Education Scotland & West CLD Alliance - Research / Read / Reflect / Report

**Quality in online and blended learning - research-based practitioner learning**

**Theme:** How can we foster and create inclusive learning environments when delivering online adult learning opportunities?

**Source 1**

**Evaluation and Application of Andragogical Assumptions to the Adult Online Learning Environment** Laurie C. Blondy University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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Overview/ Extract

Demands of the online learning environment require educators to be prepared to facilitate courses in ways that are very different from face-to face classroom settings (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Many educators utilize andragogical assumptions to address these unique demands (Burge, 1988). Malcolm Knowles (1980; 1984) developed a set of five assumptions that enveloped his concept of andragogy. This paper analyses the validity of andragogical assumptions related to adult learning and discusses applications of these assumptions to the online learning environment.

*Assumption One: Adult Learners are Self-Directed*

A self-directed online learning environment requires learners to establish their own learning goals and activities within the course objectives (Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000).

* There must be clear communication from the course facilitator at the start of the course informing the learners to think about and identify their specific **learning goals**
* Learners must have opportunities to identify what **learning activities** they would personally like to use within the course to meet their goals.

*Assumption Two: Adults Bring Experience with Them to the Learning Environment*

* For the online learning environment, the curriculum must be structured in a way that fosters sharing of experiences among learners, through the use of group projects and interactive discussions etc.
* Learners must be willing to participate in class discussions and team projects during which they share their personal experiences and knowledge, and facilitators must create an environment in which learners feel free to express opinions, share ideas, and discuss information and experiences valuable to them (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

*Assumption Three: Adults Enter the Learning Environment Ready to Learn*

* Facilitators must realize each learner enters the online learning environment for a specific reason, whether a personal desire to learn something or because the course is required by an employer or institution (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).
* Learner needs should be the central focus of the course and a variety of resources should be made available for learner access (Burge, 1988).
* Learner needs must be actively and quickly met in order for the learner to be successful online. Online courses provided through colleges and universities generally provide both online and phone service support for learners

*Assumption Four: Adult Learners are Problem Oriented*

* Knowles (1984) believed adults pursue learning because they need to immediately apply what they were learning to life situations.
* Learners should be supported to identify their personal objectives
* A variety of the course assignments and group projects should seek to have learners draw on their personal experiences and needs, requiring learners to apply the theoretical concepts of the course to their real-life situations.

*Assumption Five: Adults are Motivated to Learn by Internal Factors.*

* Facilitators must recognize the need of learners to be appreciated and respected in order to foster an environment conducive to learning.
* Enhancing learner self-esteem through acknowledgement of contributions to the course will serve to further motivate learners to succeed in their coursework.
* Learners should be recognized by the facilitator no less than once weekly for their course contributions or they may begin to feel their contributions are not valued or appreciated.

My Initial Reflection

The recommendations across the five assumptions relate very well to the approaches taken by CLD Adult Learning providers. Some aspects of the transition to online learning has been easier as processes were already in place for a learner centred approach with individuals being supported to identify and set their own goals. The difficult element has been to create new digital processes to recreate processes that were once carried out face to face. This has been achieved to a certain extent with positive results and feedback from adult learners with ongoing development. One area of feedback from practitioners is that the interaction is different online, feeling that they may be talking and leading more than usual during online groups. There are IT restrictions and risk assessment considerations that we have to overcome in relation to online learning. We have been creative in our approach to finding solutions to allow more interaction and flexibility within online learning groups to meet immediate learning needs as they arise. Practitioners are facilitating the types of discussions recommended above for online learning environments. It takes longer for adult learners to gain the skills to get online and join a group. It also takes longer for the group to go through the stages of group dynamics, for each individual to feel comfortable enough to share experiences, thoughts and ideas freely. For many, this will improve as practitioners and adult learners gain more experience engaging online. Additional support is required to maintain engagement, signpost and offer support for learning to ensure learners see progress and relevance to their reasons for learning. We have found that it works very well to support engagement but longer term planning will need to take this into account in relation to staff capacity. Support and feedback out with the online learning group is also key. Practitioners have found it difficult to provide personalised feedback in the same way during an online group. They often refer to face to face provision and the opportunities to walk around the room and engage individually with adult learners at different times throughout each learning session. This is happening but not on the same scale as face to face. Further development is needed here to ensure a consistent approach.

**Source 2**

**Characteristics of Adult Learners with Implications for Online Learning Design**

KATHLEEN CERCONE *State of Connecticut, Milford, CT USA* Cercone, K. (2008). Characteristics of adult learners with implications for online learning design, *AACE Journal, 16*(2), 137-159.

Overview/ Extract

The online educational environment is increasingly being used by adults and should be designed based on the needs of adult learners. During this discussion, the theories are examined for the ways in which they may be applied to the design of online learning environments. In addition, the characteristics of adult learners are examined, and an analysis of how these characteristics influence the design of an online learning environment is presented. Online learning environments are often new to learners and instructors, both need to adapt and change as they learn how to use this new medium.

**Criticisms and Concerns Regarding Andragogy**

According to Brookfield (1995), it is still not very clear how adults learn. Current learning theory does not address all aspects of how adults learn. Many variables influence how individuals develop as adults. The primary consideration of instructors as they design online learning environments should be that each learner is a unique being. Learners are real people with distinct needs.

This paper includes a framework of 13 characteristics of adult learners, based on different theories, with specific teaching strategies and recommendations to consider when developing an online learning environment.

Key considerations from this framework:

* Consideration of additional support needs/ accessibility requirements
* Ensure no cultural bias
* Resources available in a variety of modes
* Consistent communication with individuals and groups
* Multiple resources from of information that include differing viewpoints from diverse authors
* Acknowledge the accumulated experiences of the participants as valuable educational resources
* Allow the learner to voice their own opinion and treat them as equal in the learning process.
* Individuals have many perspectives and bring these to the classroom; these may be a result of their religion, gender, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and/or physical abilities. Acknowledge these.

**Source 3**

UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response Education Sector issue notes.

**Issue note n° 2.5 June 2020.** Open and distance learning to support youth and adult learning

**Ensure equity and inclusiveness for all.**

• In addition to measures to prevent digital divides and digital skills gaps (see the UNESCO Education Sector issue note on distance learning strategies), special attention should be given to ODL (Open and Distance Learning) for adult learners with low-literacy skills. This is especially relevant for the future of adult learning in the post-pandemic context.

• A landscape review of digital inclusion for low-skilled and low-literate people found that, before a digital solution can be identified, various functions, delivery channels, access devices, user interface options, content types, support options and affordability must be taken into consideration.

• The ITU, UN Women, United Nations University (UNU) and the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSMA) launched a multi-stakeholder initiative, EQUALS, in 2016, to address the gender digital gap. Last year, the EQUALS Access Coalition released an easy-to-use reference report, 10 Lessons Learnt: Closing the Gender Gap in Internet Access and Use, which can be referred to when designing ODL programmes.

**Explore and use various channels of learning media to ensure maximum outreach.**

• Phones, printed materials, text messages, radio, TV, low-bandwidth social media and short bite-sized micro-learning can be used to boost outreach to marginalized learners with low skills and limited access to the internet.

• Research shows that graphic-rich and audio-based interfaces are the most effective for youth and adults with low literacy skills.

• A catalogue of interactive radio instruction programmes by the Education Development Center and UNESCO’s list of online and offline learning resources can be useful tools.

Key Points to Consider

* Access to suitable devices and internet access is key moving forward
* Particular attention needs to be given to adults facing additional barriers including low literacy levels. This is already evident across Scotland from discussions at national and regional webinars and meetings.
* Ensure a range of learning options, materials and media are available. Opportunities to bring practitioners together to identify what exists, any gaps, sharing skills and knowledge will be beneficial.