

Chapter 90

Interests as a Component of Adult Course Preferences: Four Australian Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the subliminal role of interest in preferences for 50 courses available at a community college. This is an idiographic study of educational decisions. It employed a sample of situations and a representative design. Four adults participated in an educational-vocational assessment and in the process of providing vocational guidance their course selection was examined using a logistic regression. The intra-rater consistency of choices ranged from 88%-100% for repeated course profiles. Choices varied from 2-11 courses. Results supported a minor role for vocational interest in these course choices. The overall R-squared values were around .281-.764. It was concluded that (a) adult choices did not rely exclusively upon interests; (b) adults used complex decision-making policies; and (c) the policies adopted were idiosyncratic.

INTRODUCTION

The role of interest in adult and vocational education as a mental resource for learning is well-known to practitioners (Dewey, 1913; Hidi, 1990). In studies of technical and further education students in Australia, the power of interest far

exceeded the quality of instruction or the amount of learning time (Athanasou, 1994). In teaching contexts, however, interest is considered mainly in terms of gaining student attention or enhancing educational curiosity yet there are other aspects such as entrenched knowledge, emotional commitment, and relevant abilities that might define a personal interest (Athanasou, 1998a; Athanasou & Petoumenos, 1998).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5780-9.ch090

Renninger, Hidi and Krapp (1992) contrasted two types of educational interest as individual or situational. They indicated that one way to investigate interests is to concentrate on the interestingness in a situation (e.g., curiosity). A second way is to consider personal preferences (e.g., literary, artistic, musical) and look at their contribution to learning or work. Actually, Schiefele (1991) and Krapp (1993) conceived individual interest as a feature of the human personality. They saw interest as a special relationship of a person with his/her environment (e.g., a subject or a field of study).

Normally career interests (such as outdoor, practical, scientific, creative, business, office or people contact work preferences) are quarantined from the study of educational interest but they share the same cognitive, conative and affective platform. Vocational interests often act as the precursor for adult learning because they encompass the initial preference (Athanasou, 2009). Yet most research on vocational interests has been based on large groups and not on their role at a personal level.

In vocational psychology, six fundamental personality types based on general interests have been proposed by Holland (1997) and have found widespread application: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional. These are defined briefly in Table 2 and this article focuses on a specific investigation of the role of these interests and especially that of the Artistic or creative type. This latter aspect is in line with the theme for this special issue on imagination in adult and vocational education.

In vocational psychology, imagination is encompassed within the Artistic type. This type embodies creativity (e.g., art, literature or music) and is latent in many learners. In my practice as a vocational psychologist, I have noted that adults tend to rate their creative interest in the top three interest categories even if one might not categorise them as artistic, literary or musical. When questioned about this they report that creativity is viewed as any form of self-expression, ingenuity,

inventiveness or imagination. Sadly, such imagination may not find an outlet for expression in one's education or work. For instance, Athanasou (2009, p. 14) reported that 16.1% of users on the Australian Government's *my future* career exploration web-site had a dominant creative (artistic, literary or musical) interest compared with only 1.9% of occupations in Australia that were classified as creative. Interest in creative courses at high school was also substantial and accounted for 11.1% of the final Year 12 courses. This highlights some aspects of the mismatch between personal interest, educational courses and occupations.

Notionally it is considered that for many learners a career interest should be a component of course preferences. Naturally, individuals will differ and this study considers to what extent a person's individual educational choices are mediated by their career interests. It does this through the medium of an intensive, case study that is both descriptive but largely quantitative in nature. The repeated choices of four adults were examined in order to determine any pattern in their choices and to describe the ecology of their decisions.

The aim is to evaluate the contribution of a specific factor in repeated choices (see Cooksey, 1996). Figure 1 describes the model for investigating individual judgements as it has been applied in this study. The ellipses in Figure 1 represent items of information embedded in a course title. In this study the embedded features are the six vocational personality types formulated by Holland. Each educational course can be classified by these six types. As a person reacts positively or negatively to a course they are implicitly responding to these cues. If we present enough choices then it is possible to describe the role (if any) of such career interests. The individual making the choices would not be aware, however, that they are responding to a series of coded implicit features.

In this study it is proposed to present adults with a range of courses that were advertised as available at a local community college and for them to choose which ones (if any) they might be

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