

## Accelerated Learning and Adult Religious Education: Potential and Pitfalls

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(Research Interest Group - Research is complete)

**Abstract:** The results of this year long qualitative study of a congregation's adult religious education programs, examined through the conceptual lens of accelerated learning, show that accelerated learning mirrors some traditional practices in religious education, suggests new approaches, and raises questions for further research.

According to the Search Institute's national study of effective Christian education only 28% of adults involved in the 493 congregations surveyed participate in the church's religious education program (Benson & Eklin, 1990). With only a small percentage of adults in congregations regularly participating in religious education, and continuing, nagging questions about the educational effectiveness of their programs, adult religious educators are exploring a wide variety of curriculum and instructional methods in religious education programs. The report of the Search Institute's national study of Christian Education (Benson & Eklin, 1990), suggested that effective education in the future depends on making significant and thorough changes in educational structure, format and assumptions. This study is a preliminary exploration of the applicability of accelerated learning approaches for adult religious education.

### **Accelerated Learning**

Accelerated learning has been understood in a variety of ways. According to Russell (1999), "Accelerated' basically means that speed is increasing. Accelerated learning means changing behaviors with increased speed" (p. 4). In higher education accelerated learning refers to classes or learning programs that are conducted in a compressed format, such as a traditional fourteen-week course being conducted in four weekend classes (Wlodkowski, 2003). Outside of higher education, accelerated learning is viewed as a constellation of learning methods that utilize the whole brain, and by extension the whole person (Kline, 1988; Jensen, 1996; Mcphee, 1996; Rose 1997; Meier, 2000). In corporate training and development literature accelerated learning has been identified as a practical strategy for more rapid learning (DePorter, 1992; Russell, 1999; Ostrander & Schroeder, 2000). Viewed as an outgrowth of adult education and akin to experiential learning (Wlodkowski, & Kasworm, 2003a), accelerated learning embodies a deep respect for the context of the learner, practical relevance for everyday life, creative learning methods, and engagement of individuals through recognition of their individual interests, strengths, and attributes (Meier, 2000; Rose, 1997).

Accelerated learning has been the subject of considerable study and experimentation in secular forms of adult education (Wlodkowski, 2003; Wlodkowski, & Kasworm, 2003a), but is relatively new as an approach to adult religious education. Accelerated learning is not without controversy. Traditional educators see it as an inappropriate compromise of the traditional educational dilemma between convenience and rigor (Wolfe, 1998). Since accelerated formats

involve fewer hours of formal instruction, other critics hold that there is less time for students to process information between classes and less time available for class interaction, both of which are viewed as weaknesses by traditional educators. Accelerated learning focuses on the learner and the learning process, while more traditional learning methods tend to be more teacher-centered and focused on content and curriculum.

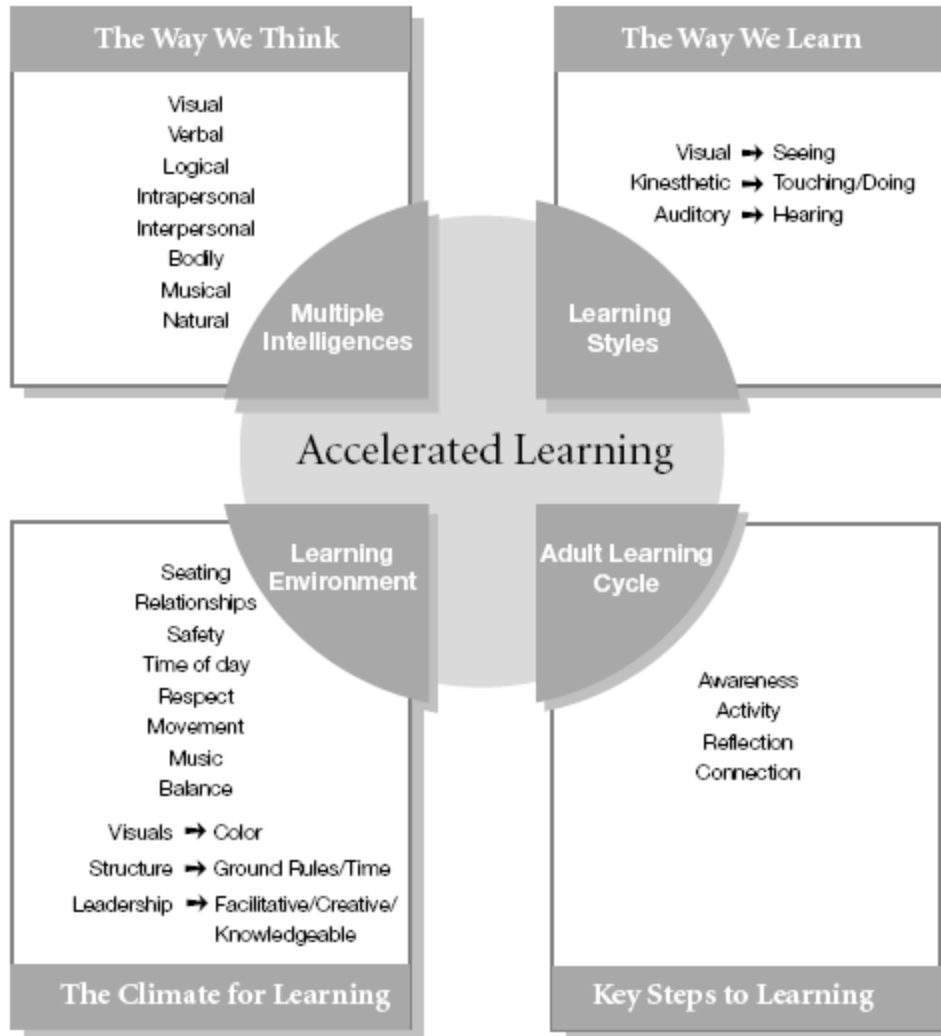
Although a controversial approach, research suggests that accelerated learning may hold promise in adult religious education programs. Learning programs that are offered in more concentrated formats might be more appealing to adults with busy schedules. Programs offered at times other than the traditional Sunday School hour or at sites other than the church might attract individuals who might not otherwise have participated. Programs utilizing teaching and learning methods associated with accelerated learning might lead to greater learning effectiveness for a broader range of people. Accelerated learning approaches could be useful in addressing low overall congregational participation in religious education programs, lack of persistence by those who do enroll in educational programs, and problems arising in trying to plan educational programs for participants with very different life experiences, different levels of religious content knowledge, and a wide variety of prior religious education experiences.

The study builds on a prior research conducted with adults who were participating in vocational education programs (Davis & Ziegler, 1992; Davis, 1999; Davis 2000). The next section describes the prior study and the conceptual framework for accelerated learning that resulted. That conceptual framework became the foundation for the current study in applying accelerated learning in congregational settings. That prior research focused on adults with limited educational experience and interest, who often faced learning situations that they described as “not relevant to their lives,” topics that seemed “over their heads,” and teaching methods that were “boring.” The purpose of that research was to identify and test an accelerated learning model as a way to strengthen participation and learning effectiveness among participants. Although educational participation and persistence are complex phenomena and not easily addressed, accelerated learning approaches showed promise as the feedback from participants was positive and attendance improved. The study led to the development and implementation of a vocational skills curriculum that proved effective in addressing the educational needs of these participants (Davis, 2001).

In the conceptual model used in that study accelerated learning was understood as a methodology that systematically attends to differences in thinking, learning styles, learning method and learning environment. Gardner’s (1983; 1993) theory of multiple intelligences has been associated with approaches to accelerated learning because it suggests that participants can learn more effectively when they utilize their preferred ways of thinking. For the same reason learning styles theory based on Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) has also been used as a basis for accelerated learning (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Dilts, 1983; Norris, 1997). The model also underscores the importance of the learning environment (Kasworm, 2001), including such things as facility, relationships, structure of learning, and the importance of color, music and support systems for learning (Davis, 2001). Although there are many different ways to understand the adult learning process (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), this model underscores the importance of four elements, awareness, activity, reflection, and connection. These elements represent a description of the adult learning cycle. The adult learning cycle is one of the four basic components of this model of accelerated learning, along with multiple intelligences or how people think, learning styles or how people learn, and the learning environment or the climate for learning. These have been found to be important for effective adult learning in a variety of

formats (Davis 2000; 2001). The four components of the accelerated learning model used in this study are depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1: A Model of Accelerated Learning



The model developed in that prior study was used as a conceptual lens to examine one congregation’s practice of religious education. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent of the occurrence of the four components of this model of accelerated learning in a church’s educational program and participants’ response to these components. The research question for the study involved determining the degree to which the components of accelerated learning are found in adult religious education events and how participants respond to these elements.

### Method

Adult learning programs in a large mainline Presbyterian church were observed at intervals over a one-year period. Programs included two traditional Sunday School classes, two small groups, two special midweek studies, two mission trips, one study trip, and two retreats.

These educational events were chosen because they are common in a wide variety of congregations. The research method included observation and informal interviews that were documented in field notes. Data were analyzed by identifying themes that were common in the majority of educational events observed and participant responses to those events. The themes were validated through ongoing conversations with study participants.

### **Findings**

Findings identify similarities and differences between accelerated learning and traditional approaches to adult religious education. Elements identified by adult participants as barriers and enhancers of the learning experience clustered into three areas: elements associated with the instructor, those having to do with teaching and learning methods, and the learning environment.

#### **Elements Associated with the Instructor or Leader**

Participants in almost all the different adult learning events studied underscored the importance of instructor enthusiasm, knowledge of topic, congruence of class experience with instructor's personal life experience, and good facilitation and communication skills. As one class participant said: "If the teacher knows what he [or she] is talking about that is important, and if he [or she] has lived it, that is powerful." The instructor's ability and willingness to learn from and consult with students was also highlighted. "I want to be in a class where the teacher listens to me and cares about my life." Although these instructor characteristics were identified as important across a wide variety of types of programs, participants noted their occurrence especially in retreats, mission trips, and study trips, pointing to the importance of time available for conversation. One woman who participated in a week long mission trip said, "This was the most powerful learning experience I have ever had. Sarah [the leader] made it fun. She was so energetic. I felt like I belonged. We really got to know each other. You couldn't help learning. And when you couple that with the people we met [at the mission site] and the experiences we had, it was mind-blowing." Participants who were most enthusiastic about the role of the instructor or leader underscored the importance of facilitation more than instruction. Primary in effective instruction was the ability to help participants learn what was important to them.

#### **Instruction and Learning Methods**

Instructional methods had an impact on the participants' learning experience. They underscored the importance of active learning approaches because they were memorable and related to real life. Participants on mission trips often pointed to the importance of "learning by doing." One recounted working collaboratively with people from another culture in preparing a meal and how she learned about that culture in the process. Even in traditional Sunday School classes, participants recalled specific "activities" involved in learning, even when they could not remember the topic or scripture passage. For example, one participant recalled numbers on the wall of a classroom that related to different positions on a controversial topic. She said that she would never forget her surprise at seeing people she knew standing at different places that represented those positions. Activities, such as those that occurred during retreats, were highlighted as important ways to remember and apply the particular lessons of the event. One man recounted a time when he made a collage depicting his sense of call on a retreat saying that the images mean even more today than when he first made the collage.

Whether in small groups or as a part of retreats or trips, those who participated noted the long-lasting importance of the relational aspects of their experience. Opportunity for interaction

and discussion made the learning experience more meaningful. By contrast, numerous participants expressed frustration with a lack of time for building relationships and even for discussion in the traditional one-hour Sunday School format, or the weekday church-based class format such as Wednesday night special topic classes. Those who participated in mission trips valued of learning from their experience, and having time to reflect on that experience and discuss it while participating.

The experiential aspects of learning, whether they occurred on trips, in groups, or in traditional classroom sessions, increased participants ability to remember and apply learning to ongoing life situations. A number of participants noted that the curriculum and lesson plans used in traditional classes often were barriers to what they termed “real learning.” Real learning occurred when they felt a heightened engagement with the topic, a deeper sense of authentic relationship with others, and a profound connection between the learning experience and their life experience. Memorable learning experiences or “real learning,” as it was termed by participants, were associated with trips, retreats, or other events where participants spoke of being physically or emotionally engaged. Such engagement often was impacted by the learning environment.

### **Learning Environment**

The learning environment included the physical place of the learning experience, the room or site, the climate of the space itself including comfort and décor, the supportive systems for learning, such as handouts, refreshments, breaks, as well as less tangible factors. Participants for example spoke of the “feel” of the event. This feel was related to concrete environmental factors but also seemed to extend beyond the participant’s ability to define its meaning, perhaps referring to less tangible aspects of environment such as hospitality. Most of the environmental factors were more concrete. Some participants spoke of the effectiveness of environments that were removed from their church, home or work settings. One woman’s comment is typical. “It helps to get away. You see things differently.” Or as another said, describing a retreat experience, “The place itself was spiritual. The view was breathtaking; the room was so peaceful, and comfortable. The whole place spoke the message of the retreat. I’ll never forget it.” Participants appreciate the “informal, warm, and comfortable” home environments of many small groups. They also made several negative comments about traditional Sunday School class environments. “The room is so boring and bland.” Another said, “It’s hard to learn. The room is junky and noisy.”

Of the three clusters of factors affecting learning effectiveness, the instructor was the most important, followed by teaching and learning methods, and learning environment. If the environment was less than adequate, good instruction and method could compensate at least to some degree. On the other hand an excellent environment with poor instruction or methods inappropriate for the subject or participants was not effective. Of all the factors, relationships enhanced learning significantly. The compressed time format of retreats was mentioned as a positive factor because the shorter time commitment increased the likelihood of their participation. Although participants reported that active experiential events such as retreats, mission trips and study trips were the most effective learning experiences, their reports were anecdotal. Participant perceptions of a greater sense of belonging, an active learning environment, heightened awareness, more time for reflection, and a greater sense of connection with both the traditions of faith and their particular life experiences were significant, however, because all were associated with reports of significant engagement in the learning process.

## Discussion

Although the settings were different, these findings parallel those of researchers exploring the effectiveness of accelerated learning approaches in higher education (Scott, 2003; Ratey, 2001) and adult education generally (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), lifelong learning (Cunningham, 2000; Hodgson, 2000; Jarvis, 2001; Griffin & Brownhill, 2001), and popular training and education approaches (Rose, 1997; Russell, 1999; Meier, 2000). Religious educators also have noted the importance of more holistic approaches to adult religious education that bear similarities to aspects of accelerated learning, moving beyond an over dependence on rational linguistic approaches and traditional school settings (Harris, 1989; Little, 1993; Seymour & Miller, 1982; Seymour, 1997). Learning approaches that more systematically attend to the way people think, the way they learn, the learning environment and the process of learning consistently are reported as being effective, both by participants in this study and reports in the wider literature of adult learning.

In a variety of ways participants learning experiences corresponded to the various components of accelerated learning comprising the model used as the conceptual framework in this study. The four components of the model, multiple intelligences or the way we think, learning styles or the way we learn, learning environment or climate for learning, and the adult learning cycle, emerged in various ways in the participants' anecdotal reflections on their experience. This finding contrasts with the relative lack of reference to these components as participants discussed their response to more traditional school based forms of religious education. This was especially true of participant experiences of traditional adult Sunday School classes where the emphasis was on content and instruction often perceived by participants as having limited relevance to life. It is important to remember that although the retreat experiences examined as a part of this study did have a strong congruence with practices common in accelerated learning approaches, not all retreats utilize active learning methods. Some utilize very traditional forms of instruction that are heavily content-based and not focused on the needs of participants. Sunday School classes can also be conducted in a manner more congruent with accelerated learning principles, as is often true in churches using the Rotation model of learning. Accelerated learning involves an approach to learning that has potential for a wide variety of educational settings.

Terming particular learner-centered practices and assumptions as accelerated learning is useful in that it is a convenient way to build awareness of their importance and to integrate various components into a common learning experience. The term accelerated learning is less important than the components that are included under the descriptor. Accelerated learning underscores the importance of addressing multiple variables in the learning process simultaneously in a variety of formats focusing on the unique needs of the adult learner.

While there are a number of variables that impact participation in religious education programs (Isaac & Rowland, 2002; Wlodkowski, 1999), the widespread lack of participation in formal adult religious education may also underscore limitations inherent in the formal religious education models currently in use and the importance of examining other learning approaches such as accelerated learning. Instructor involvement, attention to teaching and learning methods, and learning environment all were important factors in learning effectiveness for participants in this sample. Study participants were broadly supportive of approaches that incorporated learning strategies associated with accelerated learning, especially those identified in the conceptual

model utilized in this study (see figure 1). Findings from this study contribute to the model by highlighting the role of the instructor or leader.

A number of accelerated learning strategies have been used individually in effective ways for some time in congregational adult religious education programs such as retreats and mission trips. Even traditional classes used approaches identified as effective by participants in this study, but often used them less intentionally, consistently, or consciously than they were used within less traditional learning environments. Increased awareness of and skill in applying elements of accelerated learning in religious education settings could improve enrollment, persistence, and effectiveness of adult learning experiences, and suggests the promise of this approach for adult religious education.

While this study suggests the value of accelerated learning as an approach for adult religious education, the literature also points to significant pitfalls. Accelerated learning is often viewed as a panacea for learning and a quick fix. Learning in whatever format is rarely quick or easy, especially when it is important. The popular literature on accelerated learning focuses on techniques, which when taken out of context become interesting gimmicks with minimal effectiveness. At best, accelerated learning represents a constellation of activities and approaches that when taken together do seem to have a positive affect on the adult learning process. The process of application, though, requires considerable understanding and skill, not to mention creativity, persistence, and hard work.

Although participants did not use educational terminology to describe their experiences, thoughts, or feelings, their positive responses clearly paralleled descriptors associated with accelerated learning, and their negative responses were clearly associated with learning approaches that for the most part were contrary to the principles and practices associated with accelerated learning. In a time when educational participation is clearly low in many churches, participants' available time is limited, and their response to accelerated approaches is often positive, this study suggests the value of further research focused on accelerated learning approaches in religious education settings, as well as the potential for incorporating these approaches more broadly into the educational life of congregations.

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