

Using Heutagogy to Address the Needs of Online Learners

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2002, approximately 1,680 institutions offered over 54,000 online courses (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2003). While there has been a dramatic increase in the number of such courses, the real question is, how effective are they? Are we, in fact, developing capable people who possess an ‘all round’ capacity centered on the characteristics of: high self-efficacy, knowing how to learn, creativity, the ability to use competencies in novel as well as familiar situations, possessing appropriate values, and working well with others (Hase, 2004)?

Hase and Kenyon (2000) suggest that our education systems (especially higher education) need to develop proactive, rather than reactive learners. We must develop learners who can be ‘more-involved citizens’ (paragraph 25). This will only happen by changing our paradigm in which we teach and learn.

Unfortunately, for many distance educators, teaching online simply means placing their material on the Web and hoping for the best. But providing online learning experiences to develop capable people requires innovative approaches. Online learning should not mean that the standards and practices are less meaningful than those in face-to-face learning. While the latter may be preferred to some, there are many reasons for learners to choose distance learning. The expectations for an online educational experience should be equivalent to those in traditional classrooms. But that does not mean that the courses should be alike in design—only in content. As Simonson et al. (2003) state: “Equivalent learning experiences are critical to the success of distance education” (p. iii). Furthermore, instructional design procedures should anticipate and provide suitable experiences for all students (Simonson et al., 2003).

Just as Howard Gardner developed his theory of Multiple Intelligences for children, providing for differences in learning styles for adults and/or online learners should be a requisite for developing appropriately designed courses for distance education.

It is here that delineation should be made between online learning and distance education. Distance education, in its simplest form, is “the delivery of instruction to students who are separated from their teacher by time and/or location” (Lever-Duffy, McDonald & Mizell, 2003, p. 411). It may be synchronous or asynchronous. Expanding this definition, Simonson et al. (2003, pp. 28-29) state that distance education is composed of four main components that distinguish it from self-study:

1. It is institutionally based.
2. There is separation of student and instructor.
3. Interactive telecommunications are involved.
4. Learners, resources, and instructors are interactive.

ONLINE LEARNING AND ANDRAGOGY

Online learning is simply gaining information via the Internet and World Wide Web. In the past, the most popular mode of research compared a distance learning method with a traditional one. However, several other kinds of questions are also proving to be useful in shaping the impact of distance learning—questions such as (Roblyer, 2003, p. 194):

- Are certain types of distance learning resources or delivery systems more effective than others?

- What are characteristics of effective distance learning courses?
- What are characteristics of students who choose distance learning?
- What are characteristics of students who are effective distance learners?
- What are characteristics of effective distance instructors?
- What cost factors enter into preparing and implementing distance education programs, and how do we determine cost effectiveness?

How we answer these questions will determine our role as facilitators of learning, which is the essence of the theory of andragogy in which Malcolm Knowles (1984) identified five main characteristics of adult learners: 1) adults need to be self-directed; 2) they have a wide variety of experiences from which to draw; 3) they have a readiness to learn relevant information; 4) their orientation to learning is more life centered than subject centered; and 5) they typically have barriers that they must overcome in order to be effective learners. This theory was in opposition to the theory of pedagogy, which is teacher focused: I teach, you learn. Andragogy is teacher centered, but allows students to participate in the decision making related to their learning. Heutagogy takes these and other theories, and provides the basis for an approach to learning that is especially relevant to distance education.

HEUTAGOGY AND ONLINE LEARNING

Heutagogy, “the study of self-determined learning, may be viewed as a natural progression from earlier educational methodologies—in particular from capability development—and may well provide the optimal approach to learning in the twenty-first century” (Hase & Kenyon, 2000, paragraph 1). While heutagogy is not a new concept, it has been revitalized and shown to be less of a linear approach to learning than andragogy. Heutagogy, in fact, may be more of a double-loop learning that “involves the challenging of our ‘theories in use,’ our values, and our assumptions, rather than simply reacting to problems with strategies found in single-loop learning” (Hase & Kenyon, 2000, paragraph 11). Rather

than just finding a solution to a problem, students study the process of how they came to their conclusions, how this process can lead to other solutions, and how their own assumptions changed through the process. Developing more fully the learner’s ability to transfer learning strategies from problem to problem can make even incidental learning more meaningful on a day-to-day basis. Rogers (1969) summarizes this philosophy of learning in the following passage:

The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in a modern world. (p. 104)

Addressing the needs of distance learners has become a subject for much discussion as the increase of online courses continues to grow. In his letter to the University of Illinois faculty, University President James J. Stukel (1997) made this reference to online teaching:

Indeed, the Internet, and the technology which supports it, may well constitute the third modern revolution in higher education. The land-grant movement in the nineteenth century brought access to higher education to the middle class. The community college movement of the twentieth century brought universal access to higher education. The technology revolution of the twenty-first century can bring access to all beyond the bounds of time and place. (paragraph 7)

Palloff and Pratt (2003) make much of the necessity for community building for online courses. They note that learning will be much more valuable if students feel a sense of ownership of the experience through the camaraderie that takes place through online discussions, sharing of information, and partnerships. This falls in line with overcoming barriers such as isolation and inhibitions as described by Knowles (1984).

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