Chapter 20
Insuring Self–Direction and Flexibility in Distance Learning for Adults:
Using Contracts

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ABSTRACT

Distance learning via the internet has become the key to reaching adult learners globally. Adult learners have been shown to benefit from such qualities as: provisions for self-directed learning, flexibility, and frequent communication with the instructor in order to achieve success. Contract learning and contract grading are two innovations popularized during the "individualized instruction" movement of the 1970s which are being used to assist instructors of twenty-first century on-line learning courses in providing for self-direction, flexibility and frequent communication. The chapter which follows will provide an overview of contract learning and contract grading as it can be used with adult learners in distance learning courses (e.g., courses supported by WebCT, Blackboard). The chapter will examine adult learning theories which support contract learning/grading as well as provide information on designing learning contracts and grading contracts which are appropriate for adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

As stated by Wang (2006, 2008) distance learning via internet technologies is becoming the key to involving adult learners across the globe. The knowledge already held by specialists in the field of adult learning gives us much information about HOW adults prefer to learn. Among the qualities needed in an effective course for adult learners are:

- The provision of self-directed learning (pace and choice of options)
- The provision of flexibility (so that the learning can relate to the experiential needs of the particular learner)
- Frequent communication with the instructor (so that students know "how they are doing").

Figure 1.

Pedagogy	Androgogy
Teacher structured	Learner structured
Minimal control by the learner	Minimal control by the teacher
Focus on training for events to come	Focus on assimilation of learning from past experience
Encourages convergent thinking	Encourages divergent thinking
Focus on memory	Focus on thinking/doing
Content supplied by teacher/class materials	Content supplied partially by students
Based on specified content standards	Outcomes evolve as learning progresses

(Adapted from CASSL, 2009)

Malcolm Knowles, often called the "father of adult education", suggests three reasons why self-directed learning is important:

There is evidence that people who take the initiative in their own learning learn more things, and learn better, than people who simply wait to be taught. (Knowles, 1975. p. 14)

Self-directed learning takes advantage of our natural processes of psychological development. 'An essential aspect of maturing is developing the ability to take increasing responsibility for our own lives - to become increasingly self-directed' (Knowles, 1975, p. 15).

Most distance learning and technological learning systems require students to have skills of self-direction. 'Students entering [such] programs without having learned the skills of self-directed inquiry will experience anxiety, frustration, and often failure, and so will their teachers' (Knowles, 1975, p. 15).

Flexibility (i.e., provisions for different options in evidencing one's ability) is also important because each adult learner brings different experiences to the learning environment, and the distance learning course should dovetail with that experience seamlessly. In order to insure flexibility, a variety of options must be provided to the learner.

Adult learners tend to be somewhat fearful of self-directed learning, as well as technologically mediated learning, and often need guidance to recognize that they are "doing it right". Frequent communication with the instructor assists in assuring them that with self-directed learning, there is no "one right way" and that they are proceeding suitably.

BACKGROUND

Pedagogy vs. Andragogy

Many authors have written on the issue of adult learning (andragogy) and some have contrasted its principles with those of "pedagogy", usually connected with ways of teaching young people. In recent years, more debate has occurred over whether andragogy is really a set of principles of "good teaching" useful for any teacher. The author has included the chart of contrasts here (from CASSL, 2009) to highlight the principles of andragogy, as the author feels learning contracts help to meet most of the requirements of andragogy. For those who are producing materials for on-line learning for adults, these principles might be useful. (See Figure 1)

Another helpful comparison of Andragogy and Pedagogy appeared in Kelly (2006) (See Table 1)

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