

Chapter 29

Library Issues in Adult Online Education

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ABSTRACT

Adult online learners have unique information and technology needs which are best met by libraries and library professionals. Combining the concept of andragogy along with best practices for the library profession significantly assists librarians in providing meaningful learning opportunities. Effective library support for adults in online learning experiences incorporates the concepts of learning style theories, thinking style theories, and library anxiety research. Best practices in information literacy and technology literacy assist librarians in supporting the broad needs of adult online learners.

INTRODUCTION

Foundational concepts in the field of library information science and the theory of adult learning, a.k.a. andragogy, are a natural partnership for the support of adult online education. This chapter highlights how the library science profession strongly embraces the concepts of andragogy, and provides specific examples how the library science profession supports both formal and informal adult online education situations.

The chapter includes definitions and practical suggestions. It is organized into eight sections

highlighting librarianship and andragogy, learning styles, thinking styles, information literacy, technology literacy, library anxiety, best practices and future trends. The chapter concludes with comments about the future role of libraries and librarians in the area of adult online education.

BACKGROUND

Librarianship & Andragogy

The beginning of the modern library coincides with the eve of the industrial revolution, significant increases in world population, and the dawn of

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the Enlightenment Age (Rogers & McChesney, 1984). Historically, libraries have fulfilled significant social functions by meeting specific societal needs such as the dissemination of information and knowledge.

Libraries and educational institutions have been inseparably tied due to these societal, repository, and information providing roles. Similar to other educational institutions, libraries are fundamentally viewed as educational rather than recreational organizations.

The information seeking needs of today's library patron includes library visits that are irregular and for a brief period of time. This is because today's library patron typically makes the voluntary decision to visit the library to meet some type of self-directed learning need. It is not unusual in online educational environment for virtual library visits.

Like other educational institutions, libraries are facing a need to provide increased services that place an emphasis on lifelong learning, self-directed learning, and support for distance or online educational experiences. Today's society requires more from their educational institutions in meeting the informational needs of their citizens.

Utilizing the concepts of andragogy significantly assists libraries and librarians in providing meaningful learning opportunities. Incorporating modern technology and the needs of the adult online learner are essential educational program issues that must be addressed.

Andragogy can be defined as the art and science of helping adults learn. It can also be considered another model of learning that can be used alongside the pedagogical model of assumptions in helping children learn (Knowles, 1980). Adults participating in online educational experiences greatly benefit when andragogical practices are combined with the best practices of the library science profession. The andragogical approach indicates that effective adult educators possess both technical and interpersonal skills to be an effective facilitator of learning (Galbraith,

1990). It is suggested that the learning experience is centered around principles of voluntary participation, a culture of mutual respect, collaborative facilitation, praxis, facilitation of critical reflection, and empowerment (Brookfield, 1986).

The principles of caring, respect, and partnership continuously reappear in the literature as major attributes of effective adult learning programs, including online education programs. Therefore, effective adult educators, including librarians, must possess the ability and desire to work well with others in creating a conducive learning environment and experience. Adult educators who do not believe in these fundamental concepts are quickly identified by adult learners, and when possible, they and their learning programs are avoided.

When an adult educator believes in the principles listed above, little effort is required for the incorporation of these principles in the creation of online learning programs. For example, librarians can create online learning tutorials that are available 24 /7 to support the needs of the library patron's schedule. Online learning tutorials should be recommended, but not required. Online tutorials should be created in such a way as to motivate and invite adult online learners to use the tool. Online learning activities should include opportunities for reflection and feedback from the adult online learner.

In addition to the core andragogical principles listed above, library educators should also be aware of, and incorporate, six (6) identified components of effective adult education programs using andragogical concepts. These six characteristics include: (1) establishing an organizational climate and structure, (2) assessing learner needs and interest, (3) defining purposes and objectives, (4) designing a comprehensive program, (5) operating a comprehensive program, and (6) evaluating a comprehensive program (Knowles, 1980). Of these six components, establishing an organizational climate and structure is perhaps the most critical for effective adult online education

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