Building Online Learning Communities Utilizing Adult Learning Andragogical Principles

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Building Online Learning Communities with Andragogical Assumptions and Principles

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Abstract: This exploratory practice-based project considers how current online pedagogical practices centered on creating a learning community (Palloff & Pratt, 2007) integrate with principles of designing and implementing adult learner friendly learning experiences (Knowles, 1984) in online courses.

Keywords: online learning, andragogy, community, adult learners

Context

The evolution of online learning has important implications for the postsecondary credit and noncredit learning environments, which is often thought of as an ideal format for meeting adult learner needs. More so than ever, adult learners will be drawn to the online learning environment and at the same time, adult online learners are also the most at risk in terms of attrition (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Related research on online learning communities aims to address issues of student attrition and satisfaction. Accepted online practices move towards a more participatory and active, connected learning environment, but they do not necessarily incorporate deeper principles of adult learning course design and implementation.

Building Community in Online Learning Environments

There is an ever-growing up body of research which focuses on facilitating the skill development and knowledge base of online instructors who wish to create learning environments that have presence and meaning for students (Garrison, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Vesely, Bloom & Sherlock, 2007). Palloff & Pratt (2007) suggest that instructors should think through all elements of online participation – getting off to a good start with the establishment of social presence, clear guidelines for participation and opportunities for regular engagement. Facilitators and instructors need to encourage free expression of thought and allow room for learners to disagree on interpretations of their readings or ideas. Further, student or learner collaboration is something that many instructors struggle with facilitating in an online environment. Online instructors can learn to increase learner collaboration and move towards social construction of knowledge in their course design (Jung, Choi, Lim & Leem, 2002). Typically, even with increased learner participation, the instructor still assumes a role as the primary content expert, with students' increased participation viewed as an aspect of motivating learners, rather than a shift towards co-learning.

Adult Learning and Online Learning Communities

Palloff and Pratt (2007) suggest that there are other, more substantive changes that need to occur in creating true online learning communities. Here, we begin to see a shift in framing the online learning experience in ways that more closely parallel andragogical principles (Knowles, 1984). Their recommendations include establishing a balance of power between students and faculty members. For example, content planning and delivery should more holistically include student needs, interests, and perspectives. Further, the responsibility for learning should include more of an emphasis on students' sharing responsibility for their own learning (Pelz, 2004).

Palloff and Pratt (2007) argue that instructors can shift to a facilitator role while drawing out peer to peer discussion, creating a community of inquiry, curiosity and shared presence. Finally, they incorporate a discussion of student assessment and quality of instruction, and suggest ways to involve learners in more meaningful ways with assessing their own learning experiences.

Knowles' research recommends a process for practitioners to design and implement courses when working with adult learners (Knowles, 1980). While these recommendations were written 36 years ago for an assumed face-to-face format, there is considerable conceptual harmony between Palloff and Pratt's (2007) discussion of online learning communities and Knowles suggested process. This could lead to substantive changes to the design and implementation of online courses for adult learners. However, incorporating an integration of Knowles (1980) and Palloff and Pratt's (2007) vision for practitioners to include and share course design, content and implementation processes with learners is not as easily done as it may appear.

This exploratory research is centered upon those potential challenges and stimulating a discussion of how current online instructional practices may need to be adapted in order to offer adult learners more meaningful learning experiences in the online environment. As a beginning point, the authors would like to facilitate a discussion of the following research questions:
1. How can online instructors balance their needs for advanced planning and heavy online course structure design with sharing dynamic design and implementation processes with adult learners?
2. How can we adapt strategies to create active, connected learner participation to be more mindful of true co-learning, (including challenge, autonomy and disagreement) in ways that are compatible with online instructor's need to balance course content and process?

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