Chapter 2
Designing Engaging Instruction for the Adult Learners

Karen Swanson
Mercer University, USA

Geri Collins
Mercer University, USA

ABSTRACT

Instructional design for the adult learner is a growing field of study in higher education. Engaging instruction for adult learners will be defined in this chapter in two ways: designing courses using the significant learning taxonomy, and a paradigm shift to support faculty to involve student participation. The discussion of engaging instruction will be presenting using several research-based foundations such as Baxter-Magolda's self-authorship, Palmer's open learning environments, and Fink's significant learning taxonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Instruction in higher education continues to follow a traditional model of instructor delivery and content focus. In a study by Nunn (1996), he found that less than six percent of class time involves student participation. There was no evidence of any instance in which students spoke for more than 23% of the total class time. A teacher-centered instructional method has received significant rebuke in the last decade, the stereotypical image is one of instructors droning on to a captive audience of undergraduates taking feverish notes for the sole purpose of reciting the information on a subsequent test. Hoyt and Perera (2000) surveyed faculty as to which type of instruction approach they incorporated into their practice. Forty-five percent identify some combination which used lecture as a primary approach. So the question then becomes what are the best practices for an engaging course design that benefits both faculty and adult learners?

Instructional design for the adult learner is a growing field of study in higher education. Engaging instruction for adult learners will be defined in this chapter in two ways: designing courses using the significant learning taxonomy, and a paradigm shift to support faculty to involve student participation.

Adult education is defined as **"**activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perceptions, define them as adults" (Merriam & Brockett, 2014, p. 8). The adult learner can also include those who are parents, working full time or older and more experienced than the traditional college student. Adults are motivated by learning that has a practical application and personal significance. In addition, the growing abundance of information makes covering a discipline almost impossible. So the alternative or anecdote to teaching a volume of information is to design the learning for significance in a complex and rich way. Here again the need to address student motivation becomes an issue to examine.

BACKGROUND

When planning instruction for adult learners it is important to examine their motivation for being in the classroom. They have chosen to pursue a higher education degree and the faculty's challenge is to plan and execute engaging, relevant learning experiences. The traditional model of instruction in higher education, such as lecture and testing, while possibly engaging, is limited. If the goal is to be able to explicitly assess how students are making the connections among theory, content, and personal experience there needs to be a master course design. Fink (2007) explains that "our current instructional procedures are not working very well. Students are not learning even basic general knowledge, they are not developing higher-level cognitive skills, and they are not retaining their knowledge very well. In fact there is no significant difference between student who take courses and students who do not" (Fink, 2013, p. 4).

Learner-Centered Instruction

Teaching adult learners should be focused on the learning process of the students. Teacher -directed instruction, such as lecture and rote memorization can be transformed to be more engaging through activities such as discussion and application.

Huba and Freed (2000) contrast teacher and learner-centered instruction as a model or paradigm. Their research shifts the focus from what faculty teach (content) to how students learn. They acknowledge that a teacher-centered methodology is not ineffective, but a shift from solely lecturing to a teaching style that incorporates more student interaction and a demonstration of learning beyond rote memorization which supports long-term retention. Huba and Freed (2000) characterize a teacher-centered paradigm in several ways:

1. Content is primarily delivered by the instructor and students are solely learners.
2. Content is not contextualized but rather students passively receive the information.
3. Assessment is the responsibility of the instructor, requires only rote memorization and is summative in nature.
4. Learning is the responsibility of the individual and courses can be constructed in a competitive nature (p. 5).

These characteristics may be more evident in large, lecture style courses where individual interaction is more cumbersome. However, the challenge is for faculty to begin to consider a possible paradigm shift towards learning centered instruction. Fink (2013) states, " ...a major change already taking place in

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