The Keys to Online Learning for Adults: The Six Principles of Andragogy

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Part I

In order to unlock the secrets to successful adult learning in the online environment, you have to have the keys. We have found that instead of looking *outward*, simply looking *inward* will uncover the keys that adults already have stored deep inside. The keys to unlocking the secrets to successful adult learning online are embedded in the basic principles that guide adult learners. In this first of a three part series, we will explore the origins of adult learning principles in order to identify and apply them to online learning.

History of Andragogy

The concept of adult learning really isn't as new as we think, nor is it as old as we think. Whereas we can say that adult learning existed at the time of Plato and Socrates, it only means that adults engaged *in* the learning process. *How* they learned was the same as how children learned, which was that teachers taught and children (and adults), listened. This focus squarely on the teacher is called the pedagogical process of learning and has continued to be the primary model for all (young and old) students by telling them what, how, and when to learn (Cullen, 1999).

It wasn't until the early 20th century that the pedagogical model no longer seemed to 'fit' adult learners. The need for a different approach to adult learning became apparent in reaction to the economic and political changes in societies across the globe that required adults to learn expediently and with an immediate ability to apply what was learned in the workplace (Savicevic, 1991). This trend waxed and waned for a few decades until the mid-1960s when Malcolm Knowles renewed interest in the idea and began to pursue it in earnest (Knowles, 1984).

Drawing from knowledge provided by a number of prominent learning and developmental theorists, Knowles shaped his perception of adult learning and based it upon several principles that rivaled those in established pedagogy. The foundation of Knowles' approach to adult learning which he called *andragogy* was built upon two main points: an acknowledgement of the knowledge and experience gained by adult learners and the idea that the *learner* is central to the process rather than the instructor (Knowles, 1984). As he pursued his research, more points or principles of andragogy were found to be instrumental in his approach to adult learning.

The subsequent six principles upon which Knowles (1984) constructed his formal andragogical concept are:

- the role of experience;
- self-directedness;
- the learner's need to know;
- readiness to learn;
- orientation to learning;
- and intrinsic motivation.

To truly understand these principles, it is best to compare them to traditional pedagogy which is the primary method of instruction for children (Lee, 1998). Historically speaking, even though we want children to think for themselves and tell them so, the reality is that they simply aren't able to do so effectively or productively so society does the thinking *for* them. In the field of education, children are told what to learn, when to learn, how to learn, and why they are supposed to learn it. There are many reasons for this, all of which are pretty clear when examining the role of pedagogy in children's instruction. What is even clearer is the realization that adults learn differently because, well, they're *adults*.

Experience

What *is* experience, exactly? Have you ever tried to really define it? Our best definition of experience is the mental re-creation of the past so that we can use it to interpret the present and predict the future. There are two elements of experience: time and dimension. We typically consider experience as an outcome of time past. However, it can also be considered as an outcome of time *future*. How we view experience can depend on our own chronological time lines. For example, a newborn's experience is future focused in that for several years hence, his or her experience bank will be created *for* him or her whereas an elderly person will look back and reflect on past experiences created *by* him to gain understanding and insight about his or her life.

In terms of dimension, experience can be physical *or* psychological. For instance, a skydiver describes the physical experience of his last jump to his sister who then creates a mental image (psychological description) of the same event. Both draw similar meanings from the same experience but whereas the skydiver's experience is physical, the other exists only in the sister's mind. Considering that we can draw meaning from both physical and psychological experience, it then stands to reason that we can also learn from either one.

The pedagogical model operates under the assumption that children typically don't have any experience to which they can relate to when learning new information or concepts. Children are concrete thinkers (Ginsberg, 1982). They need sensory input and 'real life' examples for them to understand and relate to information. Therefore, it is the job of the teacher to provide experiences *for* the child so that s/he can grasp the concepts to be learned (Ozuah, 2005). In thinking about the example above, we can relate to the skydiver in the role of the teacher and the sister in the role of the student.

Teachers provide experiences in a variety of ways. They provide hand's on experience in the classroom (science experiments, building blocks, expressive play acting, theatre, etc.). They create psychological 'experiences' by recounting stories and describing scenarios to help create a greater understanding of concepts or ideas. It isn't until late in the high school years that adolescents begin to think in abstract terms, allowing them to create their own 'mental

experiences'. Even so, it still doesn't take the place of 'actual' experience that is necessary to apply toward future learning (Shaw & Fisher as cited in Forrest & Peterson, 2006). Children's lack of experience is also why structure is a very important component in the pedagogical model of learning. Instilling guidelines and overall structure is necessary, not only to enhance knowledge but also to keep children safe.

Andragogy relies on a different set of assumptions than pedagogy. Instead of assuming that adults (like children) have *no* experience and leaving it up to the teacher to 'fill it in', the adult learner relies on his or her own experience as a framework for growth. Over time, our experiences contribute to a vast accumulation of knowledge. Therefore in andragogy, experience is treated with the utmost respect because it is recognized for its role in creating the foundation upon which all learning can exist. We have learned *something* from every experience we have ever encountered, ranging from making toast by watching our mothers every morning in our childhood, to giving a dynamite presentation to a potential client, and to avoiding food that makes our stomach hurt.

What children learn from experience is simply stored knowledge to be drawn upon in the future. On the other hand, adults learn by integrating past experience with new concepts, thereby interpreting it in new, meaningful ways (Merriam as cited by Sinnott, 1994; Tennant & Pogson, 1995) that are immediately and decidedly useful to them. Life experience creates the textbook by which adults learn (Forrest & Peterson, 2006) and provides the springboard from which they can transition from dependence toward independence (Brookfield, 1986).

Self-Directedness

Self-directedness is the ability to make independent choices and decisions and to accept responsibility for their outcomes. Whereas we are all wired with the capability of being self-directed at birth, it is a skill that develops in tandem with experience and matures with age. The importance of allowing, and encouraging, children to learn how to make effective, sound decisions early in their lives cannot be underestimated. It not only helps them learn how to predict and accept consequences (positive and negative) of their decisions, but it also helps them understand the role of experience in the decision-making process. When they continue to make wise choices, they will continue to create good experiences, and the cycle will continue on into adulthood.

In andragogy, it is assumed that adults perform best in an autonomous, self-directed environment (Zmeyov, 1998). They don't particularly *like* being told how, when, why, and what with respect to their learning (or any other environment, really...just ask either of our husbands). According to Brookfield (1986), being self-directed is correlated with maturity. Once a person is fully mature, the need to be guided by others declines to an all-time low and the desire to be fully independent and able to make decisions is at an all-time high. Experts in the field such as Fall (2001), Knowles (1998), Pratt (1988), Tisdell and Taylor (1999), all believe that the desire to be self-directed is psychologically driven and that adults not only want to take responsibility for their decisions and choices, but they also want to be recognized for the ability to do so.

Need to Know

If you are or have been a parent, or know one, you are probably *very* familiar with the stage when children are full of questions. If you haven't experienced it yet, the "Why?" phase is cute at first but then gets old...quickly. People generally think that children genuinely want to know the answers to their many questions but the reality is that they are simply attempts to engage and solicit reactions from parents to ensure bonding is occurring. However, after this phase is over, the "need to know" is no longer determined by the child but instead, by the responsible adult (teacher, parent, etc.). Basically, children are not in control of what they "need to know" or what they are taught in school.

Adult learners realize that they need to know more skills and information in order to pursue their goals. They might not necessarily know *what* skills and information specifically they need, but they know that there is a void that needs to be filled in order to meet those goals. Adult students generally return to school to as a way to meet their goals. They probably know exactly what your program of study is and in what field they will get their degree. However, what they *don't* know is all of the information that they will need in order to get there. The difference between the adult student and a small child is that they identified the gap *themselves* and are taking the initiative and action to address it. They have a need for this information that they can use *now* to meet a real, pertinent, tangible goal.

Adults also question *why* they need to know information (Fall, 2001). If it is not relevant, then they might not spend the energy or time (or money) to learn it. In our role as online Professors, we are required upon occasion to do a course review of new and adjunct faculty. We have found that simply telling instructors what they need to do isn't enough; describing *why* the information is important and stressing the positive outcome of change helps them accept the feedback they are being given.

Readiness to Learn

In adults, readiness is created in response to developmental tasks that require certain lifestyle changes and life cycle events (Davenport & Davenport, 1984). Thinking back to the non-traditional students we get in our classes, we hear story how they couldn't stay on track in their first attempt at college or how they didn't realize the importance of working hard in school. Student after student then relates how they are now ready to buckle down and do what is required for them to be successful. Whatever developmental task has motivated them to make change in their lives has led them to enroll in college. Some students return to pursue a degree in order to move upward in their field. Some return to change fields altogether, and some students return to school to fulfill a dream and model success for their families. The constant factor in all of these stories is that now, the students are *ready* to do what it takes to learn because they know that the outcome will have a tangible effect on their social roles and responsibilities as spouses, employees, parents, etc. (Davenport & Davenport, 1984).

Orientation to Learning

Pedagogy is a very teacher-centered, subject-centered approach to learning (Gehring, 2000). Because children don't have enough experience to know what they need to learn, they must rely on others (teachers) to provide that information. With a subject-centered orientation, the focus is on learning as much as possible about the content material *in a hypothetical sense.* In other words, children learn information without the immediate need to apply it. At that age, few

know exactly what their career path will be in two, five, or even ten years so educators create a strong foundation upon which additional information can be built if/when the student begins to carve a path in a particular field. Hypothetically speaking, a high school student *might* at some point entertain a career in economics or science, so having a semi-working knowledge of calculus would position him/her well for future exploration.

For adult students, the future is *now*. Their orientation is learner-centered (versus teacher-centered) *and* problem-centered. The learner-centered concept is based on the idea that adults are self-directing and desire to be autonomous with their learning. Mature adults would rather take personal responsibility for completing college tasks on time and with accuracy than be reminded by a teacher to do so.

Instead of a subject-centered orientation that is future focused, adults have shifted to a problem-centered orientation that focuses on the need to apply what they are learning to address the developmental tasks that led them to return to school in the first place. In other words, instead of learning material that *might* be useful in the future, they are learning material that *is* useful to them *now* (Imel, 1989). Because of the immediacy of the issues resulting from the developmental task that has required a change in lifestyle, adults want to be very clear about what they need to know and want to learn (Sinnott, 1994).

Intrinsic Motivation

Because of its strong focus on children, pedagogy works best in an extrinsically motivated environment. In other words, the expectation of reward or punishment drives behavior (Ozuah, 2005). Children are concrete thinkers and have not yet developed the ability to consider abstract ideas, only what they can hear or see. That is why rewards and punishments are used to modify their behavior because those are typically concrete and identifiable factors that work well such as grades and parental or teacher approval, or disapproval.

It is pretty safe to say that children attend school because they *have* to. On the other hand, adults return to school because they *want* to. Probably the most frequently cited reason for which they do so is to enhance their quality of life and that of their family (Tice, 1997). Certainly, the benefit of obtaining a degree is the opportunity that it provides to enhance one's financial status but research shows that adults who are over 40 often attend more for personal growth and development rather than enhancing their vocational status (Justice, 1997).

Many students, in their introductions in the first week of the class, indicate their desire to fulfill their dream of an education or are returning to school as a role model for their own children. The pride and accomplishment that adult students expect from fulfilling their degree is what motivates them the most.

Conclusion

Traditional college courses continue to develop curricula based on pedagogical principles, but this approach is not suitable for adult learners. Using the principles set forth by Knowles (1984), online educators and decision makers can tailor learning so that is best suited for non-traditional adult students. The classroom interactions and assessments should be designed to harness student experiences and self-directedness as the primary pathway to learning. Discussion forums and homework need to focus on relevant problem solving as it

relates to issues that are important to adult learners and provide solutions that can be immediately applied to adult learners' lives and goals. The subsequent two articles in this series demonstrate how educators can apply the six principles of adult learning in online classrooms.

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