

# MOTIVATIONAL COMPONENTS OF ADULT LEARNING WITHIN THE INFORMAL EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

**Ilona Gehtmane-Hofmane**

Riga Stradins University, Latvia

**Abstract.** *This study investigated the motivational components of adult learning within informal educational settings using Constructivist grounded theory methodology. The research question - what are the motivational components of adult informal learning viewed in the Equine Assisted Learning practice framework as a learning space, where primarily learning takes place. Three dominant motivational components of adult learning were identified from the study and offered for discussion. Equine-Assisted Learning as an informal learning environment incorporates motivational components that appear intrinsic over extrinsic motivation, performance over achievement, and immediate satisfaction over long-term benefit. These motivational components are detailed further through three surfaced subcategories: interest-driven learning, immediate satisfaction, and desire for the challenge.*

**Keywords:** *adult learning, Constructivist grounded theory, Equine-assisted learning, informal learning, motivational components*

## Introduction

Much of the learning that adults experience occurs outside formal education and is classified as informal learning. Various definitions of informal learning exist in the research literature. Some scholars define it as an informal learning process in which the learning occurs with a low level of structure (Malcolm et al., 2003). Merriam et al. (2007, 2020) suggest that intentionality and consciousness of learning may or may not be present depending on the type of informal learning that is being done. Others described informal learning as not highly conscious and being influenced by chance (Manuti et al., 2015). Conlon (2004) believes no current theoretical model exists to balance conflicts between the role of individual and organizational benefits from informal learning in a global context (Conlon, 2004). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, n.d) defines informal learning as not organized in any way. Council of Europe (n.d.) points out that informal learning arises from the learner's involvement in activities not undertaken with a learning purpose in mind and are exclusively incidental. For that reason, it is sometimes called experiential learning. However, informal learning may have many forms. An example of one is Equine Assisted Learning (EAL).

*Equine Assisted Learning* (EAL) is a relatively new notion in academic literature. It could be defined as an innovative informal learning approach through guided human and horse interactions, thus offering an individual and unique learning experience. EAL is mainly based on empirical work that is not theoretically enough founded in research data. This approach is used in various settings for different learning needs or other reasons. The outcomes obtained from learning activities are primarily illustrated through the marketing materials offered by EAL practitioners. Nevertheless, all EAL programs have one common feature: human learning within informal educational settings (Gehtmane-Hofmane, 2016, 2018, 2019).

This study investigates the motivational components of adult learning within informal educational settings. The research question "*what are the motivational components of adult learning*" were viewed in the Equine Assisted Learning practice framework as a learning space, where primarily learning takes place.

## Methodology

As a working guide, basic Grounded Theory steps and Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodological guidance were used, with flexible guidelines that were evolved and adapted, depending on research needs.

The scope of the research base and the types of empirical data were determined and selected: in connection with the aim of the research question; the methodological approach of the study; the homogeneity of research participants; and the scale of the research and the resources available for the implementation of the fieldwork.

The study participant recruitment was performed using a targeted sampling type - *snowball approach* (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017). Participants were selected according to the following inclusion criteria: 1) adults 18 years and older. A person who has attained the age of majority thus assumes legal control and responsibility for their persons, actions, and decisions; 2) physically and mentally healthy adults; 3) adults with valued embodied knowledge. According to Brown (2010), those involved in guided human-equine interactions should first and firmly be defined as *individuals with valued embodied knowledge*. People without experience around horses are more likely to experience high levels of emotional arousal, resulting in less resistance. Therefore, experienced participants may show more resistance to EAL than those with less equine knowledge (Brown, 2010). The author does not focus on a specific number of individuals to recruit but to ensure adequate data for analysis. One of the challenges was not knowing how much any given participant would record data.

According to the Constructivist grounded theory methodological approach, the interpretive understanding of the studied phenomenon and the subjective experience from experiencing subject perspectives were gathered in the mutual

creation of knowledge between the researcher and research participants in the data co-construction process (Charmaz, 2000, 2006, 2014; Gehtmane-Hofmane, 2019). Thus, the author developed insights and theoretical interpretations through the perspectives of the research participants and their respective realities and made further interpretations of this reality by locating the actions within Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) sessions. The author sought to construct data through observations, interactions, and materials on the topic and empirical events and propose motivational components of adult learning during EAL that reflect it.

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) delays the literature preview but at the same time disavows the idea that researchers begin their studies without prior knowledge about the studied topic (Charmaz 2000, 2006, 2014; Gehtmane-Hofmane, 2019). Thus, the author began her study with several empirical interests – general concepts that give a loose frame to her research interest. The author used those concepts as points of departure and to form interview questions. Guiding interests and sensitizing concepts provided the author with points of departure for developing, rather than limiting ideas. Sensitizing concepts were used as tentative tools to interpret the motivational components of adult learning in the EAL process as preconceived interview guides.

In CGT methodological approach, interviewing differs from classic in-depth interviewing because of the wide range of interview topics to gather specific data for developing theoretical frameworks (Gehtmane-Hofmane, 2019). Thus, the conversational interview method with facilitative questions, reflective questions, and open questions was used in this study. Intensive or in-depth interviews were conducted as directed conversation. It allowed for an in-depth exploration of the learning experience and thus was a helpful method for interpretive inquiry. The in-depth nature of an intensive interview encouraged participants' interpretation of their learning experience and facilitated a detailed discussion between the researcher and the research participants. The questions were sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences and narrow enough to elicit and elaborate the individual experience (King, 2004). Using a tape recorder allowed the author to give the research participant full attention while taking notes on key points during the interview. When participants used terms from the lexicon of their experience, the author asked for a more detailed explanation, inviting participants to frame and explore their views. Studying audio recordings of interviews helps the author learn nuances of the language and meanings. Paying attention to language and meanings was crucial here. Tape-recorder interviews made it easy to see when questions do not work or force the data.

Imperative analyzes were performed for both data types, in private and in public discourse. The first-hand data was constructed through in-depth interviews. Data collected in private discourse were mutually built by the researcher and the EAL participant, and they account the context of subjective experience, studied phenomenon, and the research process. Data obtained from field notes and

narratives available in public discourse were used as an additional data source. The CGT methodological approach has both initial codes and in-vivo codes. In-vivo codes were used for participants' special terms and helped preserve the participants meaning of the participants' views. In-vivo codes served as symbolic markers of the participant's speech and meaning. These codes were integrated into theoretical categories and subjected to comparative and analytic treatment like any other code.

In order to facilitate the recording of EAL experiences in participants' own words or pictures and provide a rich data source in real-time, free text diary-keeping was offered in an open format. The diary-keeping was intended to obtain insight into how participants discursively construct an experience (Symon, 2004). Participants were invited to fix personal views without any structure to impede their documentation. The author provided each participant with a clear set of oral instructions that stressed the importance of recording their experience as soon as possible after each EAL session and offered to help them complete their diaries if they found it hard to think of what to record. Participants were given the three options for diary-keeping: audio recording, handwritten, recorded on their computers.

However, field research in private discourse does not give the author a sufficient picture of motivational components in adult learning. Thus, additional multiple forms of data were used to strengthen the data richness. As a secondary data source, the existing data obtained from public discourse were also analyzed: written narratives, interviews, video and audio materials, EAL programs, popular scientific publications, and Internet posts. Existing extant data obtained from public discourse contrasted with elicited data in private discourse in that the author did not affect their construction.

## **Research Results**

Three (3) dominant motivational components of adult learning were identified from the study and offered for further discussion.

Equine-Assisted Learning, where learning takes place in informal settings, incorporates motivational constructs that appear intrinsic over extrinsic motivation, performance over achievement, and immediate satisfaction over long-term benefit.

The motivational components are detailed further through three (3) surfaced subcategories (or motivational components): 1) interest-driven learning; 2) immediate satisfaction; 3) desire for the challenge.

Table 1 *Motivational components of learning* (created by author)

Category	Subcategories	Subthemes
incorporates motivational constructs that appear intrinsic over extrinsic motivation, performance over achievement, and immediate satisfaction over long term benefit	Interest-driven learning is influenced by the process itself and appears intrinsic over extrinsic motivation	interest creates a desire to participate in learning activities without expecting any external rewards
		spontaneous involvement in activities
		accommodate the variation in the motivational strength of interests among different individuals and within the same individual
		driven by both situational interests and personal interests
	Immediate satisfaction	The immediate satisfaction. Engaging with the interest
		Immediate satisfaction over long term benefit
	A desire for the challenge that appears performance over achievement	The participant is offered an independent decision-making role
		The learning environment, where individuals realize the creative power of their activities

The subcategory *interest-driven learning*: The Motivation Theories in Adult Learning emphasize interest as a crucial motivator for adult learners that creates a desire to involve in learning activities without expecting any external rewards (Cook, Anthony, & Artino, 2016).

This study shows that situational and personal interests drive the motivation for learning and are temporarily triggered by features of immediate learning situations produced by the authenticity of animals, in the Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) case by the natural horse behaviour, thus creating authentic situational content and context for learning. At the more abstract level, the EAL environment offers learning situations with sometimes non-predictable and changing tasks or additional tasks, individual learning processes, and outcomes. Adult learners can arouse interest not only by challenging tasks they met first.

The variety of EAL activities, tasks, and authentic learning situations deals with different variations of personal interests, reflect the richness of learning content and context, exploit the power of attraction for learning, and accommodate these variations between individuals and within the same individual.

In contrast to situational interest, the personal interest of EAL participants tends to correlate with the achievement related to the task or activity. A genuinely

interested participant in achieving tasks is more focused, works on performing tasks longer, uses more thoughtful strategies to complete each task, and enjoys doing so. Higher achievement leads to greater interest and greater satisfaction.

Furthermore, both situational and personal interests are influenced by the process that involves participants in spontaneous learning and appear to have intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation.

In an attempt to outline differences in the ways adults and children learn, Malcolm Knowles (1984) introduced the concept of *andragogy*, initially defined as the art and science of helping adults learn, and contrasted it with pedagogy, defined as the art and science of teaching children. Knowles posited a set of assumptions about adult learners, and one of them is that the adult learner is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors (Knowles, 1984).

Extrinsic motivation is used mainly in cognitive-behavioural and social motivational approaches, where external rewards are applied in various ways to ensure that interest in learning is sustained. Cognitive and humanistic approaches to learning motivation are dominated by intrinsic motivators, in which learners are encouraged to harness and use their inner power to pursue their learning goals (Munsaka, 2020).

Intrinsic motivation in EAL occurs due to the internal rewards of adult learners. These internal rewards are individual. It is a love for animals such as a horse or for some learners just interested in this learning process. For others, intrinsic motivation was obtained by doing something for the sake of satisfaction. EAL participants are intrinsically motivated when they do something simply because it makes them feel good, is personally challenging, and/or leads to a sense of accomplishment.

The subcategory *immediate satisfaction*: It is noted that learning from the perspective of observable behaviour are stimulated by the environment and the consequences thereof. If the consequences are pleasant or gratifying, the adult learner learns the behaviour that led to those consequences. Similarly, if the consequences were unpleasant or punishing, the adult learner does not repeat the behaviour that led to those consequences. (Chakanika, Sichula, & Sumbwa, 2016). During EAL, participants get instantaneous feedback for their actions. They can immediately know whether or not they act correctly. From the perspective of EAL, pleasant consequences could be characterized as gratification, in most cases, immediate positive feedback as a reward for doing something in the desired manner. EAL paint a picture of the learning process in which participants/learners can receive instantaneous feedback for their action and allow them to correct their mistakes and improve quickly. During the EAL exercises, the participant immediately experiences the consequences of every performance and decision. These results could give both pleasant and unpleasant satisfaction. When participants/learners derive satisfaction from EAL activities, they naturally want to increase their skills.

The subcategory *desire for the challenge*: Recent research on constructivist learning environment design has argued for the motivational importance of authentic, exciting tasks and contexts. The third identified motivational component of adult learning is the desire for the challenge. EAL participants' willingness to challenge focused on the learning content in context, the tasks and difficulty of the tasks, and the horse with which the participant interacts. In the language of the EAL participants, learning content does not refer to predictable knowledge and skills that they were expected to learn. This could be explained that EAL personalizes learning experiences with a focus on how to provide more learning choices and challenges in a non-prescribed and non-standardized curriculum. Thus, the term learning content and context must be seen from EAL participant/learner individual perspective. That also shows EAL content and objectives outside the traditional approaches in adult learning.

### **Conclusion**

Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) as an informal learning environment incorporates motivational components of adult learning that appear intrinsic over extrinsic motivation, performance over achievement, and immediate satisfaction over long-term benefit. Interest-driven learning is achieved through the informal learning environment that offers authentic learning content and context and challenges in completing tasks. In the EAL framework, the object of interest might well be identified with a set of situational and personal interests. It should be noted that in this study, the participants were involved in a learning process involving a scientific investigation. Immediate satisfaction is achieved because participants/learners receive instantaneous feedback for their actions to correct their mistakes and improve quickly. During the EAL exercises, the participant immediately experiences the consequences of every performance and decision. It should be noted that these results could give both pleasant and unpleasant satisfaction. The desire for the challenge is achieved through learning content that primarily does not offer predictable knowledge and skills that participants will be expected to learn. This could be explained that during EAL process personalizes learning experiences with a focus on how to provide more learning choices and challenges in a non-prescribed and non-standardized curriculum.

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