Adult Learner Essay

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Adult learning is an exciting concept. It requires a basic understanding of several types of learning theories. It also requires patience. To wade through the options available to thoroughly understand and decipher precisely how adults learn is a mind-boggling feat. In my opinion, adults are hard to teach because they think they know everything. As educators and development specialist, it is our job to meet the needs of our student population in a way that allows them to make sense of what they are learning while still meeting preset learning targets.

A diffuse understanding of all the learning strategies is essential to crafting any training geared towards adult learners. Professional development is one type of training geared toward adult learning. The use of theories surrounding andragogy when crafting professional development is helpful in the long term, in that it will allow development specialist to access the tools necessary to create a meaningful learning situation.

Andragogy is the theory of adult learning as defined by Malcolm Knowles more than 40 years ago. Knowles theory on adult learning builds on a model that is anchored in the characteristics of adult learners (Smith). Throughout his work, Knowles acknowledged there are six areas by which adults gain knowledge (Hudson). These pillars fuel the learner’s desires to gain knowledge and search for it. Andragogy is a type of pedagogy that is linked to adult learning. Andragogy also differs from the pedagogy in that pedagogy is teacher-centered while andragogy is learner-centered.

Adult learning theory, as defined by Knowles, comprises of six pillars: the characteristics of adult learning. Each pillar expounds on a different characteristic of adult learning. They build upon the others to create a complete theory of learning. The pillars are as follows:

1. Self-Concept: Adult learners can learn on their own and can be self-directed. This can build a strong relationship amongst the faculty by allowing the members to choose their courses and pair up to compare notes and objectives from the learning segment.
2. Role of experience: Adult learners can draw from their previous experiences to propel their learning. This can build a strong relationship amongst the faculty by pairing veteran professionals with novices in order to foster excellent communication and comradery.
3. Readiness to learn: Adult learners are ready to learn what they think they need to know (Chan). This can build a strong relationship amongst the faculty by allowing colleagues who think they need knowledge in a specific area to partner with each other to meet the learning targets.
4. Orientation to learning: Adult learners learn for what they need now, not what they will need in the future. This can build a strong relationship amongst the faculty by providing learners with instruction and guidance that is actionable and relevant to what is happening in their classroom immediately.
5. Motivation to learn: Adult learners are usually driven by something from inside of themselves to learn what they need to know. This can help build a strong relationship amongst the faculty by fostering excellent communication skills and comradery throughout the faculty.
6. Need to Know: Adult learners understand the value of what they are learning, which makes them work harder to understand the material thoroughly. This can help build a strong relationship amongst the faculty by filling in the gaps in basic educational principles and strategies that are actionable and relevant to the classroom.

Andragogy is a good practice to employ when creating professional development. It forces you to remember who you are teaching with and to make the necessary modifications needed to engage and capture the audience. For example, in the text, it states, “adults are more self-directed” (Hudson). In other words, adults can work independently. From this, we can infer that Knowles wants us to believe that adults do not require the same amount of energy and guidance as students. This quote suggests that adults can learn on their own and as the creators of professional development, it is our job to allow them the space to work independently and realize their intrinsic motivation.

Bias influences everything that we say and do in our lives. Andragogy illuminates personal biases in that it makes the learner aware of his shortcomings. For instance, in the text, it states, “adults tend to learn by drawing from their previous experiences” (Chan). Basically, adults look at what they learn through their biased lens. I interpret this to mean that adult learners base what they are learning on what they already know. Through andragogy, learners become involved in the planning and implementation of the education they are receiving. This forces them to acknowledge the presence of personal bias as it relates to the topic.

Recognizing your bias can deepen your understanding of culture, ethnicity, and gender and can create relevant learning experiences for any learner. To illustrate this idea, the author describes using the andragogical principles to tailor the instruction to meet student interest by involving the students in planning the learning objectives and activities and solving real-world business problems (Chan). Basically, by using the principles associated with andragogy, learners can recognize their bias and overcome them in a meaningful way. This often leads to a deeper understanding of why you learn the way you do and why you absorb your knowledge the way you do. This evidence highlights the need for learners to work with their instructors to ensure that they can engage with culture in a meaningful way.

Adult learning is a mix of all the theories of learning. No one has made as significant an impact on adult learning as Malcolm Knowles. His research and work on adult learning theories have become synonymous with the subject. He coined the phrase andragogy because he wanted to differentiate between learning geared towards children and learning geared towards adults. The six pillars of his research are still used today to describe what we now know as andragogy and has remained relevant for more than 40 years. Relevant because they are considered universal in their approach to breaking down the ways in which adults learn.

References

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