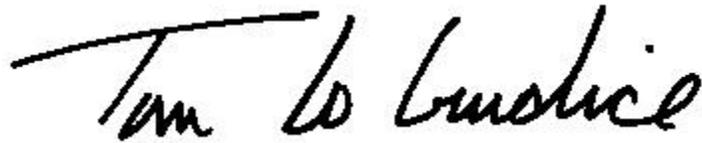


ISSUES FACING THE FIRST YEAR ADULT LEARNER: HOW THEIR NEEDS CAN BE
SERVED

Approved

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Lo Giudice". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning.

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SERVED

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ABSTRACT

ISSUES FACING THE FIRST YEAR ADULT LEARNER: HOW THEIR NEEDS CAN BE SERVED

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The demographics show that America's population as a whole is aging. In a recent study headed by the National Institute of Aging, writers proclaimed that "the aging of the population and the retirement of the baby-boom generation are considered by many to be among the most transformative demographic changes ever experienced in this country" (Health and Retirement Study, 2007, Conclusion section, para 1). Not only are Americans living longer, they are also living in better health in body and mind. Therefore, many older Americans are still able to learn and retain knowledge as they continue to age. Many of these adults have the need for lifelong learning and wish to continue their education in many areas. Since adult education is a relatively new area of study, many adult education programs do not meet the needs of these lifelong learners. How much do educators really know about how an adult learns? How well do they understand the needs of this group? There are many issues facing first year adult education students that need to be addressed and improved to better serve these learners. This paper includes the presentation of many theories and practices and needed improvements. It is imperative that these changes are made to better serve this populace, and give them the education they deserve.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Adult education is a relatively new area of study that has been growing in recent years for a variety of reasons. Recent economic struggles have pushed some adult learners back to school to continue their education and seek better employment opportunities. With ever changing technology many employers require employees to take job related training on new developments that require additional training courses. Also with a diminishing number of blue collar jobs, many adults find they do not have the skills they will need to find a good job. In addition, increasing numbers of immigrants seeking jobs here in the United States there has been an increasing need for classes teaching the English language. Simply said growing number of adults returning to learning environments, means there is growing concerns to meet their needs.

Critical to understanding adult needs is that adults learn differently than traditional younger students. Many teachers do not change their instructional strategies when it comes to teaching adults. It is imperative that they do so to accommodate for their different learning styles. Adult learners need to feel as if the information they are learning can be put to use. They also need to be able to relate the material to real life experiences. Motivation is also a different factor. Many adult students are “volunteers”; they choose to continue their education for very distinct reasons and to better themselves. They have intrinsic motivation to learn all they can, but they need to feel as if the information is helping them achieve what they want to do.

Another challenge when it comes to teaching the adult learner is time commitments. Many adults live busy lives and hold jobs, have families, and have many other commitments that they must tend to. Since adults have little time as it is, they do not want to feel like they are

wasting it. Classes and projects need to be meaningful and to the point to keep the learners attention.

One familiar challenge is in the area of computer education. Since many adult education students grew up in an age before computers, they are unfamiliar with the technology that is used in the classroom today. Many find themselves struggling to do things, such as turn an assignment in online. Special accommodations and teaching practices need to be used to ensure that these students are able to get the most out of their technological classroom experience.

For first year adult learners the transition can be very difficult. Evaluation of a first-year service learning program in a community college with a diverse population raised important concerns about the effect of program design on adult students' satisfaction. Previous research on service learning participation in various higher education environments indicates that time, family, job responsibilities, insufficient clarity regarding the purpose of the activity, and lack of enthusiasm on the part of instructors are all cited as reasons for dissatisfaction or lack of engagement in service learning (Hughes, 2002; Fertman, 1993). For these reasons adults are struggling through their first year of education. The needs of the adult learner populace need to be addressed to ensure success of these students.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is “With the growing numbers of adult learners in society, what are the issues facing these first year adult learners, and what can be done to service these students and ensure their first year a success?”

Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, it is assumed that all research and review of the current literature is accurately reported. It is also assumed that the literature leads to recommendations how best to use the research available.

Delimitations of the Research

The Research was conducted in and through Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin Platteville. Primary searches were conducted via Internet through EBSCO Host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Wilson Web. Key search topics included “adult education and teaching,” “first year adult learners,” “issues facing adult learners,” “servicing adult learners,” and “first year academic success”.

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on issues facing first year adult learners was conducted. A second review of literature relating to research, studies, and anecdotal evidence teaching methods and strategies to improve adult learners’ first year experiences was conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

Definition of Terms

Andragogy is defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn," has taken on a broader meaning since Knowles' first edition. The term currently defines an alternative to pedagogy and refers to learner-focused education for people of all ages.

The andragogic model asserts that five issues be considered and addressed in formal learning. They include (1) letting learners know why something is important to learn, (2) showing learners how to direct themselves through information, and (3) relating the topic to the learners'

experiences. In addition, (4) people will not learn until they are ready and motivated to learn. Often this (5) requires helping them overcome inhibitions, behaviors, and beliefs about learning (Conner, 1995, p. 8).

Adult Education refers to the practice of teaching and educating adults. This often happens in the workplace, through 'extension' or 'continuing education' courses at secondary schools, at a college or university. Other learning places include folk high schools (a practice in some European countries), community colleges, and lifelong learning centers. The practice is also often referred to as 'Training and Development'. It has also been referred to as andragogy (to distinguish it from pedagogy). A difference is made between vocational education, mostly undertaken in workplaces and frequently related to up skilling, and non-formal adult education including learning skills or learning for personal development.

Experiential Learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience.

Facilitator is a person who helps a group of people understand their common objectives and assists them to plan to achieve them without taking a particular position in the discussion. The facilitator will try to assist the group in achieving a consensus on any disagreements that preexist or emerge in the meeting so that it has a strong basis for future action.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

Learning Styles of Adult Learners

ANDRAGOGY

Andragogy was first defined by Knowles in 1973 in the book *The Adult Learner* as “the art and science of helping adults learn”. As said by Keith Albert in an earlier University of Wisconsin - Platteville seminar paper it has recently taken on a broader term of learner-focused education for people of all ages. Adults learn differently than traditional students, but it is important to know why adults learn differently. Andragogy can help to explain why adult learners learn differently (Conner, 1996, p. 10). Adult learners are there because they want to be, they are volunteers. They do not need the same motivation as traditional students. There are five key assumptions to the andragogic model that help to explain learning styles of the adult learner.

The first assumption is that educators must let the adult know why something is important to learn. An adult education student is volunteering his/her time to learning and does not want to waste it. They need to feel that what they are learning will be beneficial to them or they will not retain the knowledge. The second assumption is that the educators must show the students how to direct themselves through the information. Since adults are mainly autonomous learners the teachers should guide the adults to their own knowledge instead of just bombarding them with facts. This way the student can learn the information on their own and better retain what they have learned. The third assumption is the teacher must relate what the material to the learners own life experiences. Adults have many real life experiences they can relate to their education. They need to connect the material to what they already know to find value in

education. The fourth assumption is that instructors must realize is that the learner will not learn until they are ready and motivated to learn. You cannot push or motivate an adult learner, they must be intrinsically motivated. The fifth assumption is that the instructor must help the learner overcome inhibitions, behaviors, and beliefs about learning (Conner, 1996, p. 10).

The sole difference between adult learners and traditional students is that adults have much more true life experiences and pre-established beliefs than the traditional students and therefore have much more to relate to.

FOUR AREAS OF ADULT LEARNING

SELF DIRECTED LEARNING

“Self-directed learning focuses on the process by which adults take control of their own learning, in particular how they set their own learning goals, locate appropriate resources, decide on which learning methods to use and evaluate their progress”(Brookfield, 1995, p.2). In discussing modern adult education Knowles states there is a need to define the mission of education as producing competent people. The writer believes that the foundation of competent people is the ability to engage in self directed lifelong learning (Knowles, 1980, p.19). People who initiate learning for themselves instead of relying on the teacher learn with greater motivation and purpose. They also retain their acquired knowledge better and longer (Smith, 2002). It been said that the purpose of adult education is to make the student a continuing “inner directed” and self operating learner (Kidd, 1973, p.47). Most adults are self directed or proactive learners that learn better by acquiring their own knowledge passive direction of the instructor. If adults are able to learn through self paced individualized learning practices they will be more

competent in gaining and retaining knowledge that will help them to be more productive in their lives and careers.

Since adults are self directed learners there should be an emphasis on learning instead of teaching. The instructor needs to see him or herself as more of a facilitator and a resource for the learner to help guide them to their own education (Knowles, 1980, p.19). This will make the student feel more competent and give them a feeling of self worth. Adults also need learn how to become self directed and unlearn their teacher reliance. They cannot rely on the instructor to tell them what, when, and how to learn something. They must learn how to learn or they will never be able to process enough information to succeed on their own (Conner, 1996, p.70).

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Adult learners need to transform their way of thinking about themselves and their beliefs to be better educated (Knowles, 1990, p.98). Brookfield (1988) stated that for adults to truly be better educated they “must come to reflect on their self images, change their self concepts, question their previously internalized norms (behavioral and moral), and reinterpret their current and past behaviors from a new perspective” (p.213). The instructor’s job is to prompt and encourage the learner to explore new ideas and perspectives on their life, work, and ways of thinking. Although the instructor does need to be careful not to be confrontational or challenging when presenting these ideas, they need to be rational or the learner will feel threatened (Knowles, 1990, p.98). By opening up the learners mind to new ways of thinking, they will be stimulated to learn more and explore new ideas and concepts.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning in education has been around for a long time. It has been practiced through internships, field studies, research projects, and service learning (Upcraft et al, 2005, p.

254). But adults already have much of these experiences along with real life experiences. Adults can draw on these experiences, evaluate them and use them like a textbook for further education (Brookfield, 1995, p. 4). Since adults have many more experiences they are a much more diverse populace than the traditional student. Adults have a self identity which stems from their experiences. If these experiences are not being drawn upon to further educate them they will feel rejected and are less likely to learn (Knowles, 1980, p. 50). The role of the instructor is to get the learner to relate material to his or her personal experiences. Once the adult can relate the information to experiences they will be much more motivated to learn and have greater self satisfaction.

Experiential learning does have some negative effects. Since adults have so much experience they also tend to have their own beliefs, biases and habits about particular subjects. When these biases and beliefs are challenged many adult learners will close their minds to new fresh ideas. The instructor needs to find ways to open up the minds of the students to think critically and really reevaluate their beliefs (Knowles, 1990, pp. 59-60)

LEARNING TO LEARN

Many adults do not truly know how to learn. They rely on the instructor to teach them how to learn. This goes against the theory of a self directed learner, and therefore they will not receive the most out of their educational experience. The instructor needs to guide the adult but also let them learn how to learn by themselves. Learning to learn should be a lifelong learning project that the individual must continually strive to fulfill (Brookfield, 1995, p. 5).

Issues Facing First Year Adult Learners

There are many issues facing first year adult learners that need to be addressed. At many institutions of higher education lifelong learners are not identified as such and are treated as a traditional (18-22 year old) student. Today one third of the undergraduate populace is students twenty-four years or older. A Majority of adults are enrolling back in school due to a major life change such as a loss of job, career change, divorce and similar life changes (Compton, 2006, p. 1). Many of these students hold full time jobs, have families, are financially independent, and have many other obligations than being a full time student (Upcraft, et al, 2005, pp. 435-436). When you consider all of the obligations these students have, it is a wonder they find time to do research, turn in assignments, take quizzes, and learn the material for tests. It is no secret as to why adults consider anything other than something they find completely relevant to their needs a nuisance or waste of time (Badke, 2008, p. 48). They soon will become frustrated; lose interest, or possibly even drop out. Especially with the weighing financial burden of school why would they want to waste their money along with their valuable time if it is not helping them further their status or education?

As stated earlier, many adults lead very busy lives and are continuing education on their own time. Many travel from distances to classes which also take up more of their valued time. With so many other commitments, adults do not have time for busy work. They need classes and studies to be time managed and to the point. If the learner feels that time is being wasted they will become frustrated and turned off to education in general. Deadlines also need to be flexible, it must be understood that these learners have many other commitments such as family that come

before education. If the student is not able to get an assignment in because of a time constraint the instructor needs to be understanding of this issue.

Many adults returning to school set unrealistic goals for themselves. They believe that they can press hard and be done in a short period of time. When the student actually returns to school they begin to realize how much more time and effort it is going to take them to adjust and also finish their program. They may begin to alter their program or change it all together. There is a need for guidance of these returning students to let them know what is required before they begin their program of study, to ensure success (Apps, 1981, p. 49).

Negative self image is a major issue facing adult learners. They become nervous before returning to school and begin to doubt themselves. They think they may not be able to handle the workload, or that they will not be able to understand new concepts. They also think they may look silly or dumb. They also worry about what others are thinking about them. It is very important for the adult learner to be confident and have a positive self image to induce learning. Instructors need to help build this confidence by giving them some success experiences early in their education (Apps, 1981, p. 49-50).

Many returning students have careers, families, and obligations as a source of livelihood. These obligations can also bring stress to their lives. These nontraditional students do not have the time to study with other students, or talk about classes and projects. Education can put stress on marriages and families due to time and money. These tensions can take away from the students learning ability and the instructor must be sensitive to these issues (Apps, 1981, p. 51).

After being out of academia for so many years many adults have trouble readjusting to University life. They remember what it was like the first time they went to school and know their previous ways. They must unlearn these ways and adjust to the new ones. They often struggle

with learning academic procedures, and adjusting to new study skills and ways of learning (Apps, 1981, p. 47).

One of the biggest problems found with adult's continuing education is a simple lag in their technology education. Traditional students grew up in the computer age and therefore are able to work with technology much more efficiently. It is often just assumed that adults know how to use computers for email, word processing, research, and course sites such as Desire to Learn. Today technology is used much more frequently in the classroom to access information, communicate through emails and discussion boards, and turn in assignments. Many adults are not familiar with how to do any of this. They often become frustrated and simply stop using the new technology and go back to their old ways of books and hard copies. There needs to be training sessions for these nontraditional students either in an orientation process or special class time devoted by the instructor to teach them how to use the technology effectively and to their advantage.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Self Directed Learning strategies

Andragogy is the main theme of adult learning, and even though the theory is constantly being evaluated and changed many teaching strategies are still proven to be effective to the adult learner. Self directed learning is a very important strategy and will help the learner achieve their educational goals. Knowles outlined some basic adult teaching principles that are guidelines for andragogy and self directed learning.

- The establishment of an effective learning climate
- Learners are involved in the mutual planning of curriculum and teaching content

- Learners are involved in their own needs assessment
- Learners are encouraged to formulate their own learning objectives and to devise their own resources and strategies to meet these objectives
- Learners are offered support and facilitation to carry out their learning plans
- Learners are facilitated in the evaluation of their learning (Bedi, 2004, p. 95).

The establishment of the learning climate is very important for adult learning. The learning climate should make the adult feel at ease. The desks and furnishings should be adult sized and comfortable. The environment should be a place where the adult feels free from punishment and can express their ideas freely (Knowles, 1980, p. 47). The instructor should get to know more than just the students name. He should know something about them such as their interests, expectations of the course, or reasons for coming back to school (Apps, 1981, p. 146). This will make the learner feel more respected and induce mutuality between the learner and teacher. An adult learner does not want to learn in a classroom of desks and a chalkboard. They do not want to be treated like children; rather they want a place to continue their education through sharing experiences and self direction (Knowles, 1980, p. 47).

Since adult learners are volunteers that are highly motivated to learn, they need to be involved in the planning of their curriculum and the content of which they are taught. They set their own learning objectives and set goals of what they want to learn and when they want to learn it. They also are able to choose their own methods of how they will learn the material (Albert, 2008, p.8). This will give the adult a feeling of self competence and also make them feel like they are really learning what they want (Knowles, 1980, p. 48). The teacher takes on more of a role as the facilitator and guides the student through their learning process.

In the traditional classroom the teacher usually tells the students what they need to learn and how they are going to do it. Andragogy emphasizes a self diagnosis of learning needs of the student. With the help of the instructor the learner should do a self diagnosis of needs. This will help the learner better understand their areas of competencies and let them know what they really need to learn (Knowles, 1980, p.47). When the learner is proactive in deciding what they will learn it will provide better motivation and enhance their ability to retain knowledge (Albert, 2007, p. 8).

After the diagnosis of needs the learner will know what they want to learn about. Now they need to formulate their own learning objectives and to devise their own resources and strategies to meet these objectives. The learner therefore is responsible for their education and is self empowered to gain their own knowledge. They need to know that the instructor is there for a guide and resource to help them achieve their goals.

Evaluation of learning should be a mutual experience between the teacher and the learner. It is the facilitator's job to provide evidence to the learner of their progress in education. It is the student's job to critically evaluate their progress of their new knowledge and the self designed course itself.

Experiential Learning

As talked about before adults learn through experience. These experiences need to be implemented in to the classroom to induce learning. By drawing on previous experiences the learner will make the material more relevant and find more meaning in their education (APPS, 1981, pp 147-148). It is the instructor's job to keep these experiences objective and not let bias get in the way. Since many adults have firm grounded beliefs they will only think of their own

experiences, good or bad. The instructor has to help the adult keep an open mind about certain issues or material.

Use a Variety of Techniques

There are so many different learning styles that it is hard to develop a curriculum to fit the exact needs of each learner. Therefore the instructor must be creative in applying ways to reach all students. Many teachers use lectures as a teaching practice. It is a great way of initially introducing topics and theories. It should not be overused because the learner will soon become bored and there is no self direction.

Projects are another teaching strategy that teachers often use. When the student can pick their own topic it is a great way of implementing self directed learning. This teaches the students to do their own research with direction and guidance of the instructor. They will learn much more coming up with their own project and studies.

Another teaching strategy is discussion. Discussion opens up communication between the learner and their peers, with the teacher as the facilitator. It encourages participation between all members and it is a great tool for learners to draw on their experiences while hearing those of others. It creates a learning environment where adults can be opened up to new ideas and perspectives.

ACCOMMODATING NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS

Institutions need to recognize the adult learner as a valuable populace to the institution itself and realize that these nontraditional students have needs that greatly differ from that of traditional students.

Accommodating adult learners starts with the orientation programs that will help adult learners make their transition back to the world of academia. The orientation program for adult learners needs to be completely separate from that of traditional students and geared toward the adult learner's transition entirely. "Nothing is more irrelevant (or even offensive) to adult students than orientation activities focused on eighteen year old issues such as homesickness, getting along with your roommate, joining a fraternity or sorority, and institutional based correspondence addressed " to the parents of..."(Upcraft et al, 2005, p. 436)." The orientation needs to deal with real challenges facing the adult such as time commitments and constraints, technology orientation, academic adjustments, day care, family issues and financial help. These orientations will help the adult ease into the process of going back to school and make the transition much smoother. It will also make them feel recognized and cared about as a student and individual (Upcraft et al, 2005, p. 436)."

As previously discussed time is very important to the adult learner. Services for adults need to be at times that are convenient to these students. Weekend opportunities or night classes would be greatly beneficial to a student with a full time job. Flexibility of class schedules and assignments is also a must for an effective adult education program. Since many adults travel from a distance they do not want to make the drive to class multiple times in a week. This makes it hard financially and consumes more precious time. For this reason classes should be longer and be once a week or less to make it easier on the student. One downfall of this is that having only one class a week it is hard to remember and attain information from the previous week. When the student does go to class the information is not as fresh in their mind. Many institutions have implemented hybrid courses where the learner is allowed to choose a certain number courses they will attend and do some online work to supplement these courses. A downfall of

this is that many students do not have the computer access or technology to do the online work. This is why the instructor needs to be extremely flexible with each student on an individual basis when setting course curriculum with the student.

Adult learners need to know what they are learning and why they are learning it. The instructor should explain self directed learning to the students and implement it into the course. If adults know that what they are learning is beneficial to them they will have much more motivation and success in their first year. The instructor needs to be enthusiastic, positive and encouraging of these learners as they continue to grow in their education.

The Institutions should offer a learning environment geared toward the adult learner where they feel comfortable and can learn and express their ideas freely. The instructor should meet their needs and encourage a classroom of open discussion and experiential learning.

Technological accommodations need to be made available on campus for adult learners with the disadvantage of not having the technology available to them at home. Not only should this technology be available at times convenient to the learner but they should also be able to seek assistance with the use of the technology.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

After much research the readings have showed that many institutions and programs are adapting to the adult learner and recognizing them as a valuable populace. There are many improvements and interventions being made to better serve these learners.

Many institutions in recognizing the adult populace have moved away from the pedagogical teaching theory to that of the andragogical method of teaching. This is a major step in serving these learners. Research has shown that self directed learning is the key to lifelong learning. It is good for society in general to learn how to learn by themselves and not have a teacher telling them what they need to know. With such a diverse population of learners who is to tell them what to study and why to study? Adults have many experiences and beliefs that control their lives. They know what they need to learn, and with the guidance of the instructor adults will be able to fulfill their educational needs.

What is foreseen as the real problem is that adults need to be educated on education itself. Going back to school they think it is going to be regurgitation of definitions and textbooks, tests, and essays. They must learn how to unlearn what they did in their previous education and learn to learn what they need to be educated on.

Technology Education itself needs an overhaul. Many adults that do not have computer skills are going back to school and being expected to use the computer with the ease and effectiveness of that of a traditional student. Many programs do not realize what it takes for someone to learn these computer skills as they are taking the course. This leads to major problems, frustrations, and resentment for higher education in general.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With an ever increasing of Americans going back to school Institutions need to rethink the way they educate this diverse population of students. It starts with the orientation process. There needs to be a separate orientation process for adult education students that will better educate them of what they are about to partake in for completion of a degree or other educational goal. This orientation process needs to cover all issues these students may face such as the learning process, time constraints, stereotypes, technology education, family issues, learning to learn and learning goals.

Adult students should also have an advisor that is very involved with the student's goals and learning desires. This advisor must understand the needs and concerns of the student as well as understanding their personal issues they may be facing.

Many institutions are implementing the andragogical model in their teaching strategies and using self directed learning in their curriculum. Students should be educated on what this is and why they are going to partake in this kind of learning. If they better understand the teacher's method and why they need to learn to learn they will be much more open to this idea and become more educated.

In today's society many people are very busy with their lives but still need to find time for education. Flexibility within courses and classrooms to better serve the adult populace is a major factor in serving adult students. Institutions need to strive to be flexible with these students to meet their needs.

We are living in a world of technology. Many adults have fallen behind the younger generations in their ability to use this technology to their advantage. The most life experienced people do not have the power to do things younger less experienced people do because their

technological ignorance. Institutions need to offer a course on basic computer skills that will familiarize adult students with the skills needed to successfully use technology to better their education. Adults need to be educated in the use of technology so they do not fall further behind in a technology advanced world.

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