

Chapter 2

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

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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.

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The Adult Learner in Higher Education

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 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.

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