

**Beyond the Classroom: A Qualitative Study of Self-Directed Adult Learning**

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Recently, our research team conducted a qualitative study exploring how adults pursue self-directed learning and personal development outside of formal educational settings. Each of the 13 members of our doctoral cohort participated in in-depth interviews about their informal learning experiences and perspectives as interviewees and interviewers. Our research team analyzed transcripts from these interviews using an inductive qualitative coding method to identify key themes related to adult informal learning.

Several dominant themes emerged from the qualitative coding process. First, technology and multimedia play a central role in enabling diverse, engaging learning experiences tailored to adults' needs and interests. The interviews revealed their extensive use of digital platforms like YouTube, podcasts, and social media to access on-demand educational content. Interactive technologies such as smartboards and coding programs facilitate multifaceted, self-paced learning. These digital resources allow the interviewed adults to pursue personalized learning pathways outside formal curricula.

The interviews also highlighted the importance of reflection in self-directed adult education. Adults engage in continuous learning driven by curiosity, motivation, and exploration. However, they must also overcome self-doubt, uncertainty, and lack of structure. As Sam, a 22-year-old yoga instructor, stated, "So here I go getting ready to use YouTube to figure out how to thread a vintage sewing machine in time for a class" (participant interview, July 2023). Peer feedback facilitates this reflective process. Therefore, informal adult learning involves significant metacognitive development and intrapersonal skills for success.

Informal and self-directed learning itself emerged as another key theme. Adults create their own learning experiences based on passions and interests rather than external mandates. Alex, a 20-year-old college student, shared, "I wasn't going to use a pattern" when teaching

herself crochet (participant interview, July 2023). The adult learners gained knowledge and skills through activities like gardening, museum visits, and cooking rather than formal classroom environments. This self-structured learning enables personal growth and builds time management abilities crucial for lifelong education.

Finally, social and collaborative learning play a role in adult education. Adults leverage social media and peer engagement to share knowledge and experiences in communities of interest. Collaborative teamwork also motivates learning through collective problem-solving and development. This social element meets adults' needs for connection and mutual improvement in self-directed learning.

Beyond the themes that have been identified, it is critical to note the resilience and adaptability of the adult learners in our study. Despite lacking formal structure or guidance, these adults demonstrated a remarkable ability to navigate various learning resources, adapt to new technologies, and develop unique learning strategies. This adaptability indicates their drive and determination to learn, revealing another critical aspect of self-directed learning: the ability to be flexible and responsive to changes in one's learning environment. This agility in learning, often spurred by challenges and roadblocks, is a significant asset for adults in today's fast-paced, technology-driven world. Understanding this aspect can assist educators and policy-makers in creating resources and learning environments that foster resilience and adaptability in adult learners, further enhancing their learning experience and outcomes.

This qualitative study revealed that contemporary adult learning is multifaceted, blending personalized technology use, intrapersonal reflection, informal education, and social collaboration. These findings provide insights into how adults pursue lifelong growth and enrichment outside of traditional schooling environments. Understanding the diversity of self-

structured learning approaches can help educators develop impactful educational policies, platforms, and programs tailored to adult learners' needs in our rapidly evolving digital society.

Similar to the analysis conducted in Shamburg et al.'s "How and what adults learn from recreational podcast listening," where the researchers "began [coding using] line-by-line analysis of actions and processes" (Charmaz, 2014; Shamburg et al., in press, p. 13), the coding methodology for our study was based on standard qualitative analysis techniques. After collecting interview transcripts, we used inductive open coding to identify recurring ideas and experiences related to adult informal learning. These codes were then grouped into broader conceptual categories through constant comparison. Finally, analytic reflection on code relationships and patterns was used to synthesize key overarching themes from the qualitative data.

This inductive approach provided rich insights into the complexity and diversity of informal adult learning from the perspectives of learners themselves. The findings will be valuable for both researchers and practitioners aiming to support adult education and development.

## References

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage.

Shamburg, C., O'Neill, V., Jimenez, R., Rodriguez, J., & Harb, K. (In Press). How and what adults learn from recreational podcast listening. *The Qualitative Report*.