The Adult Piano Student as an Adult Learner: Exploring Motivation and Retention

An Executive Summary

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Adult piano students exhibit the learning characteristics of any adult learner. Instructors of adult piano students should be familiar with adult learning concepts so that they may motivate and increase the retention of their students. One approach is to compare the benefits and motivating factors for music participants with those identified by leisure researchers (Jutras, 2006). Additional studies have found that many adults drop out of piano study and the researchers are interested in determining the reasons for the students' loss of interest. Retention of adult students is difficult and instructors want to understand the reasons adult students give up their piano study.

Rosemary Caffarella and Sharan Merriam stress the importance of linking the individual learner to the context of adult learning (2000). Two basic assumptions form the foundation for a focus on the individual learner: learning happens inside our heads and all adults can be effective learners. Some of the topics associated with the individual learner include participation and motivation, self-directed learning, andragogy, transformational learning, memory and learning, learning style, intellectual and cognitive development, and the neurobiology of learning.

Learning, however, does not take place in a vacuum. Instructors must understand the interactive nature of learning and that the structural elements of learning are grounded in a sociological framework. The nature of piano lessons demands an understanding of interactive learning. Piano instructors must also have a clear understanding of the demands on the time of their adult students. Participation and motivation, self-directed learning, and andragogy have particular applications for adult piano students. Areas of interest to all instructors of adults are ways to motivate and retain learners once they are enrolled in programs (Wlodkowski, 1998). Teachers of adult piano students need to know the characteristics of adult piano students within the context of adult learning if they hope to motivate and retain their students.
Adult piano students anticipated several rewards before beginning a 12-week course of study (Wristen, 2006). Students anticipated they would gain increased musical ability and knowledge and did experience increased musicianship. After the study, participants identified additional rewards, such as the group environment and the qualities and influence that the instructor brought to the lessons as being rewarding. After taking lessons, adults identified many perceived benefits of taking lessons and playing the piano (Jutras, 2006). These benefits can be grouped into three broad categories: personal benefits, skill-based benefits, and social-cultural benefits.

Malcolm Knowles (1975) identifies internal incentives that motivate adult learners. These internal incentives include "the need for esteem (especially self-esteem), the desire to achieve, the urge to grow, the satisfaction of accomplishment, the need to know something specific, and curiosity" (p. 21). There is a strong parallel between Knowles' internal incentives and the personal benefits of playing the piano that the responders in Jutras' study (2006) identify. If these benefits are present, they increase the motivation of the adult piano student.

In the past, piano students traditionally took private individual lessons with one teacher. With the arrival of electronic keyboards, many universities and music stores began offering piano lessons for students of all ages. Group lessons appeal to many adults. Social/cultural benefits may apply more to group piano lessons than to individual piano lessons.

Participants in Wristen's study (2006) were surveyed prior to the 12-week program to identify the frustrations they anticipated encountering. The participants were then surveyed at the conclusion of the program to determine what frustrations they actually experienced. The participants' anticipated frustrations were seldom actualized. The notable exception is that the participants expected to be
frustrated by the course material or their lack of skill. After twelve weeks, participants were still experiencing frustrations in these areas.

Maris (2000) believes that it is important for adult students to understand the difference between declarative memory (dealing with concepts) and procedural memory (controlling muscles). Using declarative memory, the adult student may quickly grasp the concepts necessary for playing a difficult passage. Procedural memory allows muscles to perform in a specific way. When the information is in long-term memory, the actions become automatic. Adults grasp the content of their piano lessons long before their motor skills develop. Knowing what they are supposed to play and not being able to play it causes extreme frustration for most adult students. Adult students must understand that they have to practice the physical motions many times to encode a particular motion as a response to a cue.

The studies consistently demonstrate that adults stop taking piano lessons for the following reasons: time constraints; unforeseen circumstances, such as taking care of an elderly parent; susceptible to frustration by cognitive-motor skill disconnect; and unrealistic expectations for progress (Cooper, 2001; Wristen, 2006). Instructors need a strategy to help retain these students.

Raymond Wlodkowski (1998) writes that there are four factors that every motivating instructor should incorporate. These elements are expertise, empathy, enthusiasm, and clarity. The findings of the piano studies lead to several suggestions for teachers of adult piano students that support Wlodkowski’s criteria. These suggestions include: promote self-directed learning to increase independence and self-confidence; promote motivation; provide some flexibility when scheduling lessons; offer small group interactions for the students; provide frequent occasions for small group performances in informal settings; and consider prenotational instruction that includes playing by ear, rhythmic movement, instrumental technique, improvisation, and composition before introducing notated music (Cooper, 2001; Johnson, 1996; Jutras, 2006; Maris, 2000; Wristen, 2006).
Wristen’s pretest and posttest reveal some interesting responses by adult piano students about their teachers (2006). Before the 12-week study, the most sought-after quality in an instructor was patience and/or understanding, followed closely by a positive, encouraging demeanor. After the study, the posttest demonstrated that many students valued the enthusiasm/energy and the personable/encouraging demeanor of the instructor, qualities that are also emphasized by Wlodkowski. The posttest respondents found the least appealing quality to be instructional delivery. Comments included that the instructors "'sometimes talked too fast,' 'could have explained more clearly,' sometimes 'needed to be better prepared,' and similar observations" (p. 401). These results support Wlodkowski’s expressed need for clarity in instruction.

An understanding of adult learning concepts, particularly motivation and retention, should be beneficial to teachers of adult piano students. Knowing the characteristics of adult learners and how they approach their leisure activities will help teachers prevent loss of interest in the study of music. Being perceptive about the anticipated concerns and hopes of prospective piano students will increase the motivation and retention of these students and allow adult piano students to better integrate music into their lives.
References


