

The Keys to Online Learning for Adults

The Six Principles of Andragogy, Part III

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As education leaders, teachers, subject matter experts, and course designers, it is important that we capitalize on students' need to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn in order to support their academic success. In this third installment, we review the remaining three principles of andragogy and offer suggestions for incorporating them into the online classroom. Many adult students return to college after years of pedagogical conditioning, which may make them apprehensive to the openness and self-directedness of andragogical strat-

egies (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). In addition, our mature adult students struggle with balancing work, home, and family. There are ways in which we can keep their spirits and motivation strong so that they can embrace self-directed learning and achieve their goals.

READINESS TO LEARN

Adult students return to school with a wealth of experience and several identities related to the multiple roles they play in life, including parent, employee, commu-



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nity volunteer, and leader. Because adults have learned that each role they take on requires new learning and responsibility, they have formed the learning habit of “needing to know” to support a specific role or goal (Knowles, 1984). Moreover, there is a sense of immediacy to fulfill the roles and responsibilities as parent, employee, leader, et cetera that prompts them to seek the learning they need (Cosson & Riches, 1977). The adult students we work with enter college with an eagerness to learn content that has relevance to their immediate goals, which can be career based or something broader, such as making a positive contribution to society. Students are also ready to learn because they have identified gaps in their knowledge and have a sense of what they need to learn in order to achieve their goals. However, some mature adult students are also at high risk for dropping out. If the course content is not immediately obvious, then students may lose motivation, drift, do poorly, and leave school. The risk is particularly great in general education courses, where the content may seem disconnected from students’ career goals. In order to improve retention, education leaders and teachers must find ways to demonstrate the relevance and interconnectedness of all subjects.

In our courses, we pay special attention to students’ introductions and take notes of their interests, degree program, and intrinsic motivators. The classroom introduction, whether online or on campus, provides a wealth of useful information for instructors. This is where teachers learn why adult students have returned to school, their goals, and factors that drive those goals. Some students return for career advancement, whereas others wish to make a contribution to the world. The factors driving goals are often family. Students will tell us that we wish to be better providers and role models for their children. Others wish to honor their spouses and parents in order to make them proud.

Taking notes on their goals and motivating factors can be used throughout the course in the discussion forum, feedback, or in conversations reminding students of what is important to them and why they have returned to school. Using this information is especially effective in general education courses, where adult learners may struggle with material that appears to be unrelated to their majors. For instance, when teaching a general education course in environmental science, an instructor might ask the follow-up question during a discussion, such as, “How might a stricter air pollution policy affect your job as a hospital administrator?” In this example, the instructor has capitalized on the student’s desire to return to school to advance a career in hospital administration and has created a problem-based scenario with immediate application for the student. The instructor has also created meaningful learning that can maintain student engagement and motivation in courses where students may not see a direct relationship with the course and their goals. In addition, it promotes critical thinking by broadening and deepening the students’ understanding of how their future career can be impacted and influenced by other factors.

ORIENTATION TO LEARNING

Mature adult students enter college with a readiness to learn focused on supporting their current life situation and fulfilling immediate goals. Readiness to learn is closely tied to orientation to learning, which is a problem-based or performance-based approach to teaching and learning (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). Students seek relevance and immediate application of the content. Orientation to learning is especially engaging for adult students if it is geared toward using knowledge in the workplace and work-related problem solving. Cementing course content with student career development also helps students retain knowledge because the

material has an immediate application and meaning for students. Many of our students enjoy problem- and scenario-based assignments as they relate to addressing everyday issues that professionals face in the work place. However, these kinds of activities can also create assessment challenges in the classroom because many work-related problems do not have a single, correct solution. There could be multiple solutions with varying degrees of effectiveness depending on the circumstances. Thus, it is important that instructional strategies emphasize the process of analyzing problems and teaching students to evaluate multiple outcomes.

Educators need to demonstrate to students that the “right” answer is not always as important as the thought process that led to a solution. For example, in one of our courses, a take-home laboratory kit is used to conduct environmental science experiments. Some students become very anxious because they do not know what answer to expect or if they will come up with the “correct” experimental results. In this scenario, it is communicated to students that the assessment focuses on the underlying concepts, completion, and a discussion of the results that were found rather than a specific set of numerical results. Even if the experiment is a disaster, a student can still earn a respectable grade by explaining the process that led to the errors and how they can be corrected. This enhances students’ self-confidence and their ability to think independently rather than simply seeking out what is perceived to be the “right” answer.

Another strategy for supporting students’ readiness to learn and orientation to learning is to offer students choices in assignments, including choices in subtopics and in format type. Assignment choices appeal to the self-directedness of mature adult students who are ready to learn and eager to apply their learning to their goals. For example, students may have a choice of different subtopics, or formatting

options such as writing a paper, developing a poster, publishing an online portfolio, or creating a Prezi or YouSeeU presentation. Other meaningful assignments that appeal to adult learners include community-based projects such as community action planning or a service project assignment (Ames & Diepstra, 2006). Creative assessments allow students to take responsibility for their learning, solve problems that they see as important to their everyday lives, and engage in meaningful work that can benefit the greater good. One challenge for instructors using assignment choices is to ensure that assignment options are equal in rigor and closely support the course learning objectives.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Adult students returning to college may have a different set of motivational factors depending on their age, stage in life, and cognitive interests. Young adults (26–40) may be raising families and are often interested in developing their careers and financial stability. More mature adults (40–65) may have stronger interests in community leadership and advancing to careers that they find meaningful and benefit society. We have had many students tell us that after putting their education on hold to raise their families, they are finally returning to college because they want to set an example for their children or grandchildren, or because they are fulfilling their dream of becoming a teacher, psychologist, environmental advocate, et cetera. A common theme is that these factors are essentially internally driven. In other words, adult students are not returning to college because they were *told* to do so; they are returning to college because they *want* to do so as based on their current or future needs, or desires.

The way in which course content is presented to learners can appeal to the different motivational factors influencing college students. For instance, students

with a strong cognitive interest could respond well to emphasis on learning, laboratories, and intellectual discourse. Other students may feel a stronger motivation toward course material that is related to solving problems in the workplace. Many students return to school with a strong desire to make the world a better place. Based on their own personal experiences, they want to contribute to helping others avoid or cope with the problems they themselves endured.

Providing students with engaging and meaningful course materials is another area in which faculty can support students' readiness to learn, orientation for learning, and intrinsic motivation. Online course materials should be engaging and include diverse options such as microvideos, journal articles, newspaper articles, government reports, online simulations, games, interactive tutorials, maps, graphs, and images. It is vital that course materials and assessments directly support both the course learning objectives and students' need to learn from a problem-based approach. However, curriculum strategy should not over-emphasize workplace scenarios and career development assignments at the cost of course content and rigor. It is vital to find an instructional balance that cements knowledge with application. This can be accomplished by emphasizing critical thinking tasks as they relate to problem solving and other applications of the course content (Riaz, Bao, Kirwan, Weitzl, & Zorn-Arnold, 2015). Classroom materials should be directly related to current events that impact families and careers, include multiple perspectives, and present case studies from both local and foreign areas but still support course learning objectives. For example, in a course on environmental policy, an instructor might include two videos presenting opposing policy viewpoints and ask students to dissect the argument and predict long- and short-term environmental outcomes from each viewpoint. This

kind of learning activity supports students' need to address problems, relate policy concepts to environmental outcomes, and prepare them for professional work that has a meaningful impact on society.

ANDRAGOGICAL STRATEGIES AS A GUIDE

Andragogy is a guide to help educators design and implement curriculum in ways that helps students learn their best (Houle, 1996, cited in Merriam, 2001, p. 5). Bedi (2004) points out that andragogy also helps educators identify the challenges that online adult students face and implement learning opportunities that promote self-directedness. By creating learning environments that offer choices in learning and skill development, college educators can appeal to a broad range of adult learning styles and motivational factors. Using andragogical principles are the keys to developing an engaging learning experience for mature adult students. The classroom discussions and assessments should be designed to capitalize on students' need to learn and orientation to learning. Instructors can maintain students' ambition for college by tapping into the intrinsic motivators that students reveal during their introductions. Successful online course design and delivery should cement rigorous course content with relevant problem solving activities that can be immediately applied to adult learners' lives and goals.

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