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Adult Education 101 for Extension Educators

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Adult Education 101 for Extension Educators

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Abstract

Successful Extension educators artfully combine their content matter expertise with their ability to work with adults in an educational setting. This publication compares and contrasts four approaches to adult education: 1.) Andragogy, 2.) Adult Education Working Philosophy, 3.) Facilitating Adult Self-Directed Learning, and 4.) Integrated Perspective of Learning. The implications of these adult education practices will help Extension educators improve educational impact when working with adults.

Introduction

All Extension professionals (including 4-H youth development educators) work with adult learners on a daily basis to facilitate adult learning. Many Extension professionals are trained in content areas (e.g. animal science, horticulture, psychology, or nutrition) but lack training in adult education. To appropriately meet the needs of Extension clientele, Extension professionals should understand proven education practices for use in nonformal educational environments.

Approaches to Adult Education

Extension educators work with diverse adult learners in many different settings that provide challenges. To overcome these challenges, Extension educators can use a variety of approaches for adult learning. Four approaches to adult education will be discussed in this publication: Knowles's "Andragogy Model," Apps's "Adult Educator Working Philosophy," Brookfield's "Facilitating Adult Self-Directed Learning," and Caffarella and Merriam's "Integrated Perspective of Adult Learning."

Andragogy Model

Knowles (1980) defined andragogy as the art and science of helping adults learn. The andragogical model includes six assumptions about working with adult learners:

- the need to know why, what, and how,
- the learners' self-concept as autonomous and self-directing,
- the role of the learners experiences including resources and mental models,
- the readiness to learn from life related experience,
- an orientation to learning that is problem and learner centered, and
- learners are motivated intrinsically and extrinsically (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005).

This model is not designed as a one-size-fits-all approach to adult education but instead embraces flexibility in planning and implementing quality programs for adults (Knowles, 1984).

Adult Education Working Philosophy

Apps (1991) believes good adult educators develop a working philosophy that describes the outcomes of their work. Educators constantly improve and develop this working philosophy over time. A good philosophy of adult education should consist of personal beliefs about:

- Adults as learners
 - Why do you believe adults want to learn?
 - What do you know about your learner? (attitudes, motivations, past learning experiences)
- Educational aims
 - Do you transmit information, gather information, store information, and/or give information to learners?
 - Do you always aim to do what the adults in your program want you to do?
- Subject matter
 - How do you get subject matter out on the table and accessible to clientele?
 - How do you help learners sort out what is relevant and what is not?
- Teaching and learning
 - When I teach, I...
 - What do you believe about learning?
 - How would you describe teaching and learning?

Apps (1991) suggests keeping a journal to: (a) examine what you know and believe about each of these beliefs, (b) searching for alternative beliefs, and (c) deciding on a working set of beliefs.

Facilitating Adult Self-Directed Learning

Brookfield (1986) defines facilitators of adult learning as resources for learning rather than instructors who have all the answers. Facilitators enhance adult learning by creating student-centered environments which encourage adult learners to critically reflect on their own behaviors and consider alternative ideas and values. Some adult learners will reject the facilitator's attempt to make them more critically reflective. To reduce conflict, facilitators should recognize the individual learner and the collaborative nature of adult learning.

The following principles should help improve the relationship between facilitator and adult learners:

- learner must be motivated to learn,
- environment should allow for learner's differences in ability and style,
- new learning should build on previous learning experiences,
- reinforce learning,
- provide opportunities for practice,
- adult learners should be actively involved in the learning environment,
- learning material should be organized,
- guidance should be given in developing new responses, and
- new skills and knowledge should be meaningful (Mackie, 1981).

Brookfield (1986) believes that even though facilitators may possess requisite skills to facilitate self-directed learning in adults, they may encounter the following problems:

- faculty untrained in the self-directed learning process,
- learners at different stages of readiness,
- institutions and organizations they do not support self-directed learning, and
- educators and learners lack flexibility in planning instruction, locating resources, and evaluating learning (Brookfield, 1986).

Integrated Perspective of Learning

Caffarella and Merriam (2000) promote an adult education approach that integrates attention to individual learning styles and context. The contextual approach to learning focuses on interactive-learning between the individual and other learners within the educational setting and social and cultural factors that affect learning such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, power, and oppression. Educators need to consider what each learner brings to the learning environment as well as what the individual learner is experiencing at a specific point in time. For example, even though an individual learner may possess skills to participate in discussion or learning activities, job loss, divorce or other situations could interfere with learning. Also, the educational setting can impact learning (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). For example, farmers prefer to learn through field days or farm demonstration versus a lecture or role play (Franz, Piercy, Donaldson, Richard, & Westbrook, 2009).

Comparing Adult Education Approaches

A table comparing these adult education approaches is located below: Andragogy Model (AM), Adult Education Working Philosophy (WP), Facilitating Adult Self-Directed Learning (SD), and Integrated Perspective of Learning (IP).

Comparing Approaches to Adult Education

Adult Education Concepts	Adult Education Approaches
Focus on the individual learner	AM, WP, SD, IP
The learners' experience affects education	AM, WP, SD, IP
Education is student-centered instead of subject-centered	AM, WP, SD, IP
Education is flexible	AM, WP, SD, IP
The learners' environment affects education	AM, WP, SD, IP
Learners should be involved in planning educational programs	AM, WP, SD, IP
Educators are facilitators of education not solely experts	AM, WP, SD
Learners prefer to be self-directed	AM, WP, SD

Similarities Between Approaches to Adult Education

The individual learner is a major component of the four adult education approaches presented in the table. Adult educators should understand that adults have different educational needs and they must be adequately addressed through adult education. Adults are more likely to engage in educational programs if their needs are addressed.

Each adult education approach addresses the learners' experiences as a key element of adult education. The learning environment can be enhanced if adult learners are allotted time to share their diverse experiences. Many adult learners learn from each other by sharing their experiences (e.g., raising livestock, managing household finances, and instructing youth). Also, the adult educator isn't the sole provider of instruction. Adult education should be student-centered instead of subject-centered. The adults' educational needs and experiences provide the framework for educational programs.

Involving learners in planning educational programs is addressed in each adult education approach. Adults are more willing to participate and recruit adult learners to participate in educational programs if they are involved in the planning process. The adult learners can provide valuable insight that adult educators may overlook (e.g., location and time for programs and instructors who can relate to the learners).

Differences Between Approaches to Adult Education

The "Andragogy Model" provides the foundation for the other approaches. Apps, Brookfield, Caffarella, and Merriam have used components of the andragogical model to shape their educational approach and advance the adult education field.

The “Working Philosophy” is focused more on the facilitators’ role in adult education compared to the other educational approaches. Apps encourage the facilitator to critically reflect on their educational beliefs which will lead to improved teaching and learning practices for adult learners.

The “Facilitating Adult Self-Directed Learning” encourages adult learners to become critically reflective. Adult learners tend to see the world through their own lenses and ignore or disagree with other learners’ perspective. Being critically reflective broadens an individual’s perspective and makes education more enjoyable.

The “Integrated Perspective of Adult Learning” differs from the other approaches in terms of the influence of context and social and cultural factors on adult education. The other approaches do not address the influence of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, power, and oppression. These cultural factors will have an effect on adult interaction and learning.

Using Adult Education Approaches to Improve Extension Education

To improve the interaction between Extension education with adults, and establishing an effective learning environment, educators should use these adult education approaches to better understand their audience, provide opportunities for adult learners to share their experiences with each other, and provide a learning environment conducive to adult learning. To be successful with adult learners, Extension educators should be able to articulate an “Adult Education Working Philosophy.” Such a philosophy should include the involvement of adult learners in planning, implementing, and evaluating education programs, and most of all, specifically planned programs that address the unique needs of adult learners. To better serve Extension clientele, agents and specialists should have an understanding of adult education approaches.

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