

Chapter 23

Online Professional Development for Adults: Utilizing Andragogical Methods in Research and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Online professional development programs for adults are increasing in frequency. Numerous scholarly articles have been written that offer polemical or anecdotal evidence supporting the effectiveness of andragogically facilitated non-formal professional development courses, including those conducted online. However, few empirical studies have been conducted to validate their usefulness, especially those offered via the Internet. Such non-formal educational programming may be most conducive to both implementing and empirically testing a more purist definition of andragogy (Pratt, 1988; Rachal, 2002; Bradley, 2011). This chapter explores the theoretical frameworks of andragogy, as well as existing experimental or quasi-experimental research studies, with a view toward creating more learner-centered non-formal educational transactions that meet the unique needs of adult learners. Lastly, suggestions for both practitioners and researchers alike are offered to help build the body of evidence-based research and extend practical advice to educators when designing and facilitating virtual learning programs for adults that emphasize professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Andragogy is commonly viewed as a set of assumptions about working with adults. The term was popularized in the United States by Malcolm Knowles during the late 1960s and early 1970s and has since been referred to as a unifying principle in the broad field of adult education (Merriam, 1991; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Cercone, 2008). Although frequently described as a theory of adult learning, its efficacy has been questioned because of a dearth of conclusive quantitative evidence supporting its use.

Signifying the need for additional protocols relative to the practical application of Internet learning for adults, Isenberg (2007) suggests adult learning methods presently lag behind most other practical applications of online learning. Such theories, however, can help create more learner-centered online educational environments. Isenberg further posits, “Educators of adults lack a how-to-guide for applying adult learning principles to Internet learning” (p. 8). As a result, Cercone (2008) presents an overview for implementing key adult learning theories within both online instructional programs for adults as well as in future research studies. “The future of adult online learning research may be based on the theories discussed in this article, even though most of the theories were developed almost 20 years ago and in traditional classroom environments” (p. 151), Cercone concluded. He further describes andragogy as “the most comprehensive” theory (p. 150) of adult learning. A simple “Google” search revealed that at least 68 authors have cited Cercone’s groundbreaking article since its publication in 2008, thereby further elucidating the current demand for both practitioner-focused and research-based protocols to facilitate the effective implementation of andragogy in online programs for adults.

So far as the authors were able to discover, the first online experimental study that utilized all of Rachal’s (2002) criteria for conducting andragogy

research for the purpose of non-formal professional development was carried out by Bradley (2011). This mixed-methods study was designed to compare the effectiveness of andragogical or student-centered instruction, and pedagogical or teacher-centered instruction, between staff members of nonprofit social service agencies who participate in or complete an online learning module on foundation grant writing using the two methods. Outcomes are presented in relation to other relevant andragogy studies to help inform future research and practice.

ANDRAGOGY’S HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Andragogy vs. Pedagogy Debate

Both historical and theoretical foundations of andragogy are discussed here to provide readers with foundational knowledge supporting future andragogy research and practice in online non-formal professional development settings.

The term “andragogy” was first developed by Alexander Kapp, a German teacher, in 1833 in an attempt to “describe the educational theory of Plato” (Davenport & Davenport, 1985a, p. 152). Davenport and Davenport (1985b) debated whether it was Malcolm Knowles or Eduard Lindeman who brought the term to the United States. Lindeman first introduced it in 1927, but Knowles brought the term to prominence with his 1967 address as the recipient of the Delbert Clark Award (Davenport & Davenport, 1985b). Knowles, as cited in Levitt, changed his conceptualization of andragogy and pedagogy, first presenting the two as dichotomous in his 1970 work, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy vs. Pedagogy*, but later clarifying himself in the journal critique *Andragogy Revisited – Part II*, where he wrote:

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