me to speak out in class.	3.87	.973
4. I feel my classmates react positively to my experience and knowledge.	4.03	.809
5. I feel like I fit in my classes.	4.17	.592
6. I have a good relationship with all my classmates regardless of age.	4.17	.874
7. My classmates would help me to catch up to the new technologies if I needed it.	4.40	.621
8. Fellow students don't seem to listen to me when I share my life experiences.	2.33	1.124

**Table 1**

Table 1 addresses the first research objective which is to look into the non-traditional learners feeling of mattering towards their peers. Based on the findings above, it could be seen that most of the respondents have a good relationship with their peers (mean score = 4.03-4.40). They are seen to be getting support from their classmates even when they are not familiar with new technologies. Besides that, the respondents also agreed that they receive a positive experience in their classroom. Other than that, it could be seen that the respondents disagreed with the statements on feeling of isolation at the university and having peers who do not listen to them (items 2 and 8). As for item 3, although the mean score is 3.87, it is leaning closer towards the next scale, which is in agreement. Hence, it could be said here that the non-traditional learners do not feel marginalized in their classroom as they seem to have a positive relationship.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2:

	Mean	Std. Deviation
9. Sometimes my questions seem to put lecturers on the defensive.	3.00	.910
10. My lecturers interpret assertiveness (having confidence or not easily frightened) as a challenge to their authority.	3.40	.932
11. My lecturers seem to recognise the younger students but not me.	2.27	1.048
12. Sometimes I feel out of date in the classroom.	2.73	1.143
13. My experience -based comments are accepted by my lecturers.	3.73	.691
14. Some of the jokes that my lecturers tell make me feel uncomfortable.	2.27	1.285
15. My lecturers sometimes ignore my comments or questions.	1.93	1.015
16. I sometimes feel that my lecturers want me to hurry up and finish speaking.	2.13	1.106

Table 2

Based on Table 2, it could be seen that there have been mixed reactions from the respondents. Items 9,10 and 13 (mean score 3.00 – 3.73) showed that respondents are being neutral. Therefore, a further study could be suggested to look into this in order to understand their response on the three statements. On the contrary, it is shown that respondents felt that they are seen in the classroom and not out dated (item 11,12,15 and 16). In addition, respondents felt that their lecturers respect them and do not make jokes that make them feel uncomfortable.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this pilot study, it could be concluded that respondents felt that they matter to their peers as well as lecturers although some provided ‘neutral’ as their response. Hence, it is important to look into the items in order to understand the non-traditional learners better. Looking into non-traditional learners’ feeling of mattering could help educators as well as the learning institution in providing them a positive learning experience as well as avoid them from feeling marginalized.

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