

Adult Learning Theory

By Gabriel Rise It goes without saying that nowadays we are all confronted with an environment of continuous change and speedy shifts. Technology has altered the very nature of business and this had greatly influenced the employment market. Jobs requiring expertise and technical skills are growing in nearly every sector of the economy. The continuous change in what employees need to know and be able to handle suggests that learning, training and education will occur over the length of a career and, in fact, a lifetime. In light of this, adults have had to become life-long learners by consistently challenging themselves to pursue learning opportunities. Thus, a large and growing segment of the education industry more so for the post graduate courses are made of "non-traditional" students. These are working adults who are interested in enhancing their job skills, retooling for new positions and careers, and pursuing other customized learning experiences. With the changing trend in the employment market, higher learning institutions are experiencing increased demand for a larger variety of rapid paced educational resource options for the adult learning community. However, one of the greatest challenges faced by higher learning institutions is identifying instructional or delivery methods that enhance adult learning process. Thus the objective of any higher learning institutions should be to provide and establish learning objectives which are attainable by students and to use the appropriate instructional method in order that these objectives be met. This paper will explore the opportunities available for working adults to further their studies and also identify the instructional methods in delivering lessons. Education helps in the development of the human mind, and it increases the powers of observations, analysis, integration, understanding, decision making, and adjustment to new situations. In other words, education is concerned with increasing one's knowledge and understanding the total environment. Among the major research areas of learning are the self-directed learning, critical reflection, experiential learning and learning to learn. The first, self-directed learning is one that uses past experience as a resource base for learning, fitting new knowledge into current work and personal life situations. This brings with it real-life problem- solving and time-management advantages for the time-conscious student. The second, known as critical reflection, Brookfield observes it as the psychological development of an adult. This would relate to a host of constructs such as embedded logic, dialectical thinking, working intelligence, reflective judgment, post-formal reasoning and epistemic cognition which explain how adults come to think contextually and critically. As for experiential learning introduced by Liademan, the emphasis is on the experience of the working adult. Adult education is therefore a continuing process of evaluating experience, which is central to the concept of andragogy that has evolved to describe adult education. The fourth; learning to learn, is about the ability of adults seen in a range of different situations and through a range of different styles. Both the concepts of epistemic cognition and reflective judgment were introduced in this process of learning to learn. The pedagogical model of instruction is the foremost instructional method used in delivering lessons. This mode of teaching is also known as the traditional or teacher-directed approach. Knowles, mentions that pedagogy is derived from the Greek word "paid" meaning child plus "agogos" meaning leading. Thus, pedagogy has been defined as the art and science of teaching children. The traditional teaching in this context is teacher centered instruction in which teachers do most of the talking and instructing while students do a lot of passive listening and memorizing. This type of teaching is best characterized by the phrase; the teacher is the sage on the stage. Teachers define terms, give directions, explain problems, answer questions, and otherwise present information to students. In contrast, non-traditional teaching is student centered instruction in which teachers have a very different role, one best characterized by the phrase; the teacher is the guide on the side. Knowles, carried out extensive research into adult education and highlighted the problems of inappropriate learning for mature age students. He revived the use of the term "andragogy" and defined it as the "art and science of helping adult learn". The emphasis in andragogy is that the teacher takes the role of facilitator rather than teacher, and allows student to realize his or her own potential. In such an environment, students do lots of investigating, exploring, solving, discussing and explaining to their peers and teacher. As a result of researches by Brookfield and Knowles, adult learning is now strongly identified with personal growth and social change. This point is particularly relevant for adult students who return to tertiary education at postgraduate level to prepare themselves for senior positions within their professional communities. However the andragogy model asserts that five issues be considered and addressed in formal learning. They include: (1) letting learners know why something is important to learn, (2) showing learners how to direct themselves through information, and (3) relating the topic to the learners' experiences. In addition, (4) people will not learn until they are ready and motivated to learn. Often this (5) requires helping them overcome inhibitions, behaviors, and beliefs about learning. Adult Learning Pursuits The traditional educational model was well suited to the industrial age society where individuals had rigidly defined roles in which carrying out certain actions under certain circumstances would generally yield the desired results. However, the information age has replaced the relative predictability of the industrial age with an increase of uncertainty that will require greater levels of flexibility and adaptability in order to survive and thrive. Education would need to change from being a process of conditioning to one of empowerment. Learning would need to change from being a homogenous commodity to a customized experience tailored to the needs and characteristics of the individual. In this aspect, the executive MBA (EMBA) which is also known as the non-traditional MBA would appeal to the working adults who wish to continue their studies. The EMBA programs are delivered via the non-traditional educational model, which is related to the andragogy learning concepts. These programs are also designed specifically for the middle or upper level managers with some working experience. However, this perception no longer holds true as more working adults from different executive levels are enrolling for these MBA programs. The wide acceptance for this is because of its customer-suited packaged which offers greater flexibility to better serve the needs of students, particularly the working adults. Non-traditional Format Prospects The education industry has been profoundly affected by the emergence of communication and information technologies which provide

opportunities for learning programs to deliver in ways that better serve the needs of students, particularly working adults and non-traditional students. Conventional service patterns are becoming obsolete as a growing number of education providers use interactive video, Internet and other distance-learning technologies to reach students. However, a point to note is that technology does not determine learning outcomes as it is merely a tool used to support new ways of delivery; non-traditional systems. It is therefore clearly seen that the traditional lecture format used in higher learning institutions has greatly changed with the integration of technology. In light of modern research and technology, the traditional format use is limited. The educational literatures do suggest a number of new educational delivery systems that could be used to improve teaching methods both in terms of learning outcomes and the efficiency with which these outcomes are achieved. With the integration of new educational delivery, the teaching format is transformed to meet the new competitive trends that are found to be more prevalent in post-graduate courses. With this brief explanation on the evolution of the education system, we will look at the advantages as well as the disadvantages faced by students (with particular attention to working adults) enrolled in courses that are offered via the non traditional format. Time and location are the main barriers that hinder working adults' from continuing their studies. Due to their commitment to work, they are usually hard-pressed for time. Many of them do not have specific available time blocks which they can reserve or allocate for their studies. They also do not want to travel long distance in order to attend classes. Here, distance learning via the online mode provides learning opportunities that free students from the constraints of time and distance while increasing their flexibility in accessing courses. At the same time, working adults prefer self-paced and self-directed learning opportunities delivered by these web-based teaching that meets their needs. On-line or web-based MBA programs also offer the potential of delivering a personalized learning experience to individual learners. People have different strengths and weaknesses and learn in different ways. In a classroom setting, the same experience is delivered to every student. In a non-traditional learning environment, a unique learning experience may be presented based upon individual characteristics and performance. These would improve their overall level of comprehension and commitment to study. The non-traditional learning environment such as e-learning, online and video conferencing is never static, but reflects the dynamism of the working adult communities. The technology used in the delivery system provides near-instantaneous access to vast quantities of information and learning materials at a low cost (Internet charges). The dialogue of the online classroom stimulates the learning environment in which students interact with each other to expand their ideas via electronic forums and communication tools such as learning group discussions, bulletin boards, Internet relay chat, E-mail, etc. The e-learning module is also a social activity and learners tap the learning network to verbalize their thoughts. The technological advantages of online classrooms promote active group learning through technology-mediated dialogues. In addition, the somewhat impersonal online medium promotes greater student reflections. According to Cordell, online learning provides; greater cognitive development, critical thinking skills to challenge assumptions, exploration to further professional practice, empowerment of professionals to heighten personal responsibilities towards creating social change, and discovery of new knowledge. The ability to meet people, to forge professional networks and personal friendships around the world is one advantage that simply cannot be found in a traditional class. Time and distance aside, distance learning students discover the valuable benefit of online learning which is supported by a world wide network that far surpass that of the somewhat limited interpersonal relationships of a traditional face-to-face classroom. Theories of learning that undergrad much of adult and tertiary education also calls for a different emphasis, one that is more learner-centered and one that depends on contextualized learning opportunities. Under the more traditional teaching-learning paradigm, such goals have not always been easily achieved. The emergence of some of the new technologies, particularly the Internet and the Worldwide Web which is actively used in the non-traditional teaching system, supports the use of these more collaborative contextualized approaches. Thus, the benefits of the use of non-traditional format in providing opportunities for working adults to continue their studies can be summarized as: instantaneous material access; convenience; improved learning retention; real world application; practicality, flexibility and learning consistency; timely information for career-active students; minimal disruption of family and work life responsibilities; elimination of time and geographical constraints and increased peer interaction. As with any medium, there are disadvantages. By its nature, distance education relies heavily on the individual students' ability to manage and control their personal and situational circumstances to be successful. In fact, excellent time management skills are mandatory in online courses as most of the students have a full time job. The structure of a traditional class is not present in an online class and sometimes distance learning students fall behind in their work because there is no requirement to 'attend class'. In distance education, the learners (especially those using online and web programs) are usually isolated despite a wide network of friends and peers through Internet interaction. The motivational factors arising from the contact or competition with other students is absent. These students also lack the immediate support of a teacher who is present to motivate, and if necessary, to give attention to actual needs and difficulties that surface during studies. Therefore, academic achievement co-relates with more positive internal beliefs, which relates to the competitiveness and motivations to learn and excel. Apart from the human factor, technology plays an important part in information and communication flow. At present, limited bandwidth (the capacity of communication links) and slow modems hamper the delivery of sound, video and graphics, although technology is advancing. Reliance on learner initiative can be a drawback for those who prefer more structure. Learner success also depends on technical skills in computer operations and Internet navigation, as well as the ability to cope with technical difficulties. Information overload is also an issue; the volume of E-mail messages to read, to reflect on and to respond to can be overwhelming while the proliferation of data bases and websites demands for information management skills. Access to the Internet is still a problem for some rural areas. Society is moving into a new era. An era of rapid change and inherent unpredictability are driven by ongoing advancement in information and communication technology. This new era will impact upon every aspect of society.

Individuals of the information age will need different kinds of skills compared to those that serve them in the industrial age. They will need to be managers of their own destiny. They will need to find relevant information from the morass of freely available data. They will need to interpret and evaluate their findings. They will need to adapt to every changing condition. And they will need to learn throughout their lives. Traditional Behaviorist approaches to education will no longer be sufficient in the information age. Education will need to adopt Constructivism principles to empower learners through an individualized and active learning experience. However, constantly improving technology can provide for exciting new ways of delivering such learning. In conclusion, for working adults who are eager to engage in the advantages and stimulation of an active adult learning environment, distance learning education programs, like the executive MBA, is highly appropriate.

About the Author

Gabriel Rise is an expert writer at [Essay writing service](#) and a writing counselling department expert at [dissertation writing service](#). The assistance of their writers is an invaluable input in your future professional growth. EssayCapital.com is dedicated to providing a [custom essay](#) writing service that is both top-quality and affordable. Article Source: http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Gabriel_Rise

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