PROVIDING DEEP LEARNING THROUGH ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF ADULT LEARNERS IN BLENDED COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Malcolm Knowles (2011) indicates that adult learners are most likely to be actively engaged in learning when they are given some choice and control over the learning process. When the curriculum relates to the adult learner’s interests, is individualized, and authentic; the adult learner becomes actively engaged in the process by making a ‘psychological investment’ in learning. Teaching a blended course presents certain challenges for the instructor when creating lessons to actively engage adult learners. This paper discusses how active engagement is defined and determined, barriers that impact adult learners attempting to actively engage in learning, and various strategies to actively engage adult learners that directly align to the characteristics of the adult learning process, in a blended course.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in adult learner active engagement have occurred due to the instructional delivery of blended courses. The way online adult learners engage in their studies has taken on a new dimension due to the widespread uptake of learning management systems by universities and colleges. This change in learning environments has created changes in ways that adult learners are engaging with instructors, course resources, and peers. Distance learning via learning management systems can occur with limited face-to-face contact between adult learners and instructors (Douglas & Alemanne, 2007). Traditional ways used in face to face classes for actively engaging adult learners to facilitate deep learning need to be adapted and aligned to the adult learning process for use in blended courses.

MALCOLM KNOWLES PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING

Malcolm Knowles (2011) views adult learning as problem-based and collaborative not didactic. Adults are self-directed and autonomous and determine individual learning goals. As self-directed learners, they want to determine the knowledge that will be learned, the projects in which they will participate, and how they will demonstrate the knowledge gained. Adults who are self-directed take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in determining their learning needs, obtaining human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and assessing learning outcomes. Knowles argues that self-directed learning is closely related to the natural process of psychological development—where adults take on increased responsibility for their own lives and their own learning. Self-directed learners are proactive, learn more things and learn better, than do learners who are reactive learners and are passively engaged in the learning. They enter into learning with greater motivation and purpose. As a result, new knowledge is retained better and longer, as well as applied with greater ease to new situations. Adult learners have a variety of life experiences and prior knowledge from work, school, family, and community involvements. Respect for adult learners needs to be demonstrated during the learning process, in particular acknowledging the wealth of knowledge and experiences they bring to the learning situation. Adult learners need to be treated as equals in the learning situation and be given opportunities to communicate freely. Connections need to be made by the learner between prior knowledge and the new knowledge. These connections help the adult learner see the value of the new knowledge to real life situations and enable the learner to apply the new knowledge to meaningful circumstances. Adult learners are goal oriented. According to the Adult Education Center (2005), most adults engage in a learning experience to create a change in a skill, behavior, current knowledge, or attitude. Learning needs to focus on tasks involving a component of the adult learner’s social roles. Adult learners are motivated to knowledge that can have immediate application to their real life. The adult learner needs to have a reason for the learning. Application to the learner’s work or other responsibilities, help the adult learner see value in gaining the new knowledge. Adult learners are practical and focus on the parts of the new
Motivation in adult learners is both extrinsic and intrinsic. The factors that impact the motivation of adult learners include:

1. Needing to make new friendships and develop social relationships with new associates.
2. Meeting the external expectation or recommendation to participate in new learning from someone in authority.
3. Personal advancement such as achieving a job promotion, obtaining advanced status in employment, or staying competitive.
4. Obtaining or maintaining a license/certification.
5. Maintaining skills, developing skills, or adapting to changes within a job.
6. Obtaining new knowledge to assist the community, becoming better prepared to participate in community work or serve mankind.
7. Escaping boredom or acquiring relief from the ordinary daily routines of work or home with a contrast of other more exciting opportunities.
8. Learning for the sake of gaining new knowledge, obtaining knowledge for its own reward and appeasing an insatiable mind.

Retention is an important part of the adult learning process. It is directly impacted by the amount of practice and use during the learning process. What this means is that adult learners need to be actively engaged in learning, have predetermined motivation for engaging in the learning, and have relationships with adults, peers, and family that support learning will impact the active engagement of adult learners. Adult learners need to experience certain motivational practices that support engagement during active engagement in the learning process (Barkley, 2010). A sense of a learning community needs to be created by the instructor through the promotion of interactions between the instructor and the adult learner as well as interactions between the peers and the adult learner throughout the course. A learning community is created when the instructor is seen as helpful and approachable while listening to the adult learner and not talking to them in a derogatory way. Instructors should provide a psychologically safe and inviting learning environment (Learning First Alliance, 2001). Instructors should organize the classroom environment as communities that foster caring relationships between all members of the class and treat all members fairly. Adult learners are motivated to learn when they believe that their instructors care about their education and about them personally. Therefore, they must have opportunities to share their ideas and perspectives, and instructors must demonstrate that they value these perspectives as well as the students’ knowledge (Kuh, et al., n.d.). Instructors should create a sense of community and common purpose; at the same time, they should recognize the diversity and individuality of each member of the learning community. An atmosphere in which civility, order, and decorum are the norms and antisocial behavior such as bullying, intimidation, and taunting are clearly unacceptable. By establishing these norms, adult learners increase the likelihood of creating a safe environment. Instructors set a classroom climate where learners feel free to experiment, discuss, question, and take risks.

Blended courses are online and require adult learners and instructors to get together in person for sometimes several times) in person, by conference call, or through closed-circuit television links. They can be asynchronous or synchronous. In an asynchronous course, communication and activities take place outside of real time. There is a time lag between when the message is sent and a reply is received. Messages can be added at any time and read at the recipient’s leisure. Messages are not as being created and as much time can be taken as needed to craft a response to the post. Asynchronous activities take place whenever adult learners have the time to complete them. Messages can be read and responded to at any place there is internet access. For example, viewing videos linked to the course site, reading a textbook, and writing a paper are all asynchronous activities. In contrast, synchronous, or real-time communication takes place like a conversation. Some courses use only writing-based tools to communicate as a result, the only synchronous communication possible is a chat session. Everyone gets online in the same chat room at the same time and types questions and responses back and forth to each other in real time. Synchronous activities may include chat sessions, whiteboard drawings, and other group interactive work. Some courses involve multimedia tools, and a synchronous communication might involve audio or video feeds to the computer.

There are some key advantages to asynchronous collaboration tools. They enable flexibility. Participants can receive the information when it’s most convenient for them as well as any place there is internet access. There’s less pressure to act on the information or immediately respond in some way. Adult learners have time to digest the information and put it in context and perspective. Another advantage is that some forms of asynchronous collaboration, such as email, are ubiquitous. One of the advantages of synchronous collaboration is its immediacy. Information can be sent and received right away. Synchronous collaboration, in general, is more interactive than asynchronous.

The drawbacks of asynchronous collaboration are that they can lack a sense of immediacy and drama. There’s less immediate interaction. Sometimes people have to wait hours, days and even weeks to get a response to a message or feedback on a shared document. The downside of synchronous collaboration is that not everyone uses it. Although instant messaging, chat, and other such tools are becoming more common, they’re still not as ubiquitous as technology such as email. Another drawback is that synchronous collaboration is not as flexible as asynchronous. All the parties involved must be available and willing to collaborate at a given moment; the session doesn’t work as well. Also, not everyone does well with this kind of collaboration, particularly people who like to think over what they want to communicate (Allen, I., & Seaman, J. 2006). Both asynchronous and synchronous courses can help to create a safe, risk-free learning community to actively engage the adult learning in the learning process.

The instructor needs to help adult learners work to their optimal level of challenge. The goal is reached by the instructor using strategies that assess prior knowledge to determine where to begin the instruction and help the adult learners make connections between known and new knowledge, teach metacognitive skills, and empower the adult learners as partners in the learning process. Instructors should expect active engagement and can share this expectation by inviting adult learners to suggest activities that will help them achieve their individual learning goals as well as choosing learning materials and resources.

**ANTICIPATION GUIDE**

On strategy that can be used to activate the adult learner’s prior knowledge and set a purpose for reading is the anticipation guide. The reading anticipation guide is a strategy that is given to the adult learner prior to the reading. The concepts are put into statements which are read by the adult learner who decide whether they agree or disagree with each statement. During the reading the learner indicates after the statement whether they continue to agree or disagree with the statement as previously indicated or if evidence from the reading leads them to change their understanding. The adult learners list where evidence can be found in the reading to support the after reading decisions. For each statement, each learner shares what was indicated for each statement before reading and after reading with evidence from the text for support (Duffield, 1994).

**LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACHES**

Adult learners are more actively engaged in learning when they determine the learning to be meaningful to their lives. Instructors who help adult learners obtain deeper to the meaning of the reading and beliefs as well as increase self-understanding in relation to others and the larger world help the adult learners become more actively engaged in the learning process. To accomplish this, the understanding of the purpose and the importance of course activities will help the adult learner make connections between the learning and their respective lives. Social in online learning by establishing this understanding of the active engagement of adult learners. They become more actively engaged in learning when there is increased time and effort in these purposeful activities. Interactions with the instructor and the adult learner as well as interactions between the adult learner and their peers regarding important issues for extended periods of time also increase adult learner active engagement. Instructors using a learner-centered approach encourage adult learners to construct their own meaning of the new knowledge. They structure assignments so each adult learner finds some value in the assignment, motivates to complete the assignment, and actively engage in the learning process. Strategies are used so the course becomes an uncovering of the content with application to real life situations. To accomplish this, these objectives that can be applied to various topics. Diverse experiences using appropriate instructional strategies that promote new ways of thinking and responding to new information help adult learners more actively engaged in the learning process (Barkley, 2010).
Providing Deep Learning through Active Engagement of Adult Learners in Blended Courses

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Maximizing Active Engagement

Research on adult learning (Knowles, 2011) indicates that adults are most likely to be engaged in learning when they are given some control and over control over their learning process and when the curriculum is individualized, authentic, and related to adult learners' interests. They make a psychological investment in learning. Pride is not simply in learning the formal indicators of success, but in understanding the material and applying it in their lives. According to this definition, an engaged student is one who is intrinsically motivated to learn. This motivation is from a desire for competence and understanding, or simply from a love of learning, rather than a desire for a good grade or an instructor's approval. Actively engaged adult learners are more likely to approach tasks eagerly and to persist in the face of difficulty. They are also more likely to seek opportunities for learning when the extrinsic rewards are not available. This happens because intrinsically motivated adults are more wholly engaged and absorbed in their activities and bring more of their prior knowledge and integrative capacities to bear in their pursuit of new understanding and mastery. Instructors who want adult learners to understand what they learn in school and apply the knowledge and skills to real-life situations, provide engaging learning opportunities that go beyond reiterating basic facts on multiple-choice or short-answer exams.

Adult learners are driven to engage in authentic, personally meaningful, and relevant work. According to motivational researchers, tasks that have personal meaning for adult learners are more likely to promote engagement (McCombs, 2002; Stipek, 1996). As Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999), indicate, adult learners are more motivated when they can see the usefulness of what they are learning. Similarly, adult learners are driven to exercise control over their own activities, and are more likely to be motivated to learn when they believe that their actions are internally initiated and when they have opportunities to regulate their own actions and make choices (Alderman, 1999; McCombs, 2002; Sheldon & Biddle, 1998). Adult learners who do not believe that they have control or choice are less likely to expend the effort necessary to learn. Researchers agree that schools that maximize student engagement should have the following characteristics:

1. Each adult learner should have a curriculum at an appropriate level of difficulty.
2. Instructors must have high but achievable expectations for all students (Alderman, 1999; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking; 1999; Learning First Alliance, 2001).
3. Instructional tasks should be of "intermediate difficulty"; they should be tasks that the adult learner can complete with some effort to help the adult learner develop feelings of increasing competence and pride (Stipek, 1996).
4. Adult learners should also be provided with clear, frequent, and constructive feedback so that they are able to see growth in their capacities and skills (McCombs, 2002; Stipek, 1996; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

All adult learners need to have opportunities to participate in the decision making processes to regulate and direct their own learning. Instructors should encourage adult learners to take responsibility for regulating their own learning and for being self-determined and autonomous learners when choices are given to them. The evidence is clear that student motivation, learning, and performance are enhanced when adult learners make these decisions (McCombs, 2002). Researchers emphasize that the choices adult learners are given must be authentic and not token measures intended to pacify.

Methods of Assessment

Assessment of learning provides important feedback to the adult learner. There are several authentic ways to assess the knowledge gained including: applying the knowledge to multiple situations, asking students to generalize the information, and relating the learning to diverse scenarios. Frequent and, at times, immediate feedback specific about their performance helps adult learners maintain active engagement (McCombs, 2002). Rather than emphasizing that adult learners must have a high value for material weeks or months after the content is presented, if the new knowledge is in conflict with past education or work experiences may be barriers to learning. This occurs if the new knowledge is in conflict with past education or work experiences. This conflict needs to be addressed before the learner can actively engage in the learning (Knowles, 2011).

Ways to Measure Engagement

In blended courses, the instructor has to use different methods to measure the active engagement of adult learners. When building a learning community in a blended course, adult learners need individual attention. Feeling comfortable in seeking help and asking questions using technology is important (i.e., Learning Management System and email). An actively engaged adult learner can describe the purpose of the lesson to show clarity of learning. This is more comprehensive than describing the active participation of adult learners in blended courses.
CONCLUSION
Active engagement by adult learners is critical for learning to take place. Understanding the principles of adult learning helps the instructor to develop learning opportunities that facilitate active engagement and ultimately successful acquisition of new knowledge by adult learners. Adult learners will be motivated to engage in educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to a variety of desired outcomes determined by the learner. Active engagement appears to be comprised of focused and collaborative learning, involving in challenging academic activities, regular interactions with instructors and peers, and believing they are respected and supported by the university learning community. Active engagement is particularly critical in online blended courses. For adult learners to be academically successful, university instructors in the 21st century need to utilize the tenets of adult learning theory and strategies for active engagement in blended course preparation.

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