

Effective instructional strategies for adult learners



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College and universities across America are experience a change in student demographics from traditional to adult students. The adult student (those 25 and older) population in higher education continues to grows (Palazesci &Bower, 2006; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). The U. S. Department of Education reported an increase in nontraditional students from 28% in 1970 to 39% in 1999. Today, the U. S. Department of Education reported in its National Center for Educational Statistics(2006) reported that first-time full-time students are now in the minority in higher education. This growing population of adult learners bring unique characteristics to the learning environment. One might then expect to observe significant difference in instructional strategies of instructors of traditional and adult students. However, despite the unique characteristics of adult learners, the traditional approach to instructional strategies, in particular the lecture method, used in many traditional classrooms is utilized in the adult learning environment as well. While there are no inherent negative outcomes associated with the lecture method (Masikunis, Panayiotidis, & Burke, 2009; Giers & Kreiner, 2009; Revell, <https://assignbuster.com/effective-instructional-strategies-for-adult-learners/>

Wainwright, 2009), characteristics of adult learners may provoke the investigation of alternative instructional strategies.

Adult Learning

Malcom Knowles first introduced the idea that adult and children learning differently due to developmental and experiential differences in the 1970s (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Prior to Knowles work, pedagogy was the focus of instructional strategies in higher education. The pedagogy model required the instructor to be in control of the learning and was the main focus of

Knowles coined the term andragogy to describe “ a core set of principles of adult learning to build a more effective learning process for adults” (p. 2).

The six principles of andragogy are:

The learner’s need to know;

Self-concept of the learner;

Prior experience of the learner;

Readiness to learn;

Orientation to learning; and

Motivation to learn. (p. 3)

Knowles stressed andragogy as a process model rather than the content model characteristic of pedagogy.

The difference is not that one deals with content and the other does not; the difference is that the content model is concerned with transmitting information and skills whereas the process model is concerned with providing procedures and resources for helping learners acquire information and skills. (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 115)

Knowles maintained these principles, or assumptions, as foundational in designing meaningful learning experiences for adult learners (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

In addition to considering the characteristics of adult learners, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2005) emphasize the importance of recognizing learning in an adult's life occurs in structured and informal learning environments. This recognition allows educators of adults to take into consideration the vast experience and knowledge adult students bring to the learning environment. Prior knowledge then becomes foundational to the learning experience. Also, the recognition that learning occurs in multiple arenas of life enables educators to assist adult learners in understanding they are lifelong learners. This may lessen the adult's anxiety of entering a formal educational setting. The learning environment may be new, but the experience of learning new knowledge or skills is not. Lifelong learner is part of the adult's life.

Brookfield (1986) addressed the social aspect of adult learning. " the acts of teaching and learning – and the creation and alteration of our beliefs, values, actions, relationships, and social forms that result from this – are ways in

which we realize our humanity” (p. 1). From this belief, Brookfield (1986) presented six principles for facilitating learning:

Participation in learning is voluntary; adult engage in learning as a result of their own volition.

Effective practice is characterized by a respect among participants for each other’s self-worth.

Facilitation is collaborative. Facilitators and learners are in a cooperative enterprise in which, at different times and for different purposes, leadership and facilitation roles will be assumed by different group members.

Praxis is placed at the heart of effective facilitation. Learners and facilitators are involved in a continual process of activity, reflection upon activity collaborative analysis of activity, new activity, further reflection, and collaborative analysis, and so on.

Facilitation aims to foster in adults a spirit of critical reflection.

The aim of facilitation is the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults.

While Knowles advocated that adults learn differently than children, he understood the application of andragogy assumptions were dependent on the learning situation. In all learning situations, the needs of the learner are paramount in designing an effective learning experience. Knowles (as cited in Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) stated:

My intention, therefore, was to present an alternative set of assumptions to those that had been traditionally made by teachers of children, so that

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others would have another choice. I saw them as assumptions to be tested (not to be presumed), so that if a pedagogical assumption was the realistic condition given situation then pedagogical strategies would be appropriate. For example, if I were now, at age 66, to undertake to learn a body of totally strange content (for example, the higher mathematics of nuclear physics), I would be a totally dependent learner. I would have very little previous experience to build on, I probably would have a low degree of readiness to learn it, and I don't know what developmental task I would be preparing for. The assumptions of pedagogical assumptions would be appropriate. (p. 146)

However, with that said, in many learning situations adult learners do bring a readiness to learn, do have experiential background, and XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. In this context, learning strategies appropriate to the adult learner should be considered.

Institutional Reaction to Adult Learners

Despite the continual struggle of adult learners for voice and value in higher education (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001), institutions appear to acknowledge the unique population of adult learners (Simpson, 2004). Institutions offer degree programs specifically addressing the need to provide alternative student services, multiple delivery modes (in-seat and online), and flexibility in scheduling (Durey, 2007). Matkin (2004) identifies two distinct markets in higher education: the residential student (traditional students) and the nonresidential (nontraditional student). “ The members of the two markets have different reasons for seeking education, different backgrounds, different service needs, and different pathways through which they are attracted (recruited) to education” (p. 62). While, some in higher

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education academy may still harbor distrust in these nontraditional programs for adult learners, Tweedell (2007) contends “ many programs that target the adult population have been more deliberate in planning and implementing quality than other education programs whose theories and practices are rooted only in tradition” (p. 5). In addition to addressing opportunities for adult students to pursue higher education opportunities, educators must investigate and implement instructional strategies that address the needs of adult learners.

Instructional Strategies

Several models of adult learning inform best practices in adult learning. Knowles (as cited in Brewer, 2005) provided guidelines for development and practice in adult learning programs. “ Central components of Knowle’s theory are self-directedness , a focus on experiential learning, learner reliance on past experiences, adult motivation to learn, and goal orientation associated with problem solving” (p. 23). Effective instructional strategies for adult learners:

Incorporates learner’s goals and objectives

Provides opportunities for content to build on past experiences and knowledge

Focus on problem oriented and practical strategies

Require active learner participation

Provides opportunities for application of new knowledge and skills

Provide opportunities for both independent and collaborative learning

Implications for Faculty Development

Conclusion