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Adult Learning Assumptions

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine Knowles' theory of andragogy and his six assumptions of how adults learn while providing evidence to support two of his assumptions based on the theory of andragogy. As no single theory explains how adults learn, it can best be assumed that adults learn through the accumulation of formal and informal education, and lifelong experiences. Research was conducted through the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system, and seven peer-reviewed articles were located for this purpose. A literature review of these articles was conducted to determine their relevance in the study. Results revealed strong connections between Knowles' six assumptions and learning methods of adult learners.

### Adult Learning Assumptions

As adults mature, their lifelong learning experiences and education tend to become more complex due to variables that they must manipulate in order to become successful in life. (Wlodkowski, 2008). As there is no one theory that best explains how adults learn, Fidishun (2011) revealed six assumptions of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson that they feel best explain how adults learn. Research revealed a strong support for these assumptions.

#### **Motivation to Learn**

One assumption of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson of how adults learn is that adults must be motivated (Fidishun, 2011). They must be given a reason to want to learn.

#### **Intrinsic Motivation**

If adult learners are provided an opportunity to learn, they must feel that there must be a value attached to these learning experiences in order to participate in them. Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) (as cited by Knowles, 1984) revealed that adult learners approach learning in the way it can be used in real life, they will most likely integrate new learning with various life roles in more multidimensional ways. Bye et al. (2007) (as cited by Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) noted that they do not expect an immediate return, they are capable of supporting interest without recognition or with little support, and they become caught up in the feedback loop between learning, interest, and enjoyment. Bye et al. (2007) (as cited by Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002) also showed that nontraditional students perform at a higher academic level than traditional students despite traditional students being more involved in extracurricular activities. According to Bye et al. (2007) (as cited by Vansteenkiste et al., 2004), this environment allows adult learners to process reading material more deeply, achieve higher grades, and show more persistence than that of an extrinsic environment. Bye et al. (2007) (as cited by Hidi, 2000) also

showed that high levels of interest are necessary to trigger and maintain strong intrinsic motivation for learning. Individual interests are shown to be the energizing force behind intrinsic motivation (as cited by Alexander et al., 1997) and have been considered stable and long lasting (Bye et al., 2007).

### **Positive Affects**

As adult learners engage in learning, they tend to display a series of positive affects that show evidence of their true learning. They maintain a higher threshold of intrinsic motivation to learn with an accompanying increase in positive affect (Bye et al., 2007). Bye et al. (2007) (as cited by Csikszentmihalyi, 1997 & Renninger, 2000) showed that the relationship between intrinsic motivation and positive affect differs for traditional and nontraditional students as positive affect dissipates with deadlines, assignments, and evaluations. To increase intrinsic motivation and positive affect for adult learners, professors should encourage competence in the classroom to promote autonomous behaviors as well as to validate students as an active partner in sharing the learning experience.

### **Learning from Mistakes**

Although nontraditional students have spent less time in the classroom due to their professional commitments, they have the potential of making mistakes in class. To decrease the embarrassment of how mistakes may make a person feel, especially in the classroom, while still providing the motivation to continue learning, it is best to create a safe environment for learning and for the learners to let them make their mistakes on their own comfortably. Erickson (2009) explained that by doing so, they learn to understand how these mistakes were made, and how they can correct them in their own way based on their education and lifelong experiences.

**Study Team**

If adult learners were placed together into a community with similar interests, there would be a greater chance that learning will be shared. According to Tillema and van Der Westhuizen (2006), the purpose of this community is to have its own organized learning along self-determined interests by studying issues from different professional perspectives and sharing existing knowledge while working towards a common goal of generating new knowledge. This type of group has found to be used as a source of continuous learning as opposed to having time off for development while providing a high sense of understanding and problem awareness (Tillema & van Der Westhuizen, 2006). Tillema and van Der Westhuizen (2006) revealed that, “What is needed is to share the experiences...to sort things out, but not to accept the outcome...we learned a great deal about the cultures in the different sections in our school” (p. 62).

**Role of the Learner’s Experience**

Another assumption of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson is that nontraditional students are known for their accumulation of knowledge and experience they have gained from their professional fields (Fidishun, 2011). By bringing this into the classroom, these students feel that they should be acknowledged for their habits and biases. According to Fidishun (2011) (as cited by Mezirow, 1991), instructors need to create opportunities for “...reflective learning that involves assessment or reassessment of assumptions...” (p. 3). Reflective learning assists students in examining their biases and habits and moves them towards a new understanding of information presented.

### **Teacher Educators**

There have been a vast majority of professionals entering the teacher certification process due to the expanding role of alternative certification (Walsh et al., 2005). Walsh et al. (2005) revealed that these students portrayed certain characteristics as they become educators-relational maturity, higher levels of self-confidence and motivation, workplace experience, family responsibilities, time constraints, financial challenges, and disinterest in college social life (as cited by Manos and Kasambira, 1998). As they enter the classroom, their instructors can benefit from knowing their perspectives and experiences as their students' life experiences will require different personal and instructional approaches (Walsh et al., 2005). As they feel the need to succeed, this will lead them to become highly organized as they seem to have learned early the importance of looking ahead and planning their time (Walsh et al., 2005). Walsh et al. (2005) found that students praised the practical courses including field experiences and student teaching, "I feel like I am not just learning useless facts or concepts, but knowledge I can use" (p. 13). "I think there should be more if it...my master teacher gave me feedback and offered suggestions....it's where my learning started to make sense" (p. 14).

### **Community Involvement**

Nontraditional learners have leaned more towards cooperative and communal learning strategies and environments (as cited by Eilfer & Potthoff, 1998) (Walsh et al., 2005). Walsh et al. (2005) found positive comments towards a structured community and a supported rigorous academic program that stemmed from expressed high expectations that nontraditional students have for their professors, coursework, and support services (Walsh et al., 2005).

### **Conclusion**

As Knowles' six assumptions could be considered as theory, much research has proven to agree with him. Adult learners do need to be motivated to realize the importance of their learning. This move towards learning begins with an intrinsic incentive as the learner must feel that it has some value. An adult learner recognizes its value by the positive affects the learner displays in reaction to its learning environment. As they continue to learn, they most likely will make mistakes as they haven't had enough exposure to this process. Research reveals to make mistakes to learn from them. One of the best situations to learn of their mistakes is to interact with others in a community that shares the same intellect and interests in studying social issues from other colleagues. The experience that nontraditional adults accumulate can be used in the class setting for reflection and assessment. These adults can use their experience as educators to challenge or improve the teaching profession.

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