This Issue’s Focus: Teaching Adult vs Traditional Students

Previous issues of the COLE newsletter have addressed important topics such as the impact of online learning expansion to ODU’s mission and service units, elements of an effective online course and the best practices for online delivery. A special issue was produced to communicate the valuable resources we have in our instructional design team, and two faculty forums have been held to foster communication and address concerns. Additionally, the COLE committee has created tools for faculty member use to assist with the transition to an online learning format.

A question was posed during the second faculty forum that we thought would interest all —is there a difference between teaching non-traditional, adult students and traditional students in their late teens and early twenties? Research in adult education programs would tell us that there is.

In the mid to late 20th Century, Malcolm Knowles pioneered the field of andragogy — “the art and science of helping adults learn” — and contributed a great deal to the development of adult and vocational training programs here in the United States (Zmeyov, 1998, p. 105). In addition to Knowles’ work in the West, many Eastern-bloc educational theorists weighed in with their experiences of training large groups of adults to perform new job functions as their economy shifted from industrial to post-industrial (p. 105).

What is Andragogy?

Knowles, Holton and Swanson tell us that Andragogy — taken from the Greek Andros (adult man) and agogus (leader of) — is a play on the word pedagogy (or the leading of children) (p. 61). The crucial element of Andragogy is the idea of guiding the student to knowledge. While this is not different from pedagogy in terms of the goal, the methods differ simply because of the wealth of experience an adult learner possesses.

In The Modern Practice of Adult Education, Knowles (1980) identified four assumptions about adult learners.

As human beings mature:

1. Their self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward being a self-directed human being.
2. They accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning.
3. Their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles.
4. Their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to one of immediacy of application, and accordingly, their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of performance-centeredness (p. 44-45).

In his article Andragogy: Origins, Development and Trends, Zmeyov adds three more:

5. The learning of an adult is largely determined by his or her life context.
6. The adult learning process is characterized by the leading role of the learners themselves.
7. The learner and the teacher co-operate in all stages of learning (p. 106).

Based on his assumptions, Knowles (1980) draws some implications for practice:

A. The learning climate needs to be more team-centered, allowing for the free-exchange of ideas and information. The teacher needs to engage with an attitude of interest and respect. Using the first names of students is very helpful for building rapport. Teachers should not view students as “receiving sets for transmissions of wisdom” (p. 47).
B. Diagnosis of Needs should be student-directed and consists of three steps: 1) constructing a model of competence – what does it mean to achieve mastery; 2) providing diagnostic experiences – testing what they already know; and 3) assessment – helping the learners measure gaps between their knowledge and mastery. This allows the students to take ownership of their learning and provides motivation to learn (p. 48).

C. The Planning Process should involve the students to build commitment to the learning process and should include: definition of learning objectives, designing and conducting learning experiences, and evaluating success in achieving the objectives (p. 48).

D. Conducting learning experiences builds the buy-in of students and treats the learning transaction as a mutual responsibility. The teacher should act as a resource or facilitator more than an instructor. This can be accomplished through presentations and team projects conducted in small groups (p. 48).

E. Evaluation of Learning – This is the completion of the process laid out in the diagnosis of needs. Knowles suggests that adult students should be encouraged to self-evaluate and that this call for self-evaluation is a sticky situation for teachers. Teachers must create a supportive environment for students to self-evaluate in order for them to be honest about the assessment of their own skills. He further suggests that this should be couched in terms of “rediagnosis of learning needs” so that growth, not failure, is highlighted. In addition to self-evaluation, the students should be encouraged to evaluate the program and make critical suggestions for improvement (p. 49).

Zmeyov (1998) formulates some fundamental principles of adult learning based on Knowles assumptions and his own added assumptions. Many of them echo Knowles, but the expansions are:

I. **Experiential Learning:** The life experience (social, occupational, family) of a learner is used as a source of his or her own, and others’ learning.

II. **Systemic Learning:** conformity of objectives, contents, methods and means of learning, and of the evaluation of the results of learning.

III. **Contextual Learning** (attributed to Russian researcher, A.A. Verbitsky): The learning of an adult must be organized in the context of his or her anthroposphere, i.e., it must aim at the concrete objectives of vital importance to time, place and everyday factors in the life of an adult.

IV. **Actualization of the Results of Learning:** Immediate application in real life of the knowledge, skills and qualities acquired through the learning.

V. **Consciousness of Learning:** The conscious approach by both learner and teacher to all elements and procedures in the learning process, their awareness of all activities (p. 106-107).

Zmeyov (1998) further states that these principles do not only apply to adult education, but are broadly applicable to all sectors of education and are most successfully used when the learners 1) possess considerable experience, 2) are conscious of their life goals and how the knowledge can be applied, 3) have sufficient background in the chosen field of study, and 4) are trying to achieve educational objectives in a short time (p. 107).

**Andragogy at ODU**

Adult & Continuing Education (Adult & Con Ed) plays an important role in the lives of the adult students it serves. ODU has long made education accessible to adults by expanding delivery formats—originally through the Weekend College Program, and for the past 20 years through the accelerated evening format. We now continue this education accessibility evolution through online expansion.

The go-forward Adult & Con Ed program will include the effective adult education components detailed in this and previous newsletter issues.

- The move away from a cohort-based to a term-based program increases student involvement in the andragogical practices of needs diagnosis, planning, and self-assessment.
- To schedule their classes students must know the gaps in their knowledge and what is needed to close those gaps. The Adult & Con Ed office provides resources to show adult students how to plan an appropriate course of action.
- In end-of-course Faculty Evaluations, students are asked to self-assess their progress against that action plan.
- In the online classes, we are encouraging a wide range of activities to foster interaction between student participants and instructors, and looking to online learning best practices to build our own online culture.