GEOGRAPHY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Influence of adult learners’ self-direction on group learning

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Abstract: The purpose of the study is to present the group learning behaviours of adult students at a public university in Ghana. The study setting is the University of Ghana, specifically the Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies. Adults engage in continuous learning for purposes of personal and professional development. The study draws from the concept of self-directed learning and constructivist theories, examining the relationship between self-direction and group learning in an adult learning context. Through the qualitative approach, the researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews to gain insights into what influenced adult learners' self-direction and peer engagement. The research found that collaborative contexts lead to better student engagement. Also, support from a more capable colleague contributed significantly to successful learning. The main contribution of the study is that the self-direction of the adult learner is critical to moving from the zone of the current development to the zone of potential development. For practice, adult educators need to design curriculum programmes that can encourage adult learners to create student-driven support groups for learning. Concerning workplace learning, adult learners should develop professional relationships and build networks especially voluntary support groups with their peers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Adult life is one of multiple spheres, the common major ones being work and family and other social engagements which compete for the individual’s limited time. The situation gets challenging when the individual decides to take up formal studies for whatever need or motivation. To succeed in their complex world adult learners often engage in collaborative learning where their peers serve as tutors and assist them to understand and solve problems which they initially cannot do on their own. These peer engagements tend to be more effective when they are formed by the learners themselves than when they are imposed by the lecturer. This article is useful to adult learners as it draws their attention to the need to initiate collaborations to help them to cope with the pressures learning. Higher learning institutions and curriculum designers can also improve upon courses using learning approaches that encourage collaborative learning.
1. Introduction

More adults are taking charge of their learning and development to meet the demands of their daily lives. This has become necessary due to the pressures from a fast-changing socio-economic world that sometimes impact their employment. Their interest in seeking specific knowledge and skill makes them self-directed learners with the primary responsibility for their learning ranging from planning how to learn to an evaluation of learning experiences including all other activities falling in-between, that is necessary to ensure successful learning (Caffarella, 2000; Ellinger, 2004; Tekkol & Demirel, 2018). As part of the strategy of adult learners to manage their multiple roles, including learning as higher education students, adult learners tend to draw support from their colleagues and faculty (Lundberg, 2014).

It helps them to deal with learning anxiety as they face challenges in their studies, including passing exams and completing their projects successfully. They build relationships where they get support from their peers that encourages those who are struggling to persist in the course. These educationally meaningful peer relationships are essential to support the adult learner (Cherstrom et al., 2017). Adult learners also tend to achieve more with the support of their colleagues than when they work on their own (Briggs, 2013). However, it must be noted that, the level of self-directedness of the learner determines, whether the individual will seek or avail themselves to such collaborative learning arrangements, especially if the task is of common interest (Boticki et al., 2015).

Adult learners manage multiple roles including being spouses, partners, parents and full-time workers. These equally essential roles compete for learners’ limited time. Often the pressure from juggling these roles tends to affect their studies leading to poor academic performance (Tetteh & Attiogbe, 2019) and in extreme cases abandonment of the course of study. Thus, they need support from other sources, the institution, faculty and their peers to succeed in their learning (Tetteh & Attiogbe, 2019). However, their very nature as adult learners assumes that they are self-directed and have the personal attributes that enable them to take responsibility for their learning and find strategies to solve problems including getting help from their peers. There is some literature on peer engagement and collaborative learning that concentrate on the relationship between the self-direction of the adult learner and effective peer support such as implementing and sustaining cooperative learning by teacher collaboration (Hoffman et al., 2020; Miquel & Duran, 2017), promoting self-directed learning in formal educational institutions (Guglielmino, 2013) and impact of cooperative learning on self-directed learning abilities in the computer applications technology class (Mentz & Van Zyl, 2018). Therefore, this study contributes to the addressing the knowledge gap.

The study, therefore, posits that the intrinsic ability of the adult learner is critical to the learner moving from the zone of current development (ZCD) to the zone of proximal development (ZPD) concerning Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory of learning explained in the conceptual framework. The study argues that self-direction facilitates the creation of knowledge through critical thinking and social interactions that enable the student to expand their knowledge to their highest potential. This perspective led to probing into the educational experience of adult learners at the Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies, University of Ghana. Therefore, the objective of the study was to explore how the self-directedness of adult learners influenced their participation or otherwise engagement in peer support groups and its impact on their learning. To
gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of self-directed learners, the following research questions were asked.

(1) Why do adult learners join learning support groups?
(2) What informs the composition of the learning groups adults join in?
(3) What forms of support are available for adults in the learning groups?

2. The concept of self-directed learning

Self-directed learning (SDL) is one of the foundational concepts in the field of adult education. Introduced in the seminal work of Tough in 1971 (Merriam et al., 2007), the concept has been defined variously. It is mostly described as “the process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes” (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). In a recent development, Guglielmino (2013), posit that most learning contexts that develop skills and attitudes support SDL. Also, self-directed learning is positively related to academic performance (Khalid et al., 2020). However, self-directed learners are primarily responsible for the learning situation and use various processes, including collaborative learning, where adult learners engage with their peers for academic purposes (Caffarella, 2000; Guglielmino, 2013). This interdependence in learning challenges the view of a universal individual learner who is autonomous and independent and considers self-direction as a personal attribute of learners which determines their drive and how they use resources around them (Merriam, 2001) including their peers to achieve learning outcomes. These abilities empower peer learning groups as members see one another as reservoirs of knowledge that they can tap into to enhance their success as they give and receive feedback.

Self-directed learning is related to student engagement in academic work. The concept of student engagement has varied definitions in the literature (Grogg, 2018). Some studies have viewed student engagement as all-embracing of the interaction of various actors in the university environment that give the student a positive experience and contributes to the achievement of educational goals including academic, social and emotional (Bowden et al., 2019). According to Reschly and Christenson (2012) “student engagement is the glue, or mediator, that links important contexts’ such as student’s home lives, university, peers, and community to student success” (p. 3). For example, student engagement refers to the collaboration between faculty and students and, students supporting their peers in their learning activities (Bundick et al. (2014).

Trowler (2010) described student engagement as the interest that they show in their learning, class and institutional activities and the relationship between themselves. Still, others have described student engagement from the perspective of using technology to enhance collaboration among peers and for academic performance (Mango, 2015). And to “enhance learning through student interaction with one another around academic topics, often through peer teaching” (Lundberg, 2014, p. 82.) In a multicultural environment, peer interaction predicts students’ learning as they explain things to those who are foreigners and may have challenges adapting to the learning community.

Engagement also implies working together, thus, Braxton et al. (2004) and Mango (2015) argued that courses that require students to work together contribute to their learning and social interaction. Thus, the view supports earlier studies by Tinto (1997, 1998) suggesting that student study groups strengthen their relationship with peers as colleagues teach them. The foregone suggest a relationship between self-directed learning and student engagement for academic success. For instance, Rashid and Asghar (2016) found a relationship between self-directedness and student engagement via technology leading to positive academic performance. The concept of Self-directedness suggests adult learners engage in continuous or lifelong learning as a way of
improving themselves. It can be in institutions and among groups where the individual takes responsibility for their learning and work out the mechanism to achieve their learning needs.

It calls for the ability of the individual to not only desire that support but to be intentional about it and to take steps to develop such relationships among their peers (Merriam, 2001). The two concepts are important to the study because the participants include adult students who are also workers and have family and other social responsibilities that sometimes prevent them from attending classes regularly. Even for those who are regular at lectures, some adult learners do not always understand what is being taught by the lecturer either due to limited class hours or because they may need further clarification of some concepts in a non-technical language and non-judgemental and relaxed setting of peers. The pressure build-up from combining school with social responsibilities have an emotional impact on the student that he or she may not be able to bring to the attention of the instructor or the university administration and may eventually, drop out of the course quietly. This may happen even when the department has formed study groups for the students. However, where the learner can engage with their, it helps them to create their support group. That way, they may be able to address their academic and social needs more effectively and efficiently because they are comfortable with the people with whom they are dealing. Hence the need for engagement and peer learning networks.

While student engagement may serve as a catalyst for facilitating linkages of adult learners’ social-emotional and academic achievement, for the student to really achieve success the individual must be self-directed in the creation of appropriate engagement with their peers. Study results have shown that, peer study groups are not effective where those study groups formed by lecturers or institution officials.

Student engagement through peers supporting one another is another common feature among learners. Peer support is described as peer intervention, peer education and peer learning networks (PLN). Topping (2005) describes peer learning as acquiring knowledge and skills through social interaction among persons who are at a common level and none of them is of a professional teacher status among the group. According to Kester et al. (2007), self-directed learners find peer learning networks useful as it allows them to determine what to learn, where to learn and time schedules that are suitable to the group’s context. Through the network, adult learners connect to their peers from whom they get support including peer tutoring and social interactions to deal with their learning and social needs.

Peer learning networks are effective in cooperative learning situations (Miquel & Duran, 2017; South et al., 2017, p. 215). The primary purpose of PLN is to improve learning through connections and interactions, mutual goals, and collective effort. It is a formal group of “status equals or matched companions” that work toward the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping” (Topping, 2005, p. 631). Members in the network pool knowledge as they work to achieve a common purpose (Christiansen & Bell, 2010). PLN is a process of education and information sharing that occurs between individuals from the same age group or similar social backgrounds (Milburn, 1995; Sriranganathan et al., 2010).

This definition has similarity with the description of peer intervention as social and communicative processes that are used by individuals of a common demographic group or experience to realise their goal. These processes operate on the principle of homophily, whereby the social influence of peers serves as the foundation for growing affirmative relationships that enable a group to achieve its purpose effectively (Chiu & West, 2007; Harris et al., 2015). Membership of the group, particularly in a school environment, allows connecting with others and benefiting from expertise that one may be less endowed with. In other words, the activities of PLN support the concept of student engagement with the knowledge gathered by the students helping them to, self-direct.
While the concepts mentioned above emphasise process, peer support focuses on the forms of support provided and received by members of an adult group. Writing from the context of health care, Dennis (2003) asserted that peer support involves emotional support, informational support in terms of advice and feedback, and appraisal support facilitating, self-evaluation and problem-solving. These facets of support help the recipient cope with actual or anticipated stressors. It is argued that peer support can lead to better outcomes because it facilitates better relationships among adult learners and serves as a mechanism through which they boost their coping skills to persist in their studies. That notwithstanding, it is important to note that merely putting individuals together based on similar characteristics is not enough to yield satisfactory results (Harris et al., 2015). There is a need, besides, for the support intervention to promote social interaction that will build trust and strong ties among members where feedback is provided and viewed by the recipient as such.

3. Benefits and challenges of PLN

Indeed, the benefits of PLN in higher learning are well recorded. The diversity of ideas of members help to improve their knowledge, and they work together, particularly in their research (Boud & Lee, 2005). Also, Christiansen and Bell (2010) found from their study that PLN “provided emotional support in adversity and protection against social isolation” p. 807). The principle helps students to cope with learning pressures and to persist in learning (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Despite the established usefulness of peer learning networks, it has some challenges. Few studies spell out models for developing and evaluating them (Miller et al., 2016). This leads to variations in their formation and makes it difficult to assess their impact. It may also lead to social loafing, as some members may take advantage of available support to fail to give their best (Schippers, 2014). There is also the issue of leadership of the group. Because the groups are mostly of equal status, they may engage in power struggles. The alternative is that the group may be without a leader which can also create a challenge for effective coordination.

The peer learning networks contribute significantly to the success of adult learners (Laurel, 2018). This is because it facilitates the co-construction of knowledge as they think and solve problems through social interaction. It also provides the much-needed emotional support that adult learners need to enable them to manage their fears and frustrations during their studies (Dennis, 2003).

4. Conceptual framework

This study is situated in intersecting bodies of literature. They are self-directed learning and zone of proximal development.

Tough (1971) and Knowles (1975), in their initial studies, presented SDL as a linear and continuum model. They suggested that learners engaged in continuous learning as a way of improving themselves. This gave support for SDL in institutions and among groups where individuals took responsibility for their learning and worked out the mechanism to achieve their learning needs. By focusing on the autonomy and freedom of the individual in learning, SDL sums up the assumptions of the adult learner. However, later research by Lai (2011), added two more models; the interactive and instructional models that focused on SDL as a process. In addition to these characteristics, self-direction is a personal attribute of learners which determine how they take ownership of their learning in terms of their motivation, strategy and resource uses (Merriam, 2001). Thus, while adult educators assist in locating resources or expert alternative learning strategies, the adult learner should have a set of personal attributes and specific skills to be able to manage their learning as individuals or informal learning programmes. In sum, the student must have the inherent ability to search out and develop social support among peers to be successful (Liechty et al., 2009). This is the foundation of personal growth in adult education.

Astin (1999), suggested that students gain more from their learning experience depending on how intense they are into it and how relevant the activity is to their academic work. It implies that the student must find the interaction relevant to their need and be highly committed and engaged in it. The involvement underscores one of the assumptions of andragogy that an adult’s readiness
to learn is dependent on the relevance of the activity to his or her development (Merriam, 2001). Improving upon Astin's theory, Kuh (2009) proposed an engagement model that emphasises the duty of an institution to take deliberate steps to create a collaborative learning environment for students. Without discounting other forms of engagements, both Astin and Kuh believed that student engagement with peers, result in positive student learning outcomes. Kuusisaari (2013) also suggests that members of study groups learn from each other and collaboratively create knowledge in their group discussions as the learning process is social and distributed. Thus, the study groups serve as a social context for the students’ thinking to work together to learn and create knowledge as they solve problems. The importance of social context in collaborative learning is the third concept underpinning this study, and that is the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Sociocultural theory of learning, specifically the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), suggests that learning and development take place in a social context through social interaction (Kalina & Powell, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). According to the concept, the individual's potential for development is dependent on problem-solving with assistance from an adult or a more capable peer. In other words, a learner's socialisation is vital for cognitive development (McLeod, 2020). Though the theory of ZPD was associated initially with learning at primary and secondary schools, it has in recent times been applied in adult learning (Kuusisaari, 2013; Wass & Golding, 2014). In applying ZPD to the work of adults in 1987, Engestrom suggested that “it is the distance between the actual working level and the level of potential as determined through problem-solving in collaboration with peers” (Engestrom, 1987 as cited in Kuusisaari, 2013, p. 53). Explaining ZPD further, Wass and Golding (2014) argued that “with a more capable peer or teacher assistance, students can operate at a higher level than they could on their own, and this enables them to learn to operate independently at this level.” (p. 672). Put simply, ZPD is the difference between what a person can achieve working alone as compared to when they get assistance.

From the definitions, it is noted that learners who initially find it challenging to understand a concept, solve a problem or perform a task on their own may be able to do so with support from colleagues or an instructor and work independently. Therefore, the student can move from his or
her current level of development, the “zone of current development” (ZCD) to the ZPD through collaborative learning (Harland, 2003) as illustrated in Figure 1.

The assistance referred to metaphorically as “scaffolding” include resources material and feedback that the lecturer can give to the student to help them improve upon their learning. It also includes “offering the opportunity for peer support where students can observe and copy how a peer solves a similar problem, get feedback about the effectiveness of their strategies, or collaboratively invent new strategies” (Wass & Golding, 2014, p. 676).

Linking the theories discussed above points to the fact that collaborative student learning contributes significantly to enhancing adult learners’ capacity and providing them with the emotional support to succeed in their academic work. However, the self-directedness and the personal attribute of the student determines whether they will seek out and build or be part of such peer learning networks to achieve successful outcomes.

5. Materials and methods
This research used the qualitative approach because it aided the researchers to understand the lived experiences of participants through interviewing. The choice of the approach was to generate an in-depth account representing the views of the participants. Creswell (2010, p. 183) explains that the qualitative approach is where “the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on the multiple meanings of individual experiences, socially and historically constructed, intending to develop a theory or pattern or advocacy/participatory perspectives (i.e., political, issue-oriented, collaborative, or change-oriented) or both”. The qualitative design because the study was interested in gaining insights into what influenced adult learners’ self-direction on peer engagement and group learning.

6. Sampling and participants
The study adopted the purposive and convenient sampling technique, which allowed the researchers to choose only a specialised group such as adult students for the study (Cohen et al., 2000). Convenient implies selecting participants who were available (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). The participants for the research consisted of twelve adult students between the ages of 21 years (the 21-year-old opted to be in the adult education department because she is a young mother) to 48 years, with 50 per cent of them being 27 years old. Five were graduate PhD students while seven were undergraduate final year students who were all considered as adult learners in need of peer support. There were seven males and five females. The twelve participants were conveniently selected. Apart from two of the unemployed participants, all the other eight were workers. All of them were from the Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies, University of Ghana. They voluntarily agreed to be part of the study.

7. Data collection procedure
Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data. The researchers’ asked questions that elicited responses to help achieve the research interest. The interview guide helped in collecting the data. Data collection took place in the 2018/2019 academic year. The questions were open-ended to permit some flexibility in terms of participants’ responses (Bryman 2004) rather than limiting them to a few multiple-choice answers in the case of close-ended questions. Apart from ensuring flexibility in participants’ answers, the semi-structured interview also ensured uniformity in all the interviews in terms of the line of questioning (Table 1). Though the guide was followed, the interviewer was able to probe into topical trajectories in the conversation that might stray from the guide when this is appropriate (Knox & Burkard, 2009). The researchers had a one-on-one, face-to-face interview with the participants. The interview questions focused on participants’ adult learning experiences and how they coped with group learning. Some of the questions asked were: How are study or learning groups formed? How does the group help members to understand topics? How do you support each other to learn as a group? What kinds of relationships emerge from these study groups? During the interviews, participants were probed to gather in-depth
Table 1. Demographic information of respondents

| Type of Student | RESPONDENT    | AGE | HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION |
|-----------------|---------------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| Undergraduate   | Respondent one| 27  | Senior High Certificate           |
|                 | Respondent two| 27  | Senior High Certificate           |
|                 | Respondent three| 25  | Senior High Certificate           |
|                 | Respondent four| 26  | Senior High Certificate           |
|                 | Respondent five| 27  | Senior High Certificate           |
|                 | Respondent six| 27  | Senior High Certificate           |
|                 | Respondent seven| 21  | Senior High Certificate           |
| Graduate        | Respondent eight| 27  | Masters’ holders                  |
|                 | Respondent nine| 27  | Masters’ holders                  |
|                 | Respondent ten| 34  | Masters’ holders                  |
|                 | Respondent eleven| 45  | Masters’ holders                  |
|                 | Respondent twelve| 48  | Masters’ holders                  |

Source: Fieldwork (2019)

information and ask for clarifications and examples while reflecting on participants’ responses, as suggested by Gilham (2005) and Braun and Clarke (2012).

The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. To ensure the anonymity of participants, limited demographic information was collected, such as age and employment status of participants and pseudo names were used instead of their real names (Allen & Wiles, 2016). The interview sessions obtained the oral consent of interviewees, having informed them it was for research purposes, and were free to opt out of the study if they decide not to continue. The study thus met the ethics requirement. Data saturation (Jackson et al., 2015; Middlemiss et al., 2015) was considered after the 11th interview when no added information emerged especially on the kind of support students received from self-formed groups. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the Humanities funds provided by the University of Ghana Research Fund (seventh call) hosted by the Office of Research, Innovation and Development (ORID).

8. Data analysis
The Nvivo software helped to analyse data. The voice recording of the interviews got transcribed was read several times to become familiar with the content, which was followed by generating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Furthermore, the transcribed data was coded, and three themes were drawn out for interpretation. Two of the authors participated in generating the themes to compare notes and reach a consensus (Saldaña, 2015, 2021). Also, double checking avoids the idiosyncratic interpretation of data. Thus, based on the description, the researchers adopted the grounded theory approach in generating themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This procedure of data analysis conforms to how qualitative data should be analysed (Yildirim et al., 2014). Furthermore, themes developed into narratives from the participants and then the report was finally written (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

9. Results
Three themes emerged with one sub-theme based on the questions from the interviews. These were: Group composition and its effectiveness; Successful peer learning groups provide academic and emotional support; Self-formed groups critical to effective study. The sub-theme under support was financial support.

10. Group composition and its effectiveness
The study revealed that students become members of a study group sometimes by the lecturer to work on a project based on students’ index numbers. Other times students on their own formed
study groups made up of their friends. All participants had experienced forming both types of groups. Explaining how the groups are constituted, Boy, a male undergraduate student, had this to say.

Some of the groups we formed by ourselves. You see a friend, one that you mostly know, and you ask him/her if you can form a group to discuss a topic that you may have difficulty understanding. With some of the groups too that when a lecturer gives you a piece of work, the lecturer assigns members either randomly or using our index numbers.

Similarly, James said that “actually some were by the lecturer, and I personally formed a group.” However, Abosey (male) threw more light on the formation of the group. He mentioned that:

Most of these things, it is one person who starts, but you will realise that all the people who come to join the group are also in need of that thing. So even though one person had that idea and started it, I am sure that if you do not like the idea, you will not join the group. However, once people accept to join it means they need that support.

From Abosey’s statement above, adult students join study groups based on their needs. The need to better understand a complicated topic, prepare for examinations or manage extensive course work were the primary reasons why students formed or joined a group on their own. They drew from the strength of colleagues to deepen their existing knowledge, and this enabled them to perform better in their learning, especially during the examination period. One of the participants further explained that:

It was getting to our examination period, so I thought it wise to form a group with my course mates … I called them and told them that “chale we are about starting examinations, so we need to do group study and discussions. So, we were four in the group. I called more than four, but it was only the four who agreed to join.

From the expression above, adult learners formed groups based on their learning needs as well as the availability of who wanted to be part of the group. A female participant (Baaba) also joined in, to state that:

When you form your own groups and you are studying, you get to understand things better because the group consists of about five people and if everybody is sharing their ideas towards something that has come up another person may explain what I want to know that I am struggling with better than me. Sometimes the person communicates to my level of understanding until I get it other than the lecturer who has many students to manage and who is in a hurry to complete his course outline.

From Baaba’s point of view, smaller sized groups formed by the students themselves were effective because their colleagues had patience with each other when explaining difficult topics to them. The quote revealed that groups formed by the students were academically viable as they spent enough time during group discussions to allow all members to understand a particular subject rather than rushing through.

Another participant (male) further intimated that:

However, when the lecturer form groups for people if you are not careful … some people do not get on well. The mere sight of another person puts them off. It is very natural. So, this can restrict the way discussions should go.

The participant’s explanation shows that groups formed by lecturers may not be effective because the lecturers do not know students well enough to put them into groups to do meaningful work. It also explains how individual differences may prevent adult learners to collaborate effectively in groups formed by lecturers.
In addition, Serwaa, a graduate student expressed her thoughts as follows:

We realise that especially during the course work a lot of what we were doing was very extensive in terms of reading. Moreover, the truth is that everyone had different strength because we are all coming from different orientation and diverse backgrounds . . . We realise that we could draw on the strength of each other. So, we said to ourselves why do not we form a group where we will provide support to each other whereby even if we have, let us say so much work to do in a particular course work we divide the work into different areas, and everybody takes one area . . . So, we said to ourselves, to help us to, you know, improve upon our learning effectiveness, why don’t we come together as a group and meet to discuss such matters.

Serwaa’s statement shows that groups formed based on adult learning needs proved more effective than when lecturers formed the groups. The narratives reveal that for these adult learners to catch up with their reading and to prepare for their examination, they depended on forming collaborative groups for effective learning.

11. Successful peer learning groups provide academic and emotional support

The study groups provided various forms of support to their members. Key among these are effective learning, emotional support and motivation, work-family life balance. Peers distributed topics among themselves, which they prepared on and took turns to present to the group. Their colleagues made input that enriched their learning. The more capable peers served as tutors and shared their expertise to the benefit of the group. This exchange of ideas and information in the group widened their perspectives. The following are the explanations of the participants:

Bernard had this to say “For instance, on a topic that on your own, you are struggling to appreciate when you come together as a group, and somebody throws light on it, you get a better understanding. So, I can say that it helps you learn more effectively and improves your chances of being successful in your studies or in your work.

Addo, had this to say “The lecturers are in a rush to finish a topic, so if you need more clarification after the class. After class work, you go to your group members to help you understand the course you are studying

Oko, had to say, “However, when we (students) form the study groups ourselves we add people who can express themselves well and this has helped us academically because the ability to express yourself well with your colleagues helps you gain more knowledge on the topic. Sometimes these group studies help with how to organise my learning goals.

Bernard’s narrative reveals that adult learners understand concepts better when they share ideas about concepts among themselves. Similarly, Addo depends on his colleagues for academic support. Oko’s opinion further suggests that learning in groups help the group members to focus on what to learn which is beneficial academic support to them.

On other hand, emotional support identified as one of the significant benefits among students, due to the extensive work involved coupled with parental and work roles. These put pressure on them, often resulting in frustration and burnout. Collaborating with peers who empathised with the situation and encouraged them served as motivation. Dede’s confession says it eloquently:

To be honest but for the emotional support I got from my colleagues, I am sure I would have dropped from this course by the end of the first year. The demands of parenting and work were so overwhelming that I told them I was going to leave. Nevertheless, they shared their challenges with me and encouraged me to stay. I tell you; they were there for me. One of my mates always gave a listening ear whenever we met.
Dede’s narrative shows that emotional support from peers enabled adult learners to balance school and family life effectively. Those members of the study group who were preoccupied with family responsibilities were assisted by their peers who were less busy and managed to make progress through discussing and sharing material. According to Serwaa:

Now, during one of these group discussions, there was this particular lady who had virtually covered most of the topics. So, what she did was that she just went over the areas with me and explained things to me. Moreover, this was a last-minute kind of thing. To the extent, I managed to get an A in the paper. So, I would say that had it not been for that group discussion, that support, I could not have made it because I had virtually given much of my time to family to the neglect of my studies.

Furthermore, Awo revealed that:

Let us say you have issues, and you need help, you can just call on a member of the group you are comfortable or familiar with and talk to the person. For example, a member had issues with her fiancé, it was like she was depressed which was also affecting her academic work. So, she tried to confide in me and so I advised her on how to blend to the two. So that she would not have to fail her examinations and at the same time losing her boyfriend.

From Awo’s narrative, emotional support is a key benefit in joining a study group as it creates an avenue for emotional balance for academic success and social networking. It is worthy of note that those who were self-directed in the group showed much support for those who needed their help to make progress in their respective programmes as Serwaa revealed.

Further, students exhibited self-direction as demonstrated in Dede’s response. She said that:

We formed the group ourselves to enable us to help one another with our coursework. For instance, moving from what we already know to what we wanted to know from our peers. You see, unlike undergraduate studies this PhD programme involves much work, I mean researching for material, reading, writing assignments, exams. And it is not as if this is the only thing we have in our lives. Some of us are working and going to school at the same time and most of us are parents as well. All these things demand one’s time. No one needed to tell us that we had to find ways to survive in the programme. So, we formed study groups to advance our learning’.

Students, therefore, demonstrated self-direction in choosing their groups as exemplified by Dede’s comments above.

12. Financial support
Coincidentally, financial support emerged as a sub-theme when the issue of support was raised. Asking, participants about the kind of support garnered by students, financial support resonated with majority of them. Some of the students have following responses to questions:

Bernard (male) said that “not me but other members of the group have received other support. Sometimes group members come to ask for financial help to sort out their school fees.” Addo (male) also chimed in that “some colleagues also have problems with school fees. So, we the group members as well as colleagues outside the group contribute to help them top-up their fees so that they can write their exams.” “Sometimes too, it is a financial support. If the person is unable to pay their fees, they come to us to ask for financial support to top-up their school fees” Naaki (female) stated. Finally, Awo (female) intimated that “another person lost her father. At the time we were about to write exams and she kept on crying. At the time we were about to write exams and she kept on crying. So, we contributed financially.”

Mostly, the financial support was for school fees as the group members helped their colleagues so that they could register to write their examinations. Notwithstanding, Awo’s statement
suggests that sometimes the financial support is for the social needs of peers. It also means that students accept the responsibility to ensure that their peers in the self-formed groups do not lag academically. Thus, they will go any length including supporting them financially. Furthermore, the types of support received from peers are a sign that adult students will play active roles in their self-formed learning groups.

13. Self-formed groups critical to effective study groups

Reported satisfaction with the relationship with peers was found to be positively related to the effectiveness of learning. Discussion groups that are constituted based on personal fit rather than lecturer’s assignment worked better and harmoniously as each member accepted and performed their task and participated actively. Serwaa, a participant, illustrated in her response that:

Naturally, when you meet as students, people tend to flow easily with others. There were times when you realise that you are more endeared towards certain people … you understand yourself, and you easily share information … Sometimes when you form groups for people if you are not careful … some people do not get on well. The mere sight of another person puts them off. It is very natural. So, this can restrict the way discussions should go. So, when you identify people, you are comfortable with it makes the work much easier and makes the group more dynamic.

Students got actively involved and engaged in group discussion only when they found the interaction useful to their needs and can help them achieve a better learning outcome. The narrative also suggests that lecturer assigned groups makes members unhappy and therefore limits the flow of effective discussions. In other words, students go to great lengths to connect with colleagues they believe are well resourced to join their self-formed groups. Lartey (male) recalls such a situation:

We look out for those who are vocal, and we think they know in class, then we befriend them. Some too they show maturity in the way they make contributions and talk. When you ask them questions, the way they answer allows you to draw conclusion that they are intelligent, having in-depth knowledge about the concept and hence you need to mingle with or join them so that you can get the help you need.

Abossey had this comment to make:

I noticed that some of us do not study. They wait till examination times, and they come to waste your time. I quite remember a friend made similar observation so last semester he never had group discussion with anybody. He said it will be better if he studied alone” (Abossey)

In short, students preferred voluntary study groups rather than faculty or department-imposed groups due to the bond of friendship among members. They also joined a group with knowledgeable colleagues for maximum benefit rather than a waste of time. Members who were familiar with each other and had some bond, got on well in the group than when they were not, though they may be in the same class. Forming their groups goes to buttress the need for trust and bonds to make peer groups effective. Just putting people together was not good enough. They could ask contributors to repeat explanations as many times without being afraid of or reprimanded by the lecturer or stigmatisation from the class as happens mostly in larger groups formed by lecturers.

14. Discussion of findings

This study examined the influence of adult learners’ self-direction on group study. The findings show that participants progressed from 2CD to ZPD within the context of adult learning. Students identified their learning needs, sought out help by either forming or joining study groups on their own. Results from this study has shown that, given students’ peculiar situation, they came out of themselves to form groups that would study share notes and discuss course content together. The
groupings helped adult learners to organise their learning challenges as illustrated by Serwaa and Dede above. In line with Kuh’s (2009) study, students played an active role in group studies. However, a study by Boticki et al. (2015) found that when students lacked self-directedness, they tend to depend on each other for support. On the contrary, Guglielmino (2013) argued that self-directed adult learners form collaborations for better performance. This is supported by the comments of Larrey and Abossey. In addition, Arja et al. (2020) found that students’ perception of small group satisfaction improved self-directed behaviour among students and thus achieved higher academic performance. Similarly, Bundick et al. (2014) confirm that collaborative contexts lead to better student engagement. This intrinsic ability for seeking out support from a more capable colleague contributed significantly to successful learning by members of study groups, gaining from one another by way of socialisation, academic discussions and psychological support. As indicated earlier, adult learners had to manage multiple roles that compete for learners’ limited time through peer support.

Thus, the study established that, respondents’ or students perceived, peer support to be beneficial to achieving better academic performance which is consistent with findings from a study by Tetteh and Attiogbe (2019) that when students support each other in peer groups, they performed better academically. Contrarily, peer support as perceived by students in the Ghanaian context, is not institutional as posited by Tetteh and Attiogbe (2019). It is a deliberate attempt by adult learners to depend on each other for their academic achievement. After receiving assistance from their peers, the participants were capable of doing more and better. They understood that they were primarily responsible for their learning success and then took the step to seek out the necessary support, academic and emotional, from their peers to enable them to manage the difficulties they faced in their studies effectively. In another vein, Flores and Sprake (2013) showed that students are happier and more enthusiastic to participate in learning because of emotional engagement (Figure 2). It is thus, a form of cooperative learning and assistance seeking, which leads to higher self-directedness who may not possess self-directed behaviour (Mentz & Van Zyl, 2018). To the extent that what they could not do independently, that is, understand course work, prepare for exams, they could do now after they had support from their peers in the group discussion (Kuusisaari, 2013; Lantolf, 2000). Also, the anxieties and fears about not completing projects or failing examinations were removed by the collaborative support received from peers.

Figure 2. Movement to Zone of Proximal Development influenced by the self-direction of the adult learner (Source: Field data, 2019).
contrary to the findings of Lundberg (2014). These findings suggest, therefore, that self-direction of the adult learner acquired through peer support is critical to moving from ZCD to ZPD as illustrated in the model below:

Furthermore, by getting involved in what was of interest to their needs, the participants collaboratively tackled a problematic aspect of their various programmes and found solutions to them as exhibited by the responses of Serwaa and Lartey above. The study groups provided an environment of shared understanding, mutual respect and bond of friendship which enabled the members to develop collaborative skills from their current level of knowledge to a higher level (Cherrstrom et al., 2017; Christiansen & Bell, 2010). Students attribute their achievement to lessons taught in class, and from lessons picked up during collaborative learning times with their peer group members. However, as is typical of groups, social loafing was evident as some members tagged along, knowing that they will benefit from the contributions of other members. This was more associated with non-voluntary groups where the authorities usually imposed membership.

15. Limitations of the study
As a qualitative study involving twelve participants (12), the study may lack reliability which is usually linked to positivist research and therefore may be limited in the application of its conclusion to a larger population. This issue was resolved in the selection criteria, which used the purposive sampling technique to recruit adults still going through their programmes and who have the experience of participating in study groups. Despite its limitation, there was evidence that adult students found studying with their peer groups was extremely helpful to their successful learning.

16. Conclusion and implication for Adult Educators
Adult learners face many challenges which affect their academic work. They sometimes feel lonely and frustrated by the demands of academic work and if they do not get the appropriate assistance, they may quit the programme. Whereas the literature emphasises student engagement as institution-led, the study showed that self-directed adult learners took the initiative to engage their peers to create their peer learning support network which enabled them to effectively cope with the challenges of academic and social-emotional needs during their studies which resulted in the student retention and success. In addition, the study contributed to the field, a perspective of peer support from a Ghanaian university context thus making scholarly contributions and closing the Ghanaian context gap in a discourse that is dominated by the western context.

The study additionally points to the need for adult educators to include in the curriculum programmes that can help adult learners improve upon self-direction and encourage them to create student-driven support groups for learning. Concerning workplace learning, adult learners should be encouraged to develop professional relationships and build networks. This will enable them to pool expertise extending support and learning within and outside of the organisation. For future research, quantitative or mixed method approach could be conducted to assess the relationship between self-direction and peer support. Future study should be looked at in a more comprehensive way and should be expanded to include other departments and higher learning contexts.

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