Never Too Late: Better Serving Adult Learners in the Information Literacy Classroom

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Adult Learners as a Special Population

Each year as fall approaches, the idea of incoming college freshmen conjures up the images of young people, recently out of high school, preparing for their first day on campus. However, that doesn't really match the demographics of the overall higher education student population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the enrollment for Fall 2020 will see 7.4 million students aged 25 years and older in colleges and universities across the United States (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2019). Adult learners (who can also be categorized as non-traditional learners) include: students who delayed enrollment in a post-secondary institution, students who are financially independent, students who are single caretakers, students who did not obtain a traditional high school diploma, adults returning to further their education after significant time in the workforce, and students enrolled part time while working fulltime (US. Dept. of Education 2019). Other demographics not explicitly addressed in this definition that can also be considered adult learners are students with veteran status, such as those returning to school after serving in the Armed Forces.

With this increasingly important population in higher education comes a new set of needs, challenges, and experiences for both the learner and the educator, so much so that institutions are creating new models to better serve these students. For example, *Inside Higher Ed* reports that a growing number of colleges and universities are holding special orientation sessions for incoming freshmen identified as adult and non-traditional learners as a means for accommodating their needs (2019). Another example comes from Houston Community College, which has adapted to the needs of adult learners by creating the Weekend College, a degree program which allows working adults to obtain an Associate's degree within two years through a series of eight week hybrid classes held all day on Saturdays (2019).

How is the library, specifically, adapting to include this group of users? Academic libraries have long identified adult learners as a unique group that they could better serve, but while there has been some work written specifically addressing the learning needs, ways in which to assess learning, and creation of meaningful outcomes for these non-traditional students (Cooke, 2010; Rapchak, Lewis, Motyka, & Balmert, 2015), further examination could be beneficial. In parallel with long adopted pedagogical and other emerging educational methods for information literacy instruction, one approach that can be added to the instruction librarian's toolkit is to take an andragogical approach (Carlson McCall, Padron, & Andrews, 2018; Cooke, 2010).

Adult Learning and Adult Learner Motivations

The idea of adult learning and adults as lifelong learners has a long history in both education and library literature.

Eduard Lindeman's work began the mainstream discussion of adult education in the 1920's and was later popularized by Malcolm Knowles with the long-used European term "andragogy" (Taylor & Kroft, 2009). Whereas pedagogy was originally defined as the art and science of educating children and is now used ubiquitously for the science of education in general, andragogy was defined as the art and science of helping adults learn and later was positioned as a model of assumptions about learners parallel to pedagogy (Knowles, 1980).

Andragogy roots itself in being learner-focused whereas pedagogy has customarily been teacher-focused. As higher education institutions have traditionally designed their programs for younger and elite students, an unintentional result is this leaves adult learners and their needs neglected during the learning process (Yoshimoto, Inenaga, &Yamada, 2007). Knowles summarized for educators six assumptions about adult learners that focus on how a person changes as they mature.

1) *Self-concept*: Their self-concept shifts from being a dependent individual to being self-directed. As such, adults tend to prefer choice in learning environments and are resistant to situations in which the will of another person or entity is being imposed on them.

2) *Experience*: Their experiences accumulate and, since they bring their prior experience into educational settings, become resources for learning. Thus, utilizing adult learners past experiences can be helpful in creating meaningful learning opportunities.

3) *Readiness to learn*: Their social role (parent, spouse, employee, citizen, etc), often tied to their occupation, becomes a motivation for continuing their education.

4) *Orientation to learn*: Their perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediate application of knowledge, and accordingly their orientation towards learning shifts from one that is subject-centric to one that is problem-centric. Adults pursue acquiring knowledge that will help them perform a task or problem solve in their everyday life.

5) *Motivation to learn*: Internal motivation is key—while adults feel the external pressures of life events, they are also driven by internal motivation and desire for self-esteem and goal attainment.

6) *The need to know*: Adults need to know the reason for learning something, so instructors must help the learner become aware of that. When adults embark on learning something they deem valuable, they will likely be more invested with their time and energy to continue learning. (Knowles, 1980; Knowles 1984; Taylor & Kroft, 2009)

While these principles of andragogy can help guide the teaching of adult learners, be aware that there are some concerns with it as a lone approach. Henschke summarizes the critiques of andragogy to include: insufficient empirical evidence for it to be a dominant doctrine in adult education; it promotes debates framed along a binary path of adult/child; and that it should be supplemented by other perspectives such as Afrocentric, feminist, and critical (2011). In regards to library literature, there have been great advancements and further discussions to include transformative learning theory, threshold concepts, and critical pedagogy as it relates to information literacy and the adult learner.

Adult Learning in the Library Classroom

Due to the significant size of the adult learner population, information literacy practitioners will have to be prepared to address the demands for inclusive library instruction for this demographic. Beyond the learning assumptions mentioned by Knowles, adult learners often come with their own set of barriers such as library anxiety, apprehension to technology, limitations on time management, undeveloped study and academic research skills due to being out of the formal classroom for an extended period of time, and in some cases physical barriers such as aural, visual, and mobility issues (Turcotte, 2015). Re-entry adult learners also have a unique set of obstacles in that they may have less technological knowledge and experience, while ironically being more likely to engage in online learning or to access library resources from a distance due to time constraints and outside obligations with the very technology they are anxious about (Cooke, 2010).

Within the library literature, a study by Rapchak, Lewis, Motyka, and Balmert (2015) addressed the need for information literacy assessment to identify knowledge gaps in adult learners. It found that the adult learners in a three-credit information literacy course at Duquesne University had struggled most with information evaluation, more so than their traditional student counterparts who had previously taken a required one credit information literacy course. Questions raised by Carrie Ludovico of how useful the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy* is for adult learners demonstrate a need for librarians to adjust their strategies in teaching and assessing such Frames as "Authority is Constructed and Contextual" to being immediately and practically applicable to the adult learners life (2017). Motivation factors and information literacy skill gaps should be embedded into the lesson plans, learning objects, and learning assessment activities developed by the information literacy practitioner.

Additionally, there are several suggestions from information literacy practitioners which incorporate andragogical concepts into their instruction and are often paired with critical pedagogical and constructivist approaches. For example, the constructivist practice of scaffolding in instruction can be particularly useful when engaging first year adult learners dealing with the anxiety of returning to the classroom by breaking down perceived complicated tasks into smaller and more manageable components (Rapchak, Lewis, Motyka, & Balmert, 2015). Also, when dealing with the

time constraints of the one-shot library instruction session, teaching librarians can apply critical pedagogical concepts of community building by 1) addressing the emotional aspects of doing research, 2) being mindful of language and word choice, and 3) encouraging and facilitating conversations between students as an integral part of the classroom experience (Keer, 2010). When working with a subset of adult learners, such as veterans of the Armed Forces, many of which may have seen combat, it must be understood that veterans 1) share a sense of camaraderie and connect with other veterans based on shared experiences, 2) are accustomed to contributing in a team environment, 3) often have outside obligations and demands on their time making them less available for library interaction outside of the classroom, 4) have unique needs especially for those coming back from combat who may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and prefer to have their backs to a wall, and 5) don't want to be seen as needier than other students (Lemire, 2015). For all these situations, how this can be applied to the classroom is to incorporate group activities, demonstrate how information literacy can directly be applied to their immediate needs, and be mindful of preferential seating for veteran students.

Adult Reflections and Approaches to Working with Adult Learners

As a librarian at Houston Community College where working with adult student learners is common, it is necessary to have a flexible approach to library instruction. That a good deal of this instruction is done via online learning further underscores the need to have various strategies, assessments, and approaches in my information literacy toolkit in order to achieve the same learning outcomes for both my on campus and my remote students who may be adult learners. Regardless of instruction modality, I find that using the andragogical approach of "self-concept" to be useful throughout my instruction sessions for both traditional and adult learners. Implementing informal assessment activities early and often in my instruction not only helps to engage adult learners with their fellow students, it also offers the opportunity to co-create learning outcomes for that session. Utilizing polling applications, such as Mentimeter, that allow for anonymous responses and can encourage frankness with open ended questions, can help guide instruction by setting goals for that session *with* the students instead of *for* the students. For instance, I will start with a pre-assessment activity with a few warm up questions to encourage engagement (e.g. "Rank these social media apps", "What are you reading/binging", etc.) followed by more specific questions gauging their perceptions of information evaluation and where they find their information. This allows for anonymous responses, seen by the entire class, and encourages adult learners to engage without the anxiety of being singled out from their peers. Based on the responses, the session can be set up as a conversation to solve a problem as a group, whether that is to evaluate the credibility of sources, to avoid plagiarism, and to find resources that meet the requirements for their class assignments.

Connecting adult learners to the content of the library instruction session can also be aided by creating a space that

	Whiteboard Fox	**IPEVO Annotator**	**Limnu**	**Conceptboard**
Note-taking and Drawing tools	Basic: pens, eraser, ruler, text box	Pens, basic shapes, stamps, eraser, ruler, protractor, text box	Markers, pens, lines/arrows, basic shapes, eraser	Pens, highlighters, lines/arrows, shapes,
Unlimited canvas	Yes	Yes, plus ability to annotate any desktop content	Yes	Yes
File Uploads	Images (4000x4000 px maximum size)	Images	Images, documents (10MB maximum size)	Images, documents (10MB maximum size)
Commenting	Text box to add notes	Text box to add notes	Notes, labels, pins	Text boxes, sticky notes, comments tool
Account-less participation	Yes (both owner and participants)	Yes, but requires application download	Yes, for participants with shareable link	Yes, but collaborators need an account for full editing permissions
Collaboration	Share via real time link, or snapshot view	No	Yes, permission can be view only or edit	Yes, permission levels are read, review, edit
Template Library	No	No	No	Yes
Save/Export	Snapshot can be saved to personal device	Screenshot or video recording can be saved to personal device	Screenshot export. Boards saved for 14-days with free account	Export as image or PDF. Saves unlimited boards
Price	Free	Free	Free plan includes unlimited collaborative or solo boards, 14-day access to boards. Pro plan for $50/year includes additional security and admin controls, and saves all boards.	Free plan includes unlimited collaborators (50 per board, max), unlimited number of boards, no time limitation. Premium account for $72/year includes increased storage (20GB), larger upload limit (25 MB) and audio/video screensharing.

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leverages the andragogical principle of "experience" as an integral part of the library instruction session. For example, I have found success pairing adult learners with more traditional students to come up with a working definition of "fake news" and other source evaluation concepts; doing so allows adult learners to connect their personal histories (e.g., they may bring to the group examples of conspiracies or instances of propaganda and misinformation from their lived experiences that demonstrates "fake news" is not a new concept). This allows the adult learners to share with the larger group from a place of confidence and promotes a sense of community when approaching their research as an information problem we all are going to solve together. Another tactic that I have employed is creating a concept map for their research assignment with a pen and paper, as a means to help them visually work out the problem of how to find sources on their topic. This provides the means to engage adult learners' "orientation to learn" by shifting the library instruction from subject specific to problem-centric. When, on the flipside, their lack of experience can make more obstacles for them in the classroom, greater flexibility with

expectations of how outcomes are achieved is required. When working with adult learners, whose technological experience may be more variable and less robust, the use of technology itself becomes a learning outcome in addition to those information literacy outcomes to which we are accustomed. Adult learners are often aware of the gaps they have in technological know-how, and if this gap is acknowledged respectfully, it provides an opportunity to activate their "need to know" andragogical motivation and to improve their technology and information literacy skills.

Conclusion

There are a multitude of reasons that adult learners return to the formal learning environment of a college and university classroom, but in the end, they want the same thing as any student: the chance to do their best in order to achieve their academic goals. Being aware of and using the principles of andragogy, along with other techniques, can help ensure that happens. It is incumbent upon librarians and information literacy practitioners to accommodate our instructional practices to meet their needs.