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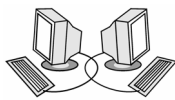
Chapter IV

Adult Learning Principles and Learner Differences

with
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Making Connections

A clear ideology for instructing and learning at a distance does not exist. An emerging belief by researchers and practitioners is that the use of andragogical principles and practices results in deeper and more meaningful learning by adults. We concur. As discussed in previous and subsequent chapters, how materials are delivered does not have an effect on learner achievement, but what methods are used to engage learners does. In chapter III, we explored models of learning and their application in distance education. In this chapter, we will introduce theory and practice that support the use of adult learning principles when instructing at a distance. We will also address strengths and weaknesses of andragogical and pedagogical methods. Questions to guide you in this reading include "What is the role of an educator when instructing at a distance?" and "How can educators foster deeper and more meaningful learning?"

Introduction

Educators and trainers should attempt to design and deliver individualized instructional sequences to provide the greatest opportunity for the learner. To achieve this lofty goal, educators and trainers will have to teach, coach, mentor, facilitate, motivate, and direct learners based on the educators' assessment of learners' unique backgrounds, experiences, knowledge, skill, abilities, personality type, social style, and/or personal styles and values (Lindner, Dooley, & Williams, 2003). Knowles (1990) suggested that as a person matures and ages, his or her dependence on an educator to teach decreases. The preceding statements are, in fact, essential for effecting instruction both in the classroom and at a distance.

While learner achievement may not be affected by how curricular materials are delivered, how learners interact among themselves and with the instructor does have an effect on learner satisfaction. Learner satisfaction improves as interactions among themselves and with the instructor increases (Fulford & Zhang, 1993; Garrison, 1990; Ritchie & Newby, 1989). While distance education may help instructors reach learners separated by location and/or time, *transactional* distance may hinder learner satisfaction and achievement. The concept of transactional distance was first discussed in 1980 (Moore) and continues to be a major barrier for the adoption and diffusion of distance education. Transactional distance is a measure of distance not as a geographical but as a "pedagogical phenomenon" (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 200). It involves the interplay among the instructors, the learners, the content, and the learning environment. Distance is described in terms of the responsiveness of an educational program to the learner, rather than in terms of the separation of the instructor and the learner in space or time or both.

Distance education as a contextual application, we would argue, is mature. The widespread appeal and acceptance of online learning, however, has not resulted in changes necessary to maximize its effectiveness and efficiency (Howard, Schenk, & Discenza, 2004). Howard, Schenk, and Discenza further suggest that the majority of distance education courses use pedagogies developed for traditional face-to-face classes. "By clinging to traditional pedagogies, universities often diminish the potential education advantages brought by the technologies used for distance education" (p. vi).

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