Constructivist and the Adult Learner in the Higher Education Online Classroom

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Online education is a growing sector and offers a valuable way for people access to education. More and more adults are going back to school for various reasons; for instance, to better themselves or get further in their field. Facilitators need to be equipped to teach the adult student and ensure that the student experience is productive and beneficial. In related research, it was found that adults learn differently than children and younger post-secondary students. Therefore, facilitators teaching adults cannot use a “one size fits all” approach, and hope for a thriving course. Facilitators are better able to guarantee their classes are taught effectively by considering the learner and educational models to ensure that the adult learner is engaged within the online course.

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In the 1990’s if you were attending a college or university and you were learning online you might not have been too honest about it. At the start, online education was sketchy at best. You may not have been sure if you were receiving a quality education and if the information was actually being taught by a professional. Most adult learners were concerned if employers would take their credentials gained through such programs seriously. Fast-forward to today and it is mind-boggling what you can learn online. Ivy League schools to small community colleges offer a selection of their courses online. You are even able to take classes at smaller institution’s that offer professional development or “personal enhancement” classes like project management or even magic or learning yoga. The fastest growing sector of online education is for the adult learner. In this paper I am going to discuss online learning; I will answer some questions; Who is the adult learner and what does constructivism have to do with how we learn? I will also discuss the best ways to teach an adult online. Adults always bring their own unique take on a subject; many are able to relate their own experiences to their learning and share it with others.

Constructivism and The Adult Learner

Constructivism can be defined many ways; Peshal Khanal says it is an umbrella term for many different theories. The biggest of these theories is that the meaningful learning occurs as a result of the students’ active engagement in a shared learning environment (Khanal, 2013) For example, when the learner uses and adjusts their prior knowledge to understand key concepts that they are being taught, constructivist learning can be said to be taking place. Some other key people in the field have made their observations on the concept as well.

John Dewey precluded the idea that schools should focus on repetition and memorization. Dewey felt that learners should engage in their learning through real world experiences that
would enable them to learn through creativeness and collaboration with other students. (Dewey, 1916) He felt that education should help improve the reasoning process. Dewey is quoted as saying, “We do not learn from experience . . . we learn from reflecting on experience.” Dewey considered the instructor as guide rather than a leader since the learning allowed for creative interaction with the instructor rather than outcome-based teaching. (Huang, 2002)

Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978) believed that there is a correlation between the social context of learning and teaching. His learning theory, widely regarded as constructivist in nature, poses that the social background of the subject would have an impact on what is being learned. The classroom must be infused with technology to enable learning. Social constructivism focuses on the ideas and concepts that are created through the social interaction with a group. Vygotsky believed that there are social implications of the levels of knowing. Vygotsky also speaks of the concept of proximal development. According to Vygotsky, the zone proximal development (ZPD) is defined as the idea that what we learn as children has a direct bearing on how much help and assistance we get in the learning. Vygotsky defines ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978). Scaffolding is closely related to ZPD as it relates to the support that the users receive as they are engaged with a task. As students we are engaged and being able to relate the learning to something tangible will aid in the retention of the information. As the learner understand the process, the learner is then able to work independently. ZPD and scaffolding are important in learning communities and the interaction with other students. A beginner within a learning group might need to reach out to another group member for help and
as that beginner learns and understands the information they move up the ZPD scale until they are not considered a beginner any longer. (1978)

Because constructivist theory suggests that we all learn differently, it requires instructors and facilitators to change their type of teaching to benefit the learner. Are mandatory online discussions necessary for the student to receive the proper knowledge and understanding of the material? If the student is required to participate in online discussions is the learner learning anything or are they just following status quo along with the other students? Do online discussions create an open environment and are the facilitators asking the right questions? Learner participation in online discussions, other collaborative online activities, online assessments and online interactive course materials, are ways of promoting constructivism in online pedagogy (Gulati, 2008) the technology might enable the participation but a good online discussion is solely dependant upon the other participants and the structure of the discussion. Some students may feel like they are not part of the group or may be afraid to voice their opinions in fear of being told they are wrong. (2008) The facilitator will be monitoring the discussions continually to ensure that all participants are contributing, but to what degree? It is a battle that all facilitators will face as they attempt to ensure they are taking a constructivist approach to online discussions. There is really no right answer to this question, and to similar ones raised by constructivism, and the information they will take away from the forums is up to them, the facilitator is just there as a guide to help the discussion along.

Adults have specific learning characteristics that must be considered beyond what has just been outlined regarding constructivism. Khanal (2013) highlights five types of learning strategies that have a history in constructivism and can be applied to the online learning environment for adults:
• **Interactive Learning:** This includes learning that uses experiences, such as: Debates, web conferences, learning by doing, online seminars and other collaborative tools. When the learner is interacting with the other learners and the facilitator the sense of community can be built.

• **Experiential Learning:** This type of learning is composed of three different items: (1) knowledge of concepts, facts, information and experience (2) prior knowledge that is applied to current and ongoing events in the learners life (3) reflection and analysis of what is being learned. (Cercone, 2008) Reflecting on the learning is specifically important with the adult learner. When the adult learner is able to look back on and apply what has been learned, the information is easier to retain. The learner may not always realize what has been learned until they are able to reflect

• **Self-Directed Learning:** This type of learning is focused on the fact that as adult learners we are responsible for what we learn and how engaged we are. Self-directed learners are independent and take initiative with their learning. (Khanal, 2013) Facilitators are only required to ensure that the learner has many tools at their disposal to help with the learning process.

• **Collaborative Learning:** This type of learning is based on the notion that adults learn better in groups and when they are able to collaborate with others. Vygotsky and Knowles both believe that this only works when the student and the group are working towards the same common goal.
• **Authentic Learning:** This is defined as learning by doing. This includes:
  Simulation based learning, student-created media, inquiry-base learning and peer-based evaluation.

Malcolm Knowles a famous American educator identified six principles to adult learning; he coined an adult education theory called andragogy (Kearsley, 2010). According to Knowles, andragogy is defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn”. He believed that all adult students are interested in life long learner and should be taught differently than their younger counterparts.

  Malcolm Knowles’ Six Principles to Adult Learning

  o **Adults are autonomous, highly motivated and self-directed:** Adults learners might feel threatened if they feel ideas are being pushed onto them. They like to be self-directed and take charge of their own learning.

  o **Adults bring life experiences and knowledge to all new learning experiences:** They like to use their experience and knowledge from their own life and apply it to anything new they might be learning. They are excellent at being able to relate their learning to real world concepts.

  o **Adults are goal oriented:** Adults learn best when they are presented with meaningful learning experiences that are linked to their personal goals.

  o **Adults are relevancy oriented:** Adults like to know how they can apply what they are learning and know why they are learning it. They need to see value in the knowledge.

  o **Adults are practical:** Adult learners like to have practical experiences that they can apply their knowledge to.
- Adult learners like to be respected: Adult learners like to feel that someone
takes interest in them and the acknowledgement of their world experiences.

Stephen Brookfield (Allen, 2005) takes adult learning a step further. Brookfield believes
that adult education is much more than taking a class; it is engaging in the community that you
belong to which surrounds you in the learning process. He is a strong believer that facilitators
always need to be working with others to build community groups, work with other companies
and corporations, anything to help improve adult education. Facilitators are working to help
engage learners in all things by being a trainer or leader in adult education.

As adults we all strive to learn and our learning styles can negatively and/or positively
affect our emotions associated with learning. Adult learners use their experiences to create a
positive learning experience for themselves. Emotions can guide them as they learn and apply
new concepts to their life. Adult learners’ social, physical and emotional conditions are always
changing (Shuck et al 2013) learning to build strategies to study and teach must be considered in
order to create an effective classroom for learning. Emotion is an important part of understanding
the adult learner. If they are anxious, scared or uncomfortable in a learning situation they will not
understand the information they are being taught and in turn will not learn. (Shuck et al 2013)
Not all emotions related to online learning are negative, some may enhance the way the adult
learner learns and relates experiences. When an adult learner feels anxiety or fear, they are able
to better analyze what is causing them to be fearful and work through the situation. Unlike
feelings of ignorance and anger will simply prohibit the learning. The adult learner must be open
to learn. The facilitator must always strive to create a positive and safe emotional learning
environment.
Constructivist Technique to Online Learning

When we combine adult learning and online education and apply constructivist principles, what do we get? Confusion, if not planned properly. The question for the facilitator should always be: How can I make this learning experience engaging and beneficial to my students?

Online classes today include many contexts for learning such as video, chat rooms, and other educational based simulations, to help keep the student engaged. Synchronous learning, which is learning that is done in a face-to-face environment. In the online classroom examples of synchronous learning would be a live lecture, something that is happening face-to-face and is live. Asynchronous learning is how most online classes are taught today, all the information required is posted within the online classroom and the learner is able to view the content at their leisure, and there are no time constraints. Both of these learning methodologies can benefit the adult learner in the online classroom. The learner is able to contribute either live and get their questions answered on the spot, or they are able to contribute to a discussion board and have their questions answered in a couple days. Synchronous and asynchronous discussion and/or lectures can provide collaboration and knowledge building among members. The facilitator will need to consider that the newest and best technology might not be what the student needs. Facilitators must always be looking at the requirements of their students and find the best match for their learning process.

A study focused on the application of Talk 2 Learn, a specific Learning Management System (LMS) used in the UK explored different theories on how we learn and what online tools are effective to help us discover new ideas, and what will help the learning “stick” and become habit in our everyday lives. Is the platform through which the learning takes place really as
important as the learning strategies used? In fact, the LMS is just software, which is of greater importance, the LMS or the learning theory? Some courses may be completely self-paced with little or no interaction whereas others may be highly dependent on the interaction within the course to be successful. (Allen, 2005) In the end, the LMS that the educator uses is only part of the learning puzzle, the facilitator and possible designer of the course need to consider all points to build an effective learning environment for adult learners online.

In a study conducted by Rossner-Merrill (et al. 1998) they examined two different online courses and the use of two different learning theories, they explored what did and did not work within an online learning environment. In order for the online course to be set up effectively, the structure and the organization of the course must be considered. If the facilitator is able to use all of their knowledge about all the different adult learning theories and organize them in a logical way the class has a great chance of being a success. The biggest challenge will be to inform and train the facilitator enough so that they understand the best course of action to take with their online classes. Face-to-face classes have many advantages to their online counterparts since facilitators are able to “observe” the students and know if they understand the material. The online facilitator will always be striving to ensure that more complex issues are always understood in the online environment and will require the use of many tools and strategies to ensure that their students are receiving a quality education.

Conclusion

Online education is emerging expeditiously as a feasible alternative to in-class learning. More and more adult learners will be enrolling in online classes to better themselves or learn more about a specific subject. The adult learner will want the best tools and resources at their fingertips to help aid in the learning process. Online facilitators will be on the constant hunt to
cross check every element of their courses to ensure they have considered adult learning principles to develop their course. Constructivist principles will help provide ideas for the facilitator to create a collaborative and learner-focused environment that will help with critical reflection of the learning process. (Allen, 2005) Facilitators will also need to consider creating a social environment where the adult learner feels engaged and that their contribution really matters. Brian Tracey said it best; “Those people who develop the ability to continually acquire new and better forms of knowledge that they can apply to their work and to their lives will be the movers and shakers in our society for the indefinite future.”
References


