

Chapter 50

Making Instruction Work for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a review of the goals of the adult learners, with a focus on factors that impact the learning process. Principles of education of adult learners are discussed. There are various effective strategies for instruction; however, regardless of the strategies developed, instruction of adults at any level in higher education must facilitate learners' paths toward achieving their goals in pursuing higher education. In teaching adult learners, some factors impacting the learner that require consideration are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The designation of adult learner refers to individuals engaged in learning in an institution of higher education at various levels who are seeking expertise in a variety of disciplines. Adult learners include a wide variety of individuals. Adult learners include: (a) students who are generally referred to as traditional students who enter college immediately after completing high school; (b) non-traditional students who enter or return to college and are enrolled in undergraduate programs; and (c) individuals who enter graduate programs, ranging from the master's level students to those seeking postdoctoral degrees and credentials. Graduate-level students themselves have various levels of career and life experiences. Graduate students may enter graduate programs immediately after completion of an undergraduate program or return to school to seek an advanced degree after having first gained some work experience.

Even though a freshman in college is, by definition, legally and socially an adult, in higher education adult students usually refer to non-traditional students who are typically in their mid-20s. These non-traditional students attend the same classes and take the same coursework as traditional students. This diversity among the population considered to be "adult learners" requires that specific consideration be given to the various factors that affect their learning and impact educational practices. Among these factors are the social, personal, and psychological development of the learner and the emergence

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of technology as a driving force. The purpose of this chapter is to draw the attention of educators to the factors that influence adult learners in their pursuit of higher education and to provide insight into elements of effective instruction.

DIVERSITY OF INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS

In considering the education of adult students at the undergraduate or graduate level, strategies must be adopted and implemented that cover at least two different populations of students who bring various levels of experience and expertise to the same classroom. The study habits of traditional students differ from those of non-traditional students who are rusty in their practice of studying and are more likely to learn from performance-based activities where they can incorporate the confidence they gained from work and life experiences in solving problems and connecting with the subject matter. Diversifying instruction and carefully assigning traditional and non-traditional students to collaborate together would help both populations of students to utilize their strengths and overcome their weaknesses. Sometimes traditional students, especially millennials, can become good resources in manipulating technology to develop a product. However, at this time, when almost everyone is using technology to some degree, a non-traditional learner may have a good command of technology as well, and be able to use technology effectively in the learning process. Life experience of adult learners at the undergraduate level may help or hinder their learning. Effective instructors make no assumptions; they begin by getting to know their students well from the very beginning.

At the graduate level, instructors can depend on the learners' prior experiences and their ability to search for answers, and build on those experiences and skills to help the learner in problem-solving and research-oriented learning.

Discussing teaching strategies appropriate for adult learners is far different from teaching strategies appropriate at levels P–12, where most students at each level are homogeneous-- having similar social and academic experiences. The education of adults must take a departure from pedagogy, which is usually focused on P–12 education. The concept of andragogy, introduced in the mid-20th century, sheds new light on teaching adult learners (Knowles, 1968).

ANDRAGOGY

During the mid-20th century, the concept of andragogy, as the method and practice of teaching adult learners, was introduced (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). According to Knowles et al. (2015), andragogy focuses on six principles: “(a) the learner’s need to know, (b) self-concept of the learner, (c) prior experience of the learner, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learning, and (f) motivation to learn” (p. 4).

The Learners Need to Know

As previously stated, adult learners cover a wide variety of individuals with varying degrees of life experience and at various stages of life; therefore, instructors must be considerate of these varying needs and be aware that the best format for their learning must vary to a great extent as well. Effective instruction

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