

## **Strategies for Teaching Adults in the Online Environment**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the development of an online course in relation to Adult Learning Theory to determine if the course met the needs of adult learners. A comparison of pedagogy to andragogy assists with this purpose. Recommendations are made based on the results of an analysis of online course design impact in relation to adult learner characteristics.

### **Introduction**

The “process of engaging the adult learner in the structure of the learning experience,” (Ask.com) or *andragogy* originated with Alexander Kapp in 1833 and evolved with further study by Malcolm Knowles, in 1957, into the Humanistic Learning Theory, focusing on the value of the learner’s characteristics and experiences contributing to the learning process. As the world of education has changed, from direct teaching in person to online teaching from a distance, *andragogy* must be considered specifically because of its possible impact on the online learning processes. Learning styles (NEA, 2006), technology skills (Scott, 2006), and time management strategies also have the potential to affect the education process. Additionally, professorial self-awareness is critical to this process of online teaching and learning. If we accept that the purpose of teaching is for student learning, then design decisions also facilitate authentic learning (LERN, 2013; Maclean and Scott, 2011). Therefore, this study examines the interaction of the adult graduate student with the online learning environment of a small regional university in the state of Texas.

### **Purpose of Study**

General principles of teaching have been researched by many educators. Good and Brophy (2008) summarized good teaching with nine principles: teacher expectations, proactive and supportive classrooms, opportunity to learn, curriculum alignment, coherent alignment, thoughtful discourse, scaffolding, practice/application and goal oriented assessments. However, there are differences in the approach to teaching online as compared to traditional teaching face-to-face. The purpose of this study is to examine the characteristics of adult learners and the impact of course design in the online education process. “Andragogy (adult learning) is a theory that holds a set of assumptions about how adults learn” (QOTFC). Knowles (1973) based his adult learning theory on four assumptions: “1) changes in self-concept, 2) the role of experience, 3) readiness to learn, and 4) orientation to learning” in the

absence of online teaching and learning. This study considers design elements of an online course in addition to Adult Learning Theory in a university educational leadership program.

Bernard Scott's (2006) course design (Figure 1) from *The Online Learning Knowledge Garden* guided the complete redesign of a course which I inherited from a colleague who had taught it successfully for years. I first became aware of this figure when researching best practices in the construction of online courses. After trying to use a course as it was given to me, I realized it would need to be redesigned. With limited time, I wanted to take this course into a higher level of rigor and meaningfulness for the online learning environment.

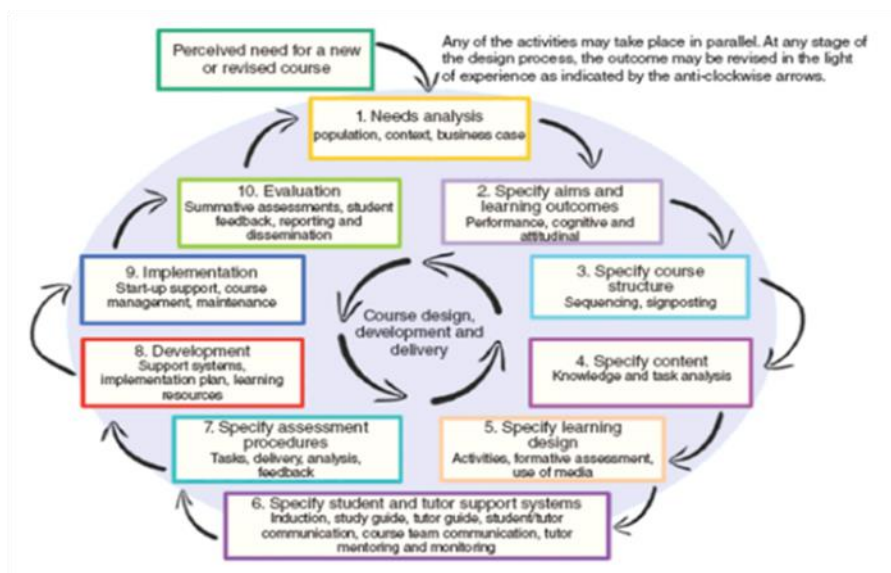


Figure 1: Scott's (2006) Course Design, Development and Delivery Cycle

Course design development and delivery is a cyclical process. Beginning with a perceived need for a new, or in my case, revised course based on a needs analysis demonstrating the necessity of this redesign; continuing with the specific aims and learning outcomes (in our situation-alignment to a state certification exam all educational leadership students eventually take upon graduation); considering the course structure and sequencing; and finally, considering the specific content to be taught and the learning designed to maximize that impact.

Critical to the online learning environment is the need for student support navigating the online learning environment. The university Instructional Technology (IT) department has in place tutoring

presentations explaining course features. Additionally, that same department hires student workers familiar with technology to assist other university students needing immediate online assistance. Having this service readily available made the development process easier to complete.

Assessment is also integral to the development process. Students need formative and summative assessments as a check for progress in learning and, as the course professor I need to verify the success or failure of course components in that learning process. The IT department provides faculty training in order to maximize technology skills in the online learning environment. Often students contact me initially when experiencing difficulties online. Since I have basic problem solving abilities, the student can often return to the class more quickly. Once the course is designed, university systems are in place to maintain updates of software and backups of course content and student submissions facilitating the overall success of students for learning and faculty for teaching.

As with the creation of any lesson or course, evaluation of the students for learning outcomes and to provide feedback for course improvement validate the development experience. The course examined for this study was developed using Scott's (2006) model. But I had more questions. Now that I had completely revamped this course into what I thought it should be, besides the students' evaluations of me at the end of the semester, how would I know if the course met their adult education needs? This began my consideration of Adult Learning Theory as a framework to consider if what I had created met the inherent needs of my graduate students as adult learners.

### **Theoretical Framework**

"The science of learning seeks to determine how people learn" and defines learning as a "change in the learner's knowledge attributable to the learner's experience" (Marzano, p.96). Using Adult Learning Theory solidifies an understanding of how adults learn and their needs in the online learning environment. In order to understand more completely it was necessary to re-examine my understanding of pedagogy, which is defined as the "art" of teaching and implies teaching to young people. Andragogy is defined as the methods and techniques used to teach adults. Understanding and comparing pedagogy to andragogy assists with the comprehension of andragogy. Alexander Kapp, a German editor in 1833, defined andragogy as the process of engaging the adult learner in the structured learning experience. Malcolm Knowles, an American scholar, first examined andragogy in 1957 and coined the Humanistic Learning Theory which focused on the value of the adult learners' characteristics and experiences as

they contributed to the learning process. In 1973, Knowles based his adult learning theory on four assumptions: “1) changes in self-concept, 2) the role of experience, 3) readiness to learn, and 4) orientation to learning” notably in the absence of online teaching and learning processes. In addition to Knowles’ four assumptions, he identified “Six adult learning principles: 1) adults are internally motivated and self-directed; 2) adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences; 3) adults are goal oriented; 4) adults are relevancy oriented; 5) adults are practical, and 6) adult learners like to be respected” Figure 2 aligns Knowles (1973) four assumptions with his six principles, all of which assist in understanding the adult learning process. By way of explanation, the four assumptions are listed in the figures to the left and the six principles are split to make eight to fit the four categories.

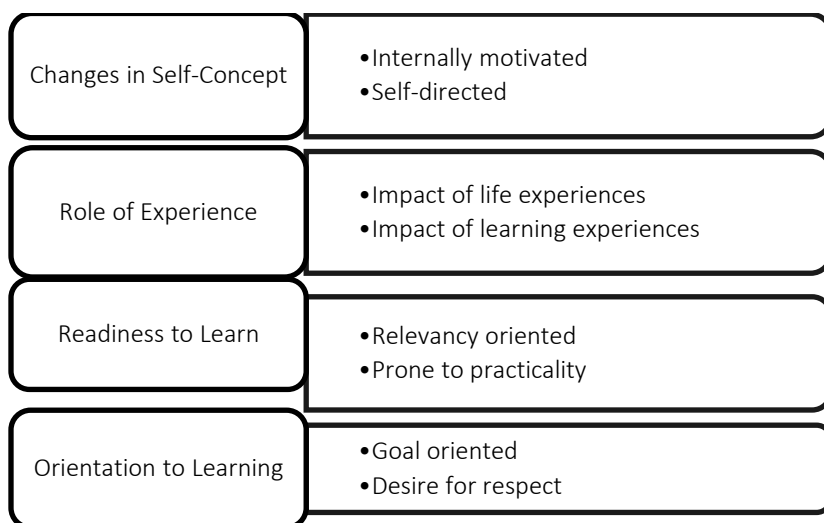


Figure 2: Alignment of Knowles’ (1973) Four Assumptions & Six Learning Principles

### ***Internal motivation and self-directedness***

The graduate students in educational leadership typically work full-time as educators while earning the master’s degree and certification required for advancement from the classroom as a teacher to the office as an administrator. Internal motivation implies that each of those students is individually moved towards professional advancement and as such, self-directed toward that end. In contacting the university, applying for admission, paying for courses and completing courses, the students demonstrate their self-directedness.

### ***Impact of life experiences and knowledge***

Successful teachers comment that one of the first things to do with a new group of students is to find out what they already know before planning how to teach new information. Andragogy specifies that

life experiences and knowledge are integral to the learning process for adults. Imperatively, the opportunity to demonstrate that knowledge and those experiences is crucial to successful learning in the online environment. Adult learners bring varying degrees of experience depending on age and professional history and the same for knowledge bases. Graduate students come from a variety of education disciplines, ranging from elementary to secondary, from teaching reading to English Literature, to all other individual subject areas in schools. Also, counselors, special education teachers, physical education teachers and other educators, considered specialists because of their range of roles in schools, enroll in graduate programs. This plethora of life experiences and knowledge brought to the education process needs to be embraced to enhance the online learning environment. To facilitate this wide range of student experiences and knowledge bases, course design must offer opportunities to integrate those with course content. In this way, students assimilate new knowledge with existing knowledge, sharing insights with fellow students at an adult level.

### ***Goal oriented***

The obvious end goal of graduate students enrolled in this educational leadership program is to graduate with the master's degree, take and pass the state certification exam and become a practicing school administrator. This explains three separate goals, each preparing the way for the next. Success in each course accomplishes the end goal of graduation.

### ***Relevancy oriented***

This principle relates to the value placed on the content in connection to the learner's experiences and expectations upon completion of the graduate degree. Course curriculum is aligned (Good and Brophy, 2008) to the state certification exam competencies in all educational leadership program courses, making what is presented in the learning environment relevant to an expectation for success upon graduation.

### ***Practical in nature***

This educational leadership program is practitioner-oriented for the teacher interested in becoming a school administrator therefore, students expect to directly apply what they learn to their knowledge base in the school environment. For example, during the program internship, students are required to help with a whole school fire drill and to see the form required from the State Fire Marshall

documenting the exercises. Not only does this experience address safety, but helps the practicing teacher understand the need for fire drills and the accompanying paperwork in a school system.

### ***Respect***

In the online learning environment communication is the primary mode for a professor to express respect for students. Interactions on the unit discussion boards (called forums) set the tone of respect. Even when a student is negative or callous in some way, the student must be approached with tact to teach the expected etiquette online. Respect must be mutual even when there is disagreement. In fact, I don't mind disagreements as long as they are handled politely. It is my opinion that professors and students do not have to agree with each other. We demonstrate our mutual respect in the ways that we interact with each other. A spirited discussion can impact learning and has the potential to demonstrate the knowledge base of both the professor and student.

Comparing pedagogy to andragogy through the lens of Knowles (1973) four assumptions and six learning principles (Table 1) provides further understanding of the importance of Adult Learning Theory when designing an online course. However, before that comparison can be made, it is important to understand at what age 'adulthood' is generally accepted as having started. The categorization of 'adult' is identified by the [United States Department of State](#) as the age of eighteen. Psychologists differ on their understanding of a chronological age to identify when a child becomes an adult. In this study, an adult is referred to as a university student. Specifically, this study regards a population of graduate level students in an educational leadership program. Those students are professionally certified to teach in Texas public schools and attend graduate classes in the online environment making it necessary to understand how to positively impact the learning experience for that age group.

With regards to changes in self-concept; in pedagogy, or the art of teaching youngsters, not yet identified as adults, self-concept changes over an extended period of time, but with andragogy, self-concept is clear and solidified from life and teaching experiences. With regards to changes in self-concept; in pedagogy, students are motivated to meet the needs required in a current situation and are largely "other directed," whereas with andragogy, adult learners are motivated to meet the needs of the present based on their desired future professional endeavors and adult learners are largely self-directed.

Changes in Self-Concept	
Pedagogy	Andragogy
Self-concept changes over long period of time	More clear self-concept as a result of life experiences and teaching
Motivated to meet the needs of a current situation and largely “other” directed	Motivated to meet the needs of the present & future professionally; largely self-directed
Role of Experience	
Mostly limited to home and some work experience; not as aware of the impact of experience on professional decisions	Having been working as educators, have observed leadership & have determined they have something of value to offer to others in that realm
Meta-cognition occurs later in pedagogy so it has less time to impact decisions made	Having started in the educational leadership program, the students constantly comment about the increase in their knowledge base about the rationale for work situation
Readiness to Learn	
Relevance is important to the learning process but is largely ‘outside-driven’	Relevance is important to facilitate the feeling of accomplishment and to increase understanding
At the age of high school, and some upper elementary, students ask why what they are doing is important	Adults have a need to know the rationale for information & how it will be used now & in the near future - key to the practicality of learning
Orientation to Learning	
Short term goals once school is entered include passing grade levels – a simplistic approach to learning	Goal orientation clearly set; students seek avenue to professional advancement through additional education
Desire for respect may be unconscious to conscious along the development range and impacts more immediate situations	Need for respectful interactions in the learning environment more prevalent to validate education decisions

Table 1: Comparison of Pedagogy to Andragogy

The role of experience and pedagogy speak to limitations connected to home with some possible work experience depending on the living environment of the youngsters. In this situation, there is a general lack of awareness of the impact of life experiences on professional decisions. However, with andragogy, our graduate students have been working primarily as teachers and have observed leadership and most likely have determined they have something of value to offer to others as a result of those experiences. Pedagogically, meta-cognition occurs later than it does with adults and has less time to impact decisions made. Adult learners in the educational leadership program constantly comment about the increase in their knowledge base and as a result of that knowledge, gain an increased awareness for the connection between education and the teaching profession.

With regards to readiness to learn and pedagogy; relevance is important to the learning process but is largely “outside’ driven; whereas with andragogy, in particular, our graduate students, relevancy is

important to facilitate a feeling of accomplishment and to increase understanding. With regards to readiness to learn and pedagogy; at the high school age, and perhaps some upper elementary ages, students may ask the importance of the learning; whereas our graduate students generally have a need to know the rationale for course content and expect a more immediate benefit as a demonstration of the practicality of knowledge.

The orientation to learning in pedagogy manifests itself in the recognition of more short term goals, for example, passing a subject area or a grade level-a simplistic approach to learning; whereas with our graduate students, goal orientation is clear. These students sought out the avenue necessary for professional advancement – that of additional education and certification. Pedagogy addresses the desire for respect, but is perhaps less consciously-driven across the developmental age ranges with impacts on more immediate situations whereas, andragogy demonstrates an understanding of the adult learner’s need for respectful interactions in the learning environment in order to validate education decisions.

Scott’s (2006) design process includes ten steps towards the development or revision of an existing course. Table 2 lists those steps in the left column with questions a faculty member might ask toward the accomplishment of those steps in the center column. The right column brings together Adult Learning Theory principles as they relate to the design process facilitating the connection between the design process and Adult Learning Theory. For example, to start the process of design, we might ask about the need for the course and who the course will have as students. In response, I know that the graduate students taking this redesigned course are considered self-directed and motivated, needing this course for the completion of a degree plan. This same format was followed for each step of Scott’s design process, matching the principles of the Adult Learning Theory as they seemed most appropriate, sometimes repeating those principles where they seemed to fit more than once. Clearly, Adult Learning Theory is a good fit for a theoretical framework from which to examine the dynamic interaction between course content and adult learners.

<b>Scott’s (2006) Design Process</b>	<b>Design Questions to Ask Self</b>	<b>Adult Learning Theory</b>
Needs analysis	What is the need for this course and who is the intended student?	Self-directed & motivated
Specify learning outcomes	What are the performance objectives, cognitive and attitudinal?	Goal-oriented
Specify course structure	What will be the best way to accomplish those objectives? What will be the sequence of instruction?	Relevancy



Specify course content (conduct a task analysis if necessary)	What is the knowledge base students need to acquire and apply?	Need for practicality
Specify learning design	What activities/strategies will accomplish the learning (including assessments)?	Life experiences & prior knowledge
Specify student support systems	What systems are in place or need to be put into place to guide the student towards success in the online environment?	Respect
Specify assessment procedures	How will assessments be delivered most effectively?	Relevancy
Development	How will the support systems, course delivery be accomplished (timeline)?	Respect
Implementation	How will the course be managed on a daily basis and how will it be maintained?	Respect
Evaluation	How will the summative assessments be delivered most effectively and how will student feedback be provided? How will all data provide information that will guide the continued course improvement process in order to meet student/program needs?	Relevancy

Table 2: Scott's (2006) Design Process and Adult Learning Theory

**Methodology**

All students complete two evaluations at the end of each semester: one provided by the university online and one provided as part of the course content with credit received. Critical analysis of both, coding for Knowles (1973) learning principles, provided data about the online learning environment. Additionally, required interactive forums used as assignments in lessons demonstrate the level of student interest and learning. Crucial to the validity of information is the attention paid to building a relationship with adult learners through course emails, phone calls, and graded papers. Data necessitated the addition of another column (see Table 3) listing the analysis of course structure in correlation to the design process and adult learning theory. Components of the course were reviewed for value in the overall education process. Key words in bold print in the table identify specific connections to the other components of the table. For example; with the opening of the completed course on the first day of the semester, students can better meet posted deadlines and if they desire, can work ahead demonstrating their motivation and the characteristic of being self-directed.

College accreditation requires the posting of learning objectives in the syllabus directly responding to the adult learner's goal orientation. Audio recorded PowerPoint presentations also explain the rationale for course components. For example, the high cost of textbooks is sometimes viewed as an

additional and unnecessary expense to a university education by students. This university administration has asked that faculty members take cost as compared to usage into consideration when choosing a text. I created a presentation to highlight features of the textbook as an explanation for its choice for the course. In that way, using pictures of the textbook pages, I can explain the value of certain components to the course goals and objectives. This has proven a positive strategy based on student comments addressing the value of the text on the course evaluations.

This particular course is a core course for the college of education so, students from other disciplines attend. This creates a need for flexibility to enhance the learning for all students. By designing questions in assignments and quizzes that reflect more than just an education environment, the students feel as though they can relate to the content. Responses on assignments will not be similar to each other because the questions require the application of concepts to a real world situation and students are encouraged to share from individual experiences. For example, ‘independent variable’ was one of the vocabulary terms. I asked students to consider a group to which they belonged and interacted with regularly, since this course is offered in the summer when fewer students have access to a public school if they are educators. One student in educational leadership explained that her extended family met weekly for dinner. This one week it was her turn to cook. Country music would typically provide the backdrop for a pleasant evening. However, as a result of this assignment, she made the music her independent variable and changed it to Rap music. She did not tell the family what she was doing but she said the dining atmosphere changed markedly because of the change of music. This was an application level activity completely designed by this student and she shared her understanding of how the independent variable dramatically changed the group dynamics that evening more than if she had not conducted the project. This same student also mentioned how applying this experience back to her elementary classroom will increase her awareness of the impact of changes made in the classroom.

Scott's Design Process	Questions to ask During Course Creation	Adult Learning Theory	Course Analysis
Needs analysis	What is the need for this course and who is the intended student?	Self-directed and motivated	<b>Entire course opened</b> completely on first day of semester to allow individual student progression
Specify learning outcomes	What are the performance objectives, cognitive and attitudinal?	Goal-oriented	<b>Syllabus</b> required to contain learning objectives and scope/sequence of course <b>Audio recorded PPT</b> created to facilitate this understanding

<b>Specify course structure</b>	What will be the best way to accomplish those objectives? What will be the sequence of instruction?	Relevancy	<b>Unit assignments require application level of concepts</b> Since this is a core course, <b>assignments must be flexible</b> to facilitate success of all students in assignment responses <b>Assignments require reflection</b> and effective written communication
<b>Specify course content (conduct a task analysis if necessary)</b>	What is the knowledge base students need to acquire and apply?	Need for practicality	<b>Consistent lesson design</b> to make navigation more user-friendly Features included: <b>instructional overviews of concepts</b> in PowerPoint; <b>rubric for self-grading</b> ; assignment documents created; discussion forums with <b>broad concepts</b> ; lesson quizzes
<b>Specify learning design</b>	What activities/strategies will accomplish the learning (including assessments)?	Life experiences & prior knowledge	<b>Reflective responses</b> on assignments based over <b>focused readings</b> from text; <b>Authentic learning assignments</b> ; <b>choices on assignments</b> (choose 1 of 2 questions)
<b>Specify student support systems</b>	What systems are in place or need to be put into place to guide the student towards success in the online environment?	Respect	Instructional Technology department provides <b>videos/PowerPoints</b> ; <b>extensive support system</b> ; <b>response from professor within 24 hours</b>
<b>Scott's Design Process</b>	<b>Questions to ask During Course Creation</b>	<b>Adult Learning Theory</b>	<b>Course Analysis</b>
<b>Specify assessment procedures</b>	How will assessments be delivered most effectively?	Relevancy	<b>Quiz questions developed around concepts/vocabulary</b> and stated in the <b>form of scenarios</b> in a variety of situations (work/school); assignments designed specifically <b>to measure the ability of the student to assimilate course content</b> into own schema
<b>Development</b>	How will the support systems, course delivery be accomplished (timeline)?	Respect	<b>IT maintains all online systems</b> to support students and faculty and is responsive to both
<b>Implementation</b>	How will the course be managed on a daily basis and how will it be maintained?	Respect	Having a <b>GA to help with grading</b> demonstrates a respect for student efforts; <b>speedy responses from IT and the professor</b> when necessary
<b>Evaluation</b>	How will the summative assessments be delivered most effectively and how will student feedback be provided? How will all data	Relevancy	University provides an <b>online course evaluation for all professors</b> ; <b>Additional evaluation</b> is provided in this course and students get a 100 regardless of what they say-criticism or

	provide information that will guide the continued course improvement process in order to meet student/program needs?		praise; As the grade book is updated with assignments and quizzes, <b>comments from GA and professor through assignments</b> and online in grade book validate student efforts; <b>students are invited to have input into the course environment</b> from the introductory PowerPoint to the end of the course
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Table 3: Scott’s (2006) Design Process & Knowles’ (1973) Adult Learning Theory & Course

**Analysis-Discussion**

The best way to demonstrate the impact of Adult Learning Theory to this course redesign experience is to include student comments pulled directly from the course evaluations and to align those comments to Knowles’ (1973) six principles of Adult Learning Theory. Provided here are some student comments pulled from the evaluations at the end of the semester. They are aligned with the four assumptions of adult learning theory and the six principles of adult learning. Data was triangulated through regular conversations with my colleague to verify my perceptions, primarily regarding student comments and course design as it relates to adult learning. We do not have the same teaching style, so he offered invaluable insights to my research process.

It should be noted that a limitation of this study is the small number of students;  $n=34$ . Few student comments could be entered because of space limitations, however the comments listed are exemplary of the many received that validated the assumptions and principles of Adult Learning Theory.

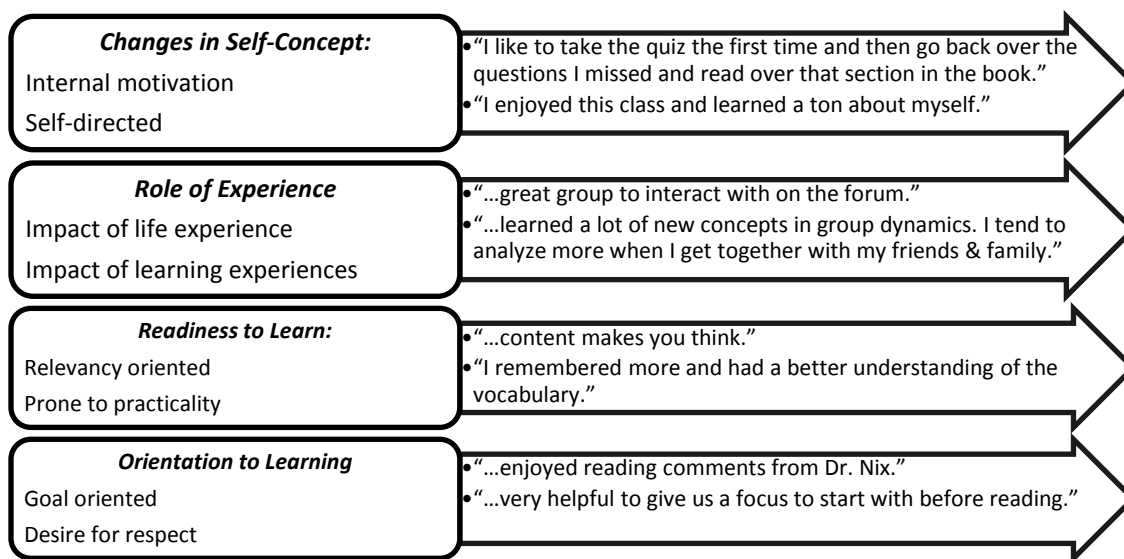


Figure 3: Knowles’ (1973) Adult Learning Theory Aligned to Student Comments Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on data from the course redesign process and from the analysis of written student comments received upon completion of this course, I am making ten recommendations that seem to support the importance of considering Adult Learning Theory when teaching in the university online environment: 1) Provide full access online the first day within a consistent course format; 2) Identify scope/sequence in syllabus; 3) Provide multiple avenues for learning (i.e., narrated PowerPoint presentations and forums); 4) Design authentic, meaningful, yet flexible assignments that apply concepts; 5) Expect students to reflect/communicate with each other on the forums over broad concepts; 6) Provide meaningful scenario-based quizzes at the conceptual level; 7) Provide and maintain instructional technology support; 8) Provide meaningful, specific comments on assignments and in forums; 9) Encourage truthful course evaluations without fear of retaliation; and 10) Listen and respond quickly to student emails and questions.

Number one: Providing full access online the first day within a consistent course format responds to the self-directed student's needs. The adult learner is internally motivated and will typically want to know due dates in order to complete some course components on time and others they will do ahead of time. If the entire course is opened, this allows the student to also see the course globally instead of a piece at a time, facilitating understanding and efficient time management. Consistency in the course design lays out a format that helps the student find components in similar locations in each unit, increasing the student's efficiency once more. Since graduate students have multiple roles they generally fulfill, they appreciate consistency that allows them to work more efficiently and effectively.

Number two: Identify the scope and sequence in the syllabus to respond to the student's orientation to learning. Typically, accreditation requires the scope and sequence of a course in the syllabus, but this also addresses the adult learner's readiness to learn and need to use time effectively in order to participate in an online course. Seeing the entire scope and sequence allows the adult learner to see the course as a whole and the importance of the units as they build upon each other in accomplishing course objectives, possibly facilitating the internally motivated student to work ahead.

Number three: Providing multiple avenues for learning by providing a variety of ways for students to participate in the class addresses the adult learner's orientation to learning, specifically the desire for respect because doing this demonstrates to the learner that the professor understands there are

multiple learning styles and all students have something of value to offer if given an acceptable way to do so. Graduate students come from multiple generations from new-to-teaching to veterans-of-teaching. This means they have various individual needs as learners and may understand things in different modes. Offering a variety of ways for students to participate online, addresses those specific individual needs.

Number four: Designing authentic, meaningful, yet flexible assignments that apply concepts encourages students to participate in a course. By flexible, I mean when you can, give choices. In this course, there are times when I wrote two major questions for a unit of study and asked students to choose one. This gives them control over how they choose to participate and provides variety in grading because not all the papers will be the same for the grader. Additionally, teaching at the concept level facilitates long term memory retention. This means creating assignments that are purposeful, not just busy work, something adult learners do not like.

Number five: Expecting students to reflect and communicate with each other on the forums over broad concepts validates their individual life and learning experiences and when I participate in that communication process, it is an opportunity to model my expectations. Writing a broadly stated forum topic or topics encourages responses from more students. Posing one question to be addressed to the professor becomes repetitive quickly and is more time intensive for the professor as well as being less meaningful in the learning environment. There are only a finite number of ways to respond to this type of forum. By providing multiple topics (more choices), the adult learners will be able to draw on their own life and learning experiences in response and this will lead to a feeling of respect for them individually and professionally.

Number six: Providing meaningful scenario-based quizzes at the conceptual level is the most time intensive part of the course redesign. Therefore the best way to approach this task is to limit the number of questions written the first semester and add more to the test bank in consecutive semesters. This kind of question encourages more thoughtful reflection over course concepts and because of being a scenario, is more relevant if the scenarios reflect student experiences. I also allow students to take the quizzes twice with the highest score going into the grade book. I have found this to be a favorite of students based on comments on the course evaluations.

Number seven: Providing and maintaining instructional technology support is a role of our Instructional Technology department at the university, in addition to addressing the professor's role of support. Adult students sometimes just need a moment to verify or to fix a situation. Something as simple as a reset of a quiz, to allow the students to retake it because of loss of electricity, can ease worry or concern for the adult learner. I have even had students call me from the hospital afraid, due to a heart attack or early child birth, when an assignment would be turned in late. I always offer alternatives so there is no need to worry and I am amazed at their dedication to the work when they contact me in these serious situations.

Number eight: Providing meaningful, specific comments on assignments and in forums whether by the graduate assistant or professor motivates students to work for the right method of response on the next assignment. Adult students feel respected when specific feedback is provided that enhances the learning process.

Number nine: Encouraging truthful course evaluations without fear of retaliation is a process unto itself. Mutual respect when interacting with students, even in difficult situations builds trust and a more honest evaluation which has the potential for an even better course if the suggestions have merit. For example; one student wanted the forums to remain open for review after the set deadline. I asked the student how this was beneficial because I had never before had this request. The student explained that she wanted to read all the responses because there were so many and if the forum shut, she would not be able to do this. I did not know how to do this, so I contacted our IT department and got their assistance with doing this and received a positive comment on the end-of-course evaluations about my response to the student. This demonstrated a readiness to learn on the part of the student and an appreciation for my respect for that idea.

Lastly, number ten: Listening and responding quickly to student emails and questions encourages students to complete coursework at the expected graduate level of quality. Students appreciate being treated courteously. This facilitates their ability to complete work successfully and validates their life experiences. Life can throw difficulties in their paths as they earn a graduate degree and listening to students from a foundation of trust and respect creates a more conducive-to-success learning environment.

These ten recommendations are as a result of my study of Adult Learning Theory in relation to course design. That understanding impacted the course evaluation return and more importantly, seemed to improve the online learning environment for the graduate students.

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