

Chapter 13

The Adult Learner in Higher Education: A Critical Review of Theories and Applications

Sumitra Balakrishnan

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5593-2468>

Xavier Institute of Management, Bhubaneswar (XIMB), Xavier University Bhubaneswar, India

ABSTRACT

Researchers and practitioners have come to understand adult learners as unique and different from child learners, and have developed different theoretical approaches, methodologies, and strategies attuned to their educational needs and life circumstances. This chapter examines the factors that impact the effectiveness of adult learning programs and classroom environments by using perspectives of education theorists. The needs of the adult learner, advantages of teaching adults, and principles that can be followed are explored with the help of Knowles' andragogy model. The importance of the classroom's eco-behavioral features—their physical and emotional environments—along with other factors that effectively facilitate the process of adult education are discussed. In this context, an adaptation of Astin's I-E-O's model is proposed to deepen the understanding of adult learning programs.

INTRODUCTION

Evolving theories and approaches to the teaching and learning of adults are central to the increasingly diverse 21st century university. Researchers and practitioners have come to understand adult learners as unique and different from child learners, and therefore design programs attuned to their needs. In order to make the learning experience meaningful for goal-oriented adult students, educators have expanded and diversified their teaching approaches.

This chapter reviews pertinent literature related to the evolution of adult education learning theories, and identifies the taxonomy of an adult learner in terms of learning style and specific needs. A review

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-2783-2.ch013

The Adult Learner in Higher Education

of the research literature on adult learning theory is followed by a special focus on the I-E-O model by Alexander Astin (1991) to explain the relationship among major factors in a learning program, and determine their contributions towards effectiveness of adult learning programs. An expansion of the I-E-O model is offered as a conceptual application to adult education.

BACKGROUND

Researchers have defined adult learners in overlapping but somewhat different ways. Merriam (2008) describes adult learners as those whose age, social roles, and self-perception define them as adults. Other scholars employ a demographic description which includes chronological age and additional factors such as part-time attendance, full-time work while enrolled, financial independence, and single parenthood (Bourke, 2014; Strange & Banning, 2001). Similarly, (MacDonald, 2018) indicates that specific criteria for an adult learner include: being at least 25 years old; waiting at least one year after high school before entering college; having a GED (General Education Diploma) instead of a high school diploma; being a first-generation student (FGS), or have re-entered a college program.

Adult learning theory arose from many theories by foundational scholars in related fields such as psychology and sociology, including Piaget, Maslow, Rogers, Bandura, Durkheim, Kolb, Tinto, and Bean and Metzner. Theories of behaviorism, cognitivism, humanism, constructivism, and connectivism illuminate different learner types and their disposition towards the process of education. The main ideas, approaches, and contributions of these theories have been summarized in the figure below (Table 1). The denotation of the theory or approach is indicated as per the theorists in their major works; the application is derived from the critical analysis of theories, scholarly examinations of relevance of theories, and meta-analyses of social theories of various scholars.

ANDRAGOGY AND HEUTAGOGY

Pedagogy Versus Andragogy

There are three broad epistemologies of learning methodology: pedagogy, andragogy, and heutagogy. Andragogy is based on Maslow's humanistic approach and his hierarchy of needs, and through Malcolm Knowles, became known as a teaching and learning theory (Halupa, 2015). While pedagogy generally is seen as teacher-centered learning, andragogy is student-centered, with the role of the teacher as "interactor" rather than "instructor." According to Knowles, self-directed learning in its broadest sense is a process "in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (1975, p.18). Adult learners bring more relevant experience and information to the classroom, as compared to a child learner, and as a result, their educational needs and expectations differ.

Knowles' notion of andragogy (1984) is the most widely accepted model used to characterize adult learners and understand them better. The main qualities of adult learners, according to Knowles, are: 1) a desire to know what, how, and why they are learning and see its practical application; 2) a recognition of when it is necessary to adapt to new circumstances, and the ability to attach value to learning

12 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:
www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-adult-learner-in-higher-education/253592

Related Content

Family Engagement and Service Delivery to People With Disabilities in Nigeria

Zabiya Idris and Terfa Ahon Adaka (2023). *Advocating and Empowering Diverse Families of Students With Disabilities Through Meaningful Engagement* (pp. 272-289).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/family-engagement-and-service-delivery-to-people-with-disabilities-in-nigeria/329463

Understanding Dyscalculia: An African Perspective

Roy Venketsamy and Zijing Hu (2023). *Handbook of Research on Shifting Paradigms of Disabilities in the Schooling System* (pp. 72-87).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/understanding-dyscalculia/332472

Assistive Technology Interventions and Equity Within Literacy Instruction: Comparing Activity Theory Models

Catherine Lipson (2022). *Handbook of Research on Challenging Deficit Thinking for Exceptional Education Improvement* (pp. 256-278).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/assistive-technology-interventions-and-equity-within-literacy-instruction/294266

The Role of the School Unit Leader in the Inclusion of Students With Disabilities

Dimitra V. Katsarou, Irini K. Zerva, Evangelos Mantsos and Panagiotis J. Stamatis (2023). *Inclusive Phygital Learning Approaches and Strategies for Students With Special Needs* (pp. 282-295).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-role-of-the-school-unit-leader-in-the-inclusion-of-students-with-disabilities/327237

Disability Awareness in Teacher Education in Singapore

Levan Lim and Thana Thaver (2022). *Research Anthology on Inclusive Practices for Educators and Administrators in Special Education* (pp. 1077-1090).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/disability-awareness-in-teacher-education-in-singapore/292931