Continuing Education

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A Reminder about Andragogy

Since we are all teaching adults in our graduate programs, I thought that a bit of a refresher (for some and new for others) on the concepts of andragogy could be useful. These concepts were developed by Malcolm Knowles, who believed that adults learn differently from children. In fact, the word pedagogy is taken from the Greek, meaning the teaching of children. Andragogy, in contrast, is also rooted in Greek and can be defined as the teaching of adults.[1]

J. R. Kidd quotes Knowles' analysis of the differences between children and adults:

> A child first sees himself as a completely dependent personality. He sees himself in his first consciousness as being completely dependent upon the adult world to make his decisions for him, to feed him, to change his diapers, and to see where the pin is sticking. During the course of his childhood and youth, that dependence is reinforced as decisions are made for him in the home, at school, in church, on the playground, and everywhere he turns. But at some point he starts experiencing the joy of deciding things for himself...To be adult means to be self-directing. Now at the point at which this change occurs, there develops in the human being a deep psychological need to be perceived by himself and by others as being indeed self-directing. This is the concept that lies at the heart of andragogy. Andragogy is based upon the insight that the deepest need an adult has is to be treated as an adult, to be treated as a self-directing person, to be treated with respect. Andragogy is student-centered and problem-oriented.[2]

It is important to recognize that this focus on the adult student is key to the whole concept of andragogy. Within this focus are cornerstones upon which the concept is built. The adult learner may be described as:

1. **Ready to learn.** The movement is toward social and occupational competence. [Instructors] need to assist learners in filling knowledge gaps; the attitude that no questions are "stupid" and that inquiry leads to opportunity is critical to effective [learning].
2. **Caught climbing the mountain of time.** To the young, time is infinite; sometime in the middle adult years, the perspective changes and time is viewed as finite and increasingly precious . . . for many, time is more valuable than money and cash exchanged for information is considered fair and just.
3. **Problem-centered in orientation to learning.** Motivation is directly related to the solving of today's problems and experiential activities are the most enduring. [Instructors] need to focus on the learner and the learning process. A shift in emphasis from facts to people brings strength and purpose to [the learning environment]. The stress on today's

concerns and problems relates learning to reality and binds both into a motivational framework that works.

4. **Self-directed.** Adults view themselves as capable and independent, and competent to direct and evaluate their own learning. The tendency to project authority and enforce a variety of "shoulds" must give way to the scenario of the [instructor] as a learning resource seeking to meet learner needs through a collegial and collaborative relationship.
5. **Experienced in life skills.** The adult's years of experience are incorporated into the learning process and mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning. [Instructors] can capitalize on this treasure trove of experience by incorporating it into the resource scenario. To reject this life experience is equivalent to rejecting the [student] as a person and must be avoided.[3]

The tenets of andragogy are important to consider when one is teaching adults—whether that learning environment is found in formal graduate education or in a continuing education experience. The design of education is so much more than the development of a syllabus and the communication of information. Effective program design incorporates:

- Identifying a possible educational activity.
- Deciding to proceed: choosing among alternative programs.
- Identifying and refining objectives.
- Developing the format of the design, including: the selection of resources, selection of instructor(s), selection of teaching methods, creation of time schedule and sequence of activities, provision of social reinforcement of learning, adjustment to the nature of each learner, clarification of roles and relationships, and identification of criteria for evaluation.
- Fitting the [educational] program into the larger patterns of individual, group or institutional life.
- Measuring and appraising results.[4]

Therefore, the development of an educational experience that will be meaningful to students is not an easy—nor straightforward—matter. Many aspects of program design and learner attributes must be taken into consideration. During these times of fiscal pressure on institutions of higher education, it can easily happen that instructor attention is distracted from the core educational mission. This column has attempted to center that attention once again on the essential interaction between learner and instruction. Every so often it is good to reflect on what we are all about.

References

1. Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Education* (New York: Association Press, 1980).
2. J. R. Kidd, *How Adults Learn* (New York: Association Press, 1973), 36.
3. Darlene E. Weingand, *The Organic Public Library* (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1984), 33–34.
4. Cyril O. Houle, *The Design of Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976), 131–85.

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