

Philosophy of Education:

The Nature of the Learner

by

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Introduction

Adult learning has undergone dramatic changes and during the 21st century more profound changes are likely to occur in the increasingly complex, diverse, and dynamic society. The information age has permanently changed how we think of time, ourselves, and the world, which has grown to be a smaller place due to technology. A backlash is occurring that is a result of the pressures of time and demand to learn more, faster. Employers are not only demanding individuals who can do the work, but recognize the value of employees who can think creatively and critically in combination with performance.

Consequently, adult learners want to take charge of their own learning and become comfortable with the process of being guided in their search for answers. Adult learners do not want to be given the answers, but allowed the opportunity to think about ideas and situations more deeply in order to understand the implications of the decisions and the possible outcomes. In the process, the adult learner is using two key factors in the learning process, one is using their own background experience and the knowledge they have gathered up to that point in life, and secondly, the desire to immediately apply the knowledge on the job and in life.

Based on the factors stated above, the nature of the adult learner in surgical technology will be based on the concept of andragogy or adult education as opposed to pedagogy. Adult learners are different from youth as learners and their concepts of learning change with time and age. Therefore, the concepts of pedagogy do not necessarily apply to the adult learner.

Andragogy and the Nature of the Learner

Dependency Versus Self-Direction

To understand the nature of the adult learner, the concepts of andragogy are related to the adult learner. First and foremost, is the aspect of maturation and its relationship to dependency. As a person matures, they naturally move from dependency to an increasing level of self-direction. The rate of this process varies with each person and at the different levels in life, ie young adult, middle-age, and older adult. On an overall basis, the adult learner has a psychological need to be self-directing and take charge of their own learning. They usually prefer some control over the place, pace, and time they learn. The adult learner usually enters the learning process in a deliberate manner, meaning they have a goal in mind and wish to reach the goal as independently as possible.

Life Experience

The second important implication is “life experience.” As people grow and develop they accumulate an ever-increasing amount of experience that serves as an important resource for learning, both for themselves and others. Additionally, adult learners, for instance in surgical technology, tend to attach more meaning to the learning gained from experience rather than learning that took place in a passive manner. This explains why surgical technology students thrive in interactive classrooms that incorporate problem-solving discussions and group activities, and appreciate the learning that takes place when they are in the lab and surgical rotation.

An aspect of life experience is the secondary outcome of learning that occurs for many adult learners. For example, an adult learner who is part of a group project not

only learns from the research for the project, but learns about groups and how they function, and how others conduct research. Therefore, the adult learner may be achieving goals beyond their personal learning experience, possibly without even being aware of it.

Another view of life experience is the learner's history, which can greatly affect what and how an individual learns. How people perceive information comes from within them – previous experiences, childhood, previous formal schooling, parental influence, and many other historical aspects of a person's life all play a part in how the person will learn. These experiences will influence how the adult learner organizes the new information, what information they will keep, edit, or discard, and how they will relate the new information to previously learned information. The adult learner's personal history forms the basis of their world views, which will serve as a guide in the day-to-day process of learning.

Time to Learn

A majority of adult learners participate in learning due to a trigger event in their life. Such events could include a divorce, new job that requires new skills, loss of a loved one, all the kids are moved out and leading their own lives (empty-nest syndrome), retirement, or some type of major event. Just preceding or immediately after the trigger event, the adult learner is often ready to learn in order to cope with the event, cope with life's tasks and problems, and possibly find a relationship between the learning and the trigger event.

Practical Reasons for Learning

Most adults have a practical reason for learning. Combined with this reason is the desire to be able to immediately apply the learned information. "Adult learners are

performance-centered in their orientation to learning” (Knowles, p. 44, 1988).

Historically, it has been thought that young people learn new information to be used in the future, whereas for adult learners the time to use the information is immediate. This does not mean the theoretical information of a subject is disregarded by adult learners, but rather the theory is immediately tied in with hands-on practice.

Praxis is a commonly used word in describing the process of immediately using what has been learned (Apps, 1991). The word refers to the process whereby individuals learn something, use it in a manner that applies to their life, reflect on the results, refine the learning or discard it, and repeat the process. The learner is then using their skills and knowledge to self-educate, develop independence, and personally construct their knowledge (Joyce & Weil, 1996). Many adults carry out praxis in their approach to learning.

Multiple Intelligences

A discussion on the nature of the learner cannot escape the umbrella of multiple intelligences and learning style. Individuals interested in multiple intelligences are referred to the books written by Howard Gardner, his most recent being *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (2000) in which he discusses adding the naturalist intelligence to the previous categories.

More pertinent is a brief discussion on learning styles. Research has definitely proven that individuals learn in different ways, and have a dominant learning style(s). Robert Smith (1982) defines learning style as “the individual’s characteristic ways of processing information, feeling, and behaving in learning situations” (p. 24).

An example of the varying dimensions of learning style preferences for adult learners in surgical technology could include “hands-on” learning, problem solving, visual materials, learning with others, learning intuitively, and learning in a step-by-step fashion. The interesting aspect pertaining to adult learners is their preference of a particular learning style. Many individuals prefer a learning style due to the fact that it is the only way they have experienced learning. Obviously, someone who has been lectured to for their entire learning experience will lean towards learning through lecture. However, by exposure to varying learning styles many learners will discover they actually prefer or learn better through different learning styles. For additional and more comprehensive information pertaining to learning styles and MI, please read the articles titled as such that are included in this educator’s web site.

References

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