Teaching Information Literacy Skills to Nontraditional Learners

Different teaching methods should be used when instructing adults versus those used to teach children. Adults have many life experiences, they have a need to know, and they are often highly motivated to learn as it relates to career growth and personal advancement.

In this paper, the author discusses andragogy and how adult learning theory affects the learner. The principles of andragogy provide the librarian instructor with a foundation for how to teach the adult learner. Suggestions for how to apply the principles of andragogy are listed in the paper. The paper will also benefit those working in public libraries who work with lifelong learners.

Background

Information literacy skills are necessary for both the traditional and nontraditional learner. The literature on library instruction is primarily focused on traditional undergraduates, but in the field of education much has been written on the adult learner (Cooke, 2010). In 2007, according to the National Center for Education Statistics 38 percent of college students were twenty-five years or older and considered a nontraditional student (NCES, 2009). As more adults return to school to finish a degree or make a career change, librarians need to understand this population of students.

Librarians who work with a nontraditional student population understand that they are adult learners, but defining the student group by age is not always the most accurate way of describing this unique group. Darkenwald (1992) defines the nontraditional learner as a student who has entered society as an adult and then reentered college. This is similar to the concept of defining the student group by age (NCES, n.d.), but accounts for differences that cannot be measured by time of life.

There are distinct differences between a nontraditional student and a traditional undergraduate. These differences are recognized in learning theories for adults and children. Pedagogy is "the art and science of teaching children" (Knowles, 1980, p. 40). Andragogy was originally defined by Knowles (1980) as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43), but after further experience and investigation, Knowles determined that andragogy was not a theory that should be used exclusively with adults. Instead, it was another way of instructing students and it is up to the instructor to determine the best instructional methods (Knowles, 1980). Knowles later stated that andragogy is a general learning theory (Henry, 2011). In spite of Knowles' shift away from andragogy being a learning theory specifically for adults, it is still used for and often applied to instruction of adult learners. The principles are useful to help a librarian instructor understand what an adult learner needs.

Andragogy

A librarian can apply the principles of andragogy in information literacy courses, one-shot instruction sessions, or at the reference desk. The principles are a "learner's need to know, the self-concept of the learner, the prior experience of the learner, a readiness to learn, an orientation to learning, and a motivation to learn" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011, p. 147). These principles are represented on a chart titled Andragogy in Practice in the book The Adult Learner by Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998). The chart also identifies the goals and purposes for adults' learning as "institutional, individual, and societal growth" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 148). It is stated in The Adult Learner that the "goals and purposes of adult learning serve to shape and mold the learning experience" (Knowles, et al, 2011, p. 148). Nontraditional learners can be back in the classroom for a multitude of reasons. These might include a desire to grow in their place of employment, personal edification, or to learn skills that will have an

impact on society (Hardin, 2008). Librarians who grasp the complexity of nontraditional learners will be better able to instruct them.

Individual and situational differences should be considered for each adult learner as these differences affect how the adult will learn. The individual and situational differences are specifically stated as "subject matter differences, individual learner differences, and situational differences" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 151). These aspects affect how the principles of andragogy manifest themselves in each learner. Students approach subjects differently as they might have had positive or negative experiences with the subject in the past or they might feel confident or uncertain about the subject thus causing them to want more independence or need more guidance. Individuals have different learning styles that cannot be ignored when they reach adulthood. Their learning styles can have a direct impact on how they respond to instruction. The situational difference is the situation in which the adult finds themselves learning (Knowles et al., 2011). Programs can be accelerated, online, hybrid, or traditional semesters. Program differences can cause nontraditional learners to need different things from instructors as they learn.

The goals and purposes for learning, the individual and situational differences, and then the principles of andragogy are important to remember as an instructor of adults. These different elements have unique impacts on individual learners. When creating curriculum that is focused on the nontraditional learner, considering the different aspects that effect learning, and making adjustments for what is in the purview of the librarian instructor are important.

Adult Centered Curriculum

According to the first principle of andragogy, a "learner's need to know" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 147), when creating information literacy curriculum that is focused on the adult learner

it needs to be relevant, applicable, with a real-life focus (Knowles et al., 2011). It should also be problem-based so that the students understand why they are learning something. Problem-based instruction can also help push the student to be a more self-directed learner. An example of problem-based instruction in an information literacy course is to give the students a scenario where they need to find information. The students then determine what they already know and then seek out new ways to find the information to solve the problem given in the scenario.

It is also important to incorporate reflection into the curriculum in an effort to push the students to be more self-directed in their learning. Teaching whole to part can assist the students in understanding how everything being taught fits together and aids in creating a learning environment where students see the big picture and understand how content ties together. When an instructor teaches whole to part, they start by showing the students the full picture and then break it down. An example of this, is to show the students a full annotated bibliography and then break it into the citations and the parts of the annotations. If the adult students are able to see the big picture and reflect on their experiences then they can better understand how what they are learning is affected by what they already know and how what they already know might need to change with the new information they are learning. This is considered double-loop learning (Knowles et al., 2011).

Double-loop learning can cause adult learners to change their thoughts and reconsider information they already know (or believe they know). One way double-loop learning can occur in an information literacy course is when students understand how the values of information literacy affect what they do and the results they obtain when searching for information. Many students believe themselves to be effective at searching for information, but have to reconsider their abilities when they learn information literacy skills.

The principle of the self-concept of the learner discusses how adult students are self-directed learners. If adults are not comfortable with the subject or the environment in which they are learning then they might not be self-directed, but it is important as an instructor of adults to encourage the students to become more self-directed and autonomous in their learning (Knowles et al., 2011). This can be done by seeing yourself as a consultant to the students rather than as a teacher. Adults come to education with many life experiences and often they need guidance and direction instead of instruction.

Brookfield (1988) emphasized the previous experiences of the learner as the primary difference between adults and children. Adults have life experiences that often affect how they view a topic or how willing they are to listen to an instructor. To work with this it is important to make connections with students and build a relationship (Ababneh, 2012). Also, make time for discussion and reflection. One way to incorporate reflection and their prior experience into a course is to have the students map their information search process. Show them Carol Kulthau's model as an example and then have them reflect on the process they go through to find information. Then after they learn about search strategies, have the students reflect again on the process and see if they approach it differently and if their anxiety lessens.

"Adult students seek learning opportunities because their life situation has created a need to know" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 192). The student's "readiness to learn" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 147) is typically formed from the situation in which the adult student found themselves. The circumstances of their life have caused them to need to learn new information. Therefore, adult students are in your class for a reason. This should be taken advantage of, by demonstrating to the students the importance of the information literacy content. To demonstrate

the importance students should see how possessing information literacy skills will benefit them in future classes and in real life.

It is important to provide feedback to the adult learner to support their learning needs. Since nontraditional learners come to school with specific life circumstances that have caused them to be in the classroom, extra support is often needed. Feedback is a great way to provide the necessary support to aid the learner in their studies.

In Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning (1984), "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Consider how this relates to the prior experience of the learner. When thinking about lecturing and creating course content, consider the content that will be taught and what experiences adults might have already had with the material. Create a course title that demonstrates to the students that the class will solve a problem, instead of titling the course around a subject. Also, tie learning outcomes to specific activities to demonstrate to the student the reason for the activity. This can be accomplished through the creation of an alignment chart that is provided to the class.

Knowles et al. (2011) states that the motivation to learn in adults is intrinsic. Hardin (2008) showed, though, that the reasons adults are in school can vary, which can alter their style and readiness to learn. In general, though, instructors of adults will best serve the nontraditional learner if they are encouraged to be self-directed and autonomous (Knowles et al, 2011), thus guiding them to have a greater intrinsic motivation.

Conclusion

Andragogy is not the only adult learning theory. Other theories to explore and potentially incorporate into professional practice include Howard Y. McClusky's Theory of Margin, Knud Illeris' Three Dimensions of Learning, David A. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, and Peter

Jarvis' Experiential Model of Learning. These theories provide a basis for understanding the adult learner and creating instruction that is focused on their needs.

Andragogy provides a foundation upon which to build curriculum that is concentrated on the nontraditional learner. The principles of andragogy of "learner's need to know, the self-concept of the learner, the prior experience of the learner, a readiness to learn, an orientation to learning, and a motivation to learn" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 147) should be considered when instructing those students who are not traditional undergraduates. The principles provide a way to understand the nontraditional learner and therefore, help the instructor better know how to relate, teach, and interact with these students. In conclusion, when working with the nontraditional learner remember the importance of creating relevant content, acting as a consultant, recognizing their prior experience, and providing feedback. These key areas will help establish the needed relationship with the students in order to be an effective instructor to the nontraditional learner.

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