

## Adult Learners in Higher Education: Learner Engagement and Literacy-related Issues

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to explore learner engagement and literacy-related issues among adult learners in a higher education context in a public university in Malaysia. 25 final year students in the B.A. English Language and Literature Studies (ELLS) programme in Universiti Sains Malaysia provide insightful comments on their learning experiences and literacy-related issues affecting their academic journey. Based on student responses in focus group interviews and students' journal entries, the paper examines the life stories of these adult learners and their views on learner engagement and literacy. This localized approach aims to provide literacy educators with a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding adult learners' learning experiences.

### Introduction

*"I consider myself very fortunate to be able to pursue my university education after all these years. Being brought up in a traditional Chinese family, it was drilled into my head by my father that educational opportunities among us siblings is first and foremost reserved for the males. My father sponsored my younger brothers' education and I was advised to marry and settle down. After teaching for 10 years, I finally applied to study for a degree course at university. Being at university has taught me to appreciate many things. I feel that this opportunity has opened many avenues for self improvement for me"* [Chinese female, 43 years old]

*"When I first came to university, I was assailed by many fears and anxieties and I felt inadequate among young students who came straight from Form 6. I must say that now I have learned a lot in my academic journey at university. Being able to comprehend academic articles, improving my English proficiency, writing a good assignment, expressing my ideas well during tutorials, doing project work with my peers; really all these skills are the reasons why I enjoyed my tertiary experience so much"* [Malay male, 35 years old]

*"I always thought there was one answer available to every question but being at university has opened my mind to the view that there are so many ways to interpret*

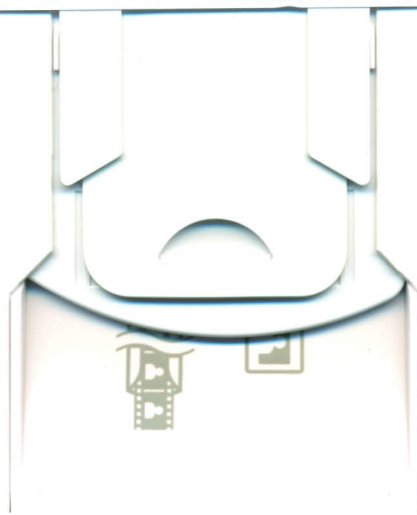


*a theory or model of learning. It has also been an enlightening experience to work in groups on various projects. Initially I assumed that things around me had a linear relationship but now I feel I have grown intellectually and I feel more equipped to handle and solve problems in my teaching life” [Indian female, 31 years old]*

These excerpts were written by adult students who were pursuing university education on a full-time basis after having taught in primary schools for a period of between 6-19 years. What evidence of literacy, generic skills and life stories can be found in their comments? How can their experiences shape literacy learning in higher education? The issues of understanding adult learners’ experiences and their literate behaviours have been contentious in many adult education circles in Malaysia (and in the Asia Pacific region) for many years. In the Malaysian education system, the purpose of students attending higher education institutions in order to pursue degree programmes in various academic disciplines is clearly to prepare the younger generation for further economic and technological development in Vision 2020 (Sixth Malaysia Plan, 1990). Educationists in Malaysia share these views as they see increased educational opportunities in the sphere of lifelong learning as a behavioural manifestation of man that communities, societies and nations should inculcate in their populace (Bajunid & Said, 2002; Lowe, 2002).

In recent years, the issues surrounding what counts as being literate among adult students in tertiary settings have undergone much change. The dawn of the third millennium has brought significant changes in every professional environment, including the field of education. Today, this contemporary and globalised information revolution (assisted by rapid developments in educational technology) has opened an entire network of information retrieval possibilities to instructors and students in various educational contexts. Some of these IT-related advances include the use of multimedia, the internet, computer conferences, list serves, relational databases and many other innovative technology-related inventions. Under such circumstances, knowledge gained yesterday is no longer sufficient to equip an individual’s literacy needs for a lifetime. For the most part of the last century, adults in Malaysia were considered literate if they had completed their Form 3 or Form 5 education and could read and write in English or Bahasa Melayu. However, these definitions do not work in today’s complex and globalised world.

Beck’s (2000) conceptual disruption of the globalization discourse provides most educators with a useful starting process. Here, he makes a distinction between globalism (manner in which globalization has become an ideology), globality (refers to world society) and globalization (denotes a processes through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying degrees of power, orientations, identities and networks) (Kenway,





Bullen & Robb, 2003). Indeed, scholars have increasingly pointed out to the contextual nature of literacy; they contend that what it means to be literate depends to a large extent on the situation in which an adult learner operates. The following examples illustrate several instances:

Literacy is not merely the capacity to understand the conceptual content of writings and utterances but the ability to participate fully in a set of social and intellectual practices. (White, 1983:56)

Literacy is not just the simple ability to read and write...by possessing and performing these skills we exercise socially approved and approvable talents. (Cook-Gumperz, 1986:1)

[Functional literacy is the] possession of, or access to, the competencies and information required to accomplish transactions entailing reading and writing [in] which an individual wishes – or is compelled – to engage. (Kintgen, Kroll & Rose, 1988:263)

Education authorities have adopted these context-bound views of literacy. Many similar definitions of literacy have been purported by other experts and it is interesting to note that most of them make good common sense. How do these definitions frame literacy thinking among adult learners in higher education? To what extent do university teachers have to understand these students' needs and experiences when planning instructional activities that stress on learner engagement in an effort to promote meaning making? However, is it possible perhaps that most of these definitions of literacy focus too much on skill to the exclusion of will? That is, literate adult learners not only know how to read and write and display literate behaviour in academic settings but also choose to acquire literate skills to enable them to do well academically. Most definitions of *engaged learners*, developed by National Literacy Research centres worldwide describe fluent, adult readers as having the desire to read and use literacy (*motivation*); the skills and abilities that allow readers to recognize print, understand it, and interact with it (*strategies*); information about reading and how to obtain ideas from the written word (*knowledge*); and the ability to learn from and with others while using reading skills and abilities (*social interaction*) (Baumann & Duffy, 1997).

This study with adult learners in a higher education context is based on this comprehensive definition, which embraces literacy abilities and literacy choices and attitudes. In this article, I develop the rationale for this approach in adult education contexts and describe how adult learners express their views about their life experiences, learner engagement and literacy-related issues. These student insights will direct adult educators to offer students opportunities to become engaged readers and writers in an academic context.



### Life Stories of Adult Students in a University Setting

Adult students come from varied family backgrounds and most have interesting life experiences that help shape the manner in which they display literate behaviours in academic settings. It is evident that most adult students have clearly defined roles when they pursue higher education after having worked for several years. Many too have had to juggle numerous role responsibilities (domestic, financial, work-related and others) in addition to their role of being full-time students in a university setting. This study involved 25 full-time adult students in a public university (mostly primary school teachers) who volunteered to keep journals for their final semester of their degree programme. These participants were students in the English Language and Literature Studies (ELLS) degree programme at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia during the Semester 1, 2002/03 academic session. For the entire 15 weeks of the semester, they wrote journal entries about their background stories, their views about their academic experiences and issues relating to literacy. The participants comprise 10 males and 15 female final year students. The participants also took part in focus group interviews (five students in each group) conducted by the researcher.

Based on their written responses, it seems apparent that nine of the adult students had to struggle against many odds to achieve their dream of pursuing a university education. Some of the interesting themes raised by these adult students related to social injustice, rigid family upbringing and lack of opportunity. The following excerpts illustrate this:

*“My home environment was very structured. Coming from a rigid patriarchal family, I was indoctrinated into believing that education is not important for girls, as we would end up in the kitchen. My father threatened to stop my education but I insisted to continue under the condition that I would not neglect my household chores. Since my family was poor and we lived in a rural area and being the eldest in a family of seven children, I had to attend to the toddlers. I had to toil daily to carry out the household chores. If I was caught reading a book, I was reprimanded for neglecting my chores. Even during my teacher training days in college, I had to contribute my meager allowance to support my family financially. I was told that a girl must practise self-denial and self-sacrifices for the family. When my father became financially stable, he sent my three brothers overseas to further their studies. I felt the injustices of sexual discrimination when my brothers inherited substantial sums of money from my father and the girls did not get any money. That's why I broke out from this socio-cultural environment and I decided to apply for university admission to fulfill my goal of furthering my tertiary education. I also wish to serve as a worthy role model to my daughters” [Chinese female, 46 years old]*





In the above excerpt, it can be seen that this adult student had to overcome numerous obstacles existent within the structure of her home environment before she could pursue her university education. During the focus group interview, a few other students raised the theme of gender inequality that existed in several traditional Chinese families and they discussed the unfair treatment awarded by their patriarchal families in only advocating educational opportunities to the male members of the family. However, most of the female Chinese students accepted that this did happen to them but that they were willing to make such sacrifices so as not to “upset my old-fashioned parents” [Chinese female, 42 years old, Focus Group Interview].

The following excerpts are taken from students’ journal entries:

*“I have been applying to pursue my university degree for the past 5 years but each time I apply, my school headmaster says he can’t afford to let me go. It has been very frustrating for me but I was really pleased that my persistence paid off. I’ve had to struggle with my family life and it hasn’t been easy for me as my husband is an insurance salesman and often travels outstation, leaving me by myself to manage my three school-going children. I am proud though of my motivation to do well in my studies and this is a good life skill for me. My mother-in-law, being traditional in her thinking, is not happy that I’m attending university but luckily my husband supports me in this.”* [Indian female, 35 years old]

*“Since my childhood days, I have only been exposed to the Malay language: at home and at school. It never crossed my mind that one day I would be majoring in English Studies at university. I began to enjoy learning English at school when I was in Form 4 as I had a very dedicated teacher who made me enjoy English as a subject. Through her, I began to read more English books, watch English programmes on TV and communicate more in English with my classmates. My main reason to obtain a university degree is my motivation to show my parents and my in-laws that I have been able to fulfil my life goal of becoming a trained English language teacher and to disprove their belief that Malays cannot speak English well. Since I am a Malay who lives among Malay people, I now realize that my community does respect Malay individuals who can communicate well in English as long as the person remains humble and stays true to cultural values that have been passed down our generation. I realize that my 3 children and my husband are the motivating factors that make me do well in my course. My husband has been helpful in looking after our kids while I’m attending university full-time. We have had to make many sacrifices but I think these sacrifices have brought us closer”.* [Malay female, 32 years old]

*“I came to university after teaching for 16 years in primary schools. I’m the third child in a family of seven. My father is a farmer and my mother is a full-time housewife. They were very pleased with my entrance to university as they*





*consider me a 'late bloomer'. Although I was accepted after my second application, I'm grateful as some of my colleagues have not been so fortunate. With a university degree, I stand a better chance of being promoted to the post of a Senior Assistant or a headmistress for a Grade B school. Being a student again has made me realize that I can now become a better English or ESL teacher when I return to East Malaysia as most of my students' mother tongue is Melanau, their second language is Malay and their third language is English. My university experience has equipped me with more teaching strategies that I can use with my students". [East Malaysian Melanau female, 33 years old]*

*"I taught for 16 years prior to my enrolment in USM. Initially I created a psychological barrier within myself, which was detrimental to my academic performance as I didn't feel comfortable being among young students in my course. My age also posed some problems as I couldn't remember facts easily, I went blank at times during exams or semester tests, I had a low self-esteem for some courses and I had fears that I might not graduate with my peers. I have always been able to do well in my coursework requirements as I enjoyed doing course assignments and was capable in expressing my thoughts during tutorials. My main problem was I kept being assailed by my negative thoughts and I began to envy my peers who seemed to handle pressure better". [Chinese male, 41 years old]*

From the above journal extracts, it can be seen that many adult students overcame the obstacles that were in their way to pursue their university education after having worked as primary school teachers for several years. During the focus group interviews, the emergent theme of being determined to overcome life's obstacles was discussed very openly and candidly by most of the adult students. Clearly the motivation to enrol for a full-time university course was the main factor in helping the adult students to overcome various obstacles in their lives. Most of them consider the value of a university education to be an important factor in helping them perceive themselves more positively and some of the students value the importance of being good role models for their children and also for their future students.

### **Engaged Learners**

Very frequently adult education contexts seem based on the assumption that, if learners work hard on taught academic skills and conventions, they will have 'acquired' the necessary literacy skills for success in academic life. However, the opposite is more often the case within adult education contexts. Adult students need to be instructed in matters pertaining to acquiring academic literacies as most of these students come from varied work backgrounds and thus look forward





to instructional activities that aid them in acquiring specific academic skills. In discussing the instructional paradigms that are traditionally used in institutions of higher learning, the term “literacies” is more appropriate as it helps to move the debate forward beyond the single set of basic skills required to declare oneself to be functionally literate. In today’s higher education contexts, learners have to equip themselves with various abilities and skills so that they can negotiate the way they make meanings (Kaur, 2001; 2005). For the adult student in higher education, campus life is a new experience and involves a whole range of registers and discourse practices that affect the way/s the student negotiates meaning in an academic context.

Higher education educators should realize that learning has most impact when it requires active engagement from the learners or when it is realistically linked to adult students’ working experiences. In other words, the instructional activities should make connections with what exists beyond the classroom. In this sense, any instructional activities which employ authentic reading and writing tasks will help promote motivated and engaged learners. Indeed, early proponents of learning considered interest to be of primary importance to learning (Dewey, 1913; James, 1950). In recent years, more scholars are in agreement with the idea that, when students have both interest in what is being taught and access to interesting academic materials, learning, motivation, effort and attitudes will improve (Knowles, 1984; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). More recently, other studies have shown that authentic instruction led to more positive changes in adults’ literacy practices outside the classroom (Kaur, 2003; Padak & Bardine, 2004).

Many teachers in higher education commonly view teaching as a transmission of knowledge of authoritative content or the demonstration of procedures. Entwistle (1998) advocates a re-conceptualisation of the relationship between teaching and learning and states that the guiding principle is that learning outcomes depend on the interaction between the characteristics of the student, the teaching style and the methods of the teacher and practices of the department and institution. Entwistle’s (ibid) stance is that of liberal humanism and it is deeply rooted in a view of education as a partnership rather than as an authoritarian transmission of information from the expert to the ignorant. Knowles (1984) too advocates a similar inclination towards the humanistic paradigm, which rests on the felt-needs rationale in meeting adult learners’ felt needs. This means that in discussions concerning literacy practices of students, educators must take into account the “interactions that continuously occur between learners and the settings when they engage in cognitive activities” (Darvin, 2006:398). The following excerpts highlight some of felt needs expressed by adult learners in this case study:

*“To me being immersed in my courses is what engagement is all about. Some course assignments are very straightforward and don’t require us to connect*



*with our lives as teachers or students. Many of my friends won't complain as these assignments are relatively easy. I like challenges so I've enjoyed assignments or projects that allow us to conduct small-scale research studies in schools or organizations. I like this bridging aspect of my learning but unfortunately very few courses had such requirements. Most of my learning has been rigidly based on the course so my suggestion for lecturers would be to get us more connected with the realities of language learning theories or models in second language Malaysian classrooms"* [Chinese female, 42 years old]

This issue was also discussed during the focus group sessions. Most adult students felt that the idea of being involved in a meaningful way in their academic tasks was something they valued and in this sense, they appreciated lecturers who provided them with learning projects that allowed them to link theories with practice. Some of the students lamented that in some courses, most of the assignments were too "theory-based and did not provide avenues for me to learn anything of significance" [Chinese male, 39 years old, Focus Group Interview]. In other focus group sessions, the students discussed that they enjoyed being involved in group projects.

The following excerpts are from students' journal entries:

*"Most coursework requirements for my degree programme have been tests and assignments and I've always struggled to do my assignments. I don't like group assignments as some group members are lazy and I end up doing most of the work; many lecturers don't realize this and we feel upset that our group members share the good grade without putting in the effort. I've enjoyed some courses where the lecturer holds discussions and gets us to air our views critically; these tutorials are challenging as I enjoy expressing my views but some of my colleagues hate this (probably because their English proficiency is not as good as mine). I also like individual presentations as we get to discuss our contributions in front of the class, using various visual aids; as the preparation of these aids require us to show our computer literacy skills"* [Indian female, 36 years old]

*"For me, being from a Chinese-medium school, doing many assignments has been difficult especially for Literature courses. I'm always conscious of my English when compared to my Indian friends who speak so well. This has always made me shy, timid and anxious during tutorial presentations and I've never got high marks. I seem to do better in my final exam though and my grades have been good. I like group projects but not many lecturers allow us to do project work assignments"* [Chinese female, 28 years old]

During the focus group interviews, several adult students echoed similar opinions in relation to their English language proficiency and group-based assignments.





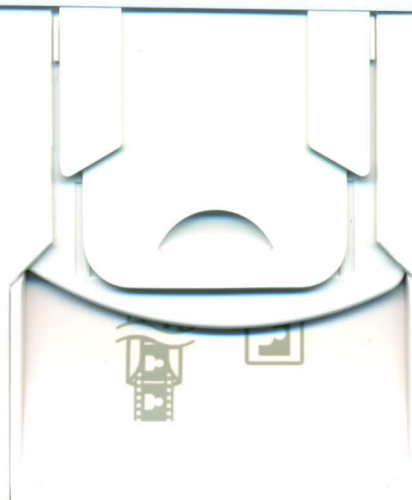
About 40% of the students stated that they preferred individual assignments for their Literature courses as this allowed them to explore ideas more creatively and critically. There were some problems with group assignments but not all were negative comments though: some reasons cited was the difficulty in getting all group members to meet at appropriate times which did not clash with their domestic duties, distance from campus or not having a home computer. However, most adult students felt that group projects did have several benefits as it helped them to get to know each other better, promoted better goodwill and good teamwork and helped them to enhance their problem-solving or analytical skills.

### Student's Views on Literacy

In the same way that adult learners discuss their life stories and learner engagement strategies, they also candidly wrote about their views relating to academic literacies in higher education. It is important for educators to look at the unique problems associated with adult students so that we can promote learning that helps all our students evolve into productive world citizens (Taylor, 2005). I believe that there is much that literacy educators in higher education can do to improve literacy-related issues for the students we are entrusted to teach. It is good for educators to reflect on our practice to question whether we always remember to be sensitive to the individual learning pace of each adult student, as well as the student's learning style. We might then seek to employ innovative teaching strategies that build on these students' current interests in ways that are sensitive to their individual development and emotional needs. The following excerpts serve to highlight some of the adult students' writings about literacy-related issues in their academic journey:

*"Most of my lecturers are good but I believe some of them assume that we know everything related to being literate academically. In my first year, I had to acquire and learn the art of comprehending research or journal articles by myself. It wasn't easy as my lecturers just make the assumption that mature learners can read well! It would have been nice if we were shown how to compartmentalize the various sections of a journal article etc. I wasn't computer-literate when I came into uni. I had to learn computing skills in my own spare time as all assignments had to be done using Microsoft Word. My view of being literate now is that an individual needs to keep abreast of all changes around our environment and to be willing to keep an open mind to learning new things that will help us become better persons or better teachers" [Chinese male, 38 years old]*

*"What is literacy? To me it's a process of becoming an all-rounded person who's not afraid of learning new things. It's also a process of becoming more articulate in expressing one's views in reading or writing. Being literate in reading and*



*writing is an essential part of being a functional university student. In my tertiary experience, I've had to handle various challenges (academic, personal, social) and I'd like to see lecturers helping us out more on this sphere though—they need to give us assignments or projects too to help us connect with the real world". [Indian male, 31 years old]*

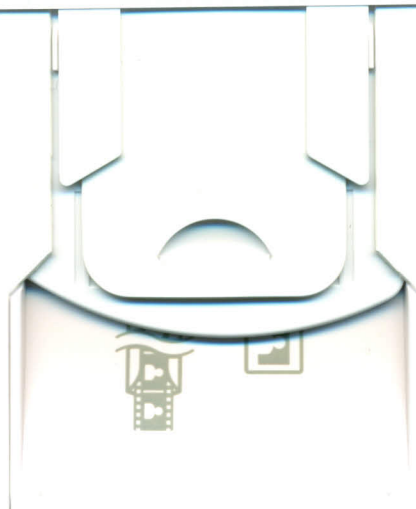
The above views on literacy were also echoed by other adult students during the focus group sessions. While most adult students are able to extrapolate on such issues, there were a few students who faced some difficulty in expressing their ideas on what counted as being 'literate' but they got the idea in the course of the group session when they listened to their course-mates discussing their views on literacy. During the focus group interview, one student highlighted the idea of literacy of being "reflective, that is I need to understand what I learn so I can apply it to my concrete situation in the classroom". [Indian female, 30 years old, Focus Group Session].

The following excerpts were gleaned from students' journal entries:

*"Some of my lecturers really touched my heart and to me being able to touch the hearts of students by helping them cope with their understanding of the subject is what the business of teaching is all about! So, to me a lecturer who can guide us towards this path has my vote as this instructor shows sensitivity and empathy of students' situation. Yes, I've acquired many general literacy skills – I learned about time management, working in a team for projects (picked up literate behaviours of understanding cultural literacy), appreciated assignments that had us employ problem-solving skills etc. Most of all, I now value good literate behaviours of my students in class and I feel more equipped to identify various literate behaviours". [Chinese female, 33 years old]*

*"Before I came to university, my view of literacy was that of being able to read, write and do arithmetic. But being involved in studies at university has made me realize that literacy has to be thought of being in the plural [literacies] as there are not only many types of literacies, there are also many types of literate behaviours exhibited by people around us – my peers, lecturers, university support staff, lab technicians, and others. I'd like to think that as a mature student, I'm leaving university equipped with skills and strategies that can help me become a better educator; that's what being literate professionally means to me. Now I feel energized as I feel I can develop better teaching strategies and bring in new activities for my future learners". [Malay female, 34 years old]*

These excerpts from students' journals show that in the landscape of their academic journey, adult students also experienced new challenges and that





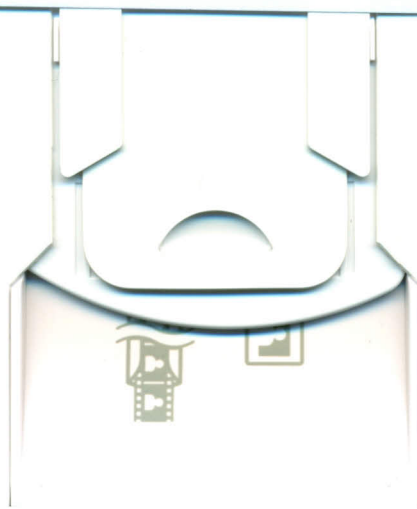
these challenges have prepared them, to some extent, to think about expanding their teaching styles. Their views on literacy seems to incorporate broad definitions of the term, to include activities and topics that they will use to teach their students when they return to teaching after graduating from university.

In one of the focus group sessions, the adult students discussed their teaching experiences and used some successful lessons to explain how they perceive literacy education. An adult student teaching a Primary 3 classroom explained how she used authentic materials to help promote interest in reading among her students: *"I used to ask my students to do comprehension questions from the prescribed textbook and workbook but I felt they were disengaged when they merely answered comprehension questions. Then when I used authentic texts, or read new stories to them or got them to do role plays etc, they became more engaged in learning"* [Malay female, 35 years old, Focus Group Session]. This adult student said she understood that 'literacy' as a concept needs to incorporate and tap into numerous skills and abilities of students to make their learning more engaging and fun. In other focus group sessions, the adult students discussed their views of literacy as being a collection of activities and skills that allowed them to incorporate knowledge from various sources in a comprehensive manner. Generally, most of the adult students' notion of literacy is plural and this concurs with many literacy experts who are of the view that it expands from the psychological to include the sociocultural and finds that what constitutes being literate depends upon the demands of time and locale (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Heydon, Hibbert & Iannacci, 2005).

## Conclusion

As literacy educators, we must listen to our students' views so that we can discover better ways of empowering our students. This paper set out to examine some implications of adult students' views on literacy, learner engagement and their life stories so that literacy educators can learn from these insights. The journals kept by the adult students provided a place for their private reflection on many literacy-related issues; students did not feel compelled to share their views with others and it provided them with a platform to reflect assumptions about optimal adult learning situations.

What seems apparent is that these adult students' views obviously pose some challenges to literacy educators in the higher education sector. What these excerpts can do is possibly highlight to educators the fact that adult students' course experiences may have become too narrowly defined by university authorities, by the metanarratives of marketing and accountability concerns. Adult students



need to given special consideration as they are a significant force, a new breed of learners in higher education institutions in Malaysia. To help guide adult students to cope with the literacy demands of higher education, we need to help them deconstruct their own knowledge, beliefs and practices as well as those that surround them. One way is to provide open channels of communication between students and educators so that their learning needs are not marginalized in higher learning. By looking at localized contexts, literacy educators can be challenged to take heed of adult learners' views about learning so that they can then plan learning objectives that answer to adult learners' views and felt needs relating to literacy-related teaching and learning issues.

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