

**IMPLEMENTING ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES TO OVERCOME BARRIERS  
OF LEARNING IN CONTINUING HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Kristen M. De Vito  
Eastern Illinois University

### **Abstract**

A fundamental aspect to continuing higher education is overcoming of barriers of learning when dealing with non-traditional students. With non-traditional student enrollment on the rise, continuing higher education programs have an obligation to address issues of accessibility, affordability and accountability in higher education. The purpose of the study was to identify the relationship between adult learning principles and overcoming barriers of adult learning in continuing higher education at higher education institutions based on published literature.

## Introduction

In ancient times, teachers like Socrates and Plato had theories about the ends of adult education but nothing about the means of adult learning. Yet because of their experiences with adults, they developed a very different concept of the teaching and learning process from what dominates formal education today (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998).

The basic pattern of our educational system started to take shape between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Education was mostly viewed as a private responsibility. Over time the growth in manufacturing and urbanization, the rapid growth of cities, and the realization that the success of a democratic society depended on the intelligence of the population contributed to the shift in the responsibility of education from private to public (Knowles, 1962). As our education system developed, the basis of our organization followed assumptions about learning and strategies for teaching children. After World War I, views of education in both the United States and Europe suggested that adult learners did not learn the same way children learn (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Scholars in the field of education began to study characteristics, learning styles, and techniques of adults as learners in different levels of our educational system.

The academic community recognizes Malcolm Knowles, known as the father of andragogy, for his dedication to adult education. Andragogy is an “integrated framework of adult learning” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, p.58). Knowles position was that andragogy presents core principles of adult learning that in turn enable those designing and conducting adult learning to build more effective learning processes for adults.

Adult learners are an increasing population in higher education. Between 1969 and 1984, the number of adults participating in education programs increased 79 percent (Hill, 1987 in Imel, 1988). According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), 60% of Illinois resident’s, ages 25-64 are participating in an undergraduate degree-seeking program. Adults therefore make up the majority of students in higher education institutions in Illinois (CAEL, 2008). Adult learners/non-traditional students are students who (a) no longer financially dependent on parents or guardians, (b) whose main are responsibilities outside schooling, (c) whose principal identities have evolved beyond the role of full-time student, or (d) usually 24 years or older (CAEL, 1999). In 2000, 39% of all college students were 25 or older and 56% were 22 or older (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, in Kelson & Lesick, 2005). This means that only 27% meet the definition of tradition, thus 73% of all undergraduates are nontraditional learners. The topic of adult education is a concern because even with increases in enrollment, the focus at colleges and universities continues to be the traditional student. Traditional students are considered college students who attend full-time immediately after leaving high school, are supported by parents, and may work only part-time if at all (Kelson & Lesick, 2005). By utilizing existing research relating to adult learning, institutions have an opportunity and an obligation to enhance adult learning programs.

The development of higher adult education as an organizational system can be viewed from two perspectives; structures for management among universities at the national, regional, and state levels and structures for operation within individual institutions (Knowles, 1969). The focus of this study was to look at the operation of continuing education programs in individual institutions. Within adult education, the term continuing education refers to “education that is pursued beyond the period of one’s formal education and to the non-degree credit education that is offered by degree-granting institutions” (English, 2005, p. 148). In North America and some

parts of Europe, the term continuing education or in this case continuing higher education, is used most frequently to describe institutionalized provisions of ongoing opportunities for adults' personal and professional growth. Continuing higher education courses usually have no formal entry requirements beyond being an adult. That being said, for too many adults who are pursuing undergraduate degrees, the traditional structure and organization of continuing higher education poses significant barriers to success.

While many adults participate in higher education programs, many do not. It is just as important, if not more important to examine what is keeping some adults from participating in continuing higher education. For this study, a barrier is anything that limits or deters adult learners from enrolling in higher education programs. The purpose of this study was to identify the relationship between Knowles' adult learning principles and overcoming barriers of adult learning in continuing higher education at higher education institutions.

### **Andragogy**

In *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy* (1970), Knowles stated that in many people's minds pedagogy is defined as the art and science of teaching. In books on adult education you can still today find references to "the pedagogy of adult education," without any realization of the contradiction in terms. Pedagogy is derived from the Greeks specifically meaning the art and science of teaching children. Knowles believed the main reason why adult education has not achieved the impact of which it is capable is that most teachers of adults only know how to teach adults as if they were children. Andragogy is based on the Greek word aner (with the stem andr-), meaning "man". Andragogy is therefore, "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1970 p.37). Andragogy has six key principles. According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998), the six principles of andragogy are:

1. The learner's need to know
2. Self-concept of the learner
3. Prior experience of the learner
4. Readiness to learn
5. Orientation to learning
6. Motivation to learn.

In addition to the six core principles, Knowles believed individual learner differences, situational differences, and goals and purposes of learning are factors that affect adult learning.

The first core principle is the learner's need to know. Engaging adults as partners for learning process satisfies their "need to know". Knowles listed several dimensions to the need to know: (a) the need to know how learning will be conducted, (b) what learning will occur, and (c) why the learning is important (Knowles et al., 1998).

The self-concept of the learner is seen as the second principle. The self-concept of the learner relates to autonomy of the learner and self-directedness of the learner. Self-directed learning is seen as self-teaching, or where learners are capable of taking control of teaching themselves in a particular subject. Autonomy refers to taking control and ownership of the goals and purposes of one's own learning. A person may be autonomous, but choose to learn in a teacher-directed style. Yet just because an adult engages in self-teaching does not mean that the person is autonomous (Knowles et al., 1998).

Adults' experiences impact learning in multiple ways. Adult experiences create a wider range of individual differences, provide a resource for learning, and can create bias that can

inhibit or shape new learning. Often times, adult experiences provide a foundation for the adult's self-identity as well (Knowles et al., 1998). Prior experience, the third principle, is important because it serves as both a resource for learning as well as a gatekeeper for new learning.

The fourth principle, readiness to learn, generally occurs when a life situation creates a need to know. Basically, the more adult educators can anticipate and understand adults' life situations and readiness for learning, the more effective they can be (Knowles et al., 1998).

Closely related to the role of prior experience in shaping learning is the role of current experiences in shaping the need to learn (orientation to learning). According to Knowles (1969), adults generally prefer a problem solving orientation to learning as opposed to subject-centered learning. And, adults learn best when information is presented in real-life contexts.

The last core deals with the adult's motivation to learn. The andragogical model assumes adults tend to be more motivated toward learning that helps them solve problems in their lives or results in internal payoffs. This does not mean that external payoffs have no relevance, but the internal need is the more compelling motivator (Knowles et al., 1998).

Individual differences are portrayed as variables. As we continue to learn about the differences that impact adult learning, Knowles grouped variables into categories of individual learner differences, subject matter differences, and situational differences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Goals and purposes for learning are seen as developmental in relation to individual, institutional and societal growth.

### **Barriers to Adult Learning**

While there are many barriers to learning, this manuscript covers barriers of accessibility, affordability, and accountability. Once barriers are identified, an even bigger challenge, and the challenge facing most institutions today is how to overcome barriers of learning.

#### *Accessibility*

Accessibility in traditional higher education is a disadvantage for working adults. Barriers relating to accessibility include time, flexibility, and instructional methods. A notable difference between traditional and non-traditional students is their use of time. Most adult learners have families and full-time jobs that compete for their time. The flexibility or inflexibility of schedules and difficult access to locations, program duration, and pre-collegiate education make success in higher education difficult. Lastly, adults learn differently than children, yet the instructional methods in the classroom often times do not reflect the difference. (Knowles, 1970, 1998; Cross, 1981; Zemke & Zemke, 1995)

By applying the learners need to know, self concept of the learner, prior experience of the learner, and orientation to learning, Knowles principles can begin to address barriers of access in continuing education programs. While it is hard to control what outside obligations adult learners may have, continuing higher education programs can make classes available at a variety of times in a variety of ways to make it less of a competition to obligations that already exist. Services, including admission, academic and financial aid advising, registration, and the bookstore should be available at times convenient to adults as well as traditional students. Also the duration of the academic program provides significant inflexibilities (Cross, 1981). It is not uncommon for a two year program to take upwards of five years (Kazis et al., 2007). Continuing higher education programs could work to create shorter-duration programs or checkpoints with

intermediate credentials throughout the degree programs.

Pre-program assessment is also important. It is hard to design a program that doesn't take into account the entry-level knowledge and understanding of participants (Zemke & Zemke, 1995). Also, many working adults enroll in undergraduate programs that can improve their career and income potential only to find that they lack basic skills necessary to take even introductory degree-credit courses. Unable to take classes that brought them to college, adults can get frustrated and give up. By assessing the general entry-level knowledge of participants, continuing higher education programs can make the process to complete non-credit developmental courses easier, as well as provide assessment results to instructors to help with curriculum design, all while assessing the adults' readiness to learn (Zemke & Zemke, 1995).

Lastly, instruction in adult classes needs to be readdressed. The learning experience should be problem-centered, relevant to the learners personal goals, integrate information with what is already known, and wherever possible account for learning style differences (Zemke & Zemke, 1995). Adults learn best through methods and techniques that use experience. There should be a move in adult education away from the transmittal techniques of lecture and assigned reading toward the action-learning techniques of community projects, case method and critical incident process, discussion, simulation exercises, and the like (Knowles, 1969).

### *Affordability*

An American college education is said to be the most expensive college education in the world. Especially with a struggling economy, cost is a big issue for adult learners as well as what types of assistance exists to combat the cost of college. Current patterns of financial aid and institutional funding reinforce the disadvantages that face adult learners.

Most financial-aid programs are designed with full-time students in mind. Basically federal student aid is "financial assistance that's available through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid" (FAFSA, 2008). For federal financial aid, you must be enrolled or accepted for enrollment as a regular student working toward a degree or certificate in an eligible program and most federal grants cannot be used for noncredit courses. Most federal education loans are only available to students attending half time or more (Kazis et al., 2007).

With a few exceptions, Federal Pell Grants are available only to undergraduate students. Grants do not have to be repaid. Technically, Pell Grants are available to less-than-half-time students, but the eligibility formula does not allow these students to count living expenses or other indirect costs as part of the cost of education like federal aid programs do. Also, Pell eligibility is based on the previous year's income and penalizes working adults seeking to return to school following layoffs and sharp reductions in income. Lastly, Pell Grants cannot be used for non-degree or non-credit programs that might otherwise be attractive to working adults who want to improve specific job related skills (Kazis et al., 2007). If one meets the requirements, the amount you get will depend not only on financial need, but also on costs to attend school, student status, and plans to attend school for a full academic year or less" (FAFSA, 2008).

State student aid policies generally follow federal eligibility rules. A majority of the states provide no grant aid to less than-half-time students. Almost all states have very early aid application deadlines that disadvantage adults whose work and family obligations discourage long-term planning (Kazis et al., 2007).

The most obvious way to break down the barrier of affordability is to change federal and state loan programs. These aid programs were designed to promote access for traditional

students and do not meet the needs of the adult students. Continuing higher education programs have an opportunity to act as an advocate on behalf of the non-traditional student in making fundamental changes to offer more direct assistance to adults. Also, continuing higher education programs must look within their own institutions. A lack of flexibility in institutional policies regarding payment options for adult students demonstrates the lack of focus on those who do not meet the institutional definition of a college student. Often time's payments must be made in full before students can register for a new semester. On average, that gives adult students two to three months to pay their student bill. Already having other financial obligations, payment options are discouraging. The principles of adult learning can be applied in terms of institutional and societal change.

### *Accountability*

Accountability in higher education favors enrollment of traditional students. Accountability measures are intended to provide meaningful ways to assess program quality and to help institutions and systems improve by identifying strengths and weaknesses. Most accountability discussions and measures center on traditional full-time students, even though higher education outcomes are weaker for adult learners (Kazis et al., 2007). Little information exists to answer adult learner questions about employment outcomes, earnings potential or return on education investment when choosing a college or university.

Students, both traditional and non-traditional are the primary consumers of higher education. Prospective college students utilize a variety of commercial products when evaluating what institution to attend. Most consumer information about higher education focuses on traditional student needs. College guides such as *U.S. News and World Report* annual publication "Americas Best Colleges" present comparative data about individual institutions. Publications include information on everything from academic offerings to campus social life, target traditional students looking for a full-time college experience. Nowhere, is there any mention of adult students and their efforts to select a college. No commercial products geared for adult learners exist (Kazis et al., 2007; Kelson & Lesick, 2005). Adults want college-grade education and degrees of unquestioned quality, the same as traditional students. The task is to make the regular university program easily available to adults.

By putting andragogy in practice, the goals and purposes for the learning aspect of continuing higher education programs can begin to address the issue of accountability through institutional change. Continuing higher education programs need to collect and record data relating to enrollment, progress and completion rates as well as earning outcomes that capture adult learners' economic gains (Kazis et al., 2007). The future success of continuing higher education depends on the history of the program. The data collected, in some cases, may not be a ringing endorsement for continuing higher education programs. Regardless, continuing education programs need to make that information accessible to both current and prospective adult students. On the institutional level records can be used for marketing/recruitment or to show the administration there is a need for additional resources. Adult education practitioners in education institutions often struggle with institutional constraints regarding not only adult students but also policy, staffing and resources (Knox, 1993; Cross, 1981). This information can be used to make necessary the changes to improve continuing education programs.

Continuing education organizations should work at the state and regional level to create a database of continuing higher education programs. This process may be slow moving, but it is a

necessary step to overcome barriers of accessibility. These changes can be related back to Knowles' developmental goals and purposes in relation to institutional and societal growth.

### **Conclusion**

Educational institutions vary greatly in their acceptance of adult and continuing education as an important part of their mission. At one extreme are schools and colleges whose predominant mission is to serve young people who attend full time. At the other extreme are community colleges and public universities, which have a commitment to both preparatory and continuing education. Between these extremes, there is a continuum of institutions which the adult education function ranges from being marginal to central. Especially at institutions in the middle of this continuum, adult educators must compete with barriers of learning that affect adult students directly or indirectly (Knox, 1993).

One limitation of this study was the lack of research available about continuing higher education programs at colleges and universities. Donaldson (1992) agrees stating that more research in continuing education is needed, particularly research that addresses the changes that have been experienced by continuing higher education and the roles and functions that continuing education assumes in response to these changes. Why the lack of research? Some speculate that barriers also exist for continuing educators' and their involvement in research. Some of the barriers mentioned include a longing for the days when less was expected of continuing educators in the research arena, and the lack of research divisions and capacity within continuing education organizations (Boyd & Rice, 1986 in Donaldson, 1992).

There is also a clear need for consensus on components of continuing education. As mentioned, there are state, regional and national organizations for continuing higher education intuitions and professionals. Yet, as Ashburn mentioned (2007), policy makers and colleges alike are bewildered by noncredit course goals; many colleges do not even agree on a definition of noncredit work.

Knowles position is that andragogy presents core principles of adult learning that in turn enable those designing and conducting adult learning to build more effective learning processes for adults. Andragogy works best in practice when it is adapted to fit the uniqueness of the learners and the learning institution. Knowles saw this not as a weakness of the principles, but as a strength. The strength that the core principles apply to all adult learning situations provided they are considered jointly with other factors that are present in that situation (Knowles et al., 1998; Kazis et al., 2007).



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