

Gifted adult students: tips on studying

A master thesis of a student at Open University The Netherlands (November 2013) informed us about a qualitative study into the studying experiences of gifted adults who went back to college. Based on this study, and combined with informal interviews with gifted adults, the following tips were formulated. The thesis can be requested by sending an e-mail to s.oosterveen@yahoo.com

Giftedness and studying

Being gifted doesn't always mean that you are quick to learn! Gifted people are often interested in a lot of different subjects and motivated to achieve good results. But in order to finish a course it's also important to focus on one subject for a long time, to work together with others, to memorise a large body of information and distill the main elements from all that information. Writing papers is also an important ability that not everyone has as a matter of course.

Why is this difficult for me? How can that be when I'm gifted?

It's important to realise that even gifted people have trouble with certain aspects of studying! Even you can learn to write papers, and even you can learn to make a good planning. These are all called executive functions and they can be developed later in life without any problems.

Giftedness and studying

Many gifted people have a high standard for quality and find it self-evident that a college will ask this of them. It can be very frustrating to find that that isn't always the case. But a course is not made up in a static way. Oftentimes it's possible to give direction to your study experience by being pro-active and explaining what you need. There are also a number of things to look out for when choosing a subject. Below you will find some practical tips for that.

1. Course material

Although you will probably find the course material interesting it's possible that you have to deal with subjects that are part of the course and that you don't like so much, or that the amount of information is so big that you don't know where to start. There are a number of ways to process information effectively:

- Making summaries
- Mind mapping (For example [http://www.leren.nl/cursus/leren_en_studeren/actief_leren/visueel_schema.html])
- Getting an overview in advance by reading the headings, subheadings, introductions and summaries in advance
- Speed reading (For example [<http://studieplaza.studienet.ou.nl/studiecoach/speedreading#.UIV9rBAqKGU>])

However, some gifted students report that these techniques diminish the fun they have when studying, because they are so extremely focused. Try it out and find what works for you.

The way the material is taught can make a difference when absorbing the information. Some learn most from a teacher in front of a class, others like to study by reading books on their couch, or by working in study groups with other students. Your preference may vary depending on the subject. These are all issues you may want to consider before starting a specific course.

2. Relationship with the teacher

Gifted students prefer a teacher that has a helicopter view of the material, who can link theory to his/her own practical experiences and tell fascinating stories about this. Unfortunately you can't always choose your teachers and you may have to settle for a teacher who only explains what you need to know in order to pass your exams.

- Try to build a good relationship with your teacher, and show your interest in his/her subject. That is nice for both of you and can make your courses more interesting.

- A good relationship with your teacher may come in handy. For example if you want to do your paper in a different language, or want to do a project by yourself instead of in a study group, or if you want to choose a subject where that is not the norm.

3. Fellow students

Not all your fellow students will be as highly motivated as you, and that can lead to frustrating situations when you have to work together. What to do?

- Focus on the experiences your fellow students bring to the table, whether they are gifted or not. They are often very useful!
- When you have to work together use each other's strong points. Is someone good at languages and you are not? Do you like doing literature research and is the other good at statistics? Use these things. You don't have to be good at everything yourself, and you are probably quite busy already being a (part time) student.

4. Exams

Multiple choice exams mostly ask you about facts, and this can be unavoidable in some subjects. But these kind of questions are often very superficial and don't give much room for your own input. Exams with open questions, papers and presentations are better in this respect.

- Before you start a course, find out how the testing is done. Is it mostly multiple choice exams? Then think about if this suits you or not. Opting for multiple choice exams is often done for efficiency. Smaller colleges may therefore use multiple choice exams less often.
- Sometimes it's possible to do a paper instead of the multiple choice exam, if you place a founded request with your teacher. A good relationship with your teacher can enable this.

Translation: Yvonne Veltmaat

Appendix : Summary master thesis “Experiences of gifted adults returning to the education system: a qualitative study” (“Ervaringen van Hoogbegaafde Volwassenen die weer Toetreden tot het Onderwijs: een Kwalitatieve Verkenning”)

According to studies in children, adolescents and young adults, gifted students have certain specific learning characteristics. These characteristics lead to positive or negative learning experiences, depending on a number of factors. The focus of educational research in gifted people is generally not on adults.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand the learning experiences of gifted adults who have gone back to college, or are doing this for the first time. The main question of this study has been defined as follows: Which positive and/or negative experiences with adult education are reported by gifted adults who are studying for the first time or went back to school, how do they interpret these experiences, and which solutions do they give for possible problems?

Participants, procedure, research setup

The sample consisted of 10 gifted men and 12 gifted women whose ages ranged from 29 to 61. Participants were approached in the digital news letter of Mensa and local electronic mailing lists of Mensa. A cross sectional qualitative survey was done, consisting of in-depth interviews using the online video software Skype.

Measuring instruments

A short list of topics was compiled for the interviews to enable an open conversation about the positive and negative experiences in education. This offered participants the opportunity to talk about issues that were relevant to them, instead of being asked about themes found in advance in literature about gifted children, adolescents and young adults.

Results

Participants reported that they love to learn new things and being submerged in a whole new conceptual framework. They reported negative experiences when the content was presented in a way that didn't fit their learning style. The solution they offered was to make teachers and students aware of different learning styles and how to cope with them.

Due to their intrinsic high standard of quality the participants were very positive about the teachers who were able to place the study material in a bigger context and who were open to discussion. Negative experiences were reported when teachers didn't have these qualities. When asked for solutions to this problem, most participants told us they conformed to the teacher.

The participants had a preference to assessment procedures that tested deep learning. Negative experiences were mainly reported where the assessment consisted of multiple choice questions. The participants found that testing by multiple choice questions shouldn't be the standard.

The participants reported positive experiences with class mates who had relevant working experience. They reported negative experiences where class mates were less motivated than they were to get a good result when working together. Solutions for this were conforming to the standard of class mates and carefully selecting which class mates to work with.

Conclusion

The experiences of gifted adult students can be understood by looking at these four external aspects of learning: content, teachers, assessment procedures and class mates, combined with the following three internal aspects of learning: self reported preferred learning style, self determination and standard of quality. When designing teaching methods individual differences need to be taken into consideration. Summative assessment should be aimed at deeper learning, and the working experiences of adult students should be used in the course. Finally a flexible approach to co-operative learning is recommended.

The full report can be requested by sending an e-mail to s.oosterveen@yahoo.com