



Thoughtfully Designed Online Courses as Effective Adult Learning Tools

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Abstract

Online learning, a growing segment of higher education, is highly utilized by adult learners. Therefore, it is important that online courses are developed with adult learners in mind. This work attempts to associate the principles of quality online course development with six assumptions of the adult learner as described by Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy. Each principle is linked to one or more of Knowles' andragogical assumptions to demonstrate a relationship between quality online and adult education development. The conclusion is that online course development informed by these principles leads to a course serving the needs of adult learners well.

Introduction

Online learning has emerged as a recognized and valued segment of higher education. Although well established, online learning has witnessed a steady increase in enrollment in recent years (Merriam et al., 2007). This iteration of distance learning has capitalized on an expanding population having access to the Internet. Although access is not ubiquitous across the globe, in North America over 320 million people are Internet users, representing approximately 88% of the continent's population, many of them adults (Internet World Stats, 2015).

The online student, most commonly female, employed, and older than a traditional university student, is offered a variety of online course options. These options include blended, hybrid, web facilitated, and fully online courses (Allen and Seaman, 2015). Adult students face challenges in online learning, but this medium offers many pragmatic advantages to this learner group such as increased flexibility and accessibility (Kelland, 2005; Merriam et al., 2007; Williams, 2002). Furthermore, from an adult learning perspective, the principles that guide effective development of online courses are in the same spirit as the assumptions regarding adult learners and andragogy as proposed by Malcolm Knowles (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, 1984).

Andragogy, the theory of adult education championed by Malcolm Knowles in the late 20th century, applies six assumptions to the adult learner to best understand and accommodate their educational

needs. According to Merriam et al. (2007), these assumptions are:

1. Adult learners are self-directed learners and act independently.
2. Adult learners have gained valuable experiences in their lives and value applying their experiences to the learning process.
3. Adult learners are eager and ready to learn what they need to learn to succeed.
4. Adult learners are interested in the application of learning in order to problem-solve.
5. Adult learners are more internally motivated and less so by outside forces.
6. Adult learners are interested in understanding the value of what they are being taught.

While scholars have applied the assumptions of andragogy to inform quality online course design, this work proposes that an online course designed using sound pedagogical principles can exhibit a learning experience beneficial to adult learners.

Though not universally adopted, pedagogical principles for online learning as presented by Anderson and McCormick (2005), can be used as a framework to inform quality online course design and promote online learner success. These principles propose online course design must be matched to curriculum, be coherent and consistent, have ease of use, be inclusive to learners, engage students, be innovative and effective, and include formative and summative assessments (Anderson &

McCormick, 2005). Each of these principle parallel well with one or more of Knowles' assumptions of the adult learner and, therefore, if implemented thoughtfully, will produce an online course environment which can be an effective tool of adult education.

Online Course Development Principles Applied to Andragogy

The principles of online course design proposing that course content match well with the curriculum and that online course organization is coherent, consistent, and easy to use parallels with Knowles' assumption that the adult learner must understand the importance content being presented (Knowles, 1984). Content must be well organized and be designed with course objectives in mind (Blondy, 2007; Hanna et al., 2000). Mapping course objectives transparently to course content conveys to students that learning objectives are being met as a result of particular content. This is critical to an adult learner acutely interested in how course content fits into the course design and their individual learning plan (Blondy, 2007). Additionally, adult learners are often confronted with many situational barriers and demand a clear and focused approach to course design (United States Congress, 1993).

The principles suggesting that an online course be inclusive to all learner groups while having ease of use are aligned to Knowles' framework of andragogy. The technology ubiquitous in online courses is often seen as a barrier to success by adult learners (Pickett, 2009). Therefore, designing an online course with learner inclusion in mind increases the chance that all students, including adult learners, will understand the digital architecture the course and ensures the technology will be to their advantage. In addition, an inclusive course design also reinforces the self-directed learner assumption (Blondy, 2007). A self-directed learner finds a learning environment that is welcoming and which promotes respect and trust as valuable to the learning process (Blondy, 2007; Knowles, 1980).

An online course must also be designed to engage students throughout their course experience. Knowles (1980) states, in three assumptions, that the adult learner is self-directed, has a wealth of knowledge from prior experiences, and is ready and eager to learn. These assumptions pair well with an online course emphasizing engagement. Engagement empowers the self-directed and eager learner as it asks the participant to independently and uniquely interact with the course materials and with fellow students. Many initiatives that promote engagement require that students take an active role in course participation and, therefore, affect the direction of the course (Conrad and Donaldson, 2004).

This allows students to introduce and integrate their previous experiences into the course providing context and adding richness to their learning experience and that of others students (Blondy, 2007; Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Palloff and Pratt, 2002).

An online course must also exhibit innovative and effective teaching techniques. These two principles of quality online course design dovetail well with the andragogical assumptions that adult learners bring with them prior experiences, need to understand the importance of course content and that an adult learner values content application and problem solving (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, 1984). Though a broad category, innovative and effective techniques include promoting the critique and analysis of relevant problems in respective fields. Incorporating problem solving and critical thinking components to an online course allows students to understand the application and relevance of course materials to their lives and their respective fields. To the adult learner, this technique verifies the authenticity of course content and assigns value to their ability to use prior experiences to solve problems. Furthermore, this empowers and validates the adult learner promoting student buy-in (Blondy, 2007; Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Robinson, 1992).

There should be variety in assessments embedded in an online course and they should contain formative and, possibly, summative components (Blondy, 2007; Anderson & McCormick, 2005). This strategy of online course assessment aligns well with the andragogical assumptions of an adult learner as self-directed, one who values application of content, has a high degree of readiness, and is internally motivated. A variety of assessments, especially those that challenge students at high learning levels, are valuable to self-directed and ready student as they allow they promote ownership of personal course experience (Blondy, 2007; Conrad and Donaldson, 2004). These thoughtfully designed assessments can also allow students to leverage their prior experiences and apply course concepts to real-life situations (Blondy, 2007). This assessment strategy also leads to diverse and consistent interaction with the online instructor. This regular contact greatly influences the internally motivated student because these students are inspired by appreciation of their backgrounds and contributions (Blondy, 2007; Cercone, 2008).

Conclusion

Although the appropriateness and effectiveness of online learning as a tool for the adult learner is not universally supported, this course format it is being utilized by many adult learners. Therefore, it is important that online course designers adopt a strategy

with the adult learner in mind. The concept of andragogy, championed by Malcolm Knowles, is a prevailing and accepted approach to adult education, therefore, it would then be beneficial to apply a design strategy that acknowledges and parallels this educational philosophy. The online course design principles presented by Anderson and McCormick (2005) do this well. According to Knowles, the adult learner is most successful in a welcoming, collaborative, respectful, transparent, and challenging learning environment with clear expectations. By integrating these guidelines into the course design process, the online learning environment can fulfill these requisites providing an enriching, valuable, and effective environment to the adult learner.

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