

# **Learners' Expectations of an Adult Education Program**

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# Learners' Expectations of an Adult Education Program

## *Abstract*

*The extent to which curricula meets learners' needs concerns students and teachers alike. In higher education needs assessments may be undertaken as part of instructional design prior to program development, during program evaluation for program redevelopment or at course start up. This study reports the results of a needs assessment of new intake learners in an adult educator development program. The findings reveal a learning profile for the majority of learners consistent with Knowles (1975) conception of the self-directed learner. However, a portion of the participants indicated they prefer teacher-directed style of learning. The results have implications for enabling learners' problem-solving and critical thinking as program outcomes.*

## **Introduction**

This paper presents the expectations of learners as they enter an adult educator development program from data gathered from a needs assessment. In doing so it discusses needs assessment and argues for inclusion of learner input in the instructional design of a course or program. Patricia enrolled in an adult educator development program to gain teacher training for her position as an instructor in an interior design program at a community college. Jake enrolled in the same program to prepare for a career change from a computer supply salesman to the training field. Each learner invested time, finances and responsibilities to attain new learning. They expected the curriculum would improve their careers by enriching their knowledge, skills and attitudes as an adult educator. Imagine the feelings of disappointment that might arise if Patricia and Jake feel they aren't learning the knowledge and skills to help them in their jobs as adult educators. How can academic programs meet learner needs and expectations?

The Adult Education program at Brock University consists of five core courses delivered by facilitators in classroom and online format. The program draws a mix of learners that bring varied expectations, academic backgrounds, life experiences, knowledge, skills, and attitudes. As adults in mid career they differ from the typical full time university undergraduate student seeking their first degree. This dissimilarity pertains to learners' expectations for program content, process, outcomes. The unique requirements for the adult educator may be overlooked through assumptions about their characteristics, resources, needs, capabilities and expectations. This purpose of this study was to obtain learner input for curriculum design by developing a learner profile related to learner preferences for self-direction and inquiry, learner backgrounds pertaining to computer use and essay writing experience, and their expectations for practice teaching. Factors influencing enrollment in the program and demographic data was also collected.

## **Needs Assessment**

One common way to incorporate learners' expectations in the instructional design of a course or program is to conduct a needs assessment. As one of the first steps in the analysis phase of several instructional design models (Dick and Carey, 1990; Morrison, Ross and Kemp, 1994; Smith and Regan, 1999) a needs assessment occurs before program development, during academic program reviews, and during redevelopment to monitor alignment between curriculum with learner needs. A needs assessment refers to the process of collecting learners' perspectives (views and opinions) on their need (expectations) of a program. It assesses

consumer need. It is a direct process that may employ a variety of methods such as focus groups, telephone interviews, print or internet surveys. The surveys of this nature often take the form of closed-ended, open-ended questions or a combination of the two accompanied by questions about the background, capabilities, characteristics and needs of learners.

Needs assessments are common in industry training and community based programming. In the post secondary environment assessment of learner needs may be undertaken by a central research services department under the umbrella of institutional research or locally within departments. Educational programs within faculties or schools have been traditionally less likely to involve learners in curriculum planning, drawing instead upon the guidance of the literature, field experts, and faculty. According to Stufflebeen, McCormick, Brinkerhoff, and Nelson (1985) there has been debate about the definition, purpose, validity and methods of learning needs assessment in academic settings. Ho (2007) discovered that conducting a needs analysis is the weakest part of the instructional design of university faculty.

The common elements in many instructional design models consist of analysis, design, development and implementation. This generic process is often referred to as the ADDI model. This four phase sequence of instructional or curriculum development begins with assessment by identifying the boundaries of the domain that a program or course will contain and the concepts within that domain as identified through the literature by faculty or instructional designers. Needs assessment of learners is more frequently conducted in preparation for new program start up rather than during program redevelopment or as an ongoing quality control measure. It is also common for academic reviews to assess the needs of potential employers of graduates and to a lesser extent assesses the satisfaction of graduates of the program. In some situations a mix of graduates and industry representatives are invited to participate in a focus group and/or survey. Decisions as to the format used for a needs assessment vary and are influenced by financial limitations, practical realities and institutional practices.

A needs assessment is a form of inquiry that represents the critical thinking of program designers to inquire broadly and deeply into learning situations. It is a logical process that like a scientific model uses reasoning to investigate a problem situation. The scientific model begins by loosely defining a problem situation then moves to assess the conditions surrounding the problem before developing a hypothesis for the cause of the problem or to create solutions to the problem. In curriculum development, the problem to be solved is, "What is the curriculum design, content, process, and activities suitable for this group of learners, context or topic?"

Ironically, although the adult educator's development is the *raison d'être* for an adult educator program, adult learners may not be consulted in program design. If included at all they may be given token representation on planning committees where they may be viewed as sub status stakeholders in shaping curriculum.

### **Risks and Benefits**

There are several risks and benefits in assessing learner expectations for learners and program developers.

#### *Learners*

Asking learners' for their needs and expectations for the curriculum of an adult educator development program brings risks and benefits. Being asked for an opinion can act as a powerful motivational device, stimulus to reflective thinking, self-ownership, direction and management of learning. As a cognitive learning strategy being asked to reflect on what one needs in a program can kick start an inquiry process. When a needs assessment occurs as learners begin their program it paves the way for the use of inquiry as a learning strategy throughout the program. In order to respond to questions of this sort the learner must assess what they know, what they need to know and how they can learn it best - key metacognitive behaviors.

As an affective learning strategy being asked for opinions on curriculum conveys respect and confidence in the capabilities of the learner to manage their learning. In this way, it stimulates feelings of empowerment, shared decision-making, collaboration and a sense of contributing to the building of a learning community. It sets the stage for a positive learning climate, which according to Rogers (1994) is key to student-centred learning.

The risks to learners are that their feedback and needs won't be incorporated into program design leaving learners to feel that their contribution carries little weight and isn't valued. This kind of interpretation may have negatively impact motivation and learning. On the other hand, some learners may feel there is a risk in taking ownership for their learning. This is especially the case when learners view the teacher as expert not only in content but also in diagnosing learner capabilities and needs.

### *Programs Developers*

Adult education programs and courses may be developed by faculty members or a team of individuals including faculty, instructional designers, and others. Course writing teams often consist of an instructional designer along with one or more faculty members who act as content experts. In the development of online learning and distance education materials larger teams include the content expert(s), instructional designer, editor, graphic designer, desktop publisher and technical specialist.

Many course/program developers consider it crucial to obtain the views of learners prior to program design, during program redevelopment and throughout program delivery. Developers with this perspective use needs assessments to validate the content, the learning processes or intended outcomes of a program. In this way, the needs assessment serves as a measurement instrument that builds in validity and academic rigor. Sometimes program developers wish to build a program around a specific epistemology or set of educational philosophies that include a learner-centred approach. Assessing learner needs provides a stepping stone in this philosophy. It not only acknowledges the rights of learners to be involved in curriculum design, but also provides an indicator of how highly learner input is valued. Although many adult education programs describe their curriculum as learner-centred, the extent to which learner needs are woven into the fabric of curriculum development is unclear.

The use of a needs assessment can identify gaps in program planning. A comparison of what learners expect to what program developers have on the drafting board illuminates differences as well as similarities. This comparative analysis as mentioned earlier represents the developer's use of inquiry. The critical examination runs the risk of surfacing discrepancies between what is planned and what is needed to make the program valid in the eyes of the consumer.

A needs assessment can identify learner priorities and the importance of particular aspects of curriculum. Again, a comparison of learners' priorities with program developers' priorities can shed light on any misalignments between the two. This analysis runs the risk of forcing developers to a decision point at which they must reevaluate the importance of their program priorities and make a choice between meeting, exceeding or subordinating learning priorities. The findings of the Intake Survey 2006 indicated that most respondents preferred to determine their own learning goals (81%) and to direct their own learning by planning their learning resources and activities (58 %) rather than having the facilitator direct their learning. This data supports the incorporation of self-directed learning opportunities throughout the program as a priority.

The identification of learner expectations and priorities can expose new opportunities for changes in the instructional design of a program. For example, the Intake Survey 2006 of Brock University's Adult Education program found that the majority (83.0%) of the respondents indicated that they enjoyed analyzing problem situations. When learners' problem-solve they engage in an inquiry process that builds critical thinking skills, one of the goals of the program.

Learner enjoyment of problem analysis coincides with facilitators' suggestions for case-based learning activities throughout the program.

Many facilitators consider it beneficial to the success of their role to have the learner primed by the needs assessment. In this way, the learner has considered their learning needs prior to their learning experiences. The facilitator can build on the foundation established by the needs assessment to scaffold learning towards metacognition and automatic engagement in an inquiry process.

The risks to developers of the needs assessment are numerous. Both focus groups and surveys present risks. In focus groups the selection of the participants can skew the data. Every effort should be made to sample a range of learners. Too often these groups are comprised of the "good" learners. When a survey is developed there is the risk of validity, that the questions may not measure the objectives of the survey. Developing a valid and reliable survey instrument takes knowledge of instrument design and time.

The identification of learner needs before program design allows flexibility in program planning. Once courses are established there is often little room for modification. Although facilitators at the start of a semester may ask participants to develop personal learning goals and outcomes for the course, the content, learning activities and assessments have often already been firmly established. Program planning stakeholders may not wish to alter the curriculum based on learner (user) data or may feel it is risky to allow learner participation in program planning, especially where a program's learner-centred philosophy is embryonic.

### **Methodology**

To assess the needs of new learners enrolling in the adult educator development program a needs assessment survey was developed. A survey method represents quantitative research. The survey contained questions about factors influencing learners' enrolment, how they learned about the program, learner characteristics, experience with technology and with writing essays, the importance of practice teaching, their future academic plans and demographic questions. Open ended section for comments was also included.

In development of the survey content was draw on feedback previously gathered from course evaluations, an exit survey and graduate survey of the program. Content validity was also established through a review of the survey by staff in the Centre for Adult Education and Community Outreach. Participants were asked to respond to the questions using 5 point Likert-type scales. Three of the dimensions measured in the survey used scale options ranging from "not at all important" to "very important." One dimension used a scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" and two questions used a scale ranging from "very inexperienced" to "very experienced."

All 130 new learners enrolled in ADED4F04 in the Fall 2006 semester were mailed a letter of invitation to participate in the study, the survey questionnaire, and an addressed self-stamped return envelope during their fifth week in the course.

### **Data analysis and results**

Of the 130 questionnaires mailed to new ADED 4F04 learners, 47 or 36 % returned completed questionnaires. Survey data was compiled using SPSS for simple descriptive statistics. Demographics reveal that the majority, (83%) were female and 40% were between 36 and 45 yrs. Over half (53.2%) of the students indicated they were enrolled in the program as their first degree. In terms of employment sector, the results of this sample as shown in Table 1 show that community college teachers form 21.3% the employment field whereas the majority (31.9 %) of the respondents indicated that they are employed in an area other than teaching or training. The remaining 25% of the sample are volunteers, work for a non profit organization,

unemployed, retired or other. A little less than one third of the respondents worked in non teaching areas while approximately the same percentage (21 %) worked as teachers or trainers and one quarter worked as volunteers, were unemployed or were retired.

Table 1 Employment areas

Top three employment areas	Percentage
Employed in an area other than teaching or training	31.9
Corporate training and development	21.3
Teach at a community college/university	21.3
Other (volunteer, unemployed, retired, other)	25.5

As shown in Table 2, Factors affecting enrollment decisions, respondents indicated that the most important factors influencing their decision to enroll in the program was an interest in course/workshop planning, a desire to learn about teaching adults, career enhancement, developing facilitation skills, and developing skills in creating learning resources, activities and materials. When it comes to program specific factors, respondents indicated that the top five factors were geographical proximity to their home, institution specialization, online delivery format, best transfer credits and reputation. In terms of learning about the program, respondents indicated that informal word-of-mouth recommendations about the program from a friend or newspaper advertising was twice as likely to influence their them than was the ADED website.

Table 2: Factors affecting enrollment decisions

	N	Mean
interest in course/workshop planning	47	4.81
desire to learn about teaching adults	47	4.51
career enhancement	47	4.36
developing facilitation skills	46	4.30
developing skills in creating learning resources, activities & materials	47	4.19
learning about educational leadership	47	4.15
pursuit of an undergraduate degree	45	3.71
employment requirement	46	3.07

The top five program factors affecting enrollment decisions were based upon the location of program close to home (3.61%, only institution with program (3.73%), online delivery (3.68%), best transfer credits (3.61%) and reputation (3.51%). The top three sources in which participants learnt about the program were from a friend of colleague (29.8%), newspaper advertisement (25.5%) and from the ADED website (12.8%)

In terms of learner characteristics, as illustrated in Table 3, respondents indicated that the top five characteristics that characterize them as learners are: a need to learn, continual

self-evaluation, dialogue, choosing learning strategies appropriate to learning style and enjoying analysis of problem situations. Approximately three-quarters of the respondents (73%) considered themselves either experienced or very experienced in using computers as a learning tool whereas almost half of the respondents (44.7%) indicated that they are inexperienced or very inexperienced in academic writing.

Table 3 Learner Characteristics

Top five learner characteristics	Strongly agree and agree (%)
I have a need to learn	87.9
I continually evaluate my own performance and make adjustments in order to optimize learning	83.0
I consider dialoguing with my classmates as an important learning activity	83.0
I choose learning strategies appropriate to my learning style	83.0
I enjoy analyzing problem situations	83.0

In response to interest in practicum opportunities, 72.3% of the learners thought was either important or very important to have the opportunity to practice teach as part of their courses. In terms of their continuing education 68.1% of the learners indicated they will seek additional education and 34.1% indicated they plan to pursue graduate study.

As illustrated in Table 4, the majority of new learners hold learning preferences consistent with the profile of the typical adult learner with the top five preferences indicated by more than 83 % of the group being a strong need to learn, enjoying analyzing problem situations, choosing their learning own strategies, and dialogue with classmates. Nonetheless, approximately one fifth (19%) prefer to have the facilitator determine their learning goals and a sizable group (42%) prefer the facilitator to determine their learning outcomes, resources and activities.

### Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the study presents eight strategic curriculum recommendations designed to further enhance programs' ability to meet learner needs.

1. Publicize the program's reputation and specialization in recruiting efforts
2. Sustain and promote the program accessibility
3. Offer guidance on developing learning goals, outcomes, activities and resources where required to accommodate a range of learner self-direction characteristics
4. Provide opportunities for learners to self-select course readings and resources rather than assigning all readings
5. Provide opportunities for learners to build problem-solving and critical thinking skills through the use of case studies
6. Continue efforts to enhance computer and critical literacy especially in the foundation course ADED 4F04
7. Adjust practicum experiences for learners employed in non teaching positions
8. Involve learners in program design through systematic needs assessments

Table 4: New entrants learning preferences

Statement	Percentage
Need to learn	87.9
Enjoy analyzing problem situations	83.0
Like choosing my learning strategies	83.0
Dialogue with classmates is important	83.0
Continually evaluate my learning	83.0
Collaborative learning enhances my learning	80.9
Like to assess my learning needs	80.0
Enjoy selecting my learning resources	76.5
Prefer to select learning activities that suit my learning needs	74.4
Practice teaching is important to my learning	72.3
Able to diagnose my learning needs	72.3
Manage time well	68.1
Prefer facilitator to direct my learning by planning my learning resources and activities	42.5
Prefer to have facilitator determine my learning goals	19.1

### Discussion

The results of this research study provide baseline data on the perspectives of new learners as they enter an adult educator development program that informs a learner profile useful for program planning. Consistent with informal observations, the typical learner entering the adult education program is female, ranging in age between the mid thirties to mid forties, who has learned about the program by word of mouth, enrolled in the program due to geographical proximity and features such as program specialization, Brock transfer credits, online learning and reputation. The majority of the new learners are working in non teaching environments and completing the adult education program as a first degree.

The results of the study are significant in a number of areas. In terms of learners' prior teaching background, this study sample indicates that the community college instructor group constitutes less than one quarter of learners. Whereas when the program was originally established the majority of the learners were from the community college sector. Classes now consist of individuals from a mix of employment areas with less than half currently working in teaching or training. This finding has implications for curriculum design and facilitation that suggest a re-examination of assumptions about learners' prior knowledge of the role of the teacher and limitations on practice teaching opportunities. Recently, learners in non teaching positions have expressed difficulties and frustration with learning activities designed for application in a teaching or training settings or in locating practicum experiences. This finding raises the possibility that within any class the majority of learners may be unable to locate out-of-class practicum experiences.

Data regarding prior formal education was somewhat surprising. It appears that half of the learners take the program as their first degree. This means that most classes will have a mix of learners with varying academic skills in writing and computer literacy. Some learners will have undergraduate degree preparation while others will not. This finding is consistent with the data indicating that half of the students are inexperienced in academic writing. These results have implications for facilitator support as well as learner development in academic writing. Although most facilitators expect a range of writing skill levels in any class, knowing that basic essay writing may be a new topic for half of the class allows facilitators to anticipate learner difficulties and prepare to engage learners in foundational writing activities. The finding has implications too for curriculum redevelopment of the foundational course in the program and learner support services. Learners weak in critical literacy and academic writing often benefit from tutorials. Recently, the adult education program in conjunction with the student development centre offered a three hour workshop on essay writing skills. The event was a huge success attracting learners from across Ontario at all stages in their program. Continued liaison with the student development centre for the provision of future workshops appears indicated.

The learning preferences profile of the new learner emerging from this study is consistent with the typical adult learner described by Knowles (1975). The majority of the learners indicate they are interested in self-directing their learning, enjoy inquiry, use cognitive learning strategies, continually evaluate their own learning, and self-assess their learning needs. These learners are well suited to a learner-directed curriculum. However, approximately one fifth (20%) of new learners prefer the facilitator to determine their learning goals and approximately 40% wish the facilitator to direct their learning by planning learning resources and activities. This group of learners' holds expectations consistent with a teacher-directed model. These findings suggest that course designs may wish to include resource and learning choices. In addition to suggested readings, provision appears warranted for enabling learners who wish to self-select readings or other media that are meaningful to them.

One of the core goals of higher education in general is to develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The data in this study show that adult educators welcome the opportunity to learn by analyzing problem situations. This suggests the inclusion of case studies throughout the program as an appropriate learning strategy in course design.

This study demonstrated a learner-centred approach by reaching out to learners for input on curriculum planning. Participants indicated that a learner-centred design that provides opportunities for self-direction in learning is preferred. Future application of the survey is warranted to monitor learner trends in a systematic fashion, provide data for facilitator support, and to maintain a curriculum responsive to learners' needs, capabilities and expectations.

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