Chapter 45
Advancing Active Learning with Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

A yearlong journey resulted in a professor developing and implementing a course using a new emergent theory of adult learning that builds upon the concept of andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn. This model is referred to as ACES: Accessing student content knowledge, Creating student-centered goals, Engaging students in real-life learning experiences, and Soliciting feedback using non-traditional methods. This case study is about the development and implementation of this process and its success. The study demonstrates how adult learners prefer to be active participants in the learning process.

INTRODUCTION

Adult learners are both a challenge and an opportunity for faculty in higher education. The challenge is for faculty to teach both traditional and non-traditional students and the opportunity is for them to cultivate new instructional practices that will enhance the learning of all adult learners. King's (1993) research suggests that active learning strategies enhance critical thinking and the application of knowledge creating more meaningful learning. More recently, Carini, Kuh, and

Klein (2006) echo this sentiment. Barr and Tagg (1995) building on King's research, encourage universities to make a paradigm shift from being instruction-centered learning-centered. Sivan, Leung, Woon, and Kember (2000) contend that an active, student-centered approach to teaching promotes deeper levels of understanding to produce higher quality learning experiences. O'Sullivan and Cooper, 2003 indicate that active learning promotes increased student achievement and Berry (2008) asserts that active learning improves retention of concepts. Increased student achieve-

ment and retention of concepts are of interest not only to those inside the university but to external stakeholders as well. These benchmarks will help the graduate to be more prepared for the workforce.

In the midst of recovery from an economic recession, financial resources in higher education continue to decline. At the same time, the general public is demanding that higher education be more accountable for student learning and better prepared graduates for the workforce. Regular articles in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Selingo, 2012), the New York Times (Fish, 2012) and the Washington Post (Anderson, 2012) echo the call for more accountability in higher education. In addition, state and federal agencies and accreditation organizations continue to require higher education to clearly *demonstrate* students' success in meeting educational standards. Faculty are rethinking how they deliver content to students (Wright, 2011). This chapter presents a model that improves adult learning.

Adult learners present faculty with an opportunity to change the way course content is delivered to students. Although faculty regularly voice their opposition to the "sage on the stage" approach to teaching, this approach is still rampant on campuses (Pharr, Arnold, Prince, Davis, Brown, McFadden, & Maahs-Fladung, 2012). The "sage on the stage" is alive and well and continues to be the most preferred teaching method as documented by student opinion surveys (Carlson, 2005).

Although it would have been easier for the professor and the students to maintain the status quo, this professor embarked on a yearlong journey to change the way she delivered content to her students. If this approach was successful (students were satisfied and student-determined outcomes were met), then she would continue to implement strategies such as these in future courses. The first step in the process involved identifying the educational needs of adult learners and specific learning strategies such as experimental learning which would meet these needs. This process was done by conducting the literature review. The second step involved recruiting students to help her plan the course content and delivery methods. The third step was the actual implementation of the plan, delivering the course itself. The fourth step required the students and the professor to evaluate the course and submit a proposal to an appropriate conference. The fifth and final step involved collaboratively writing about this process and submitting it to an appropriate venue for publishing. What an exciting journey she embarked on with her students!

BACKGROUND

When considering adult learners, one must first understand the concepts of andragogy and pedagogy as they provide a context through which adult learning is explained. Andragogy is defined as the "art and science of helping adults learn, while pedagogy is the art and science of teaching or instruction" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Popularized by Malcolm Knowles, andragogy is generally considered the most well-known model utilized to describe adult learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Knowles established four assumptions (a fifth was later added) which ultimately led to the development of customized learning programs for adults. His assumptions were that:

1. As an adult learner matures, his or her self-concept evolves from a dependent personality to a more self-directed individual.
2. As an adult learner matures, he or she acquires experiences from which future learning is shaped.
3. As an adult learner matures, his or her readiness to learn becomes correlated to the developmental tasks of one's social roles.
4. As an adult learner matures, his or her time perspective changes from future to immediate use of knowledge and there is a shift from a subject to a problem orientation.
5. As an adult learner matures, the motivation to learn becomes more internal.

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