

Running head: ADULT LEARNING APPLICATION

Adult Learning and the Desire for Immediate Application

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Abstract

Evidence supports that adult learners have different motivations and the desire for immediate application of the learning. A review of assumptions about learners researched by Malcolm Knowles suggest critical views of them, followed by demonstrated uses of selected aspects of his work. A conclusion for the applied use of the learning is provided.

Knowles' assumptions about adult learners

The study of adult learners is a recent phenomenon which surfaced as an extension of the established learning models of teaching children. Knowles, Holton, & Swanson demonstrated that pedagogy, the art and science of teaching children, became the dominant teaching method for adults in the United States through much of the 19th century (1998, p. 36). The term andragogy, the art and science of how adults learn, was introduced in the mid 1960s as a framework to differentiate adult learning from the teacher controlled environment of pedagogy (p.61).

Malcolm Knowles built on the studies of others and used the framework of andragogy to explore six differentiating assumptions about adult learners:

- The need to know why they need to learn something
- The learner's self concept and capability for self-direction
- The role of the learners' experiences is much greater in adults
- Readiness to learn related to the potential for applied use of the learning
- Orientation to learning is life-centered versus subject-centered
- Motivation for growing and developing through life (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, p. 64 - 69)

Critical evaluation of the assumptions

Critical views of andragogy include the emphasis of the motivation and self-drive of the student in the equation (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 87 - 92). Criticisms were addressed through a focus on good instructional practice, objective rather than subjective

approaches to learning and the realization that it is not a single solution for all learning situations, but a potential part of the process which also required skill on the part of the teacher. Two aspects of Knowles' work that stand out as having the highest impact on the adult learner are the immediacy of application of the learning, and self-directed learning.

Immediacy of application

Life-centered learning by adults focuses on the ability to learn content which has immediate application (as cited by Smith, 2002). It is in contrast to the subject-centered studies of youth. A demonstration of the difference is shared by Knowles, Holton, & Swanson with titles for adult education course offerings updated from *Composition* to topics such as *Writing Better Business Letters*, or *Writing for Pleasure and Profit* (1998, p. 68). Advancing from title changes to creating content specifically for adult learning provides advances toward helping adults learn from their acquired point of reference (Mezirow, 1991, p. 4).

Self-directed learning

Internal motivation is a key to self-directed learning. This differs from the use of external motivation which has also been tested to show an ability to change behavior or learning. External motivation can be used to solve complex problems by breaking tasks down into simpler steps and rewarding positive activity as demonstrated in Skinner's work with shaping (Friedman, 1998). Daniel Pink's work showed evidence that higher rewards increased speed of performance for known tasks, but hindered performance for higher level thinking or creative problem solving (2009). External motivations are from the perspective of the instructor or manager to motivate performance. The transition from external rewards to internally motivated self-directed learning by the student is supported by the teacher to work not as a provider of external rewards, but to

coach the student in becoming responsible for their own decisions. Self-directed learning has application in corporate training and development such as IBM's use of cognitive apprenticeships that leverage technology to address training and mentoring across distances (as cited by Snyder, Farrell, & Baker, 2000). Cognitive apprenticeships began with modeling, scaffolding and coaching by instructors and then faded to allow self-directed learning and reflection through generalize-ability (as cited by Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 180 - 183). Daniel Pink (2009) also cited the improved company performance and development of new services by Google through the applied use of internal motivators of autonomy, mastery and purpose by engineers using twenty percent of their time in self-directed activities to work on projects of their choice.

Conclusion

Coaching students to become self-directed learners will help them apply Malcolm Knowles' insight that adult learners have different motivations from youth. Helping adults recognize difference and similarities will help them build on their vast experiences for qualitative learning (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Internal motivation for life long learning and immediate application of the content is a powerful tool for self-directed adult learners.

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