

## Teaching Learning Concepts to Graduate Students through Writing

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### Abstract

Over a period of four years, the instructor of History and Theory of Adult Education monitored and recorded graduate students' reactions to the experiences of learning through writing assignments that incorporate diverse methods associated with stringent pedagogical and andragogical methods. After experiencing the two divergent teaching styles and completing the writing assignments paired with each, adult learners discussed and determined the efficacy of the two different approaches, and their reactions to the divergent styles.

*Keywords:* Andragogy; pedagogy; adult learners; learning through writing; graduate students; adult education

### Review of the Literature

Currently, the demographics of college students are shifting away from young, generally privileged, white men to a more diverse group of adult learners. Caruth (2014) discussed the increase of students in colleges nationwide who are 25 years of age or older and explored her concern that institutions of higher education are relying too heavily on traditional pedagogical strategies that may not adequately address the needs of diverse student populations. Through her research, Caruth found that "almost half of today's overall college student body are adult learners, but many facets of higher education are not designed with adult learners in mind" (p. 22). There has been little change over the last 20 years in age distribution of graduate students, but between 1987 and 2007, the number of graduate students over the age of 40 and above increased by 87% (Bell, 2009).

In response to the increased presence of nontraditional students on college campuses, institutions must adjust to accommodate the changing instructional needs of their students. Although pedagogical strategies have been sufficient in teaching traditional college students, this approach does not appear to engage adult students as effectively as andragogy, the method of teaching developed by Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s (Chan, 2010, p. 25). Chan adopts Knowles' definition of andragogy and describes it as "the art and science of helping adult learn, in contrast to pedagogy as the art and science of teaching children" (p. 27).

When instructors use andragogy, Knowles argues, they can better engage adult students by adding a level of practicality and immediate relevance that is not present in pedagogy

(Chan, 2010). Andragogical strategies facilitate learning experiences that better resemble the world outside the classroom. In most environments outside of academic settings, individuals will collaborate, propose new ideas, and solve problems. Outside of academia, people rarely, if ever, learn or work through textbook quizzes, abstract lectures, and graded worksheets. When adults come to higher education and graduate classrooms, they are usually motivated by the potential for advancement in their field, or they are transitioning to a new career. Due to the specific goals aligned with graduate school, students should be given the opportunity to learn applicable strategies, not just the content. According to Knowles, “instructors who use andragogy appropriately are not dispensers of the information they believe to be valuable, but instead are facilitators who provide guidance while their students determine what they need to know” (Caruth, 2014, p. 23). While pedagogy relies on extrinsic motivation and scaffolding for younger learners, andragogy makes use of intrinsic motivation and the wealth of life experience that adult learners bring into the classroom.

Scholars familiar with andragogy understand that it is based on six assumptions: self-concept, internal motivation, role of experience in learning, readiness to learn, a need to know, and orientation to learning (Chan, 2010, p. 25). The ideas of self-concept and internal motivation suggest that adult learners who will benefit from andragogy are autonomous, self-directed, and independent, and they are more motivated by internal rather than external factors. Baskas (2011) maintained that intrinsic motivation “allows adult learners to process reading material more deeply, achieve higher grades, and show more persistence” than extrinsically motivated students (p. 3). Baskas also explored the necessity of a safe, comfortable learning environment in which adult students can make mistakes and then correct them using their education and past experience. Andragogy also relies on the assumption that adult learners have past experiences they can draw from and build on through their learning. However, a valuable life experiences that adult learners bring to the classroom are occasionally accompanied by harmful biases, and the reflective learning that is encouraged by andragogy allows them to reassess those biases and move toward new, more accurate understandings of the world around them (Baskas, 2011).

In addition to drawing upon personal experience, adult learners need to know the value of class content and how it applies to their lives. When adults are engaged in content they find relevant, they are willing to learn what they believe they need to know. Chan (2010) argued that, because adults are looking to learn for immediate application, their learning is task-oriented and life-focused. Students must be motivated in order to evolve their roles as learners from the familiar demands of pedagogy to the more active learning techniques they will use in andragogy; otherwise, they will not be able to receive the potential benefits of the method.

Though andragogy is a more relevant and effective method to teach enduring concepts to adult learners, almost all students will initially approach the method with trepidation. Levine (2002) described such apprehension occurring when he used andragogical strategies to teach a graduate level course in which students were to learn about group work and collaboration through practical experience and reflection. Levine began the class as students expected, with a short presentation about the course and his expectations. Then he explained that the students would work collaboratively to create their own group projects. The students had never been given such freedom in a classroom and were anxious about how to proceed because they were all more familiar with pedagogical strategies that would have called for the teacher to create their rubrics and give more direction for the project in general (Levine, 2002).

As the students became more accustomed to the idea of more active learning roles, they began to proceed by rejecting their instructor's suggestions in favor of doing something less theory oriented and more practical because that is what they valued. Being able to tailor their learning to what they find relevant allows students to remove themselves from their professor's academic biases (Levine, 2002). Levine's use of andragogy required his students to think beyond simply what they were learning in class and, instead, emphasized critical reflection upon the academic choices they made, which reinforced the strategies they learned and equipped them with the tools to succeed in the workforce better than if they learned abstractly what to do.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

This study uses data collected from 98 graduate students between 2013 and 2016 enrolled in a required master's level adult education course, History and Theory of Adult Education. The coastal southeastern state university offers this required program course annually in fall semesters. Students could join the program during any time of year, making it possible for participants to be in the beginning of the program, somewhere in the middle, or completing their final semester of classes. This course introduces adult teaching models. Although it is possible that a student had participated in an activity or class utilizing andragogical principles, the underlying concepts had not been shared.

### ***Procedure***

To determine the efficacy of writing as a learning tool and compare pedagogical to andragogical teaching styles, a course was constructed to explore the different

experiences of research paper writing, first through pedagogy and then through andragogy. The course for adult education graduate students first called for a paper written through pedagogical, teacher-based principals. The instructor provided students with strict requirements for writing this first paper, including the topic, number and types of references to be used, the order of major content subtopics to be included, formatting, and narrow page requirements. This essay was a research paper about andragogy that used pedagogical teaching strategies to expose students to the idea of andragogy. The instructor-given guidelines were as follows:

Your paper should be formatted in the style of APA 6th Edition, with a minimum of five resources comprised of at least one book; at least two resources such as periodicals (non-electronic), interviews, etc.; and any other two resources. There can be no more than two websites/electronic journals incorporated. Your sources should be peer reviewed or refereed, meaning that it has undergone the process used by publishers and editors of academic/scholarly journals to ensure that the articles they publish meet the accepted standards of their discipline. Most, but not all scholarly journals are peer reviewed. Wikipedia is NOT a reliable referred journal and information found on this site should not be included in your paper.

The guidelines also included a list of elements that were to be included in the research paper such as an introduction, definition of andragogy, and the six assumptions of andragogy. Writing the first research paper with such strict professor-given guidelines allowed the students to engage in the epitome of pedagogical learning.

While the first research paper aimed to teach students about the concept of andragogy through pedagogical processes, the course's second assigned research paper called for students to work with active participatory andragogical principles. Each student individually determined the topic for their personal paper based on a topic in adult education/learning they were interested in pursuing. Each of the four classes developed the formatting and resource constraints to be followed by class participants. These included general or specific requirements, guidelines, and evaluation rubrics.

The four fall semester classes each constructed unique requirements. The different rubrics the classes created showed that each class prioritized aspects of the paper differently (see Table 1). For instance, though all four classes required usage of 6th edition APA formatting, they differed on the appropriate number and types of references to be incorporated, page requirements, and other characteristics. The class from fall of 2013 simply required two or more sources, while the fall of 2015 class required papers to include three or four sources, only one of which had to be peer-

reviewed. Only one class required a clear thesis statement, while the others decided a project statement or topic would be sufficient. Though there was some overlap in what the students believed to be essential for their research papers, no two classes used the same criteria.

Table 1

*Number of Courses that Chose Specific Essay Requirements*

<u>Student Determined Essay Requirements</u>	<u>Number of Course Sections</u>
Specified Minimum Length	3
APA 6 <sup>th</sup> Ed. Formatting	4
Quality of References	4
Clear Topic	4
Organization	2
Content Knowledge	1
Spelling/Grammar	2
Specific Sections	2
Thesis	1
Personal Stance	1

Following the completion of both assigned research papers, the diverse teaching styles utilized in each were introduced in greater depth and discussed in class groups. Students were then provided an opportunity to reflect on the processes of each and evaluate what they believed to be the benefits and detriments of the diverse philosophies and methods of pedagogy and andragogy.

### **Conclusion**

In this experiment, student experienced learning from the more familiar style of pedagogy followed by their first significant experience with an andragogical model. At the end of each semester, many students expressed mixed emotions regarding their preferred method of learning in the graduate classroom. Under the pedagogically assigned research paper, students in all four semesters reported difficulty finding book resources when everyone in class was researching the same topic while the campus library had a limited number of books on the topic. It seemed that, even though the

professor explained the limited resources and students were asked to utilize the scarce books each year, those available campus resources were checked out by the following morning, increasing the burdens on those who did not visit the library directly after class. Overall, students consistently voiced the opinion that the pedagogical approach was too confining, as they had difficulty meeting the necessary requirements when resources were limited. During discussions revolving around an andragogical approach to learning, students stated they enjoyed the opportunity to choose their own topics but wished for more guidance and defined parameters. Students found they had little trust that the professor would grade the assignment based on an instrument they had created and felt their work did not truly measure up to former standards and requirements. The learners continuously brought up the notion that they were “writing blind” and feared they were not following the intended path of the professor, which would lower their assignment grades.

Students perceived merits to both methods, as different situations and learning environments call for different requirements. After much classroom discussion, a significant percentage of students in all four classes stated that they preferred a combination of the styles instead of learning exclusively from one viewpoint. However, they stated that a gradual progression towards andragogy would put them more at ease with strategies they determined beneficial to adult learners. In the case of graduate adult learners in need of relevant coursework related to their careers and future learning, andragogy can help them to interact with their learning in a way that pedagogy cannot, including becoming stronger self-directed learners.

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