

A STUDY ON ADULT LEARNING SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT:

In the provision of ESL teaching, adult education has become more prevalent as more adult students are seeking higher education. The positive outcome of this global trend is educational institutions are having big volume of nontraditional student- populations seeking linguistic competence which is, however, comparatively a new challenge to adult educators and programme developers. Adult students are, in a large-scale, expected to balance the needs of work, family, and related obligations. Because of their age, knowledge, and experience, adult learners have different orientations and emphases than traditional learners. Furthermore, adult instructors can, oftentimes, come across adult learners having acute economical insolvency, pressures of normal day-to-day tasks, previous experience of hopeless academic situations which may raise the bar of perplexity. As an adult educator, one can tailor instruction that helps adults overcome their fears, anxieties, and concerns and increases their self-confidence to be interactive. Appropriate teaching strategies, relevant lesson plans and productive learning environment lead them to self- discovery, to transferring of knowledge by bridging the gap between the old skills and the emerging new skills and professional competence. This paper intends to explore what exactly an adult learner is, and also to review adult learning principles and their implications for the mentors. From here, the focus is on what pedagogical and other techniques and methods would be appropriate to best support the needs of adult learners.

Key words: Adult educators, adult learners, adult learning, adult teaching, experience.

1. Introduction

Teaching adult is a significantly challenging pursuit. Over the past decades driving forces behind pushing adult learners to avail class-room learning facilities have been several; such as, need for professional advancement, ambition to get more prestigious position in new sector, desire to be oriented with latest and updated skills and ever- changing knowledge, or dream to fulfill long-cherished aspiration to have higher degree. Thus, adult ESL educators are experiencing the same myriad and rewarding challenge posed by adult learners. Here the dynamics of adult teaching and learning are on the view. Malcolm Knowles (1975), the father of adult education promoted “Andragogy” to refer learner-focused pedagogical practices. It is widely acknowledged that teaching adult is different from conventional teacher-oriented, test-driven, lecture-based adolescents or children’s teaching. Hence, adult instructors require more academic preparation and broad range of skills to facilitate adult learning and help achieve their goal.

2. Andragogy

Davenport and Davenport (1985, p. 157 cited in Merriam, 2001), in their writing, note that andragogy has been classified “as a theory of adult education, theory of adult learning, theory of technology of adult learning, method of adult education, technique of adult education, and a set of assumptions.” Based on humanistic psychology, Knowles’s version of andragogy (1975) presents the individual learner as one who is autonomous, free, and growth oriented. This model is different from traditional pedagogy (concerned with youth education) which embodies a teacher-directed education. In pedagogic model, teacher is all in all who takes control of the classroom learning situation and he alone decides which, when and how to teach. This traditional practice of teaching does not nurture students’ creativity and autonomy in any situation rather encourages learners to be dependent completely on course instructors. Hence in the pedagogic setting of teaching, dogmatism, didacticism, pedantry and teachers’ supreme authority are key words. In contrast, andragogy values students’ perception, their feedbacks in all through teaching learning situations and stimulates their self-control and independence. In the andragogic setting of teaching, learners’ can spontaneously participate in all stages of learning and this is a learner-directed method where learning environment, power factor, collaboration and self-guidance on the learners’ part are key words. In addition, the new instructional model rearranges the relationships between the ‘four common places’ (instructor, learner, context, and curriculum) of an educational situation (Schwab, 1973, cited in Paraskevas, and Wickens, 2003). For Houle (1996, pp. 29–30 in Merriam 2001) “Andragogy remains as the most learner-focused of all patterns of adult educational programming”. What is significant, Houle (1996) continues, is that andragogy has alerted educators to the fact that they “should involve learners in as many aspects of their education as possible and in the creation of a climate in which they can most fruitfully learn” (p. 30). Today the term andragogy is used in Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Yugoslavia, and other central and eastern European countries to refer to what the British and Americans call adult education (Draper, 1998, cited in Merriam 2001). Anderson and Lindeman (1927) had first used the word in the United States via a published piece, although Stewart (1986a, 1986b) notes that Lindeman apparently even used the term as early as 1926. Brookfield (1984) suggests that Anderson and Lindeman drew upon the work of a German author of the 1920’s, Eugene Rosenstock. However, Davenport and Davenport (1985) asserted that the word was first coined in 1833 by Kapp, a German teacher to contrast education theory with traditional pedagogy, designed for teaching children. (Hiemstra, R., & Sisco, B. 1990) However, Knowles contributions to this system have been many (1975, 1980, 1984; Knowles & Associates, 1984), and have influenced the thinking of countless adult instructors, hence, he is justly referred as the father of adult education.

3. Nature Of Adult Student Populations

The term adult learner really covers anyone as young as 18 to as old as 108 (Carol Smith, 2008). But Brookfield (1995) emphasises some other important characteristics such as culture, ethnicity, etc of adult learning population than merely redefines them by their age factor: Blithe generalization about 'the adult learner', 'adults as learners' or 'the nature of adult learning' imply that people over 25 form a homogenous entity simply by virtue of their chronological age. Yet the differences of class, culture, ethnicity, and personality, cognitive style, learning patterns, life experiences and gender among adults are far more significant than the fact that they are not

children or adolescents. Nevertheless, this article examines only those adult learners who have been out of any classroom learning situations for a considerably substantial time. In most cases, they are even older than the educators by age and sometimes by being possessor of varied and pragmatic experiences of life on earth. (Merriam, 1999, in Conlan, Grabowski, and Smith (2003). Merriam (2001) also cited Knowles five assumptions underlying andragogy which describe the adult learner as someone who: has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning, has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning, has learning needs closely related to changing social roles, is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors.

4. Adult Learning Principles

Imel (1989) explains the four learning principles, which include:

- adults are autonomous as they can take control of their learning.
- adults have many life experiences to contribute to the learning process.
- adults are problem based than content based.
- adults are goal-oriented and motivated by personal or job demands to learn.

With maturity people change their focus –from learning for the sake of learning to learning knowledge of immediate value. Adults are independent learners. Their age – long wealth of experience makes them result-oriented and keen on having specific goals in the end of a course. Adults have set beliefs, values, concerns, notion and conceptions of doing things. Being self – directed, they do not like to receive knowledge in a passive way but love to interpret and transfer knowledge into skills by being actively involved into the entire teaching learning scenario. Furthermore, adults become intrinsically motivated when they perceive course materials and skills are timely and can meet up their perceived needs. Previous adult literatures also refer that adult learners want more practical, career-applicable courses and programs. It is obvious that adult learners are mature students with special requirements and high-end expectations from the course guide. Therefore, facilitators’ in-depth knowledge of the subject, comprehensive course plan, top-bottom preparation for time management, and class-room activities can accelerate consciousness, motivation and enhance self-esteem to bring about greater academic success. pragmatic experiences of life on earth. (Merriam, 1999, in Conlan, Grabowski, and Smith (2003). Merriam (2001) also cited Knowles five assumptions underlying andragogy which describe the adult learner as someone who:

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5. Adult Learning Theories

5.1.Action Learning

In adult ESL, action learning is a periodic term. Conlan et al. (2003) in their article “Adult

Learning” consulted Stewart (2001) and O’Neil (2000) to define and present features of action learning in the following ways: Emphasize action learning Classroom training is inefficient. Half the people in the room are secretly working on their "real" jobs; half are so relieved not to be doing their real jobs, they've turned their minds entirely off. Half already know half the stuff being taught and are playing Buzzword Bingo on their Palms; half will never need to know more than half of it (Stewart, 2001, p. 184). Action learning is defined as an approach to working with, and developing people, which uses work on a real project or problem as the way to learn. Participants work in small groups or teams to take action to solve their project or problem, and learn how to learn from that action. A learning coach works with the group in order to help them learn how to balance their work, with the learning from that work (O’Neil, 2000, p.44). So, whoever adopts this approach in adult teaching may divide the whole class into some small and constant groups (for a certain course duration) based on their real life experience and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. There also should be a coach for individual groups and a supervising leader to help manage, to render overall motivation, and to draw optimal outcome and mastery.

5.2. Experiential Learning

According to Lindeman (1926, p.7 in Brookfield 1995), “experience is the adult learners’ living textbook,” and that adult education is “a continuing process of evaluating experiences.” Experiential learning denotes learning from experience. Educators here involve their students in different learning activities to make the learning experience meaningful. This strategy opens the door to conduct interactive classes as it applies pair work, group discussions, dialogues, debates, role-playing, simulations etc. This learning theory also entails learners in the learning processes as learners are free to contribute in setting goals, planning course contents and designing class activities. Experiential learning components are quoted below from the description of (Conlan et al., 2003, p.8).

- Is a cyclic process involving setting goals, thinking, planning, experimenting and making decisions, and finally action, followed by observing, reflecting and reviewing
- Uses participants' own experience and their own reflection about that experience, rather than lecture as the primary approach to learning. Experiential learning theory allows for the generation of understanding and allows for the transfer of skills and knowledge.
- Is, therefore, particularly effective in adult education as it addresses the cognitive, emotional and the physical aspect of the learner.

5.3. Project Based Learning

- In Project Based Learning, learning is creative as it nurtures students critical faculty & reflection, incorporates innovative ideas and thoughts. Like in Action Learning, here in this theory learners also work in small groups, recognise problems, and sort out approaches to find ways out to the problems.
- The learners gather information from a variety of sources and synthesize, analyze, and derive knowledge from it. The learning is inherently valuable because it is connected to something real and involves adult skills such as collaboration and reflection.
- At the end, the learners demonstrate their newly-acquired knowledge and are judged by how much they have learned and how well they communicate it.
- Throughout this process, the teacher's role is to guide and advise, rather than to direct and

manage student work. (Conlan et al., 2003 p.9) Therefore, it may enhance team-spirit and co-operation among group members. It also may explore the potential of learners; encourage them to experiment and yield better performance. As such, this theory can be highlighted to be particularly effective for boosting up student's confidence and co-operation among team members.

5.4. Self-directed Learning

Cyrill Houle (1960, cited in Merriam, 2001), Malcolm's mentor and author of a number of books is the proponent of self-directed learning (SDL). Since then SDL becomes an inseparable part of adult learning literature. This idea explains that adult students can directly take part in planning, selecting, designing and evaluating their course materials with course instructor. They, being mature learners, can have greater control over their

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6. Learning Environment

Building optimal and positive learning environment is another important task and challenge of adult educators. It's a crucial part of adult learning theory as adult learners are keen on matter like this. Their age, maturity, insight drawn from varied experiences and sense of honour should be nourished in classroom context as well. Therefore, one of the core part of favourable learning environment should be 'learners need to be set relax and secure'. According to Robert Gagne theory (in Sherow 2006, p.8) instruction can be analyzed and broken down into different components, which can then be taught sequentially.

- Learners need to be well-come in an ideal class room scenario, good spacious room, comfortable sitting arrangement, constant power supply etc.
- Motivating learners by imparting knowledge of objectives by installing expectation.
- Open ended discussion to integrate learner's prior experience.
- Needs analysis helps presenting stimulus.
- Furnishing learners with leaning guidelines.
- Stimulating to be receptive, vocal and interactive.
- Constructive error analysis and feedback can reinforce students learning.
- Evaluation system should take into account student's attitude towards test i.e.
- It should assess performance properly by not being a scaring practice.
- Creating learning environment in such a way which can diminish adult learner's negative and futile learning memory and can equip them with positive armours to combat real life communication battle effectively.

Gagne believes that learning tasks for intellectual skills can be organized in a hierarchy according to complexity: stimulus recognition, response generation, procedure following, use of

terminology, discriminations, concept formation, rule application, and problem solving. The purpose of the hierarchy is to identify the prerequisites that should be completed to facilitate learning at each level.

7. Toolkits for Facilitators

The paradigm of adult education has shifted teacher-oriented teaching to student-oriented teaching. In it, the role of an instructor is that of a facilitator facilitating learners' skills development by being a constructive resource of information. An ideal course-guide should be optimistic and interesting person who can hold students interest. In addition to these, they need to have good communication techniques and strong interpersonal skills to guide their teaching efforts in achieving learning objectives. Based on researches conducted by Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon (1993, p.150 cited in Eric digest, 1991) on adult student populations about their expected characteristics of adult facilitators, they found the following features:

- To be knowledgeable
- To show concern for students learning.
- To present material clearly
- To motivate
- To emphasize relevance of class material
- To be enthusiastic
- Creates a comfortable atmosphere
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8. Instructional Strategies and Techniques

During planning, a successful adult facilitator can consider selecting and assessing teaching methods keeping an eye on learners' needs and objectives. To ensure everybody's voluntary participation, one has to accommodate styles regarding diverse educational backgrounds, levels, concepts and pace of adults learning. As such, no curriculum developer can ever overlook individual adult's wants, skills, concerns and insights. Therefore, adult educators should adopt strategies which will unveil issues to reach each and every participant to actively involve practicing and assisting retention knowledge outside class-room situations. Considering all three

types of learners visual, auditory and kinesthetic, the practitioners in (AARP and Legal Counsel for the Elderly, 1993) suggested the following strategies to be effective for a group of diverse learners. Visual aids such as slides, posters, and flip charts

- Diagrams of key concepts.
- Structured note-taking.
- Discussion (Large & Small Groups).
- Uses a variety of techniques
- Adapts to meet diverse need
- Dedicated to teaching.

In this regard Roger Hiemstra (1985, p.8) also pointed out An attitude of openness and trust within the place of employment also is imperative for self-directed learning to thrive. Mutual respect, mutual trust, collaboration rather than competition, a sense of support by staff and peers, as well as a sense of humanness are important elements which the facilitator can affect and or implement. The vast resource with which this is done depends on the availability of both personal and material resources with these views in mind one can wind up that to be a successful adult instructor one has to assume the role of a friend. He has significant responsibility for creating a less-threatening, free-agent, anxiety-free, learning atmosphere where both parties can enter into a mutual partnership in the process of sharing knowledge. Again, providing congenial environment means ensuring comfortable atmosphere where learners will feel accepted, mutually respected, secured, open to participate actively in the teaching-learning processes. Environment should foster intellectual freedom and be supportive to make it easy to be right to make mistakes.

9. Techniques

As educators nobody can ever forget that learning is a continual process, a lifelong experience. In a new and different learning situation, learners can feel insecure and nervous. Ensuring safe atmosphere, expressing solidarity and attachment can help erase anxieties and put them at ease. Constructive reinforcement and proper timing can be viewed as intrinsic parts of the teaching – learning process. Because, they motivate learners to prepare themselves to spontaneously participate in learning activities which actually enable their learning longer lasting. Presenting course materials specifically is another vital issue to arouse senses and interests which can virtually benefit learners pragmatically. These are some techniques adopted by language instructors in class-room learning situations. With time and growing new trends the facilitators may face unique learning settings; hence, it can be a wise step to be equipped with some optional activities and strategies to enhance learning progresses in response to learners

- Follow course and delivery plan.
- Present your subject-matter clearly, describe course objectives right away.
- Link each segment to previous segment as repetition reinforces learning.
- Try to call students by their name. (Learnt from Dr. Fakrul Alam sir, and have found it really very useful)
- Supply appropriate handouts.
- Brainstorming & Sharing.
- Role-plays or simulations or skits
- Teams teach— co-presenters or demonstration.
- Gaming activities- word search, puzzles and flash cards.

10. Needs Assessment, Case studies and Methodologies

It has been long before acknowledged and stressed that obtaining learners perspectives about course content, methods & approaches of teaching along with skill they treat of immediate value always bring positivity, motivation, consequently fruitfulness of learning. Besides, this is perceived as a productive way to incorporate learner's opinions, voice, and expectation into an academic programme. Being asked for an opinion can act as a powerful motivational device, stimulus to reflective thinking, self-ownership, direction and management of learning. In this way, it stimulates feelings of empowerment, shared decision-making, collaboration and a sense of contributing to the building of a learning community. It sets the stage for a positive learning climate, which according to (Rogers 1994, in Research Reporter) is a key to student-centered learning. Developers with this perspective use needs assessments to validate the content, the learning processes or intended outcomes of a program. In addition, the identification of learner expectations and priorities can expose new opportunities for changes in the instructional design of a program.

11. Adult Learning Principles and Classroom Practice

Adult learning principles, in any adult teaching-learning situation are indeed effective. On the basis of three and half years experience of adult teaching, my observation upholds that they assist create enthusiastic teaching-learning environment in class which is rare scenery of adult classroom. After day long work when they come to the class, they remain exhausted, neither feel like concentrating on lectures nor feel like leaving the classroom as the gaining certificate is one very important goal. Except a few, majority shows an attitude like certificate should come automatically just by passing the time idly (or by expecting too much from teachers as they need to be considerate). The picture of my classroom has changed a lot after employing adult learning principles. They miss less class or almost no class. Every time the class is almost full which is not only an inspirational sight to an instructor but also to learners' who perceiving others' learning

- Encourage questions and provide correct answers.
- Start and finish on time.
- Discuss and make them share about how to transfer knowledge to be effective users.

12. Conclusion

In adult education, it is obvious that learning situation and process of learning should be treated with utmost importance rather than course content. In order to create a successful, positive learning situation and process adult educators need to perfectly apprehend the dimensions of adult teaching-learning as described by Malcom Knowles and others in various adult education literatures. Their attitude and approach towards teaching should not be anything fixed and static. Without testing and implementing, so to say without proven results at hand no method, theory can be taken as ideal be it andragogy or pedagogy. Because choosing one over the other depends on learning environment and learners' prior knowledge. If a group of learners has proper orientation with subjects, they can choose relevant materials and suitable strategies and evaluation procedures which may perfectly befit the situation. Learners, unfamiliar with subjects, may end up setting course dynamics and skills poorly developed (Pew,2007) Educators are

expected to be flexible, open-minded, liberal regarding selecting methods, approaches, strategies, and sometimes particular circumstance may lead them to mix and make a balance between models and theories. Continuous effort in appreciating, reflecting and adopting new techniques and strategies, processes can support them achieve better insight into changed teaching-learning situations and learners. Apps (1996 cited in Amstutz, 1999) also emphasises the impact of love on the adult classroom on the part of adult facilitator. He came to this position by recognizing that “we have become people of the mind and have forgotten how to also become people of the heart” (p.27). He goes on to state in his credo, “we believe that our relationship with learners is essential and special and that love and trust are embedded in it” (p.83). The challenge of an adult resource-person is to involve adult learners spontaneously into various classroom activities by strengthening their effort for learning and for critical reflections and try out multiple approaches to delivering the same information. The keys to teaching adults are creating friendly environment, treating adults with empathy, designing materials by taking into account students who are truly mature. Another word of caution, adult instructors can be tactful in generating students’ honest opinion and thoughts and be careful while sorting out course contents, teaching approaches and setting objectives. In mixed classes, educators may even consider dividing the class into sections (if the institution supports) on the basis of learners’ level or may go with an amalgamation of andragogy and pedagogy as a way out.

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