

# Online Learning Insights

A place for learning about online education

Andragogy

How to Make Learning Matter to Online Students



SEPTEMBER 25, 2015 SEPTEMBER 25, 2015 ~ DEBBIE MORRISON ~ 3 COMMENTS



([https://onlinelearninginsights.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/learn\\_alevine.jpg](https://onlinelearninginsights.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/learn_alevine.jpg)).

“Classic Learning” by Alan Levine on Flickr

One of the core premises of “Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning” (<http://wp.me/p1N30w-3iE>) is to make learning matter to students (Brown, Rodediger & McDaniel, 2014). The authors emphasize that learning is stronger when it matters, when the abstract is made concrete and personal. Intuitively it’s a logical premise; of course we want learning to matter to students, where learning is relevant and applicable to their contexts. Yet how do we know if students perceive course concepts as relevant and meaningful? And even if they don’t, does this matter? The consensus is that it does. Evidence indicates that when learning is relevant, students are motivated and engaged→ learning is more effective and outcomes are more likely achieved. This phenomenon is described in “Make it Stick” and in recent research (Bernard, 2010). In practice, I’ve seen how students are more likely to engage and participate in online courses when assignments encourage them to apply course concepts and ideas by building on their existing knowledge and experience.

### **Framework for Relevant Learning – Andragogy**

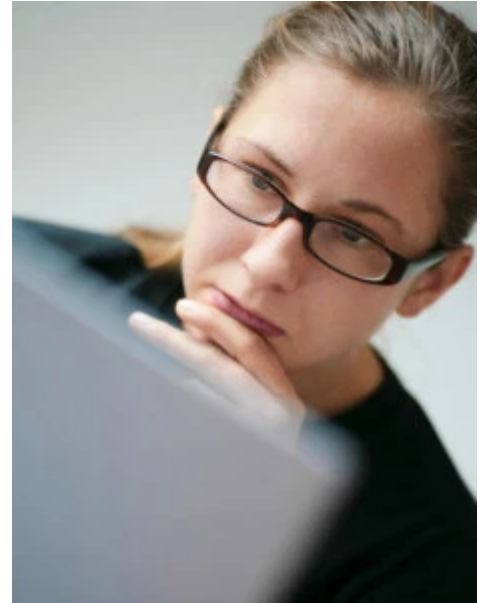
The concept of making learning relevant to students is not new. Malcolm Knowles, ([http://web.utk.edu/~start6/knowles/malcolm\\_knowles.html](http://web.utk.edu/~start6/knowles/malcolm_knowles.html)) creator of andragogy the theory of adult learning, outlines a set of assumptions of how adults learn; relevance is a core element (1984). Andragogy suggests adults learn differently than children, and learning programs tailored to characteristics of adult students, such as work experience, existing knowledge and life situations, are more likely to motivate and engage students in the learning process. Below are core assumptions of andragogy that serve as guidelines for making learning matter to students:

1. Adults need to know why they need to learn something
2. Adults need to learn 'experientially'
3. Adults approach learning as problem-solving
4. Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value.

([https://onlinelearninginsights.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/girl\\_thinking-e1443045252774.jpg](https://onlinelearninginsights.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/girl_thinking-e1443045252774.jpg))

### **Strategies for Making Learning Matter**

I've found that by applying adult learning principles to the design of online courses, assignments and learning activities for instance, payoffs are significant in terms of student participation. I've seen this time and again. Online students are sensitive to busy work—activities or assignments that don't appear to have a purpose, don't require critical analysis, don't appear to align with course learning objectives, or have real world application. Granted, these are students' perceptions, yet it is beneficial to explain the purpose of an assignment, to describe how it will further learning and be of value, or be applicable later in the course. Following are practical strategies that I've applied when designing courses in an effort to make learning matter. Comments highlighting my experiences are in blue.



- Describe an assignment in three parts; 1) outline the purpose of an assignment: how it fits in with objectives, what students will gain from the assignment, why they are doing the assignment, 2) describe assignment details and logistics: provide a description of assignment, format, resources, due dates, rubrics, and 3) describe technical logistics and details, e.g. any platforms or software needed for the assignment, collaboration tools for group assignments, where and how to submit the assignment e.g. within the LMS, or Turn-it-In, etc. Frequently I've seen assignments that lack detail in at least one of the three mentioned here. This creates confusion for students, potential for lower-quality assignments, need for frequent reminders/clarifications, more student questions, and it delays students getting on the path to learning.
- Provide opportunity for students to apply and share their experience and knowledge of subject matter: encourage students to draw upon work experience or existing knowledge. For example in a discussion question activity, include opportunity for students to share their experiences as applicable to the topic. Doing so can be as simple as adding another component to a discussion question where students incorporate examples from their personal or work experience.
- Create opportunities where students research and/or share how (select) course concepts apply to real world scenarios or situations. This can be done within a discussion forum activity, a blog post assignment, written reflection activity or other type of written assignment. Alternatively, assignments can be based upon a real world challenge or problem the student is facing within their work, community or personal situation. As discussed earlier, the key is to highlight to for students why they are doing the activity—even though it may seem obvious. An example of how a question might be framed—here's how a question from an undergraduate course in nursing might read "...to demonstrate how (concepts) apply to current situation in clinical setting, describe how this would be integrated...".

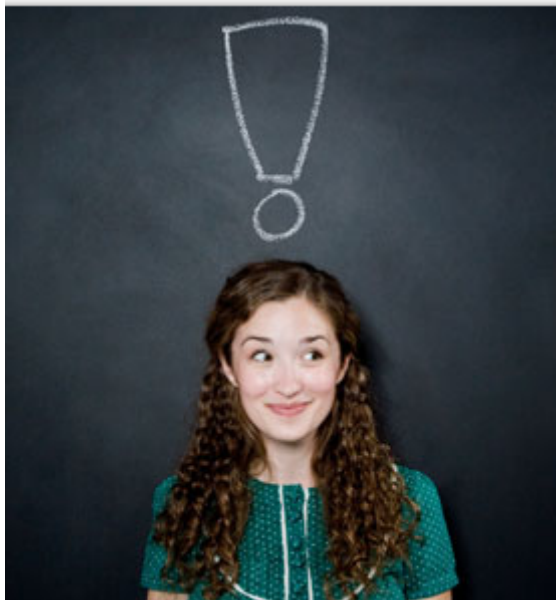
### **Closing Thoughts**

Making learning matter to learners does matter; where learning is relevant and applicable, especially for adult students. Considering adult learner characteristics is good practice that can lead to motivated and engaged students. Yet online learning does require a different approach than used for face-to-face settings—one that considers characteristics not only of the students, but the medium. The strategies outlined here are a starting point.

## References

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## How-to Encourage Online Learners to take Responsibility for their Own Learning

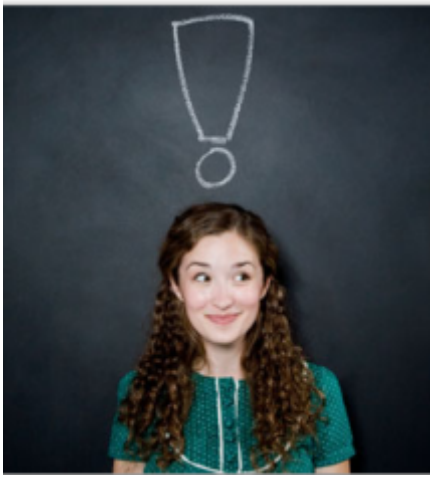


SEPTEMBER 7, 2012SEPTEMBER 7, 2012 ~ DEBBIE MORRISON ~ 12 COMMENTS

“To single out the institution as being solely responsible for student departure, as do many critics, is to deny an essential principle of effective education, namely that students must themselves become responsible for their own learning”. (Tinto, 1994)

(<https://onlinelearninginsights.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/screen-shot-2012-05-13-at-8-28-21-pm.png>) Author Vincent Tinto could have been writing about distance education when he wrote his book Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition





([http://books.google.com/books/about/Leaving\\_College.html?id=AB-ERLYDMg8C](http://books.google.com/books/about/Leaving_College.html?id=AB-ERLYDMg8C)), but he was writing about the drop-out phenomenon in traditional colleges. Yet this quote is relevant to distance education today, perhaps even more so as educators wrestle with the high drop out rates of some online courses, specifically MOOCs. In recent posts I've written about how course instructors can support online learners, how to consider the needs of the learner (<http://wp.me/p1N30w-11C>) and guide them through phases of dependency to independence. Yet what is the responsibility of the learner? What role does the online student play in his or her learning? And how can this be communicated to him or her? In this post I discuss learning models that assign responsibility to the learner, how these principles can be applied to online learning, and finally describe how instructors and institutions can hand over responsibility to the student.

### **Which Learning Theory Applies to Online Learning?**

Of the numerous learning theories that have emerged in the past there are assumptions made about the characteristics of the learner. Distance learning has often been associated with adult learners. Adult learning theories – for instance Malcolm Knowles' Andragogy Theory (<http://www.instructionaldesign.org/theories/andragogy.html>) or K.P. Cross' Adult Learning Theory, both suggest that the adult learner requires motivation, a drive to learn, life experience to apply to the learning situation and a sense of self-directedness. And, more recently the Connectivism Theory, (<http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm>), similar to J. Bruner's Constructivist theory, is associated with networked learning and Massive Open Online Courses. This theory suggests that learners come to a course already motivated, seek to engage with the content, other learners and construct new knowledge. We can apply some of these principles to online learning credit courses, and go one step further by communicating to the learner what they are responsible for.

### **Behaviours of Successful Online Learners**

There is much we can extract from these theories as mentioned, and apply to online learners. We can identify behaviours that students need to demonstrate to be successful in an online learning community. Some behaviours:

- Time management and organization skills where the learner is able to complete assignments within due dates, manage course materials and content effectively.
- Motivation and drive to learn demonstrated through participation in forums and/or group work.
- The drive to ask questions and seek instructor support.
- Strong writing skills where the learner can create discussion posts and interact with classmates.

Not to be overlooked are the **technical skills** learners must possess coming into the course. Learners need to have basic computer skills, such that they can send and receive emails, upload and download files, navigate the Web, source and evaluate digital content. Proficiency in Word and Power Point software is also strongly recommended.

One tactic numerous institutions use to reinforce the required skills, is to offer a self-assessment on the school's website. A 'quiz' that will assess whether the learner is ready to learn online.

### **How the Institution can Communicate Learner Responsibilities**

The first step is for the institution to identify what the learner must know, or the skills that are needed. Next, the learner responsibilities must be articulated, recorded and then made accessible to potential

learners. Our institution does a fairly good job outlining expectations within the course, but we are lacking in this area (posting on our website for example the skills required). I've included several links to schools that do a good job in communicating upfront what is expected of learners.

Metropolitan Community College (<http://www.mccneb.edu/elearning/responsibilities.asp>) outlines a comprehensive list of Student's Responsibilities for Online Courses on a web page and divides each into categories, computer skills, communication and participation, computer skills, time management etc.

#### **Student Responsibilities for Online Courses**

Metro's online courses provide you with a flexible and convenient way to learn, but that doesn't mean online learning is easier than in a traditional classroom. Online courses offer the same opportunities for learning and growth, and the chance to challenge yourself as a student. As an online student you will need to be motivated, dedicated and determined with your studies.

##### **Computer skills**

You will need to have a working knowledge of the following computer skills:

- Creating and naming/rename folders.
- Saving, opening, and placing files inside folders.
- Opening and working with more than one application at a time.
- Protecting your computer against computer viruses.
- Creating a document in a word processing program.
- Naming, saving, retrieving, and editing a document.
- Sending email and attaching files to an email.
- Browsing and surfing the Web.

##### **Communication and Participation**

- Be willing to communicate with classmates and faculty online.
- Participate in weekly online activities. You will need to log into your course one or more times per week to view announcements, participate in class activities, assignments, online discussion and quizzes and tests.
- Complete the online assignments, quizzes, and activities by the due date to allow your instructor adequate time to review your work and provide feedback.
- Contact your instructor with course related questions by course mail well in advance of due dates as you may need to wait 48 hours for a response to your questions.

##### **Computer**

Your computer must be able to run one of the compatible web browsers listed on the Browser Compatibility page: <http://www.mccneb.edu/online/compatibility.asp>

(<http://www.mccneb.edu/elearning/responsibilities.asp>) **How Course Instructors can Assign Responsibility**

We've discussed how the institution can outline responsibilities that stipulate for its potential students what is required, yet what can course instructors do? instructors can help the learner by outlining in the course syllabus or within the course home page, what he or she as the instructor expects from students. We are working on the assumption that the learner is responsible, has a specific skill set and is ready to learn. Yet further clarifying actually helps the learner learn. Examples of expectations might include:

- Learners are responsible for completing reading and watching lectures as assigned with module each week.
- Learners take an active role in discussion forums by posting thoughtful responses, responding to classmates.
- Assignments must be submitted on time, late work will not be accepted unless student contacts the instructor prior to the due date.

These are just a few examples – instructors can customize student expectations to fit the course's uniqueness. Including these responsibilities upfront, at the beginning of the course is necessary. It calls attention to the responsibilities – gives the learner the chance to be successful.

Instructors don't need to shoulder the entire burden of the online student's success. The learner is responsible for his or her own learning, yet institutions and instructors can 'give' the responsibility to the learner by outlining what it 'looks' like.

#### **Resources:**

Student Responsibilities for Online Learning (<http://www.hostos.cuny.edu/oaa/onlinelearning.htm>), Hostos College

Adult Learner Characteristics ([http://online.rit.edu/faculty/teaching\\_strategies/adult\\_learners.cfm](http://online.rit.edu/faculty/teaching_strategies/adult_learners.cfm)),

R.I.T. Online Learning

Student Responsibilities in Online Learning (<http://www.mccneb.edu/elearning/responsibilities.asp>),

Metropolitan Community College

BLOG AT WORDPRESS.COM.