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THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

BARRIERS TO ADULT LEARNING

being a Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF ARTS

in the University of Hull

by

MARIA SAMOUILIDI, B.A.

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To my parents.

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## ABSTRACT

Learning is a rather vague term, conveying different meanings, depending on the context in which it is used and on the perspectives from which it is looked at. Three main groups of theories (behavioural, cognitive and humanistic) have been developed to study the learning phenomenon. Adult learning is a distinct aspect of this phenomenon, having particular characteristics and principles.

The reasons that deter adult learning are various and act at two stages. Firstly, they prevent students from performing to their full capacities and secondly, they keep potential students away from courses. A short list of barriers to adult learning includes - among others, finance, lack of time, ageing, emotional barriers and lack of motivation.

Ageing is a natural process, bringing some physical, mental, psychological and other kinds of changes that influence negatively adult learning. What is of interest for this study is the way intelligence and memory respond to ageing, and the implications for learning. Moreover, other implications for learning derive from loss of speed, low self-concept and educational disadvantages due to age. Barriers like these are overcome by specially designed instruction and by encouragement.

Anxiety is a common emotional barrier to learning, causing a reaction of apprehension, when the individual's self-esteem is under threat. A learning situation provokes anxiety which generally speaking has a debilitating influence on performance. Such influence can be reduced

in a environment characterized by respect, interest and encouragement.

There is a strong causal relationship between motivation and learning. What motivates people to learn is the desire to reduce unmet needs and the desire for self-advancement. However, there are factors such as the teacher, the learning material, the learner's self-concept and his socio-cultural environment that reduce motivation. Teachers can prevent that by applying the principles of adult learning in their instruction.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, a greater than ever number of adults is engaged in education which is becoming both more accessible and necessary than it used to be. Recreational courses, vocational re-training, liberal education, professional seminars, literacy programmes, are a few examples of the institutionalized learning opportunities offered to adults. In return, the adult population, this highly heterogeneous clientele, makes use of the provision and dictates innovations to suit its needs. What are the problems that all these people are faced with? Moreover, what are the problems that keep a large number of adults away from learning? These issues are of major importance for everyone who is involved in any level of educational machinery, from policy making and finance, to teaching.

This study does not intend to offer a comprehensive review and analysis of all the inhibitory factors, since a project of such a magnitude would not be realized under the existing limitations of time and space. There is a more restricted area of interest which will be examined and handled with the appropriate feeling of responsibility, in the following five chapters.

Chapter 1 deals with an introductory discussion about the concept of learning, followed by the justification of the special reference made to adult learning. Chapter 2 outlines the main problems faced by adult learners and adult would-be learners. Three major problems are chosen from this chapter for closer examination.

Chapter 3 is focused on the effects of the process of ageing on cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of adult life, related to education. In Chapter 4 the sources of anxiety and its role in learning performance are considered, and finally Chapter 5 examines the issue of lack of motivation with particular reference to adult learning.

## CHAPTER 1

### WHAT IS LEARNING

#### *Introduction*

Before starting to consider the factors that deter adults from learning, some thought should first be given to the issue of learning itself. The concept is rather complicated and many writers on it concede that they are not in a position to provide a precise definition and that the knowledge held at the moment is in a primitive stage. Lovell does give a definition of learning which he regards as

a relatively permanent change in our potential for performance as the result of our past interaction with the environment.

It is important to pay attention to a couple of points in this definition. Firstly, there are changes in potential for performance due to biological maturation or ageing. For example, a child acquires at a given time the potential to use language, in which case the change does not result from an interaction with the environment but from a natural process with universal application. Hence, such cases are excluded from the definition. Secondly, the change does not need to be observable in behavioural terms. Learning does exist even if the change is hidden. A period of time may intervene before the

"potential manifests itself as overt behaviour" but the mere existence of changed potential is enough to justify talk about learning.<sup>1</sup>

Although Lovell's definition does give a sensible insight into some aspects of learning, it still fails to address the actual process, that is to say, it does not specify how somebody learns. To what it refers, is the final product of the process (ie change). It is very difficult to depict in a rigid and detailed way what goes on in the human mind while learning, to talk about what is called the chemistry of learning. It is much easier though to recognise that a certain behavioural change is a result of this, unexplored yet, process. Thus the result becomes a criterion for testifying that the process has taken place. Many writers consequently, would not regard statements like that of Lovell as a definition of learning but as a reference to the result-criterion of learning that allows us to recognise something which otherwise remains indescribable.<sup>2</sup>

At this point, it should be explained that when people refer to learning, they do so from three different angles. a) Some confine themselves to the actual process, b) others mean the educational opportunity and c) the last group refers to the product of the process, (eg Lovell).<sup>3</sup> Because of this diversity of views, drawing upon various bibliographical sources is not only difficult but also tricky, since each writer follows his perception, most of the times without creating an awareness.

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<sup>1</sup>LOVELL, R.B., Adult Learning, London, Croom Helm, 1980, pp. 30-31.

<sup>2</sup>TIGHT, M., (ed.), Adult Learning and Education, London & Canberra, Croom Helm, 1983, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>KNOWLES, M., The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species, Houston, Gulf Publishing Company, 1978(2nd ed.), p. 7.

A further divergence exists between the psychologists and the educators. The first are interested in any kind of learning that takes place in the "natural societal setting", throughout the life-span.<sup>4</sup> Everybody is involved in it and it may happen consciously as well as unconsciously, meaning that people do not plan for it and very often they do not realize its existence. It is characterized as incidental, unintended and involuntary.<sup>5</sup> The educators on the contrary, confine themselves only to that learning which occurs in a "formal instructional setting" and involves conscious and systematic efforts towards the achievement of set goals. "...learning in an educational context requires effort and planning".<sup>6</sup> It also concerns only those who take the decision to join the settings out of their desire to acquire some behavioural change. Therefore, a learning project becomes an effort to change as Tough puts it.<sup>7</sup>

Although a great deal of knowledge, skills and attitudes are acquired informally, through every day life, there still remains a number of needs to be served by formally organized opportunities. This is where the educators come into play, aiming at offering assistance for the fulfilment of specific learning needs. Of course, the psychological findings on learning are taken into account also in the educational world in order to improve understanding and

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<sup>4</sup>The terms "natural societal setting", and "formal instructional setting" (which follows in the text), are borrowed from BROOKFIELD, S., Adult Learners, Adult Education and the Community, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1983, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>ROGERS, A., Teaching Adults, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1986, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup>THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, Education For Adults, Block A, Milton Keynes, The Open University Press, 1984, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

practice, but the educators restrict their interests only to planned learning, simply because this is the area in which they can intervene. In the present work learning is treated according to the above educational perception.

### *Kinds of learning changes*

Whatever the approach employed, (psychological or educational), learning causes changes in various spheres of human behaviour which are referred to by Gagné as "varieties of learning capabilities". He identifies five such varieties, classified under the following headings.

a) Intellectual skills involve the use of symbols (letters, words, numbers) for interacting with the environment through oral language, writing and calculating.

b) The capability of stating ideas by speech, writing or even drawing, forms the second type of learning sphere and it is called verbal information.

c) The third type of skill refers to ways that individuals use to manage their own learning, remembering and thinking. There are different approaches that people learn first, and employ then, for example when dealing with problem solving or remembering unrelated names. These skills are called cognitive strategies.

d) People also learn how to execute movements such as throwing a ball or using a pair of scissors, acts referred to as motor skills.

e) States of mind that influence choices of action are acquired characteristics and there are referred to as attitudes. There are "tendencies" that differentiate individual preferences.<sup>8</sup>

### *Theories of learning*

In an effort to understand the nature of learning, many theories have been developed. For simplicity's sake, they can be divided into three groups, according to three main approaches: a) behavioural, b) cognitive and c) humanistic.<sup>9</sup>

#### a) behavioural theories

They originated from experiments on animals and define learning as a stimulus-response process during which the instructor brings about change and shapes the results by providing certain stimuli and accepting some of the learner's responses, the desirable ones, while rejecting others. The theories reflect animal learning and they are limited when applied to human beings. They describe some external parameters of the learning phenomenon but they fail to explain the very nature of it. In other words, the behavioural theories confine themselves to the superficial, perceived by the senses behavioural event and ignore deeper activities. Finally, they

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<sup>8</sup>GAGNE, R.M., The Conditions of Learning and Theory of Instruction, New York, Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1977(4th ed.), pp. 47-48.

<sup>9</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit, p. 45.

over-emphasize the role of the teacher-instructor who in reality is not always so actively involved as the behaviourists imply.<sup>10</sup>

Let us take for instance the case of a student who undergoes some learning by writing an essay. The stimulus according to the behavioural theories is given by the essay title and the response comes from the tutor in form of the mark and the comments. From the results, the student extracts his "lessons" and learns how to develop certain aspects of the essay-writing activity. However, learning does not stop here. Much more takes place while the student reads, thinks and writes the paper which the behavioural theories ignore.

#### b) cognitive theories

This group comes to fill the gap by focusing on some activities occurring in the learner's mind while creating the response, that is to say, the theories refer to patterns of organizing and processing given information.<sup>11</sup> The learner is recognised here to have a more active role than that appearing in behavioural theories because "in order to learn, understanding is necessary; the material must be marshalled step by step and then mastered"<sup>12</sup> and these are activities undertaken by the learner. However, even in the cognitive theories the individual is not a protagonist, for the process is

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 46-47.

<sup>11</sup>OSBORN, M. et al, Review of Existing Research in Adult and Continuing Education, Vol. XI, The psychology of adult learning and development, Leicester, NIACE, 1982, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit., p. 47.

controlled by the material that has to be mastered. Both teacher and learner are dominated by an external power which is the world of knowledge.

### c) humanistic theories

Finally, the humanistic theorists emphasize the learner whom they regard as the dominant figure in the learning process. Both teacher and material are left aside, carrying little importance because what actually matters are the person's actions, the steps towards discovering something meaningful, the efforts to "illuminate the dark area of ignorance" as Carl Rogers **puts** it. According to the same author, learning is a discovery, where both feelings and cognitive aspects of the learner are involved, as the individual comes across a new world of experience which expands the existing knowledge and satisfies the current curiosity. The external stimulus appearing in the previous theories is not denied by the humanistic ones but it is considered to be under the learner's control, since he is the one who initiates learning.<sup>13</sup>

Learning for the humanists is a situation in which man demonstrates great interest in uncovering the unknown around him. Yet, the question of what kind of activities happen within him is bypassed, for the theorists seem to be somehow absorbed in admiration of human drives that lead towards knowledge. The new, important

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<sup>13</sup>ROGERS, C.R., Freedom to Learn, Ohio, Merrill Publishing Company, 1969, pp. 3-5.

element that they suggest though, is the emphasis on the learner's role in bringing about change.

The above three approaches should be perceived as attempts to describe aspects of the learning phenomenon and a more complete view is probably taken by synthesizing them. It should also be borne in mind that learning is a comprehensive concept, from the point of view that there exist not just one but several types of learning (eg verbal information, problem solving etc). So each of the theories actually reflects certain facets of these types. What they all share is the recognition that learning is a cognitive activity and a continuous process of organizing existing material on the basis of new evidence.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Adult learning as a distinct type*

Thus far, learning has been treated generally, without discriminating between age groups and especially adults. However, terms such as "problems in adult learning", "characteristics of adult learning", "principles of adult learning" etc, very often appear in the educational literature. Even the title of this work makes a similar distinction. The question that has to be answered then, is whether there is a particular type of learning, characteristic of adults, or terms like the above carry little meaning. Moreover, if adult learning as a distinct type does exist, then what are the factors that make it special?

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<sup>14</sup>THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, Education for Adults, Block A, Item A3, Milton Keynes, The Open University Press, 1984, p. 2.

In searching for an answer, it is useful to employ the distinction between learning as process of change and as educational activity, and then to check for differences within these parameters, separately. Certain peculiar features are easily identifiable. It is often quoted for example that adults are free to choose their own direction within a variety of educational provision (autonomy of direction), or that they have a limited amount of time to spend on learning activities. Features like these derive from and concern an external socio-economic environment; they refer to the educational activity and not to the actual learning itself. Having identified differences at this stage, let us go further to find out whether adults master new material in a different way than children or adolescents do. The task requires, of course, psychological expertise but a few points can easily be mentioned within the educational understanding. Such examples are the use of experience as a learning resource, the difficulty to cope with  $\frac{\alpha}{n}$  fast learning pace and the ability of abstract thinking which varies between adulthood and earlier stages.<sup>15</sup> Characteristics like the above show that adults process the material that they have to learn in a different way than other age groups, hence it is not pointless to distinguish adult learning as a special type.

#### *Characteristics-principles of adult learning*

Some characteristics of adult learning have already been mentioned. Simpson has identified the autonomy of direction and the

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<sup>15</sup>JARVIS, P., Adult and Continuing Education: Theory and Practice, London, Croom Helm, 1983, p. 96.

use of personal experience as a resource.<sup>16</sup> So far as the autonomy of direction is concerned, the adult student is presented with a great variety of educational provision, ranging from academic programmes, through vocational courses, to recreational activities. The adult learner not only has the opportunity to make choices within such a broad scope, but also he is free to either participate, or not. In other words, the voluntary nature of learning allows the individuals to decide for themselves whether they want to learn or not and furthermore when and what they want.

On the other hand, adults are expected to bring their enormous experience to the learning situation. It is material accumulated throughout the years, and it can serve as foundation for building up new knowledge (provided that it is utilized), as  $\alpha_n$  learning facilitating factor, or even as a barrier. Moreover, it is due to the existence of a rich experience, serving as background, that adult learning groups are faced with a great heterogeneity, which is an additional characteristic of adult learning. Boud reported this in terms of mature students in Higher Education,<sup>17</sup> while Rogers presents it as a more general phenomenon.<sup>18</sup> So in an adult learning group both teacher and students have to cope with different cultural backgrounds, socio-economic statuses (although this tends to be more or less in common), or educational experiences, and needs have to be accommodated by sharing the same learning material and the same teaching method.

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<sup>16</sup>BROOKFIELD, S.D., Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning, Milton Keynes, Open University, 1986, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup>BOUD, D., "Facilitating learning in Continuing Education: some important sources", Studies in Higher Education, Vol. 11, No 3, 1986, p. 238.

<sup>18</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit. pp. 67-68.

Experience has also another role to play in adult learning. It permits the students to judge whether the learning material is relevant to their needs or not, and if not, the achievement becomes negatively affected, as adults believe in the immediate use of what they learn.<sup>19</sup> Children usually are not very much concerned about the relevance of what they are taught, first because they are not in a position to judge and then because they are supposed to accumulate knowledge for their future. But adults generally speaking, have neither the time nor the interest to prepare themselves for long-range needs. They participate in a learning situation in order to resolve current problems or to satisfy existing needs. Therefore, a student who joins a technical course to keep up with current technological advancement in his area of expertise, goes to it with quite clear expectations which if not met, result in threatening his achievement. Of course, all adult students do not have this degree of expectation awareness, neither do they pursue a course for fulfilling specific educational needs. However, when the adult students are conscious about their requirements, they expect to be presented with relevant material, otherwise the motivation declines.<sup>20</sup>

As it has been mentioned before, learning in the educational context happens consciously and it aims at bringing about change. In the case of adult learning the notion of intention is even more apparent than in children's. Knox observes that adults engage in

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<sup>19</sup>KNOX, A.B., Adult Development and Learning, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1977, pp. 408-411.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 411.

studying, out of their intent to modify performance.<sup>21</sup> They pursue their own desire to undergo some systematic learning, driven by the needs they perceive to have. Children on the other hand, participate because they have to, because some others (parents, teachers, society), believe that it is necessary. For them participation is not a matter of personal intention, but of imposed obligation.

Having established the special nature of adult learning and outlined some of its characteristics, we can move further, searching for generic principles. A number of well-known theorists<sup>22</sup> have shown interest in the issue and each of them has identified important conditions of adult learning, some of which are outlined below.

To start with, it has been reported that adults need adequate motivation to change their behaviour, together with awareness of the inadequacy of the present behaviour. Additionally, they should be given a clear picture of the expected results so as to know at what they are aiming and also regular feedback on their progress. Furthermore, adult students perform better when they are allowed to set their own learning pace and to practise the required behaviour. Finally, the importance of appropriate material, having meaningful relationship to the past experience and the need for reinforcement have been stressed.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 406.

<sup>22</sup>Gibb-1960-, Miller-1964-, Kidd-1973-, Knox-1977-, Brundage & Mackeracher-1980-, Darkenwald & Merriam-1982-. In BROOKFIELD, S.D., op cit, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup>BROOKFIELD, S.D., op cit, pp. 26-31.

Of course, as Brookfield admits, to specify principles of adult learning with general application is "an activity full of intellectual pitfalls", because of the great variety that exists in the adult population, starting from cultural through educational, to personal variables. Apart from the heterogeneity in the adult population that threatens the idea of identifying principles with general application, Brookfield also questions the sample used in the research on these principles. The sample is subject to criticism for it covers only a small non-representative part of the adult population (white, middle-class Americans), while very little is known about other class and ethnic groups.<sup>24</sup>

### *Summary*

Learning in the educational context is a rather vague term that embraces three different notions. a) a changed behaviour, resulting from a conscious effort, b) the inner process that the individuals undergo before the behavioural change and c) the educational activity and provision. Adult learning is a distinct type of learning and the particular reference to it is justified, since it has its own characteristics and follows special principles.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 26 and pp. 32-33.

## CHAPTER 2

### BARRIERS TO ADULT LEARNING

#### *Introduction*

Before attempting to unravel the issue of barriers to adult learning, it is necessary to establish the meaning of the term "barriers", as it will be employed throughout the text. Other words that appear in the literature to describe the same phenomena, are blocks, hindrances, blockages and obstacles. They all refer to those factors that prevent adult students from making effective use of educational provisions, either because of personal reasons or environmental ones. Terms such as "learning problems" and "learning difficulties" have also been linked to barriers to learning. These terms are more often related to education for people with special needs but this work will not deal with natural disabilities; it will actually concentrate on problems faced by ordinary adult students.

Rogers identifies some of the barriers to learning and classifies them under four major categories: age, situational barriers, physical environment and social environment.<sup>1</sup> They are all concerned with situations in which students cannot, for one reason or another, grasp

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<sup>1</sup>ROGERS, A., Teaching Adults in Extension, Norfolk, Education for Development, 1987, pp. 46-47.

an aspect of the subject under consideration, or even if they can, they still do not perform to their full capacities.

### *Age*

Age itself sets limits to the learning activities to which adults have access. Despite the efforts of many adult educators to prove that their students are still able to learn, a view which to a great extent is correct, it should not be disregarded that there exist learning situations in which older adults are not able to participate.

There is an inconclusive debate on the deterioration of mental abilities by virtue of age and the way this affects adult learning. But at this stage, there is no point getting involved in these arguments which will be dealt with in a later chapter. However, there are other undeniable changes brought about by age, mainly concerning the physical side, which have a rather clear effect on adults' ability to embark on certain kinds of learning. Thus, "skills which depend on a steady hand or a keen sense of balance or sharp eye-sight or nimble fingers...", are less accessible to older people.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the Belbins set age limits for learning certain jobs which require high speed and manual dexterity. For instance, the age of 32 is considered to be the maximum for high-speed assembly jobs. Similarly, the range of 25-30 years is the upper limit for learning to be a sewing machinist.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the magnitude of this group of

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup>BELBIN, E. & BELBIN, R.M., Problems in Adult Retraining, London, Heinemann, 1972, p. 39.

barriers is smaller than it is generally perceived to be, thus leaving enough room for adult participation in learning.<sup>4</sup>

### *Situational barriers*

Hunger, poor health and tiredness also disturb learning, for they prevent students from performing as well as they can.<sup>5</sup>

In an effort to assess learning ability accurately and to facilitate learning performance, the adult learner should be in an environment that minimizes the extent to which physical conditions and health interfere with learning.<sup>6</sup>

Learning blocks like these, (hunger, poor health and tiredness), very often apply to Third World societies and are rather easily identifiable though not so easily removable. This is not to suggest that Western learners are free from these situational obstacles. They may not have to face hunger but at least tiredness is very often present in adult classes, as a number of students join them after a busy day.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>KNOX, A.B., op cit, p. 410.

<sup>7</sup>The situational barriers include more factors than the above three.(See Table 1) However, here reference is made only to these particularly, following Rogers' typology.

Table 1 Perceived Barriers to Learning

| Barriers  | % Potential learners |
|---|----------------------|
| <i>Situational Barriers</i>                           |                      |
| Cost, including tuition, books, child care, and so on | 53                   |
| Not enough time                                       | 46                   |
| Home responsibilities                                 | 32                   |
| Job responsibilities                                  | 28                   |
| No child care   | 11                   |
| No transportation                                     | 8                    |
| No place to study or practice                         | 7                    |
| Friends or family don't like the idea                 | 3                    |
| <i>Institutional Barriers</i>                         |                      |
| Don't want to go to school full time                  | 35                   |
| Amount of time required to complete program           | 21                   |
| Courses aren't scheduled when I can attend            | 16                   |
| No information about offerings                        | 16                   |
| Strict attendance requirements                        | 15                   |
| Courses I want don't seem to be available             | 12                   |
| Too much red tape in getting enrolled                 | 10                   |
| Don't meet requirements to begin program              | 6                    |
| No way to get credit or a degree                      | 5                    |
| <i>Dispositional Barriers</i>                         |                      |
| Afraid that I am too old to begin                     | 17                   |
| Low grades in past, not confident of my ability       | 12                   |
| Not enough energy and stamina                         | 9                    |
| Don't enjoy studying                                  | 9                    |
| Tired of school, tired of classrooms                  | 6                    |
| Don't know what to learn or what it would lead to     | 5                    |
| Hesitate to seem to ambitious                         | 3                    |

Note: Potential learners are those who indicated a desire to learn but who are not currently engaged in organized instruction.

Source: Cross, P, Adults as Learners, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1988, p. 99.

### *Physical environment*

Although the physical environment is not considered to be as important as other personal and situational obstacles, it does play a role in learning. Inappropriate temperature or lighting, or bad ventilation make the learning conditions difficult.<sup>8</sup> Such situations require extra effort on the part of both teacher and students in order to overcome them, or alternatively, they decrease the performance.

It is common for adult classes to be accommodated in premises designed for and used by pupils. However, children's chairs and desks arranged in rows do not enable discussion groups, the most favourable teaching method for adults, to take place. For adult discussions the furnishing is usually arranged in a circle to facilitate interaction among the group members.

### *Social environment*

As far as the social environment is concerned, a classroom is something more than a place where a "cold" instructor interacts with students whose only concern is to gain new knowledge or skills. Very often, especially in adult education, reference is made to the social interaction taking place in the classroom and to the importance that carries for the learners. In certain cases, social interaction is among the first reasons that bring lonely adults to educational

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<sup>8</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit, p. 46.

experiences. There are students who participate not for the subject itself but for fulfilling rather their needs for socialization.<sup>9</sup>

Taking this fact into consideration, one can see how important the social environment is for students' involvement in adult education classes. A survey on dropouts revealed that a number of people abandon the course because they dislike other students.<sup>10</sup> Bad relationships between learners themselves, learners and teachers or teachers and learners hinder learning. Also, lack of participation of particular social groups (eg ethnic minorities and blue-collar workers), may be attributed partially to social reasons. Such groups may well feel that they do not "fit" in a white, middle-class environment.

### *Pre-existing knowledge<sup>11</sup>*

Apart from the above four categories of obstacles, (age, situational barriers, physical and social environment), pre-existing knowledge, skills and attitudes present another major problem in adult learning. Students go into the learning situation with a great amount of knowledge which may well be useful in some cases but not in others. Often the existing patterns are in conflict with the new learning, therefore the latter cannot take place successfully.

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<sup>9</sup>ROGERS, J., *Adults Learning*, Milton Keynes, The Open University Press, 1977(2nd ed.), pp. 17-19.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>The term when used alone has a comprehensive meaning and it encompasses pre-existing knowledge, skills and attitudes, all together.

In order to be more receptive to new knowledge the students may have to discard some of their preconceptions. The most difficult to change, are old, well established attitudes. The learner has to go back and analyse the process of building them up, in an effort to understand first why they are wrong, and then to remove them. Such an action is called unlearning and it is said that adult students have as much to unlearn as to learn. The dismissal of pre-existing learning patterns (unlearning), is hard because:

Adult ... participants have already invested emotional capital in acquiring...knowledge and experience. They will expend much more in defending the integrity of this knowledge, so new learning changes will sometimes be strenuously resisted.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, going through unlearning is often necessary, for the new material should be harmoniously integrated with that already existing and not just placed on top of conflicting, undisturbed old patterns.

When old learning is challenged, that means that either the source of it, or the learner's judgement (concerning the choice of this source), is challenged. Sometimes, they may both be. Also prejudices, which are strongly held beliefs based on weakly founded knowledge, blockade a learning change. Finally, there is a group of people with "an undue reverence for the past", who refuse to change their traditional patterns.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit, p. 159.

<sup>13</sup>ibid, pp. 159-160.

All the above reasons (emotional investment, prejudices and reverence for the past), generate defense mechanisms, known as withdrawal mechanisms to defend the existing learning patterns.

Pre-existing knowledge, apart from inhibiting new learning by contradicting it, also creates another kind of obstacle in the form of work experience. While the last is a welcome feature for vocational and professional courses, it may sometimes give to the adult student an "expert status" which actually inhibits his ability to explore alternative approaches. Thus, the student is confined to "exhibiting" and confirming the current expertise rather than challenging and expanding it.<sup>14</sup>

### *Emotional blocks*

Learning blockage caused by emotional factors is a common feature, present in almost any kind of adult course. There are quite a lot of causes which are responsible for this blockage, with anxiety being the predominant among them. Anxiety derives either from a fear of the externally imposed requirements, or from lack of self-esteem. The individuals perceive that they are not able to cope with the course, or they are not as capable as others. Therefore they withdraw in themselves, becoming passive spectators of the activities taking place around them, or conversely they push too hard. Both

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<sup>14</sup>KNIGHTS, S. & McDONALD, R., "Adult learners in Higher Education: some study problems and solutions from Australian experience", British Journal of Educational Technology, Vol. 13, No 3, 1982, p. 240.

strategies end up with poor performance or at least, poorer than it could have been without anxiety.

Additionally, several kinds of apprehension operate in the adult classroom. They vary from students' reluctance to join the learning methods as they consider themselves "too serious to play", to fear of failure, or losing face. The emotional factors call for ego-defense mechanisms to preserve student's self-image which is perceived to be distorted.<sup>15</sup> A more detailed discussion of these factors will follow in a separate chapter.

Up to this point, the barriers considered fall under Roger's definition of learning hindrances. They consist of those factors which deter learning that takes place within the classroom or during independent study. There exists however, a broader view which regards as learning barriers those factors that prevent adult participation (access) in educational opportunities. According to this view, an adult is not prevented from grasping some material because of bad relations with the teacher for example, but he does not have at all the opportunity to enter the learning situation. He stays outside the "gates" of the educational provision as opposed to students who encounter problems after entering the "gates" and while involved in actual learning. The second type of blockages are known as "barriers to participation" or "barriers to access" and they are classified as dispositional, institutional and situational.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit, pp. 162-164. Also pp. 166-168.

<sup>16</sup>OSBORN, M. et al, op cit, p. 50.

Dispositional: they are related to the self-perception as an adult learner, and to various attitudes, such as the belief that an elderly person is too old to learn.

Institutional: they derive from the organization of and the provision made by the educational enterprise. They consist of issues such as inconvenient schedules, high fees or inappropriate courses of study.

Situational: they arise "from the adult's situation in life at a given time" and involve for example, lack of money, time or child care arrangements.<sup>17</sup>

### *Attitudes to education*

A serious dispositional barrier to participation derives from certain attitudes to education held by adults. First of all there is the rather widely spread belief that courses and formal learning are suitable only for the young as a preparation for adult life. Middle-aged people regard their lives as already settled and they hesitate to risk new experiences and bring about changes. Moreover, a great number of adults who stay away from education, do so because they consider themselves as educational failures, unable to learn. The formal system labels people as successful or hopeless learners and this distinction follows a person throughout his adult life, preventing him from having a second chance. Other potential learners are put

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<sup>17</sup>CROSS, P., Adults as Learners, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1988, p. 98. See also Table 1.

off by their previous school experience and they do not want to undergo something similar.

In an effort to create positive attitudes towards education and motivate people, broadcasting (radio and television) can be employed. Through its educational output and by advertising learning opportunities, it generates a desire to learn and informs about existing provision. It has actually been reported that broadcasting had played a critical role in adult literacy campaign. Of course, change of attitudes is only the first step towards increasing participation; it must be followed by actual reforms in the educational provision so as to reflect and respond to the created expectations.

Attitudinal change goes hand in hand with structural change and without changes in the educational system there can be little hope of transforming attitudes towards education.<sup>18</sup>

### *Lack of time*

A broadly referred barrier to learning is the lack of time. Adult life is characterised by a plurality of roles that pose demands on individuals. The problem is more acute especially at the middle phases of life cycle when responsibilities are usually heavier than ever. Nonetheless, it is at these phases that educational participation may be of critical importance as it is related to career advancement.

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<sup>18</sup>ACACE, Continuing Education: From Policies to Practice, Leicester, ACACE, 1982, pp. 66-67.

TABLE 2 Reasons\* why adults had not been able to study in the past

|  | Type of Study |     |       |           |     |       |
|--|---------------|-----|-------|-----------|-----|-------|
|  | Part-time     |     |       | Full-time |     |       |
| <hr/>  |               |     |       |           |     |       |
| Base:all wishing<br>they had followed<br>a course=100% | All           | Men | Women | All       | Men | Women |
| <hr/>  |               |     |       |           |     |       |
| Reasons  | %             | %   | %     | %         | %   | %     |
| Could not afford                                       | 26            | 25  | 24    | 32        | 34  | 29    |
| Did not know about<br>suitable courses                 | 19            | 20  | 19    | 17        | 15  | 18    |
| Did not have entry<br>qualifications                   | 15            | 14  | 16    | 16        | 17  | 15    |
| Had to look after<br>children and other<br>dependents  | 14            | 4   | 22    | 8         | 5   | 11    |
| No suitable course<br>in the area                      | 12            | 13  | 21    | 8         | 8   | 9     |
| Could not get time<br>off                              | 11            | 13  | 9     | 5         | 6   | 3     |
| Too much travelling<br>involved                        | 8             | 9   | 8     | 6         | 4   | 8     |
| Study would not have<br>given financial<br>benefit     | 8             | 7   | 9     | 7         | 6   | 8     |
| Family objected  | 5             | 2   | 8     | 11        | 7   | 15    |
| Unable to get enough<br>finance/grant                  | 3             | 5   | 2     | 6         | 7   | 5     |

\*Main reasons only listed

Source: ACACE, Continuing Education: From Policies to Practice, Leicester, ACACE, 1982, p. 67.

Usually, family and job commitments are the areas where a large proportion of adults' time is consumed. Adult students also complain about lack of time to cope with course requirements as well as lack of support from the work (by work release schemes for study).<sup>19</sup> Women sometimes, have to face the opposition of their families which refuse some extra time for educational activities.

### *Finance*

Financial reasons are reported to be the first which debar adults from education, according to a survey by ACACE.<sup>20</sup> Even if it does not apply to all kinds of courses, or it becomes the first in the hierarchy because other reasons are hushed up,<sup>21</sup> it is still very important. Despite desiring to pursue courses, adults have to sacrifice or postpone education in the name of other priorities because courses are costly. Apart from the fees, there is also a number of additional expenses which are indirect. These include costs like a) paying somebody to look after the children during the lesson time, b) transportation expenditure and c) loss of overtime payment.<sup>22</sup>

The cost of child care can be overcome by free or low-cost provision of creche and nursery facilities by the educational institutions.<sup>23</sup> Other suggestions for reducing the travelling

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<sup>19</sup>SMITH, B.R., "Learning difficulties of part-time mature students", Journal of Further and Higher Education, Vol. 7, No 3, 1983, p. 83.

<sup>20</sup>See table 2.

<sup>21</sup>CROSS, P., op cit. pp. 101-102.

<sup>22</sup>ACACE, op cit. p.70.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. pp. 73-74.

expenses include utilizing the work place for educational purposes and creating a large network of small educational centres.<sup>24</sup> According to the first idea, lessons can be held on the job premises after the end of the work which means that the employees do not have to travel for their classes. By creating a number of small educational centres instead of few great ones the provision gets more widely spread which reduces the distance that students have to travel to get to the centre. Through removing problems like these, the access to education becomes easier and the motivation of prospective and current students gets enhanced which is of great importance for adults who voluntarily undergo learning projects.

### *Motivation*

It is often said that adult learners are highly motivated as they volunteer to learn. Although the above argument is not denied, it should not be disregarded that the motivation which the learner possesses may drop during the course of time, due to various reasons. Thus after the zeal and initial enthusiasm fade away and the learner realizes the changes that should occur in his life in order to accommodate the course requirements, it is up to the teacher, to a great extent, to motivate the class and maintain the morale. Motivation is a powerful drive that can even overcome other kinds of difficulties such as lack of money or inconvenient physical environment and lead to successful accomplishment of the learning course.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid, pp. 69-70.

The factors already mentioned which inhibit learning could easily be expanded to include geographical barriers (mainly long-distance travelling to classes), lack of information on available opportunities, or lack of flexible modes for part-time study.

From the forgoing discussion one can understand that the scope of barriers is too broad to be dealt with sufficiently in the chapters that follow. Bearing in mind the limitations set by the study, it is proposed to concentrate on a selection of barriers to learning and to take a closer look at them as well as trying to suggest ways of overcoming them.

### *Summary*

The barriers to learning are factors deriving either from a person or from his environment, bearing an inhibitory effect over learning. A simple classification distinguishes the age, hunger, poor health and tiredness the physical environment and the social environment of a learning group. The list can easily expand to include others, such as pre-existing knowledge, emotional blocks, attitudes to education, lack of time, finance and motivation.

## CHAPTER 3

### AGEING AS A LEARNING BARRIER

#### *Introduction*

Human beings undergo many changes during the maturation process, not only physical but also psychological and social. Physical capabilities, mental abilities, interests, attitudes, values, creativity and life styles, all get affected to a larger or smaller extent.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this, the adult as a learner develops different learning patterns from those he adopted as a child or an adolescent. Often, maturation generates developments which from an educational point of view, are undesirable and therefore are regarded as barriers to learning. Nevertheless, not all the barriers will be discussed here, since much specialized work has been done on each one. A comprehensive coverage is beyond the limits of this chapter. It is difficult to specify, when the deterioration of human, particularly of mental abilities, begins. Generally speaking, middle-aged adults are held to be subjected to ageing impairments along with the older adults, hence, this chapter refers to both groups.

Paying attention to learning problems caused by ageing is important in the context of industrial developed societies, in which an ageing population is predominant, because education has or should have a central role to play and this is due to three reasons. First,

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<sup>1</sup>KNOWLES, M, op cit, p. 43.

adults are responsible for the economic, political, social and cultural functioning in the society, therefore, education is necessary for the accomplishment of their activities. Second, the fast pace of technological development makes part of the existing knowledge obsolete, while at the same time it creates the need for updating. Again the education should provide the opportunities for familiarization with the new realities and enable people to keep up with the constant and rapid changes. Third, there are some groups (eg retired, housewives), who participate in educational provision out of their desire to utilize some spare time they have.

Since adults form the largest group in industrial societies and education is of great importance, it is necessary that people should be aware of the effects of ageing on adult learning abilities. Furthermore, some steps should be taken so that educational practice becomes influenced by the research findings on special instructional needs created by age.

Usually, learning problems caused by ageing are readily identified with impairments of cognitive abilities, namely intelligence and memory. Although these abilities do suffer a decline over the years, the damage is not to the extent that is thought to be. Moreover, a number of other barriers also operate in adult learning causing harm which in some cases is even more severe than that caused by the cognitive decline. The list of non-cognitive obstacles includes among others, wrong attitudes towards learning capacities in adulthood, lack of confidence, anxiety, loss of speed, level-standards of prior education, bad health, and deterioration of sensory acuity

and psychomotor abilities. In the discussion that follows, intelligence and memory will be considered, as well as some of the non-cognitive barriers.

### *Intelligence*

Intellectual abilities are very important for everybody who embarks on a learning activity and for this reason, the research interest in them and the learners' concerns about them, are both justifiable. For years now, a certain amount of experimental work has been conducted to investigate the effects of ageing on human intellectual powers so as to shed light on the question that many adults are faced with, that is whether they still maintain these powers which will permit them to undertake learning successfully.

As far as intelligence is concerned, Cattell made a distinction between the innate general cognitive ability and another part which develops throughout the years, as a result of education and life experience. He called the innate component fluid intelligence and the acquired one crystallized.<sup>2</sup>

Up to the 70's, it was believed that intelligence, just like human physical abilities, has a peak in late adolescence and after that a gradual decline begins in adulthood, following a maturation process. However, later research evidence proved this model partially false. Thus, the fluid intelligence is indeed subjected to

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<sup>2</sup>BISCHOF, L.J., Adult Psychology, New York, Happer & Row, 1976(2nd ed.), p. 141.

decline but the crystallized one remains stable or even increases with age.<sup>3</sup> This differentiation sounds sensible considering that man, at least informally, never stops learning and new information, understanding, skills etc, are always acquired, to expand the old stock.

Despite the deterioration of fluid intelligence, Knox agrees that ability and educational performance are affected only to a small degree because the learners rarely operate to their full capacities and the amount of intelligence they are left with is enough for them to carry out the educational requirements.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, a great deal of work has been done in order to find out how intelligence responds in the course of ageing. The easiest way to investigate changes among generations is to compare intelligence test results taken from young, to those taken from older subjects. This research method is known as cross-sectional and reports lower scores from the side of older people. However, reports coming from longitudinal studies, (another approach to the problem), differ substantially. Research of this type is conducted with individuals who have the same age, (rather than different age groups) and it measures their intelligence over a long period of time, to find the effects that the ageing process has had on them. In contrast with cross-sectional findings, the longitudinal studies claim that intellectual abilities remain rather stable throughout adulthood.

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<sup>3</sup>OSBORN, M. et al, op cit, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>KNOX, A.B., op cit, p. 414.

This view should be closer to reality taking into consideration two important criticisms about the validity of the cross-sectional measurements. Firstly, the tests are performed under time pressure, a feature that puts older subjects into a disadvantaged position as their speed diminishes gradually with age. When speed is not a test factor, the discrepancy of scores between the two generations is smaller and in some instances older adults perform even better.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, it is unfair to compare the intellectual performance of two generations, as the test results are influenced by diverse social factors.

Social change can create substantial differences between older and younger age cohorts (such as two generations) regarding the experience and values internalized during childhood and adolescence.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, it should be said that there is still a lot of disagreement among psychologists as to when and if intelligence does decline, and this is so because it is not exactly known what constitutes intelligence, or how it can be measured. The current trend though, suggests that decline is not very severe and that the cross-sectional research fails to take into consideration influential factors such as timing and social change. Also, the contemporary research emphasizes the fact that deficits "are not general (across abilities) and universal (across persons)".<sup>7</sup> As it has been reported previously, some abilities are more resistant to the effects of ageing

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<sup>5</sup>BOLTON, E.B., "Cognitive and noncognitive factors that affect learning in older adults and their implications for instruction", Educational Gerontology, Vol. 3, No 4, 1978, p. 332.

<sup>6</sup>KNOX, A.B., op cit, p. 411.

<sup>7</sup>BALTES, P.B. & SHAIE, K.W., "On the plasticity of intelligence in adulthood and old age: where Horn and Donaldson fail", The American Psychologist, Vol. 31, No 10, 1976, p. 721.

than others and actually this has been demonstrated by contradictions in test results due to different mixtures of fluid and crystallized intelligence. "When crystallized intelligence is more prominent, no decline is likely to be observed".<sup>8</sup> Additionally, individuals do not respond to ageing in the same way. When the intellectual faculties are exercised, the loss is smaller because parts of intelligence, such as verbal fluency, improve with practice over the time. In the opposite case, it is not only that development does not occur but also the retention of abilities decreases.<sup>9</sup>

### *Memory*

Memory, like intelligence, is not a unitary concept. As intelligence is regarded in terms of the various aspects of it (eg comprehension, spatial ability, verbal fluency), similarly, memory is traditionally regarded as a three-stage process. a) the reception of the material to be memorised and the transformation or encoding of it, b) the storage of the transformed information, and c) the retrieval or recall.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to the length of time that comes in between the reception of the information and its retrieval, memory is divided into short and long-term. The first type refers to retention of material over a period of time that ranges from a few seconds to several

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<sup>8</sup>HORN, J.L. & DONALDSON, G., "On the myth of intellectual decline in adulthood" The American Psychologist, Vol. 31, No 10, 1976, p. 706.

<sup>9</sup>KNIGHTS, S. & McDONALD, R., op cit, p. 238.

<sup>10</sup>CAVANAUGH, J.C., Adult Development and Ageing, Belmont, Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990, p. 217.

minutes, while the equivalent period for the long-term memory covers from minutes to several years.<sup>11</sup>

The part of memory affected by age is not the actual storage capacity.

Research indicates that there is little, if any, diminution in the capacities of short-term memory and long-term memory as age advances... The phenomenon of forgetting is usually attributed to ineffective search and retrieval processes.<sup>12</sup>

In its turn, the ineffective retrieval process is due to deficiencies in encoding strategies. It has been claimed that adults fail to process efficiently the input stimulation compared with younger individuals. Therefore, because the analysis and the organization of the input material (ie encoding) is not properly carried out, the retrieval is negatively affected.<sup>13</sup>

This failure to impose an organization on information that is to be learned and retained seems to account for much of the variance in learning between older adults and young adults (and, more generally, between effective learners and less effective learners).

However, when meaningful material is used in tests, the discrepancy between adult and younger subjects becomes reduced, demonstrating that adults are not in so bad<sup>a</sup> position as learners as

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<sup>11</sup>BOLTON, E.B., *op cit*, p. 335.

<sup>12</sup>OWENS, D., "Designing instruction for older adults", Programmed Learning and Educational Technology, Vol. 25, No 1, 1988, p. 25. Also JAMIESON, G.H., "Remembering and applying newly learned concepts - how do older students fare?", Studies in Adult Education, Vol. 8, No 2, 1976, p. 172.

<sup>13</sup>CRAIK, F.I.M., Age Differences in Human Memory. In BIRREN, J.E. & SCHAEIE, K.W., (eds), Handbook of the Psychology of Ageing, New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977, p. 402.

presented by some tests.<sup>14</sup> But adults are really "at a loss" when they have to shift between perception and recall, a situation called "divided attention" which causes disruption to encoding strategies.<sup>15</sup>

As far as adult education is concerned, memory deficits can be minimized by taking some steps.

a) There exist certain hints, known as cues, indicating the nature of something to be recalled, that can be used to enhance the retrieval of information stored in memory.

b) Attention should be paid by the teacher so as to protect the students from interference caused for example by the physical setting or by the pre-existing knowledge. Adults are reported to be more vulnerable to this kind of disturbance than younger people are and this is one explanation for deficiencies in older students' encoding process.

c) Adults require more time for searching, retrieving and producing a stored response, therefore performance is improved when they are allowed to set their own pace and have adequate time to respond. Learning conditions involving speed should be avoided, whenever possible.<sup>16</sup>

d) When adults are less efficient in organizing input information, the information itself should be well-structured and meaningful so as to compensate for the diminution of the organizing ability. Moreover, the use of advance organizers, such as outlines or summaries that

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<sup>14</sup>OWENS, D., op cit. p. 24.

<sup>15</sup>CRAIK, F.I.M., op cit.

<sup>16</sup>BOLTON, E.B., op cit. p. 340.

precede what has to be learned, helps adults to create a "mind map" of what will follow, and to connect what is already known with the material to be confronted next.<sup>17</sup>

Both intelligence and memory are cognitive abilities which are affected by ageing in the way and to the extent that has been presented. What can be inferred from the previous discussion with regard to the degree of handicap that deterioration of intelligence and memory cause to older students, is that they are obstacles that can be overcome or at least minimized. However, what are considered as more serious barriers, in the sense that they are more difficult to be overcome, are some non-cognitive factors which are discussed below.

### *Anxiety - Attitudes*

Educators believe that greater damage in adult learning is caused by prejudices and fears rather than by the decline of the cognitive powers. Sayings like "when age is in, the wit is out", or "you can't teach an old dog new tricks", have deep roots and strong influence on people, inhibiting adults from participating or achieving their best when they participate.

A common fear among adult students is that they no longer have the learning abilities they used to and consequently, they feel rather limited. For that reason, there exists a hesitation to push

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<sup>17</sup>OWENS, D., op cit, p. 26.

really hard and to aim at a high achievement. Age becomes a good excuse for confining to mediocre efforts, without implying by this that adult students do not want to work hard and achieve. But these unfavourable attitudes possessed by some, actually hold them back.<sup>18</sup> The Belbins also refer to the feelings of men over 50, about industrial re-training. They range from uneasiness to fear and tension, because the men perceive that they are not able to cope with the new technology.

Men over 50 are frightened of anything new and are chary of applying for promotion if it requires new learning. The new electrical signals are twenty times easier to control, but the older man thinks that mentally it will be too much for him. Men change from being calm, at ease and relaxed to being so tense you dare not get near them.<sup>19</sup>

Even during training, older adults are more vulnerable to anxiety than younger people and the overcoming of their tension can bring a "burst of progress in learning".<sup>20</sup>

Another trap is to attribute the struggles required by learning, to ageing. Some students are afraid that they have to put in too much work, not because the task requires so, but simply because they are getting old and therefore, less capable. These kind of thoughts dry up the motivation and enthusiasm, bringing at the same time some depression and anxiety. Most of the times the students do not even voice them so as to receive advice.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>ROGERS, J., op cit, pp. 45-46 and 48-49.

<sup>19</sup>BELBIN, E., & BELBIN, R.M., Problems in Adult Retraining, London, Heinemann, 1972, pp. 162-163.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup>ROGERS, J., op cit, pp. 46-47.

An additional product of ageing is the well known answer given by many would-be students that they are too old to involve themselves in an activity (ie learning) which is supposed to be for young people. Afterwards, they are running towards the end of their lives and why bother?<sup>22</sup> Even if there is not such a strong rejection, there exists sometimes a reluctance to join formal learning because many adults have not been engaged in an organized learning situation since leaving school, and because in some courses most students are young school leavers.<sup>23</sup> There is some basis for the above attitudes which presents barriers to learning and people involved in educational provision for middle-aged and especially for older adults, must take them into account when designing courses, so as to remove these barriers. However, some of the developed attitudes are not based on real evidence and adults may miss opportunities for personal or occupational development, or for making a constructive use of their spare time, for instance the retired, may have plenty of time at their disposal and still lots of abilities to utilize.

The teacher faced with such fears and attitudes has to encourage the students by making clear that although there may be a degree of decline in mental abilities, it is not so grave as to affect performance substantially. Furthermore, people tend to develop skills to cope with situations, and compensate for certain deficiencies.

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<sup>22</sup>KNOWLES, M., op cit, pp. 155-156.

<sup>23</sup>BELBIN, E. & BELBIN, R.M., op cit, p. 36.

### *Educational disadvantages*

There are cases where students suffer from problems described previously which to a great extent are not real. Nevertheless, there exist situations, where middle-aged and older students find themselves disadvantaged by virtue of age, compared with younger counterparts. As they have been away from school for a longer time, they are less aware of current developments in the subject matter they study, and actually some of them also complain about having forgotten study skills. Additionally, a part of what they have been taught in their early school years, is now out of date and may be invalid. This is a very real problem in the case of mature students who decide to pursue science subjects, since science and the teaching of science have undergone rapid changes. So, the students find themselves lacking background knowledge which they have to acquire, while at the same time coping with the course material.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, awareness of this kind of educational imbalance puts potential students off, creating another barrier to learning by discouraging participation. More generally, it has been claimed that one reason for older adults' reluctance to pursue learning activities is because, their generation, overall, is less well educated than the younger ones. The statement is supported by research which indicates that "the more formal education older people have, the more likely they are to participate in educational activities".<sup>25</sup>

The problem of coping with the evolution of knowledge can be faced by creating a series of preparatory classes, before the course starts, so as to identify and fill the existing gaps which are both

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<sup>24</sup>KNIGHTS, S. & McDONALD, R., op cit, pp. 237,239.

<sup>25</sup>BOLTON, E.B., op cit, p.338.

reasonable and expected.<sup>26</sup> As to the lower educational level of the older generation, it has been suggested that it is better (also for other reasons), to have age homogeneous classes so that the older students do not feel threatened.<sup>27</sup>

### *Loss of speed*

It is not only the different educational standards that create barriers to adult learning but also the loss of learning speed that poses another disadvantage. Most writers agree that adults for one reason or another, gradually become slower learners. First of all, they need more time to consolidate in their memory storage the information received, because they have become less effective in organizing it. Similarly, as it has been mentioned earlier, the retrieval and reproduction of what has been stored becomes slower.<sup>28</sup> Also, adults emphasize and prefer accuracy rather than speed. They would like to be allocated sufficient time so as to feel free from pressure and to concentrate on the accomplishment of their task.<sup>29</sup> Lovell adds that there is an impairment in central nervous system concerning the organizing and the decision making processes. The older person is slower in his actions because of a slowing in the central processes involved in perceiving signals and in selecting actions in response to items.<sup>30</sup> According to an additional explanation adults learn less readily than younger people due to a difficulty in

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<sup>26</sup>KNIGHTS, S., & McDONALD, R., *op cit*, p. 241.

<sup>27</sup>The idea is not original but its source cannot be traced.

<sup>28</sup>OWENS, D., *op cit*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>29</sup>KNOX, A.B., *op cit*, p. 241.

<sup>30</sup>LOVELL, B.R., *op cit*, p. 119. Also BISCHOF, L.J., *op cit*, p. 336.

modifying an initially wrong impression - that is to correct mistakes.<sup>31</sup>

Educators taking into consideration the slow down in adult learning should try to avoid creating a highly competitive situation because it is counter-productive as it encourages quick functioning. What really enhances effectiveness is to let adults set their own pace.<sup>32</sup>

### *Summary*

From what has been discussed, it can be said that ageing has an impact on human cognitive abilities, in attitudes towards learning ability and education, and in learning speed. Additionally, older students are disadvantaged compared to younger counterparts, by virtue of the time lapse from their former education and the standards of that education. People involved in educational provision for adults have to take into consideration all these learning barriers, in order to help the adult population benefit from education.

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<sup>31</sup>WELFORD, A.T., "Experimental psychology in the study of ageing", British Medical Bulletin, Vol. 20, No 1, 1964, p. 67.

<sup>32</sup>ROGERS, J., op cit, p. 62.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANXIETY AS A LEARNING BARRIER

#### *Introduction*

Older adults are not the only age group to experience anxiety while learning. In fact the phenomenon is widespread and it affects all the adult population.

Anxiety may be defined as a reaction of apprehension ranging from uneasiness to complete panic preceded by a real or a symbolic condition of threat which the subject perceives diffusely and to which he reacts with an intensity that tends to be disproportionate.<sup>1</sup>

Ausubel goes further, to specify that what actually is threatened is the subject's self-esteem,<sup>2</sup> that is, feelings related to competence, efficiency and adequacy of the self, compared with the others and with some ideals.<sup>3</sup> Hence, he distinguishes anxiety from fears, since the latter are due to a threat directed against the physical and not the emotional well-being of a person.<sup>4</sup>

When an adult student feels anxious about how to cope with the new situation that a course presents to him, he is actually afraid of a diffusely perceived coming failure or inadequacy, concerning either

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<sup>1</sup>GOULD, J. & KOLB, W.L. (eds), A Dictionary of the Social Sciences, London, Tavistock Publications, 1964, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>AUSUBEL, D.P. et al, op cit, p. 442.

<sup>3</sup>BRUNDAGE, D.H. & MACKERACHER, D., op cit, p. 23 and SINCLAIR, K.E., "Students' affective characteristics and classroom behaviour", in HUSEN, T. & POSTLETHWAITE, T.N. (eds), op cit, p. 4881.

<sup>4</sup>AUSUBEL, D.P. et al, op cit, pp. 442-443.

his role as a student or other roles. Possessing and trying to maintain a positive self-image is natural, therefore, a degree of anxiety is assumed to be normal when the feelings of self-worth are challenged. However, there are persons with an impaired self-esteem, which is more sensitive towards threats, causing excessive anxiety, known as neurotic.<sup>5</sup>

It can be assumed that not all students are equally anxious. Moreover, not all courses generate the same degree of anxiety;<sup>6</sup> some are more relaxed than others and this mostly depends on their type. Generally speaking, you are most likely to find tension in a vocational re-training programme for instance, than in a recreational group, for the simple reason that in the first case the student is exposed to more threats such as the regular assessment of his work , or the examinations. In other words, the prospects of getting hurt are higher.

#### *Sources of adult learners' anxiety*

According to what has been mentioned before, anxiety is due to a threat against self-esteem and since threats of that kind exist in many aspects of modern life, they are also present in learning situations. Adult students seem to have quite a variety of things to worry about, ranging from pressures due to non-academic commitment, to apprehensions concerning their study skills.

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 443-444.

<sup>6</sup>ROGERS, J., *op cit*, p. 39.

They often join a course carrying the belief that they are not as capable as their colleagues, that they have more deficiencies compared with a perceived model of the average student, hence more difficulties to face. It all concerns a tendency to underestimate their own resources<sup>7</sup> and probably overestimate those of other people. This kind of attitude may sometimes energize a hard work response but in the long run it is very likely to cause lack of confidence, hesitation in participation in the group activities, feelings of inferiority and ultimately anxiety about how to manage the demands of the course. Thinking that other students are cleverer or more knowledgeable, has a further implication. It makes adults reluctant to ask questions, being afraid that they will make a fool of themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Similar feelings of low self-perception are generated by the fact that much time has elapsed since the end of formal education. The troublesome question that adults are faced with, is how they will perform an old role, after such a long break. Are they still in a position to concentrate while studying or to do some homework in written form? Are they able to overcome certain gaps of knowledge created by the development in their area of study? Moreover, are they informed of what goes on around them in general terms, or have they lost some contact with the current reality? The issue of keeping up with the actuality is of course of secondary importance but it may be of value in terms of the way somebody estimates himself. It is likely to cause inferiority and make the student adopt the non-threatening role of observer, so as to avoid embarrassment

<sup>7</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit, p. 163.

<sup>8</sup>BELBIN, E. & BELBIN, R.M., op cit, p. 31.

before the teacher and the group. Finally, there is the fear of disappointing significant others, such as spouse, friends, colleagues and very often the teacher.<sup>9</sup>

For some adults even the idea of making mistakes is a source of anxiety. This is particularly common in the case of re-training where the trainees usually come from a situation characterized by consolidated skills and few mistakes, to another, where they find themselves very much "error-prone". A trainee reports about this.

As a railway worker I had grown up with the idea of never making a mistake. Making a mistake was the ... thing you were always afraid might happen.<sup>10</sup>

However, putting these kind of goals and having such expectations from oneself in a learning situation, is rather counterproductive because the student becomes too cautious to try and probably too disappointed by making mistakes which ultimately are more or less normal and inevitable.

Therefore, learning may well be regarded by such individuals as a situation that lowers adult's status and reduces his authority by placing him in what is perceived to be a subordinate position, with consequent implications for his self-esteem.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes, such feelings are supported by previous schooling experiences related with humiliation and lack of efficiency.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit, p. 163.

<sup>10</sup>BELBIN, E. & BELBIN, R.M., op cit.

<sup>11</sup>ROGERS, J. op cit, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup>BROOKFIELD, S.D., op cit, p. 30.

Additionally, learning something new may well imply that the old behaviour was somewhat wrong. Habits, practices and attitudes have to change, at the expense of self-worth.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, attention should be paid to professional and vocational courses for the reason that performance in these has often a decisive role over job maintenance or promotion. Obviously, adult participants find themselves under pressure and anxiety<sup>14</sup> since a failure in the occupational area does not only threatens the life-style (material welfare) but also the person's self-esteem.

Several other types of pressure are experienced by quite a number of students. Employees who study on a day-release basis, often have to carry on with their existing responsibilities, plus accommodating time and energy for attending the course and doing the homework. Then, there is the issue of relationships, first with the family members and secondly with other relatives and friends. As the time becomes more limited, some of the social interactions get affected and dilemmas concerning priorities, together with pressures, begin to emerge from the necessity and the effort to strike a balance. Sometimes, however, relations do not suffer from lack of time but from the change individuals undergo during their studies. Certain aspects of their personality become different and therefore they find it difficult to communicate with their environment, as they used to, resulting in some isolation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>ROGERS, J., op cit.

<sup>14</sup>BELBIN, E. & BELBIN, R.M., op cit. pp. 28, 33.

<sup>15</sup>DAVIES, J., "Towards identifying the special needs of adult learners", Programmed Learning and Educational Technology, Vol. 23, No 3, 1986, p. 260.

## *Anxiety and learning performance*

Searching for the effects of anxiety on learning, it has been found that learners with high free fatty acid levels in their blood, (indicator of high anxiety), perform poorly.<sup>16</sup> For them the situation presents a severe threat that inhibits their functioning. Sometimes, anxious adult students may even miss a short course as they develop psychosomatic disorders at the beginning of it, that prevent them from attending for the rest of the time.<sup>17</sup> The difference in performance between high and low-anxious subjects becomes obvious in certain experiments involving two age groups. The older group achieves less, by virtue of higher anxiety levels they develop.<sup>18</sup> Sinclair gives an explanation for this.

When the level of anxiety aroused is high, these emotional and worry responses distract attention away from the task at hand. They may also be associated with defensive patterns of behaviour which may help preserve self-esteem but at the expense of successfully dealing with the task.

The same writer mentions three defensive patterns of behaviour, ie. ego-defense mechanisms, which are day-dreaming, absenteeism and careless work.<sup>19</sup> He actually refers to pupils but phenomena such as day-dreaming and absenteeism apply to adult students as well.<sup>20</sup> Day-dreaming involves a deliberate mental withdrawal from what goes on in the learning group. Since some elements (eg material, colleagues or teacher) are perceived to hurt

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<sup>16</sup>EISDORFER, C. & WILKIE, F., Stress, Disease, Aging and Behavior, in BIRREN, J.E. & SCHAE, K.W., (eds), op cit, p. 260.

<sup>17</sup>BELBIN, E. & BELBIN, R.M., op cit, p. 162.

<sup>18</sup>BISCHOF, L.J., op cit, p. 135.

<sup>19</sup>SINCLAIR, K.E., op cit, p. 4482.

<sup>20</sup>ROGERS, A., op cit, p. 160.

the self-esteem, the adult chooses to protect it, even if this means the sacrificing of learning. As far as absenteeism is concerned, the student chooses to withdraw both mentally and physically, escaping from a situation that bears an emotional cost for him.

Apart from the ego-defense mechanisms that inhibit learning, anxiety itself affects directly the learner's performance, causing certain disturbances. Thistle supports the view that an anxious person has limited prospects for effective verbal communication and that even what he hears and sees are distorted versions of reality.<sup>21</sup> When it comes to unfamiliar tasks or activities requiring improvising skills, the anxious person is again at a disadvantage. Novel problem-solving situations are threatened by anxiety, because the learner confronts them with a response from his old repertoire and not with a novel solution. This happens because the anxious learner wants to remove the improvisation element of the problem-solving situation as soon as possible.<sup>22</sup>

Without denying the debilitating influence of anxiety, it should be made clear that the above claims refer to high levels of anxiety and that the results differ when low and moderate levels are concerned.<sup>23</sup> Generally speaking, a certain degree of anxiety and tension is not only reasonable in learning situations but also acts as a facilitating factor.<sup>24</sup> Anxiety directs the students towards achievement, in order to protect and restore their threatened self-

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<sup>21</sup>BRUNDAGE, D.H. & MACKERACHER, D., op cit. pp. 28-29.

<sup>22</sup>AUSUBEL, D.P. et al. op cit. pp. 447-448.

<sup>23</sup>KNOWLES, M., op cit. p. 112.

<sup>24</sup>ROGERS, J., op cit. p. 36 and AUSUBEL, D.P. et al. op cit. pp. 447, 449.

esteem and reduce the anxiety level. In fact, performance does not depend only on the degree of anxiety. What actually exists, is a kind of network of factors that make anxiety either a positive or a negative influence on performance. The general assumption is that high anxiety deters learning, whereas, at a low level, anxiety plays an enhancing role. Moving further from this assumption, some other factors come into play. High anxious students for instance, can be more productive than low anxious ones when the task is easy, but their anxiety becomes a real barrier when they are confronted with a difficult task. Similarly out-performed, are high anxious students when confronted with a situation with high ego-involvement, such as an important examination. When ego-involvement is low however, as in a game-like performance situation, high anxiety has little effect at all, if not a slight facilitative influence.<sup>25</sup>

### *Implications for adult learning*

A learning group is usually a challenging experience for adult students, from the point of view that their self-esteem is subjected to a substantial amount of threat. On the other hand, maintaining and enhancing the feelings of self-esteem is "one of the most basic of human needs" and people undergo "considerable trouble to ensure that their feelings ... are not damaged".<sup>26</sup> Therefore, in order to make the adult class beneficial for its members, several sources of threat have to be reduced.

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<sup>25</sup>SINCLAIR, K.E., *op cit.*

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4881.

As it has been mentioned before, there is a tendency among adult students to underestimate their personal resources and consider their colleagues more capable than themselves, which usually causes anxiety, as they question their ability to meet the standards. It is necessary for them to realize that other individuals are also going through similar difficulties, something that results from establishing links and solidarity among the group members. It is probably due to this, that in-company courses, operating within a familiar physical and human environment, reduce trainees' anxiety.<sup>27</sup> Adult students need social support to confirm that they are not exceptional in terms of problems and worries they are faced with.<sup>25</sup> It gives great relief and encouragement to hear that their colleagues experience similar feelings and this is the reason that makes periodical gatherings of students who study on their own, popular.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to that, a friendly atmosphere should be established, where everybody feels that he is respected, no matter his deficiencies and mistakes. Everybody should understand that making mistakes does not mean losing face before the others or disappointing the teacher. In order to learn, adult students should be provided with relationships characterized by trust and freedom from threat.<sup>30</sup> As to the lack of confidence due to the time lapse from previous formal education, appreciating comments at the beginning of the programme, and of course the performance itself later on, will enable the students to build the right attitude. Experience has demonstrated that "some tokens of respect and

<sup>27</sup>BELBIN, E. & BELBIN, R.M., op cit. pp. 17-18.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid. p. 163.

<sup>29</sup>The remark is not original; its source however, cannot be traced.

<sup>30</sup>BRUNDAGE, D.H. & MACKERACHER, D., op cit. p. 31.

interest" coming from both the teacher and the fellow students, are also very helpful. Furthermore, the teacher should keep in mind that in some cases extra time, outside the class, is required for assisting personally some members of the group.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, initial worries of "second-chance" students, such as making correct decision in terms of the chosen course or coping with the requirements, are overcome with a counselling package<sup>32</sup> or even with the opportunity to try for a short time a free "taster course ... to sample what is involved".<sup>33</sup>

### *Summary*

Anxiety is an emotional barrier to learning, causing a reaction of apprehension when the individual finds himself under a condition of threat which affects particularly his self-esteem. In a learning situation, it is very likely that threatening conditions exist, deriving from underestimating oneself, the time lapse from former education, or from losing face by making mistakes. Apart from certain exceptions, generally speaking anxiety has a debilitating influence on learning performance of adults which can be reduced in an environment characterized by interest for each other, respect, encouragement and group solidarity.

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<sup>31</sup>ROGERS, J., *op cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>32</sup>KNIGHTS, S. & McDONALD, R., *op cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>33</sup>Hull Daily Mail-Beverley Edition, October 2, 1990.

## CHAPTER 5

### LACK OF MOTIVATION AS A BARRIER TO LEARNING

#### *Introduction*

The last barrier to learning to be considered in this work is the absence of motivation. The inhibitory effects of such a situation over learning should have been felt and recognized by almost any student. Experience suggests that most of the times it is very difficult to learn without any kind of motivation. There is evidence to suggest the existence of a causal relationship between motivation and learning.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, it is unusual to experience a total absence of motivation, but negative effects appear even when the level is low, and this is the situation which is actually considered as a barrier to learning. Hence, what is meant by the words "lack of motivation" throughout the chapter, is a low level.

An illustration concerning the lack of motivation can be easily drawn from the case of two students of equal ability, receiving the same quality of instruction and demonstrating different achievement, by virtue of different levels of motivation.<sup>2</sup> A motivated learner is more cooperative, more open to the offered material and more ready

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<sup>1</sup>AUSUBEL, D.P. et al, op cit, pp 399-401.

<sup>2</sup>WLODKOWSKI, R.J., Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986, p. 3.

to benefit from the instructor. Additionally, he exhibits greater care and concentration, resulting in an enhanced information processing.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that there is an obvious link between motivation and learning achievement, there is not enough research evidence to support this correlation in the area of adult education, whereas substantial work has been carried out in the area of youth education. But as Wlodkowski puts it:

It appears reasonable to assume that if motivation bears such a significant relationship to learning for students as old as eighteen years of age, it probably has a similar relationship to adult learning. In support of this assumption, ... researchers found that the relationship between motivation and learning increased along with the age of the students, with the highest correlations being found in the twelfth grade.<sup>4</sup>

Walberg and Uguroglu who studied the correlation between motivation and learning, covering a population of approximately 637,000 students (first to twelfth grade), found that "motivation measures on average "account" for 11.4% of the variance in achievement"<sup>5</sup> but they also added that the percentage is underestimated for technical and theoretical reasons.<sup>6</sup>

By claiming that there is a strong causal relationship between motivation and learning achievement, does not imply of course that

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>UGUROGLU, M.E. & WALBERG, H.J., "Motivation and achievement: a quantitative synthesis", American Educational Research Journal, Vol. 16, No 4, 1979, p. 385.

<sup>6</sup>WALBERG, H.J. & UGUROGLU, M., Motivation and Educational Productivity: Theories, Results and Implications. In FYANS, L.S.JR. (ed.), Achievement Motivation: Recent Trends in Theory and Research, New York, Plenum Press, 1980, pp. 130-131.

the role of other factors, such as the quality of instruction and the ability of the learner, are neglected. To be more accurate, the title of the chapter could have been formed as "lack of motivation: a barrier to making an effort to learn", because, what is ultimately controlled by motivation is the importance that the learner attaches to his efforts, the power of will and the devotion to the project. The achievement is a different story, but generally speaking, it follows a good effort.<sup>7</sup>

Thus far, an attempt has been made to demonstrate the importance of correlation, so as to extract the consequent assumption that learning is deterred when motivation is inadequate. The term "learning", has been confined to academic achievement and that is why it has been substituted once by "learning achievement". Nevertheless, this chapter, in line with previous ones, will adopt a broader concept of learning, including the participation in educational provision. Therefore, when reference is made to lack of motivation as a barrier to adult learning, it can be assumed that a) adult students are inhibited from reaching their capacities because they are not well motivated, and b) adult would-be students are kept away from learning projects because they have not enough motivation to begin such a project.

### *The concept of motivation*

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<sup>7</sup>KELLER, J.M., Motivational Design of Instruction. In REIGELUTH, C.M. (ed.), Instructional-design Theories and Models: An Overview of their Current Status, London, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1983, p. 391.

When one starts wondering what is it that makes a person want to become a learner and devote a part of his energy and time to education, the issue of motivation comes into play. Motivation can be defined as a tendency from within, to engage in a particular behaviour. Man does so, in order to satisfy his needs which are the motives that direct him towards behaving in a certain way.<sup>8</sup> Knowles claimed that the dominant human motive is the maintenance of self-esteem. Every time that the man perceives signals of inadequacy coming from his internal or external environment, he gets engaged to action, aiming at getting rid of an adverse set of needs and to re-establish his self-esteem. Education provides a means to achieve this. After having dealt with the reduction of unmet needs, a new process of seeking positive growth, starts.

The drive for positive growth presupposes, not an adverse set of existing conditions which need to be changed, but a potential positive outcome which will reward the individual when he seeks and obtains it.<sup>9</sup>

The "positive outcome", the need for self-advancement, is another motivating force and education again serves these kind of aspirations.

So, the motives of human behaviour are roughly classified into two categories. Those that derive from the desire to reduce unmet needs and those that originate from a need for self-advancement. The two categories reflect quite clearly Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with self-actualization at the top, corresponding to the need for self-advancement, and the other levels related to the reduction of unmet needs.

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<sup>8</sup>BRUNDAGE, D.H. & MACKERACHER, D., op cit, p. 36. Also LOVELL, R.B., op cit, p. 109.

<sup>9</sup>BRUNDAGE, D.H. & MACKERACHER, D., op cit, p. 37.

### *What motivates people to learn*

Participation and attendance in learning projects follow the same principles, in terms of motives. In search for these principles, Houle has devised a simple but rather comprehensive typology of needs that highly motivated adult learners wish to satisfy. Other researchers have suggested more complex typologies, but their works can be regarded as an elaboration on Houle's fundamental one. Houle distinguishes three categories of needs.

a) Achievement of a goal, such as getting a job promotion or obtaining a degree that presupposes and requires undertaking a course.

b) Satisfying an itch for learning, a genuine curiosity. People who have this kind of need, celebrate the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake, and

c) Fulfilling social and personal needs. People get the opportunity to escape from boredom, to make friends, to have some purpose which they regard to be worthwhile, or even to experience the personal satisfaction that growth and achievement have to offer.<sup>10</sup>

If what has been previously described forms the incentives to learn, as experienced by a group of people, what makes others keep away from learning, or reduces their motivation to achieve during the

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<sup>10</sup>CROSS, P, Adults as Learners, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1988, pp. 82-83.

learning process? The reasons are various and what follows is an attempt to consider some of them.

### *Where lack of motivation comes from*

To begin with, for somebody who is already involved in an adult learning group the sources of what might constrain his motivation are the teacher, the subject, the prospects of failure and ultimately, his self-concept.

#### a) The teacher as a learning obstacle

In any kind of course, whether it is teacher-centred, student-centred, a series of lectures or programmed learning, the teacher is always involved in one way or another. He is the one who chooses, prepares, presents and interprets it. Everything offered, from reading lists, through discussion topics, to the organization of practical sessions, is "filtered" by him. For this matter, the learner has difficulties accepting the material, however attractive this may be, when the vehicle, ie teacher, is disliked by virtue of his behaviour "that might appear as arrogant or patronizing".<sup>11</sup> When this is the case, the material is rejected together with the person who offers it.

#### b) The subject as a learning obstacle

Sometimes, the difficulty lies with the subject matter and not with the teacher. Adults possess positive or negative attitudes about subjects. Throughout schooling, they develop preferences and they

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<sup>11</sup>WLODKOWSKI, R.J., op cit, p. 75.

form stances about their abilities in particular areas of study. Teachers, friends and family environment usually influence the build up of those abilities and preferences. Usually someone develops his skills along one of two broad divisions which are the arts and the science. Hence, new learning that involves elements of the non-favourite subjects is faced with feelings ranging from uneasiness, to apprehension. Similar reactions are caused by new learning that threatens well held convictions, and demands openness towards new ideas and beliefs.<sup>12</sup>

What should not be forgotten, is the pragmatism that characterizes adult learning. As it has been mentioned when talking about the characteristics of adult learning, the motivation is strongly affected by the irrelevance of the material. Adults cannot tolerate, and of course they do not have the appetite to put forwards effort, if what they are taught is not useful to them. "Most adults are not much interested in storing knowledge for later use or in locating answers to questions they do not have".<sup>13</sup>

Even the instructional process may raise doubts, disapproval or opposition concerning its efficiency. The students may feel uncomfortable with some modern teaching methods or believe that they do not follow the right way to accomplishment of their aspirations. When confidence, concerning the attainment of expectations, abandons the students, the motivation dies as well. What actually gives them the will and the strength to continue is the

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<sup>12</sup>WLODKOWSKI, R.J., op cit, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup>CROSS, P., op cit, pp. 84, 90-91.

realization that they move towards their goals.<sup>14</sup> Non-favourite subjects, irrelevant topics and <sup>α</sup>novel instructional process shake their good will and determination, creating prospects of failure.

c) Prospects of failure

Adult students' primary motivating force is the desire to become successful learners<sup>15</sup> and if such prospects seem to be unrealistic, motivation gets undermined. The teacher may be respectful and the material may present no difficulties, but still adults may well feel that they do not have many chances of success, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the time might not be adequate for them to carry out the course work, either because at the beginning they underestimated the work required, or because they found themselves involved in new non-academic commitments, as time went by. Also the novelty of the material and training puts adult students off as they cannot imagine themselves performing those new tasks and the prospects of failure look high.

Anyway, it is rather odd for somebody to embark on something, while believing that he will not succeed. If, by chance, he has done so, what seems to be safe for him is to stay withdrawn or become negative, so as to preserve his psychological well-being.<sup>16</sup>

d) The learner's self-concept as a learning obstacle

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>15</sup>WLODKOWSKI, R.J., op cit. p. 7.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp 97-98.

As has been discussed in chapter 4, adult students often underestimate their resources, having a low self-concept concerning their learning ability. Nevertheless, there is a positive relation between self-concept and academic achievement that makes the second actually dependent, to some extent, on the first.<sup>17</sup>

The poor self-concept also influences adults who seem hesitant or unwilling to get involved in educational projects. This group of people are in a more disadvantaged position, compared to those who lack confidence while participating, because they do not even try. They cannot imagine themselves as learners and they perceive that a learning group will be an alien environment for them. The adult group that mostly fits in with this description are those who are poorly educated. Older adults are also deterred by their self-concepts as they believe that time has run out.<sup>18</sup>

Thomas, summarizing some of the aforementioned factors that threaten motivation, claims:

What drives individuals to seek out or avoid learning activities are the learners' perceptions of themselves (self-regard, self-concept), their perceptions of the value associated with the successful completion of the task and their perceptions of the extent of which effort will result in achieving success.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp 89-90.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 9. Also BOWN, L., "Motivating adult learners", Scottish Educational Review, Vol. 21, 1979, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup>THOMAS, J.W., "Agency and achievement: self-management and self-regard", Review of Educational Research, Vol. 50, No 2, 1980, p. 233.

Other issues that influence motivation to learn, are the personality of the adult and the socio-cultural environment in which he has been brought up and in which he currently lives. The two issues are interrelated, since environment is recognized as an influencing factor over personality, hence it is difficult to talk separately about each of them. Some adults are ambitious, curious and active by nature, whereas others are helped and inspired by the circumstances. For example, people around them have and value educational ambitions, regarding a course as a worthwhile and necessary activity. The thing is, that some have stimulating forces, whereas others lack them. Cross reports that controversial issues important for some people are resolved with participation in learning. Others however, do not confront similar controversies. They take their lives simple, or they live in less stimulating environments, without cultural, ideological and other differences and coexistences that are usually a source of stimulation. In several instances, adults distance themselves from the reality around them, becoming confined to their small worlds. Consequently, it is unlikely to stimulate a desire to enquire, and seek answers in an educational programme.

Another reason for lack of motivation is related to the concept of "teachable moments". The idea is that adults go through certain phases during their life-cycle, more or less common to everybody. The phases are characterized by important events such as starting a career, getting married, becoming  $\alpha$  parent or pensioner. Each phase calls for a certain type of learning and motivation is at its peak for

this particular type, whereas it drops after the end of the phase.<sup>20</sup> For instance, courses for professionals in their area of expertise, do not usually appeal to somebody who is about to retire, just as pre-retirement courses for somebody who is beginning his career. It is very difficult to motivate an adult to learn something, after the teachable moment for that learning, has gone, or before it has come.

Many writers attribute the decision to re-enter or not a learning institution, to the school experience that adults have got. If schooling was unpleasant, it is unlikely that adults would opt for something that has left bad memories. Even if the school was not a bad experience, it may have failed to "leave pupils with any desire to learn more".<sup>21</sup> Finally, issues like job and family commitments, lack of time, lack of information about courses, red tape, fees, and travelling to go to courses, are strong reasons for depriving motivation to participate.(See chapter 2)

### *Enhancing motivation*

To enhance adult motivation to learn is a very complicated matter, since a variety of factors are involved. The learner's personality together with his school experience, the values held in his socio-cultural environment plus issues related to the management of the educational provision and to the instructional process are only a rough sketch of a complex network.

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<sup>20</sup>FALES, A.W., "Learning development over the life span", in HUSEN, T. & POSTLETHWAITE, T.N. (eds), The International Encyclopedia of Education, Vol. 5, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1985, p. 2949.

<sup>21</sup>BOWN, L., op cit.

When the educators are called to enhance the adult learners' motivation, obviously they cannot be expected to alter all these factors, at least in the short run. They may for instance influence the value attached to education in a society over a period of time, but still, the results do not entirely depend on them.

What they can do however, is to keep in mind and implement the principles of adult learning, so as not to let down those who have taken the decision to enrol. In other words, attention has to be paid to issues like clarity of the ideas presented each time, clarity of the task that has to be accomplished, regular feedback, relevant teaching material and instructional methods, and convenient timetables.

Having these in mind, one has to admit the decisive role of the educators in terms of enhancing adult motivation to learn. On the other hand, his crucial role is often dependent on various socio-economic issues, that limit the prospects of changes which he might want to bring.

Nevertheless, there is always room for manoeuvring, inventiveness and sensible educational provision for energizing the learning abilities that exist in adult population.

Motivation is known to affect perception, memory, capacity for thought and creativity. There is evidence that this is true throughout life, and this provides yet another reason why we have to take account of

motivation. Our work must be to help adults of any age to make the best of these functions.<sup>22</sup>

### *Summary*

Experience and research evidence demonstrate a causal relationship between motivation and learning which makes motivation one of the basic "ingredients" for learning. It gives the reason for embarking on a educational project and the stamina to produce. Motivation derives either from a set of unmet needs which the individuals need to satisfy, or from a desire for self-advancement. Although naturally these two motivating forces should affect everybody, the reality suggests that for many people there are obstacles which reduce the influence of the forces. The teacher, the methods of instruction, the material to be mastered and some prospects of failure, often put motivated students off. Other students hesitate to participate, blocked by unpleasant school experience, their poor self-concept, financial reasons, various commitments, social values and other reasons. In an effort to maintain and to enhance motivation, the educators are called to apply the principles of adult learning to the educational provision and try to make what they offer suitable for the needs of their clientele.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid. p. 8.

## CONCLUSION

Adult participation and performance in education are threatened by a great variety of problems. A careful consideration of them, together with a sensible provision that leads to their reduction, will give a boost to the number of participants, while at the same time it will enhance the benefit that adult students derive from their learning groups.

A great deal of efficiency, seems to rely on the atmosphere and the interpersonal relationships among the members of a learning group. Elements of respect for each other, acceptance, encouragement and solidarity are highly evaluated. A non-competitive environment and self-pacing, also contribute positively to adult learning performance. The teacher is of major importance, a source of specialized knowledge and directions. However his presence has to be discreet and his attitude humble, so as to recognize, involve and draw upon the experience of the students making them feel equally important in terms of contribution to the learning process. Learning material has to respond to current needs that bring each individual to a learning opportunity. Finally, the physical environment in which adult learning takes place, deserves more attention. One should not forget that adults are very likely to suffer from sight and hearing impairments which can be worsened by inappropriate lighting, or seating arrangements.

The above are some general, basic hints for reducing barriers to adult learning which are related to the instructional level since this has been the major concern of the present work. Undoubtedly, far more barriers to learning exist, the reduction of which depends on middle and high educational management. For these levels, further suggestions could be made (ie courses in the work place, creche facilities) but they lie beyond the focus of our interest.

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