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Evaluating the Application of Andragogical Principles Beyond the Classroom

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Abstract: Given the common occurrence of catastrophic events, such as natural disasters and acts of terror, there is an increasing need for those who serve in volunteer capacities, such as first responders to receive training which prioritizes their learning needs, specifically as adults. “Volunteers, particularly among firefighters, represent an important part of the first responder population” (Quincy, 2014). Simply put, first responders are an integral part of world society. Communities rely upon their services as ambassadors of safety and emergency facilitators. “Of the estimated 29,980 fire departments in the U.S. in 2014, 19,915 (66.4 percent) were all-volunteer. Mostly volunteer and all-volunteer fire departments protect 35.4 percent of the U.S. population, about 115 million people” (NVFC, 2016). As first responders, they are in frequent contact with citizens in times of great need and are depended upon for the distribution of information. The world’s emergency facilitators are also adult learners and thus, any education/training they receive should be grounded in andragogical principles. Therefore, this roundtable proposes to explore the development of systems for evaluating effective adult training in arenas outside of the classroom, such as volunteer first responders, with Knowles’ six principles of adult learning as a guide for benchmarking.

Keywords: andragogy, learning environments, Malcolm Knowles, evaluation, assessment

Introduction

According to Malcolm Knowles, “In the Andragogy model, the facilitator sets a climate for learning that physically and psychosocially, respects adult learners and then involves learners in the planning, delivery and evaluation of their own learning” (Knowles, 1984, p. 47). Knowles further emphasises that effective adult education should be founded on six specific adult learning principles (Knowles, 1984, p. 47). As adult educators we continually strive to measure the effectiveness of adult education, in the classroom and beyond. Some researchers feel that the way to assess the validity of andragogy is through the development and use of valid and reliable instrument (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). One could argue that there is a direct connection between volunteerism and adult education. Though there is extensive research regarding andragogy in the classroom, there exists limited research about the prioritization of adult education principles in volunteer education, such as first responder training, which illuminates the significance of this roundtable.

Background

With such heavy responsibilities of first responders, it is imperative that we as adult educators explore the effectiveness or lack thereof in their training and development. Effective training is key in ensuring first responders are equipped with the most efficient practices in emergency situations. Furthermore, andragogy is defined by Knowles (1984) as the art and science of adult learning. In understanding how adults learn, we must first understand where learning can take place. Thus andragogy refers to any form of adult learning across various educational settings. He explains the concept of educational settings as formal, informal, and

nonformal spaces. This concept debunks traditional views of learning only taking place within formal settings. We do not associate learning with social settings such as work, or our everyday lives. Merriam & Bierema (2014) argue that both nonformal and informal learning takes place in settings where education is not the primary focus, yet is supplementary to the organization's reason for existence. The reality is we engage in learning far more than we would naturally assume. In current times, there has been an increase of learning taking place in both informal and nonformal spaces.

Distinguishing the differences between evaluation and assessment

In order for learning to occur one has to partake in an educational process. Meaning adult learning is the outcome of the adult education process. As with any process, there has to be a means of evaluation or assessment to gauge effectiveness. Wang (2011) addresses the importance of assessment yet the poor utilization of the tool within the field of adult education. With the influx of adult learning programs taking place outside of formal environments, many of these programs are not being held to the same assessment and/or evaluation standards. Particularly in the case of adult higher education (Kasworm & Marienau, 1997), the positive use of assessment serves not only as a catalyst for the improvement of student learners but also as a form of evidence for the validity of the programs and student performance. To further discussion we must then distinguish between assessment and evaluation in regards to meeting objectives set forth by Knowles's principles of adult learning. Wang (2011) regards the term assessment as focusing on student work, whereas evaluation involves making judgments about all other things that are measured for various purposes in academic endeavors.

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