

The Tailored and Balanced Approach

The community college classroom is home to a large population of adult learners. How can instructors best facilitate the learning process for these students? The answer to this question can be found deep within the works of one of the founders of adult education, Malcolm Knowles.

Knowles' theory of andragogy was developed to educate adult learners differently than children. With andragogy, the instructor serves as a facilitator to adult learners, guiding them through the process of learning by focusing on each learner's unique experiences. Yet, some adult learners may lack the experience, mental capacity, or motivation to direct their own learning. Therefore, teachers of adult learners in the community college classroom should use a balanced approach to andragogy, tailoring the learning process to meet each student's individual needs.

Knowles' First Element

Knowles' approach involves seven elements that facilitate the learning process. The first element centers around the instructor establishing the right classroom climate. A welcoming physical environment, a sense of mutual respect and trust, an emphasis on collaboration and support, and an impression of openness and authenticity help create this climate. Instructors must establish the correct tone at the beginning of the term in order to build rapport with students and establish credibility. Ice breakers, brain breaks, and making conversation before class begins are ways to establish this classroom climate.

Knowles' Second and Third Elements

Knowles' second and third elements emphasize the need to make accommodations for adult learners. This can be done by involving students in the course planning process and allowing them to diagnose their own learning needs and knowledge gaps. Difficulty arises when students who lack experience with these assignments struggle to identify their needs. Consider a humanities class where one of the learning objectives is the study of cultural diversity. The adult learner is a 23-year-old white male who grew up in a small town with a 99 percent white population. His limited knowledge of cultural diversity is based on things he's heard from the news, his parents, and social media. His knowledge gaps may seem too vast to articulate. In this case, the instructor should work collaboratively with the student to identify needs and knowledge gaps until he is ready to become more self-directed.

Knowles' Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Elements

Knowles' fourth, fifth, and sixth elements involve the teacher and student mutually establishing learning objectives and plans in the form of a contract. Using the aforementioned scenario, the instructor would provide more prescriptive learning objectives while the student is still learning the basics of cultural diversity. The instructor will likely have personal opinions concerning cultural diversity, and might be inclined to promote them when establishing the learning objectives rather than allowing the adult learner to formulate his own position. Providing a diverse collection of scholarly literature that covers the spectrum of positions on a topic is one way to allow free thinking without the intervention of bias.

The seventh element involves the learner evaluating his own learning. This is an important check-in that allows students to see their growth, renew their confidence, and reflect on their journey through self-directed learning. Evaluation can be administered through online surveys or on paper, and can be collected for a grade or remain private to the student, depending on the instructor's objectives.

Conclusion

When instructors use a tailored and balanced approach to facilitate adult education, they meet each individual student's learning needs while balancing the institution's curriculum and course objectives. Adult learners are empowered by a classroom informed by Knowles' theories, which allows them to direct their own learning or allows the teacher to assist them in building learning goals. These students broaden their knowledge base and critical-thinking skills, leading to productive service in industry, education, government, or wherever their passions lie.

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