

BASIC ANDRAGOGY-ORIENTED STRATEGIES AND COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE EDUCATION

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Abstract: *With the rapid onset of an unprecedented lifestyle due to the new coronavirus COVID-19 the world academic scene was forced to reform and adapt to the novel circumstances. Although online education cannot be regarded as a groundbreaking endeavour anymore in the 21st century, its current character of exclusivity calls for deeper understanding of, and a sharper focus on the “end-consumer” thereof as well as more cautious procedures to be exercised while teaching. While millennials are no longer thought of as being born with a silver spoon in their mouth but with an iPad or any sort of device in their hand (irrespective of their social status), adults are more hesitant when coerced to alter course unexpectedly and turn to new methods of attaining their learning goals. This is why proper communicative approaches need to be thoroughly considered by online instructors. This article aims at presenting teachers with a set of strategies to employ when the beneficiaries of online academic education are adult learners.*

Keywords: andragogy, online education, distance learning, communication, adult learners

1. Introduction

With the rapid onset of an unprecedented lifestyle due to the new coronavirus COVID-19 the world academic scene was forced to reform and adapt to the novel circumstances. Although online education cannot be regarded as a groundbreaking endeavour anymore in the 21st century, its current character of exclusivity calls for deeper understanding of, and a sharper focus on the “end-consumer” thereof as well as more cautious procedures to be exercised while teaching. While millennials are no longer thought of as being born with a silver spoon in their mouth but with an iPad or any sort of device in their hand (irrespective of their social status), adults are more hesitant when coerced to alter course unexpectedly and turn to new methods of attaining their learning goals.

This is why proper communicative approaches need to be methodically considered by online instructors. This article aims at presenting teachers with a set of strategies to employ when the beneficiaries of online academic education are adult learners.

The vast majority of adult learners have learned in a passive traditional face-to-face classroom and most of the teachers have provided instruction in said classrooms. Both adult students and their teachers must now adapt to this new medium of instruction and cope with the challenges that come along. Moreover, teachers, in their capacity as instruction providers and designers alike, need to have a thorough understanding of adult learning theory especially with respect to online and distance learning. Moore and Kearsley [1]

show that “the more one understands the nature of adult learning, the better one can understand the nature of distance learning”.

Martin [2] states that there is very little difference in a student’s ability to learn course material from online methods versus face-to-face methods. According to her, a study conducted by Charlotte Neuhauser for Madonna University, School of Business evaluated two courses (one rendered face-to-face and one taught online) with the same content and revealed that “there is no significant difference in the major metrics—test scores, assignments, participation grades and, final grades. With the right resources and a good plan a very strong effective course can be developed and implemented.”

Around the globe, there is no unanimous classification of age groups in adult education and, according to the educational context, student ages vary between 25 and 64 or even further. However, within the scope of this paper, the term “adult” refers to learners who have graduated the compulsory learning cycle and are currently attending an elective tertiary education program and are aged 20 and over.

2. Pedagogy vs. Andragogy

Common pedagogy teaching practices focus on a teacher-centred and teacher-directed approach where the teacher is the decision-making actor, taking responsibility for the lesson content, organisation and the duration of the teaching and learning process for the pertaining units on the one hand and for the assessment method and moment thereof on the other hand. In this context, learners have merely an obedient role, being shown what and how to learn based on the information that the instructor, who is the supreme authority and ultimate resource, feeds them.

As adult learners are this paper’s centrepiece, it becomes inherently important to deflect from *pedagogy* (from the Greek equivalent of “child-leading”) and take a step further onto the field of *andragogy* (from the Greek

equivalent of “man-leading”). Although quite new if not entirely unknown to the vast majority of teachers, the concept of andragogy seems to have been coined as early as the 1830s by the German teacher Alexander Kapp and later on developed into a theory of adult education by the most prominent figure in US adult education in the 20th century, Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, defining it as “the art and science of helping adults learn” [3].

Consistent with the features of adult learners, Knowles [4] laid down five main assumptions:

1. *Self-concept*: As a person matures, his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being;
2. *Experience*: As a person matures, he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning;
3. *Readiness to learn*. As a person matures, his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles;
4. *Orientation to learning*. As a person matures, his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness;
5. *Motivation to learn*: As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal.

Consequently, adult education shall be rendered differently. As this educational model is learner-centred, the teacher plays here the role of the facilitator whose responsibility is to bring adults closer to their goal. As such, Knowles and Brookfield suggested a series of principles to be applied by instructors:

- the participation of the learner should be voluntary,
- create a cooperative learning climate and demonstrate respect for the students self-worth,
- collaboration to develop goals and

- objectives,
- utilize practical application to achieve goals and objectives,
- critical self-reflection of learning and the quality of what they learned, and

- nurture of the self-directed adults [5].

Table 1 below illustrates the differences between these two teaching models as compiled by Kelly [6] in a compact table:

Table 1 Assumptions of Pedagogical and Andragogical Models

<u>Assumption about:</u>	<u>Pedagogy</u>	<u>Andragogy</u>
Concept of the learner	dependent increasingly on teacher (passive)	self-directed (active)
Role of teacher	authority figure	guide and facilitator
Role of the learner's prior experiences	to be added to more than used as a resource	a rich resource for learning by self and others
Readiness to learn	uniform by age level and curriculum	develops from life tasks develops from life tasks
Orientation to learning	subject-centered	task or problem-centered to meet life needs
Motivation	by external rewards and punishments (credit)	by internal incentives and curiosity

3. Characteristics of online education and distance learning

Nowadays the concept of distance learning can rarely be regarded as apart from online education. According to Encyclopædia Britannica [7], *distance learning*, also called *distance education*, *e-learning*, and *online learning* are a „form of education in which the main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication.” [In line with the technological progress], „modern distance learning courses employ Web-based course-management systems that incorporate digital reading materials, podcasts (recorded sessions for electronic listening or viewing at the student's leisure), e-mail, threaded (linked) discussion forums, chat rooms, and test-taking functionality in virtual (computer-simulated) classrooms.”

Later on, Moore and Kearsley [8] widened their research and discriminated between *distance learning* (focused only on the learner's contribution and effort) and *distance education* (where both the

teacher's and the student's efforts are involved). E-learning (instruction delivered via delivered via the Internet, extranet or intranet), mobile learning/m-learning (if mobile devices are employed in the process), online learning, distributed learning or home learning are all terms to be found in the novel educational environment that we have been all facing during the last months due to the new coronavirus COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed by the regulations in force.

To sum up, irrespective of the term used, there are four distinct characteristics of distance education:

1. distance education is by definition an institutional, mostly academic, learning environment;
2. students and teachers are separated in terms of place and (sometimes) time;
3. interactive telecommunications connect members of a learning group with their teacher;
4. the electronic instructional resources (audio, video, graphic displays) are inherent to the content of instruction.

3.1. Behaviourism in online education

Initially, behaviourism focused exclusively on measurable and observable data and

disregarded ideas, emotions, and the consideration of inner mental experience and activity in general. In the *behavioural approach*, the organism is seen as reacting to stimuli (circumstances) from the outer environment and from inner biological processes [9]. *Constructivism*, on the other hand, asserted that learning relies on building mental models based on experience. These educational approaches led to different methods for the use of media in the classroom, with behaviourism focusing on altering student behaviour and constructivism emphasising the process- and experience-based learning [8]. There is also a mid-component of educational psychology - the *cognitive approach* [10] that validates the importance of mental processes, i.e. how a person acquires, stores, and acts on information. This approach highlights learners' interactions and their manner to perceive data, learn, memorize, and make decisions in order to solve problems and discover new ideas. Online education requires a certain type of behaviour, hence teachers need to comprehend the above-mentioned theories and apply them appropriately to the specific online behaviour and cognition of adults and to the general content and restrictions imposed by the online environment.

3.2. Online education methods

In the online academic environment there are actually countless methods to deliver material content to students nowadays. Dependent on the subject matter, the number of students and the resources involved, universities in Romania will use at least one method. On the one hand, there are pre-programmed software packages such as WebCT/Blackboard or open source solutions such as Moodle or Zoom. "Open source means that the code that created the application can be altered to fit any need. [...] The delivery method is often beyond the control of the course designer and all of them have limitations" [11]. Webinars are held via Cisco's WebEx or Skype, but these tools do not allow for more than 100

participants at a time.

4. Communication in online adult education

As stated above, in the andrological model of education, the teacher assumes the role of facilitator and as such they need to facilitate communication both between the student and the instructor and between students during the learning process. This does not necessarily imply that all students must make use of all methods of communication but rather that they are supposed to be able to use more than one. The more methods of communication available to students the more collaboration possible and students perceive the teacher's appreciation of their efforts in the online class. In online education we have *synchronous* and *asynchronous communication* and they are valued by teachers in accordance with the instruction content and context:

Chat fields used during online sessions on a Moodle-based platform for example are a type of *synchronous communication* where instructors and their students are online at the same time conveying and receiving information in a real-time conversational mode. The chat activity module enables participants to have text-based, real-time synchronous discussions. This may be a one-time activity or it may be repeated at the same time each day or each week. Chat sessions are saved and can be made available for everyone to view or restricted to users with the capability to view chat session logs.

Chats are especially useful when the group chatting is not able to meet face-to-face, such as:

- Regular meetings of students participating in online courses to enable them to share experiences with others in the same course but in a different location;
- A student temporarily unable to attend in person chatting with their teacher to catch up with class work;

- A question and answer session with an invited speaker in a different location;
- Sessions to help students prepare for tests where the teacher, or other students, would pose sample questions.

The classical form of asynchronous communication is the e-mail, which is indeed much preferred by adults, but is regarded as an obsolete method in the 21st century. In online education, forum activity modules are preferred: they allow participants to have asynchronous discussions i.e. over an extended period of time. On a Moodle-based platform there are several forum types to choose from, such as a standard forum where anyone can start a new discussion at any time or a question and answer forum where students must first post before being able to view other students' posts. A teacher can allow files to be attached to forum posts. Attached images are displayed in the forum post. Forums have many uses:

- For course announcements (using a news forum with forced subscription)
- For discussing course content or reading materials
- For continuing online an issue raised previously in a face-to-face session
- A help centre where tutors and students can give and receive advice
- A one-on-one support area for private student-teacher communications (using a forum with separate groups and with one student per group)
- For extension activities, for example "brain teasers" for students to ponder and suggest solutions to [12].

Equally important for adult learners in the online environment are the assignment activity modules by means of which teachers can communicate tasks, collect homework and provide grades and feedback.

In terms of feedback, adults will always appreciate if they are allowed to provide feedback in turn and they are very motivated knowing that their opinion contributes to the whole course.

5. Strategies to adopt in adult academic education

Based on Knowles' five assumptions of andragogy, the following strategies are suggested in order to make adult learners more comfortable in the online classroom and to benefit their educational process.

1. *Self-concept* may be addressed by providing adult learners with learning experiences that keep the teaching to a minimum and promotes the student's autonomy. If adults are assigned a task to explore a topic on their own they will be unmistakably effective and they will expand their knowledge in the area, precisely aware of what information to extract with minimum intervention from the teacher.

2. *Adult learner experience* will be put to use by applying teaching models that may appeal to a wide range of experience levels and backgrounds. Instructors should survey their class beforehand to find any technical knowledge limitations they may have, as well as to assess their education background. It is very beneficial to find common ground among learners, because when similar life experience levels are a good incentive for positive debate and information sharing and usually help to establish a learning group of people who can easily interact.

3. The *readiness to learn* of adult students may be exploited when they are provided e-learning deliverables on their mobile devices. In the 21st century people are almost always on-the-go, so they will appreciate the opportunity to access materials anywhere anytime.

4. The *orientation to learning* may be tackled by pointing out how the subject matter is going to contribute to solving the immediate problems that adult learners face in their everyday life or in their career while also improving their skills and facilitating their work. By accommodating student individual interests and goals in the course design, teachers will manage to empower learners to work toward their goals and

infuse them with self-confidence as well.

5. The *motivation to learn* is one of the key concepts in adult education as it is a personal choice to attend school in order to grow professionally and according to Pappas [13], it's crucial to tap into a learner's intrinsic impetus with the right thought-provoking material that will question conventional wisdom and stimulate his mind."

Beside Knowles' assumptions of adult learning, of course there are other possible methods to stimulate adult learners in their confrontation with online education.

- Humour and a relaxed manner are among the best pain-killers in the hostile-looking encounter with e-learning. Adults will react well to a teacher who is or always tries to look relaxed and in a good mood and will gain a sentiment of reassurance in an otherwise challenging environment;
- Based on the saying that "practice makes perfect", a great deal of practice exercises in an online learning course will ensure that adults get to retain and master the subject matter. In this context, repetition is critical, so it helps them to repeat certain steps and be reminded of the main points for the whole duration of

the online course;

- The use of graphic elements and inspiring designs draw the adult learner's attention to the core aspects of the learning activity and the visual information is more easily assimilated;
- In their need to assume responsibility for their actions, it is of the essence for adults to also be in charge as much as possible of their learning outcomes. Consequently, self-assessment and a peer-relationship with the teacher strictly in this context, multiple options and subtle support may prove to be worthwhile.

6. Conclusions

This article has emphasised characteristics of 21st-century online education in the context of andragogy and has offered suggestions of communication and strategies to address adult learners' idiosyncrasies in order to improve the online learning process and to create a comfortable and profit-yielding academic environment. The scope of this field of education is vast and shall be subsequently investigated more profoundly in further research activities and papers.

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