Self-Directed Adult Learners and the Paradox of Choice

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Structure of the Presentation

1. Problem
2. Key Concepts
   1. Adult Learners and Motivation
   2. Freedom to Choose
   3. Paradox of Choice
3. Empirical Study
   1. Study Design
   2. Results
4. Conclusions
1. PROBLEM
Adult Learners and Motivation

• It is common knowledge that we all learn best when we are motivated.
• But what motivates adult learners?
• There is no single right answer because we have our individual differences.

However, many scholars believe that adult learners typically have a deep need to be self-directing and the possibility to choose increases their motivation.
FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

ARE MORE CHOICES ALWAYS BETTER?
2. THE KEY CONCEPTS
DIFFICULT ROADS LEAD TO BEAUTIFUL DESTINATIONS.

REMEMBER WHY YOU STARTED.

BE PROUD OF HOW HARD YOU ARE WORKING.

2.1. LEARNING MOTIVATION
Adult Learners and Motivation 1/2

• All educational institutions try to find out what motivate their students and sustain them in the learning process.
• Scholars have defined motivation in numerous ways.
• In the context of learning, it has been seen for example as purposeful engagement in study, to master concepts or skills or simply to be moved into action.
• Even though adult learners’ motivations and needs vary; earlier studies suggest that they typically want to be in control of their educational paths and they appreciate the ability to choose.
• To fulfill this need many higher education institutions offer a large number of optional courses to their adult students.
Adult Learners and Motivation 2/2

• Scholars also suggest that
  – The individual learning possibilities are extremely important in motivating adults to learn and the importance of autonomous.
  – Self-determined motivational factors increases with higher age.
  – Adults have more experience in participation in decision-making and expect the same during their education.
  – Adult learning should be based on students’ individual needs and experiences and it should focus on real life situations and goals.
2.2. FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

Unsplash
Photos for everyone
Importance of Choice

• Most of us believe that the more choices we have, the better.
• Freedom to choose allows individuals to pursue the kind of lives they value the most.
• Many scholars suggest that alternatives promote innovation, economic development and social progress.

American writer Madeleine L’Engle: “It is the ability to choose which makes us human.”
2.3. PARADOX OF CHOICE

Unsplash
Photos for everyone
Paradox of Choice by Barry Schwartz

• Although the alternatives and possibility to choose mean commonly welfare and freedom, too many options can be even harmful to our psychological and emotional well-being.

• The available number of options affects evaluation and rises the complexity of decision-making process.

• As a result, people tend to simplify their decision-making processes or do not make the decisions at all.
When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing?

Sheena S. Iyengar
Columbia University

Mark R. Lepper
Stanford University

TWO SELECTIONS OF JAMS IN A SUPERMARKET

EXTENSIVE SELECTION
(24 FLAVOURS)
More interest
Less sales

LIMITED SELECTION
(6 FLAVOURS)
Less interest
More sales
3. STUDY
Research Hypothesis

• In Finland, all post-graduate degree programs have both compulsory and optional courses and students have to enroll on each course separately.
• Students cannot choose compulsory courses unlike the optional ones.
• The currently accepted premise in adult education is that freedom to choose increases students’ motivation and promotes their progress of studies.
• However, in this study the following alternative research hypothesis ($H_a$) is tested:

The possibility to choose study modules from a large number of alternatives to fulfill adult learners' personal needs does not increase students’ commitment to studies or promote their study progress
Study design

- In the study the postgraduate students’ study success was analyzed (passing or failing courses)
- Students’ course selections as well as the number of passed and failed courses after their first academic year were retrieved from the official study registry of the university of applied science.
- Sample: 273 students starting their postgraduate studies
  - All of them had at least three years of work experience after gaining their bachelor’s degree.
Results - Students’ Perspective

- During their first academic year, all students (N=273) together passed 1603 course out of 2971 enrolled ones.
- The passing ratios (number of passed courses divided by number of enrolled courses) for compulsory and optional courses were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Passing ratio</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory courses</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional courses</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The lower passing ratio (significant at p < .01) for optional courses do not suggest that ability to choose increase students commitment to studies or promote their study progress.
Results – HEIs Perspective

- The progress of studies and graduation are not important only to the students but also to the educational institutions.
- This is emphasized in Finland, where higher education institutions (HEIs) are not allowed to charge any tuition fees for the students coming from any EU/EEA country.
- Instead, the Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences are funded by the government and the funding is heavily based on the number of the degrees attained at the university.
- Therefore, the Finnish Higher Educational Institutions pay special interest on efficient flow of studies, timely graduation as well as efficient allocation of scarce resources to the different educational actions.
Labor Costs for Compulsory and Optional Courses

• The labor cost for organizing a course in the UAS in question can be calculated as follows (both compulsory and optional modules):

\[ \text{Labor cost} = 110 \text{ h} \times \text{Teacher’s hourly wage with employer contributions} \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labor cost (€)</th>
<th>Average number of passing students</th>
<th>Cost per student (€)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory course</td>
<td>5 000 *</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional course</td>
<td>5 000 *</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• The average labor cost for every optional course passed by one student is 74 per cent higher compared to the mandatory courses.

* Rounded average (see the next slide)
Salaries of the Faculty Members

- In the Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences the salaries of the faculty members are based on collective labor agreements (equal pay).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Technology (€/month)</th>
<th>Other fields (€/month)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Starting salary</td>
<td>4 870</td>
<td>3 962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 5 years</td>
<td>5 188</td>
<td>4 277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 10 years</td>
<td>5 545</td>
<td>4 760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 15 years</td>
<td>6 043</td>
<td>5 343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 20 years</td>
<td>6 357</td>
<td>5 621</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- And according to the collective labor agreements the annual amount of work is 1600 hours.
Conclusions 1/2

• The statistically significant findings of the empirical experiment reported suggest that in formal adult education the more options is not always better.

• In the UAS in question, freedom to choose optional modules from the large pool of alternatives did not promote adult learners’ study progress.

• The graduate students were far more likely to pass the mandatory courses than the courses that they have freely selected from the long list of optional courses.

• All courses have an equal importance because all of them are five credit point courses and thus have an equal weight in the Grade Point Average (GPA) calculation.
Conclusions 2/2

• The findings of the study have also a direct effect on the business of the educational institutions.
• This holds true at least in the cases when the organization’s income is directly connected to some measurable outputs like an annual number of attained degrees.
• In the new competitive environment, all HEIs must allocate their limited resources more efficiently and effectively.
• The findings of the study pointed out that in the UAS in question, the labor cost to get one student to pass an optional course was 74 per cent higher compared to mandatory one.
• Although, the labor costs are only one of the many factors in the management of a HEI this kind of cost difference cannot be totally forgotten.
Finally

- It is too early to reject the null hypothesis that the freedom of choice promotes adult learners’ commitment and study progress in general.

- First, people differ in their choice making orientation and they have different decision-making approaches and preferences. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all adult learners and HEIs.

- Second, self-directed learning takes place both in formal and informal contexts. Informal education has different motivational factors than formal learning. Studies on informal education have clearly pointed out the importance of choice to the learners.
Tunne huominen - All for the future.