Chapter 4
Ragan's Principles Revisited:
Evolving Application

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ABSTRACT

Adult learners, once considered a non-traditional population in higher education, have established a firm normalcy. The research of Knowles proposes that adult learners are motivated by learning experiences that are directly applicable to their lives, tend to be self-directed, and want to feel that they have a definite sense of purpose in a learning experience. These foundational elements of adult learning are well-documented and understood by successful adult learning practitioners. The selected elements of Ragan's framework were interpreted through the researcher's own lens and practice in online learning. As such, there was license taken in the application to the courses taught by the author.

BACKGROUND

Adult learners, once considered a non-traditional population in higher education have established a firm normalcy. The research of Knowles (1980) proposes that adult learners are motivated by learning experiences that are directly applicable to their lives, tend to be self-directed, and want to feel that they have a definite sense of purpose in a learning experience. These foundational elements of adult learning are well-documented and understood by successful adult learning practitioners.

Andragogy, as conceptualized by Malcolm Knowles and further developed by Ragan and others, is a theory of adult learning that emphasizes self-directedness, active participation, and practical application of knowledge. Ragan's principles within the context of andragogy recognize the unique characteristics of adult learners and their motivations for acquiring new skills and knowledge. The principles include creating a learning environment that respects the learners' experiences, providing opportunities for active engagement, and allowing for self-directed exploration. Additionally, Ragan's approach encourages the integration of real-world applications into the learning process, fostering a connection between theory and practical relevance. By acknowledging the autonomy and life experiences of adult learners, Ragan's principles align with the core tenets of andragogy, empowering individuals to take ownership of their learning journey and apply newfound knowledge in meaningful ways.

What is lesser known is how adult learners thrive in an online learning environment. As online learning expanded in higher education, much of the research emphasis focused on the undergraduate experience, as well as the experience of students who are typically not considered adult learners (students ranging in age from 18-22). Early research into the experiences of adult learners in online environment found less than promising results. Adult students tended to be less academically successful in online learning, were retained at a lower rate than their non-adult peers and found online learning to be a less attractive learning option.

As online learning has proliferated, so has its success among adult students. According the 2015 *Noel-Levitz Adult Learner Marketing and Recruitment Practices Benchmarking Report*, the online format is one of the most popular formats for adult learners, ranking third in preference for students at private institutions. Among private institutions with adult programs, online or blended formats are in place at over 60% percent of those institutions. Further, the 2015 Babson Survey of Online Learning reports a 3.9% increase in the number of distance education students, a slight increase over the 3.7% increase in 2014. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET) reflects that 28% of all college students now take at least one distance education course, and that 14% of all higher education students took all of

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