

Biography, Transition and Learning: TVET Skills Development among Adults

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Abstract

Adult learners often faced challenges in participating in lifelong learning activities due to multiple personal and professional commitments. This study examined the factors influencing their active participation in short courses at Hulu Langat Community College. Eight participants were interviewed using the Biographical Method, which enabled them to narrate life stories and connect personal experiences to learning engagement. The interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word and analyzed manually through thematic analysis, cross-checked against the research questions. The findings indicated that work-related identity strongly shaped participation, with three categories emerging: unemployed participants who pursued vocational skills to manage transitions into unemployment, full-time employees who enhanced career-relevant skills to remain competitive in their professions, and retirees who remained active to contribute meaningfully to family and community life. Across these categories, participants experienced similar transitions, challenges, and coping strategies, while three overarching themes were identified which are coping with life transition, continuous professional development, and togetherness with family and community. The study highlighted the importance of tailoring lifelong learning programs to diverse work-related identities, suggesting that institutions should design flexible, context-sensitive courses that supported adults in transitions, career growth and community engagement.

Keywords: Adults; Biography; Interviews; Lifelong Learning; Life Transitions.

1.0 Introduction

In general, the definition of lifelong learning emphasises on two main aspects: self-development to cope with continuous change and a societal purpose including democratising education (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021; Field, 2001). Furthermore, Scholars have highlighted that lifelong learning is context-dependent, as the needs and priorities of individuals and societies vary across countries, regions, and local settings (Bagnall, 2001; Muhammad et.al, 2004; Osborne & Borkowska, 2017).

Studies on adult participation in learning at the individual level also reveal the importance of the government's role in determining the level of lifelong learning participation (Ng, 2010; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; and Boeren et al., 2012). For example, Ng (2010) conducted a qualitative study of adults in Singapore. The findings from the study revealed that the government plays an important role in influencing adult participation in learning. These adults report that their involvement is largely due to government subsidies.

In Malaysian context, Muhamad and colleagues define adult education as 'all

forms of learning activities provided by various institutions in Malaysia to adult learners above the age of 17' (2004: 5). This study focuses on the participation of learning activities by adults which are courses in the form of vocational skills implemented at community colleges. This is in line with the Blueprint of Enculturation Lifelong Learning in Malaysia (2011-2020) which states the role of community colleges as the lifelong learning hub of the local community. Md Salleh and Rahmad (2021) examined the role of lifelong learning in community colleges and found that cultural factors, particularly gender roles and the preference for collaborative learning, significantly influenced participation in lifelong learning programmes among Malaysians. This study explores lifelong learning participation through the lens of life transitions. The findings suggest that individuals are more likely to engage in learning activities when responding to changes in their personal, social, and professional circumstances.

2.0 Literature Review

The findings of this literature review focus on the factors that influence adult participation in learning.

2.1 Life transition as a stimulus factor in adult participation in learning

Drastic changes in life nowadays affect aspects of a person's life, especially adults (Ingram et al., 2009; Field, 2015a). Giddens (2005) asserts that habits and routines are no longer relevant guidelines nowadays. Bauman in the same opinion explains that every routine or social institution, every relationship and practice, is uncertain and open to change; there is no fixed point on the social compass today (Bauman, 2005 quoted in Ingram et al., 2009: 2). This statement describes the transition or transition of life drastically applies to all. This situation has concerned the attention of many researchers, covering many issues of change including technology, education, careers, and identity. For example, in the past an individual worked for a long period of time in an organization, however, nowadays an individual frequently changes careers and short time in an organisation (Ingram et al., 2009; Boeren, 2016). Therefore, nowadays life transitions are inevitable, and an individual needs to be ready to face these changes.

Research in adult transitions focuses on understanding the problematic situations that lead to transitions and exploring individual responses to those problems. For this reason, scholars have found that transitions can be investigated in three main concepts: identity, agency, and structure (Ecclestone, 2009; Biesta et al., 2011). Transitions in identity involve modifying individual habits and carrying through social interaction. On the other hand, transition in agency refers to the ability to control one's life (Biesta et al., 2011: 6). Finally, transitions in structure focus on the normative rules, cultures, settings, and expectations involved in understanding individual change. The combination of findings from these three concepts helps to clarify the context of life transition in policy discourse and practice (Ecclestone, 2009: 126).

Scholars of education have demonstrated that life transitions or their triggering factors can be a direct contributing factor in adult participation in lifelong learning (Ahammad, 2023; Field, 2012; Ingram et al., 2009; Withnall, 2006; Ng, 2010). For example, Biesta and colleagues suggest that adults participate in learning as 'individuals react to events in their lives, often to gain control over aspects of their lives' (2011:6). Other scholars use the term 'trigger factors' to describe life transitions or turning points that contribute to adult participation in learning programs (Ng, 2010; Ecclestone, 2007; Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Merrill, 2004). Participation in learning activities helps adults to cope with the transitions in their lives. While life transitions stimulate adults to engage in learning, socio-cultural factors influence their decision to learn.

2.2 Sociocultural values shape the orientation of adults towards learning

Existing studies show that sociocultural values influence adults' orientation towards learning (Lee, 2014; Merriam and Mohamad, 2000; Merriam and Kim, 2008). The main concept of sociocultural focuses on the values, beliefs, and meanings shared among group members, distinguishing them from others (Merriam and Mohamad, 2000; Hofstede et al., 2010). Fry defines culture as something that 'shapes the way people earn a living, the social unit in which they live and work and the meaning they give to their lives' (1990: 129); Abdullah as 'a group of behavioural patterns related to thoughts, manners and actions that have been shared, learned and passed on by members of society to the next generation' (1996: 2). Based on this definition, culture can be thought of as being built by previous generations, practiced continuously, reproduced and adapted by new generations and forming the identity of a group. Therefore, an understanding of cultural values is important to explain the participation and experience of adults in learning (Ng, 2008; Field, 2004). A study by Merriam and Kim (2008) revealed three themes of learning orientation in eastern societies. First, learning is communal, which means there is a sense of interdependence in engagement in learning. This theme can directly be linked to the value of collectivism, where individual learning must benefit or contribute to the social well-being of others. Second, learning is lifelong and informal. Learning is structured by community problems and issues; Therefore, the learning atmosphere is community-based and informal. Third, learning is holistic. Learning and education include developing a good individual character, and a spiritual person rather than solely knowledge development.

This study explores the biographies of adult participation to identify the factors that influence their active involvement in learning activities

3.0 Methodology

The study was conducted in 2016 at the Hulu Langat Community College which showed a highest participation of participants in the short courses programme between 2013-2015. The college is located in the town of Kajang. The population in Kajang consists of a wide variety of occupations in various

sectors. The majority of the population is employed in the service sector (business, education, and public administration) at 65%, while in manufacturing sector is 27% and other sectors as 8%, shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographics of study participants*

| Pseudonym | Age | Marital Status | Ethnicity | Educational Background | Work-related Identity | Number of courses attended | Category |
|-----------|-----|----------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Ruby | 41 | Married | Malay | Master | Quitting as a university lecturer | 37 | Unemployed |
| Sree | 43 | Married | Indian | SPM | Quitting as clerk in a factory | 19 | |
| Fatima | 38 | Married | Malay | Diploma | Quitting a teacher at school | 42 | |
| Zetty | 27 | Single | Malay | Certificate | Clerk | 17 | Full-time employment |
| Virtual | 29 | Single | Malay | Master | Tutor in University | 64 | |
| Eva | 61 | Single | Indian | Certificate | Retiree | 31 | Retiree |
| Jane | 58 | Married | Malay | SPM | Retiree | 25 | |
| Hanny | 50 | Married | Malay | SRP | Retiree | 23 | |

3.1 Biographical method

Many studies in education and understanding of adults have used biographical methods (Fang et al., 2023; Gouthro, 2014; Crossan et al., 2003). These studies suggest that the analysis of individual biographies helps to shed light on the complex interactions between various domains of public and private life. In line with that, Alheit asserts that 'learning can only be understood concretely in relation to the biography of the student' (2009: 116). Therefore, the biographical method is appropriate to current research as it allows adult learners to reflect on their 'agent orientation' especially in relation to participating in learning (Ecclestone, 2009). The stories can relate to the student's past experiences, current life situations as well as future plans. Additionally, their life stories reflect the influence of cultural and socio-economic factors on the time and context in which they occurred. In the context of this study, biographical interviews were conducted with eight adult students who actively participated in a short course program organised by a community college. This method allows adult learners to reflect on their current situation based on their previous experiences and envision their

future. The scope of the interview includes their decision to participate in the learning, the learning experience regarding the short course program, and their plans for the future.

3.2 Data analysis methods

The interview data that has been transcribed was analysed by developing code. Coding is an important step in developing thematic analysis (Saldana, 2016). Saldana explains the purpose of the code as 'representing and capturing the main content and essence of the datum' (2009:4). Rubin and Rubin (2012) propose several techniques on which the development of coding is based: research questions, published literature, repetitive words or responses evoked by the interviewee.

After completing building the code, the data is categorised into several findings and analysed. The analysis of this category resulted in thematic findings based on the biographical stories of the study participants. For example, all three participants from the unemployed group expressed that their perception of the TVET skills had changed. Although the message is conveyed in different ways, however, the story is in the same theme of "changing perceptions of TVET skills".

4.0 Results and Discussion

Based on the demographics of the participants in Table 1, the demographic of these active participants, for example, different academic qualifications. There were three participants who only had SPM and below. This can illustrate that academic background is not the main measure in determining the active participation of adult participants in the context of learning activities, especially in the context of this TVET.

Participants were divided into three categories according to their career identities, namely unemployed (three participants), full-time employment (two participants) and retirees (three participants).

4.1 Unemployed participants

4.1.1 Ruby

At the time of the interview session, Ruby had quit her job for ten months. He chose to withdraw from doctoral studies for unavoidable reasons and resigned as a lecturer. Ruby believes there is a better destiny for her and chooses to adjust to the life transition in a positive way. She plans to expand the family business that she manages with her husband. They have consultation company that provide training in soft skills, such as public speaking, motivation, and career counseling. Ruby wants to expand sewing skills training services in her company:

After resigning as a lecturer with whom I had served for 17 years, I did research on how to build a career in sewing. Why sew? The first reason is that I like it. I started cutting sewing material when I was five years old. The second reason... I guess... is the influence of the family. Maybe God guided me to do what I liked. [...] To achieve this, I need to have a certificate confirming my expertise in sewing.

Ruby's narrative explains that her decision to participate in a sewing course was triggered by her unemployment and her childhood interest in sewing. To adequate her skills, she enrolled in various sewing courses at community colleges. Ruby acknowledged challenges and discomforts she confronted in facing the transition from a professional career to a new career as a tailor. Despite holding a master's degree, she admits that her academic qualifications do not make her any better than her peers. She needs to start anew. She is in control of her life and is able to move beyond academia to envision a different future in sewing. At the time of the interview, she was preparing to obtain a Level 3 Certificate in Sewing through the Prior Experiential Learning Accreditation (APEL) platform.

4.1.2 Sree

Sree encounter difficulty of not having a monthly income after choosing to quit the Voluntary Redundancy Scheme (VRS) offered by the factory. She has worked as a clerk for over 20 years at the factory. Sree's new role as an unemployed individual had changed her attitude towards sewing skills. In the past, her mother once suggested that she learn to sew; Sree was not interested because she could afford whatever clothes she wants. Now, however, Sree is a regular participant in the sewing course and has started making school uniforms, daily wear, and traditional attire for her family. Over the course of five months, she attended nineteen sewing short courses.

When I was working, I only bought whatever clothes I wanted because I had my own income. Now, I need to have new skills to help me to reduce household expenses. So, I learned how to sew, as a cost-saving measure.

At first, Sree wanted to learn to sew solely to meet her own needs. However, after participating in several short-term programs, she realised there were opportunities to generate some income.

I wanted to learn basic sewing skills, including sewing straight lines by using different materials. Some materials are thick, some can be stretched, and some are slippery. They must be handled in different ways. Therefore, I plan to attend a full-time sewing course that teaches a variety of skills, from basic to advanced.

The drive to earn additional income prompted Sree to venture into the sewing skills.

4.1.3 Fatima

Fatimah has been working as a teacher for eight years, however, the school's in a remote location that puts some pressure on her. Although Fatima had pleaded several times to move to a closer school, however, her appeal was unsuccessful. Thus, Fatimah decided to quit her job. She accepted the situation in a positive way. It is an opportunity for her to learn and acquire new skills in the vocational field. She admits that with her new skills of cooking and sewing, had helped her to take better care of her family. After participating in several short course programs, she realised the potential to

start a business with her newly acquired skills:

I plan to have my own sewing business, making school uniform and women's clothing. Nowadays, when any of family and friends know that I saw my own clothes, they start asking if I accept their orders.

Fatima emphasises that her peers play an important role in motivating her to use her skills. She realised that there was a demand for tailoring services in particular from her family and close contacts.

4.1.4 Coping with life transition

Overall, the unemployed participants were actively participating in learning activities as a way out to cope with this life transition. They quit their careers after serving for a long time due to structural factors that were beyond their control such as bureaucracy and redundancy. They took the initiative to fill the life transition by developing vocational skills, especially in sewing. They move from careers in academia and managerial to the new field of TVET. The sewing skills that they acquired were relevant to their current position as mothers which enable them to make clothes for themselves and children. This is one of the meaningful steps when it comes to saving on family expenses. Subsequently, these participants admitted that their perception on TVET skills had changed. In the past, they felt that this skill was less important because they had a career. But now, they admit that this skill has helped them a lot, which in turn opens up opportunities to generate income. The participants in this group aspire to start a business from home.

4.2 Full-time employment

4.2.1 Maya

With her academic qualification, Maya currently is a tutor at a local university. Maya was appointed to teach two undergraduate modules: lifelong learning and entrepreneurship. The responsibility requires Maya to build knowledge of vocational and entrepreneurial skills. She decided to enroll short courses programme in a community college to gain skills that were crucial in her new job.

What I learned here is relevant and relevant to my current needs. I was able to ask experienced educators about business issues; they also have their own businesses – for example, Cikgu Ani has a sewing business and Cikgu Iza has a catering business. Both of them understand the challenges, costs and profits in business.

Maya feels that her involvement in the short course program is beneficial in her new career. By attending this course, she builds strong social capital and is able to learn business-related issues from peers and teachers.

4.2.2 Zetty

Zetty is a clerk in an office. Before working permanently, Zetty had learned to sew during the period of unemployment. Thus, despite being employed, Zetty continued her passion. She admires the work of a well-known Malaysian fashion designer and looks forward to having the opportunity to work with the

designer. Zetty also hopes to have her own brand:

I plan to start sewing services. If I managed to receive many orders, I will quit my job. I don't like to stay at work for a long time. I prefer to be self-employed and have freedom in my work [...] I want to be a fashion designer with my own brand.

Zetty plans to get a certificate in the tailoring skills. However, there is limited institution that provide certified sewing courses training on a part-time basis. Thus, as an alternative she enrolls in sewing courses offered on weekend by community college.

4.2.3 Continuous professional development

Participants from the full-time employment reported that their motivation to learn was for a continuous professional development. Some of the participants in this group are educators who, in their jobs, teach vocational and entrepreneurial skills to the students. This is in line with the Malaysian Government's aspiration to encourage students to have an entrepreneurial mindset and encourage them as a job creator rather than looking for jobs with others. Therefore, these participants took the initiative to enroll in the short course program so that they could acquire the necessary vocational and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills to transfer the knowledge to their students.

4.3 Retirees

4.3.1 Eva

Eva has retired as an officer in a bank. She shared how participating in a cooking course strengthened her relationships with family members and neighbors:

Every time I cook the food menu that I learned in the short course, I share it with family and neighbours. They were so excited to taste my food. I'm proud when they love my cooking. I told them I learned to cook at community college. Sometimes when there is a family celebration or a neighbourhood event, they asked me to cook.

According to Eva, the cooking course improved her social network and inspired her plans to start a home-based food business. The skills she has acquired, reinforced by positive feedback from family and friends. This responses in turn strengthen Eva determination to start a small business.

4.3.2 Jane

Jane is a retired clerk at a local university. Jane has a positive attitude towards learning. She was active participating in learning programmes that organized by her workplace and other organisations. She seized every learning opportunity that involved her passion for cooking.

When I work previously, I always hope to join a community college short courses programme as regular as I want. However, I could only attend weekend courses. Now, I have more time to learn. I am focusing on cooking courses as I am excited to be able to prepare variety of cuisines

for my family and community.

Jane expressed her joy when she was able to prepare a variety of menus for families and occasions with the local community.

4.3.3 Hanny

At the time of the interview, Hanny was in his final year of military service and planned to start a home-based bakery business as soon as he retired. The Malaysian Army is offering a transitional training programme to retiring personnel to equip them with vocational skills for future careers. Although Hanny had applied for a cooking course, however, there were no vacancies. Thus, Hanny looked for an alternative place to study and found a community college short course program.

I want to continue to contribute to my family. I went to an interview for a culinary course in the Army's transitional training program. However, I failed to get a placement in the program. I'm disappointed... I had to do something to acquire cooking skills. Therefore I continue my studies here (at a community college).

Hanny has a definite learning goal: to start a home-based bakery business as a new career. Therefore, he chose to acquire culinary skills by investing some money in course fees.

4.3.4 Togetherness with family and community

Participants who have retired are encouraged to learn through a sense of community togetherness through possible contributions. These participants have retired from a variety of different occupational backgrounds; For example, some used to be clerks, military officers and bank employees. Eva and Hanny chose to develop vocational skills as a second career after retirement while Jane focused on serving her family and community more broadly. They ensure that they continue to be active with skill activities. These participants expressed how the various cooking skills that acquired have increased their togetherness and strengthened their relationships with family, friends and neighbours in particular and the community at large.

5.0 Conclusion

The triggering factors of life transition on unemployed and retired participants were significant changes in their lives. The transition of life prompted them to learn TVET skills to cope with their new identity. Many participants then start a home-based business using skills that they have acquired. The skills that they acquired had helped them build and develop a new identity as an entrepreneur. Although there were some participants who had high academic qualifications, they start over from scratch in TVET skills. The findings indicate that, for unemployed and retired participants, learning skills helps their career-related identity to restart and for working participants, learning helps their careers to move forward (Crossan et al., 2003: 65). Thus, the changes in their lives have strengthened their learning identity from tentative students to active and committed students.

In the context of learning through life, Hodkinson, et al. (2008b) build on the idea of Strauss (1962) by distinguishing two ways of life: routine and change. Routine is defined as a normal life without anything dramatic happening, while change is when something dramatic happens. Hodkinson, et al. (2008) developed this theory to illustrate the importance of trigger factors or dramatic things in a person's life. Findings from the study revealed that when participants talked about identity, it would be associated with their career-related identity whether it was routine or change. The findings emphasised that changes and needs in career aspects impact the active participation of adults in learning. Furthermore, the study also showed that involvement in learning activities helps adults to cope with transitions in career and life.

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Author Contributions

N.M. Salleh: The author planned and designed the study, collected and analysed the data, interpreted the results, and drafted the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this research. The manuscript is a part of author's doctoral research and is not under consideration by other journals.

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