

WHOLE PERSON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND INSIGHT LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION AND INDEPENDENT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

More distance learning programs and online courses are being developed every semester; therefore, designing an online educational environment that meets the needs of adult learners is of paramount importance. The purpose of this paper is to present a framework for using the concepts of distance education and independent learning, assessing the limitations and challenges inherent in these approaches. Particular emphasis is placed on generating whole person learning outcomes and to establishing conceptual and learning frameworks (insight learning). Considering the characteristics of adult learning theories, recommendations will be made regarding how to design an online environment that will best meet the needs of adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

The inexorable trend towards online courses, distance education and independent learning continues unchecked. This trend applies to the workforce, as well as in higher education. The need to explore distance education and adult learning theories is rising due not only to the increasing number of online programs, but also to the growing number of adult learners who are actively seeking educational alternatives more fitting to the 21st century. Adult learning trends can be traced back to three main agents: the demographics of an aging population, dynamics inherent in the global economy and changes and continuing innovations in educational technology. Modern western societies are characterized by a shift in demographics, which make them more adult oriented (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Most adult students have jobs and family responsibilities, and they therefore seek flexibility and autonomy in distance education. Most of distance education students are adults between the ages of 25 and 50; therefore, a better understanding of adult learning is fundamental to using effective practices in distance education (Moore and Kearsley,

1996).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the characteristics of adult learners and learning theories that constitute a framework for distance education. This paper attempts to develop conceptual insights of online learning for enhancing the practices in online learning environments and course design. Particular emphasis is placed on generating whole person learning outcomes (Hoover, Giambatista, Sorenson & Bommer, 2010; Hoover, Giambatista & Belkin, 2012) and to establishing conceptual and learning frameworks as insight learning (Hoover, Mitchell & Wu, 2012; Robinson, Hoover & Mitchell, 2013).

UNDERSTANDING ADULT LEARNING

Part of designing effective instruction involves understanding how adults learn best. Adult learners should not be confused with K-12 students because each has their particular characteristics, needs, and expectations. Numerous theories attempt to explain the best approaches to effectively foster learning outcomes. Before delving into that, instructors and designers need to be aware of what characterizes adult learners.

Andragogy and Characteristics of the Adult Learner

Compared to child learners, adult learners bring a set of beliefs and a wide range of accumulated life experiences in very diverse areas (Jarvis, 2004). The learning environment is no longer a conventional teacher-centered context where the instructor is the only source of knowledge. Forrest and Peterson (2006) assert that andragogy should be more of an element in the design of management education programs. This approach assumes that adults learn and change more readily through processes of leading to accepting personal responsibility in learning (Hoover et al, 2010) as opposed to pedagogical approaches more appropriate for children. Andragogy is based

on a number of concepts, several of which will be addressed in this paper. These include the capacity to make changes in self-concept, the role of experience, readiness to learn, and the achievement of a learning orientation. Adult learners are potentially more prone to take responsibility for their own learning and thus may prefer to be actively engaged in the learning process. The assumption that adult educators should use a different teaching style is based on the widely espoused theory of andragogy (Brookefield, 1990; Knowles, 1973), which Knowles (1977) defines as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998).

Unlike pedagogy that provides a teacher-centered approach, andragogy revolves around the learner. Originally, Knowles identified four andragogical assumptions which were later expanded to six in the andragogical model put forth by Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (2005). The model is part of a learning theory system and includes six assumptions about adults: (1) the need to know; (2) the learners’ self-concept; (3) the role of the learners’ experiences; (4) readiness to learn; (5) orientation to learning; and (6) motivation. When applying andragogy to learning, adult educators step back from their educating role to a facilitator role that provides the supportive environment for learning. A greater amount of flexibility is provided to self-directed learners who engage in a lifelong learning environment where they share approaches and interact with learners with different, but applicable experiences. Based on Knowles's andragogical model, the following adult learning characteristics are discussed:

1. Autonomous and self-directed: Unlike young learners who tend to rely on the instructor's decisions of planning and assessing classroom activities, adult learners and especially online learners prefer to be part of the decision making process (Knowles, 1984). They need to have a certain amount of flexibility to direct themselves, identify their learning needs and goals, and evaluate their progress (Rubenson, 2011).
2. A foundation of life experiences and knowledge: Adult learners come from different backgrounds and they draw a lot of their knowledge from their work or personal experiences. Learning has to be meaningful for them in the sense that they can make associations between what they are learning and what is interesting to them (Rubenson, 2011).
3. Goal-oriented: Adult learners usually register for classes because they are either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to attain a certain goal. At the beginning of the class or a program they would expect the learning objectives to be clearly articulated.
4. Relevancy-oriented: Most of adult learners tend to be busy due to a full-time job or family requirements. It is very important to them to see the relevance of what they are learning to their own experience and future goals.
5. Practical: learners like to put their acquired knowledge to practice. They learn best when they can apply what they learned in real life situations such as their work environment. If activities and projects are not applicable, then learning will not take place effectively.
6. Respect: All learners, but more specifically adult learners need to be acknowledged for their experience and

knowledge. They should be offered the opportunity to voice their opinions and share their ideas for others to learn from.

Adult Learners and Motivation

The first principle of andragogy is the need to know. Adult learners prefer to know why they need to learn something before undertaking it (Knowles, et. al., 1998). This implies that learners are more likely to do more effort when learning is meaningful. They need to know the learning objectives and outcomes, as well as the relevance of the knowledge to their particular situations or problems. The learner should be guided and informed why certain knowledge is worth learning. This does not only facilitate learning decisions, but it can also bring the adult learner from indifference and reluctance to motivation (Ryan, 1995).

The sixth assumption about adult learners relates to motivation. It states that adult learners tend to be affected by an intrinsic drive even though they might be prompted by external motivators (Knowles, et. al., 1998). An example of this would be an employee who is taking online classes to learn new skills that will help him/her feel a higher self-esteem or job satisfaction rather than focusing only on getting a promotion or a salary raise. This assumption supported by Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory that emphasizes the importance of autonomy, relatedness, and competence in pushing people toward growth (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

WHOLE PERSON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The conceptual model of whole person experiential learning was introduced in the first Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning (ABSEL) proceedings (Hoover, 1974). This model was refined by further examining cognitive-emotional interactive factors (Hoover & Whitehead, 1976). The model achieved its final form (Hoover, 2007) with the addition of a spiritual dimension of analysis:

Note: the whole person model encompasses dimensions 1), 2), 3), and 4).

1. Intellectual Actualization has to occur to the extent that a cognitive framework is established, allowing for the "what", "where", "when" and "how" of successful endeavor.
2. Emotional Actualization has to occur to the extent that emotional involvement is established to the point that the groundwork is laid for commitment and internalization.
3. Behavioral Actualization has to occur to the extent that necessary skills are understood, believed in and behaviorally learned to the point that successful, goal focused performance can be manifested at will.
4. The global and encompassing aspect of whole person actualization is Spiritual Actualization. Spiritual Actualization occurs when basic life perspectives/values and meta-philosophies are altered. Such an occurrence is often described as transcendent learning, transformative

learning or individual change. Spiritual Actualization learning experiences have traditionally been rare in the context of an organizational change management program or in educational settings.

The most current version of the whole person learning definition can be found in Hoover, Giambatista, Sorenson & Bommer, (2010):

Whole person learning exists when a personally responsible participant, exposed to both direct and vicarious modes of participation, cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes in a high intensity learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement.

This definition adds “direct and vicarious modes of participation” and “high intensity learning” to the original 1974 definition. These concepts were added to the model, incidentally, as a result of insights drawn from observations of adult transformative learning experiences. This definition also introduces the prescriptive personally responsible role of the adult learning individual – one of autonomy and self-direction, key components of adult learning. Autonomy and self-direction are capacities more fitting for adult learning processes, and are not only something that adult learners prefer, but also that they demand. Choices leading to long-term learning integration are reinforced through the avenues of autonomy and self-direction.

It is useful to examine whole person learning for adults from the perspective of the educator and the learning system designer. As such, the definition below (Hoover, 1974) outlines a “how to” perspective. Whole person experiential learning may be methodologically managed as follows if the objective is to design a more effective learning system or to establish a set of processes more conducive to transformative learning and personal change:

Whole person...experiential learning may be viewed as a methodology of education whereby structure and individual or group experiences are contrived to develop learning and perceptual capacities, to develop and reinforce cognitions, to impact on emotions and attitudes, and, importantly, to function in developing capacities to behave consistently with the insights of these processes and experiences.

One insight, viewing transformative learning experiences for adults, especially as they may occur in the workplace, is that they often involve a combination of direct learning experiences combined with a collection of vicarious learning experiences (Hoover & Giambatista, 2009). Therefore, to round out the Hoover whole person learning model, the concept of vicarious observational learning was added to the whole person learning repertoire (Hoover, Giambatista & Belkin, 2012):

We introduce the term vicarious observational learning (VOL) because not all vicarious experiences involve direct observation (e.g., experiencing vicarious pleasure in gossip about others) and not all observation is vicarious (e.g., a psychologist observing a patient). Observation is described...as a more generalized learning phenomenon, while Merriam-Webster.com defines vicarious as

“experienced or realized through imaginative or sympathetic participation in the experience of another”, closely resembling the particular learning experiences we created and assessed in these studies. Since our particular approach to vicarious learning includes observational learning and management education scholars are generally familiar with this term, we therefore coin the term “vicarious observational learning.”

The point of the Hoover whole person learning framework for adult learning is that impactful transformational learning, the kind of learning that produces long-term individual change, is not sourced in just one isolated aspect of the person. While most educational processes have historically focused on cognitive processes and intellectual change, the whole person approach recognizes that lasting change involves multiple learning dimensions.

CHARACTERISTICS AND ASPECTS OF INSIGHT LEARNING

For whole person learning to manifest, there has to be a framework of learning for its design and application. Insight learning (Hoover, Mitchell & Wu, 2012; Robinson, Hoover & Mitchell, 2013) offers a framework that allows for such a process. The common thread in whole-person approaches to experiential learning begins with the foundational element of the cognitive dimension (Hoover & Whitehead, 1974). This point can best be examined by asking the following question --- What would an experiential learning experience be without the cognitive dimension?

In order for the experiential learner to develop relevant affective/emotional and psychomotor/behavioral components of learning, there has to be a frame of reference provided by a useful cognitive framework. Without a useful mental frame, where can the whole person learner find a peg upon which to hang his/her experiential hat? It is obvious; therefore, that experiential education and adult education in particular, begin with the challenge of establishing useful mental frames, necessarily accomplished by changing preexisting mental frames to an enhanced and more efficacious state of cognitive awareness and personal insight. As Hoover, Mitchell and Wu (2012) observe --- “Munoz, Mosey and Binks (2011), in a recent paper focusing on entrepreneurial educational challenges, concluded that it is possible for students to change their mental frameworks, something they define as ‘A change in the way they (students) perceive reality and the inherent opportunities within’ (Munoz, et al, 2011:292). Therefore, in entrepreneurship, the area of their specific focus, they concluded that a change in reality perception needs to occur in entrepreneurship courses in order to enable students to more effectively identify new business opportunities.”

When examining adult learning, distance education and independent learning in this paper, we are using the term “insight learning” to describe the process that produces a change in the way they (students) perceive reality and the inherent opportunities therein.

Insight learning, as defined here (Hoover, Mitchell & Wu, 2012) contains four identifiable phases and constructs.

1. Identify the nature of the current mental frame.
2. Design an alternative mental frame that will function as a replacement of the current mental frame.
3. Participate in a simulation or experiential learning exercise that has an impact sufficient to change the preexisting mental frame.
4. Integration of the new/enhanced mental frame into the student's intellectual and behavioral repertoire.

The first step is identification of the nature of the current mental state as a target of educational change. This will be established initially by the instructor, but must ultimately be agreed to by the student. This should occur early in the learning process such that a mutually agreed upon "baseline condition" is established. Without a specific set of baseline criteria as a launching pad, it is impossible to measure progress to an elevated state or condition. There can be no "to" without a "from" as a reference point. The instructor and the student have an equal responsibility for this phase of insight learning. When phase one has been completed, the instructor and the student have embarked on a shared journey of learning and intellectual exploration.

The second step is the design of the alternative mental framework that will function as a replacement for the current mental framework. In order to undertake the tasks required to execute phase one and phase two of insight learning, the instructor needs to have adopted a personal philosophy of education such that he or she is dedicated to altering student mental frameworks. When the instructor is designing the class, identifying learning objectives, establishing benchmark levels of accomplishment, and measuring learning outcomes, the design of the new/target mental frame will come into focus. That said, the instructor should keep in mind that this target mental frame construction was done in isolation, without student input and without testing the feasibility of the set of outcomes with the students. While phase two of insight learning is the responsibility of the instructor, before it is implemented in the class, the instructor should be willing to make alterations as a consequence of real time student feedback.

The third phase of insight learning is for students to participate in a learning experience that has an impact sufficient to change the preexisting mental frame. Such phenomena could also be intended to produce significant levels of affective/emotional and psychomotor/behavioral changes as well, as per the criteria for whole-person learning. Successful execution of the third phase of insight learning requires a joint effort on the part of the instructor and the student. The student has to be involved in the process because insight learning is not something that the instructor does to the student; it is something that is done with the student. The instructor has to be involved in the process in order to insure that his or her high potential design is implemented in an effective manner.

The fourth and final phase of insight learning is integration of the new/enhanced mental frame into the student's intellectual and behavioral repertoire. The successful execution of phase four falls to the student. While some "testing out" of these newly acquired capacities can be done as part of a simulation or experiential exercise, the ultimate test will come when the student has the chance to exercise these capacities at will, and in

conditions that are not as sheltered as to outcome and consequence as the college classroom.

CHALLENGES TO ONLINE EDUCATION

Before a more general Implications for Practice discussion, some specific challenges relative to online education, distance learning and independent learning derived from the whole person learning (WPL) model are highlighted.

WPL COGNITIVE DIMENSION CHALLENGES

The online and distance learning environment is not necessarily antagonistic towards the cognitive learning dimension. For example, cases can readably be examined and discussed in an online setting. Problems solutions can be worked on in a collective setting, with all students participating either directly or vicariously in the solutions being used as cognitive learning examples. Business courses such as finance, accounting and quantitative methods can work well in an online setting. However, when it gets to more emotional and behavior aspects of whole person learning, the online environment can become a challenging setting.

WPL EMOTIONAL DIMENSION CHALLENGES

Anyone with even a modicum of experience in writing and receiving emails on the Internet or online, knows how challenging it can be to communicate emotions as a communication sender, and how difficulty it can be to read emotional intent as a communication receiver. Emoticons may be cute, and even entertaining, but lacking the capacity for nuance and shades of meaning, they are a poor mechanism for manifesting meaningful levels of emotional understanding. In courses such as organizational behavior, leadership, and marketing, it is possible to process course concepts such as motivation theories, leadership models and advertising strategies, just as finance courses online can process course concepts such as future value formulas and just as accounting courses can process debits and credits. However, when the course topics move into arenas of affect, where the understanding and processing of the concept carries with it an emotional impact, online learning, distance learning and independent learning can be challenged. It takes a very skilled online instructor to pull off emotionally laden topics such as trust, empathy, and active listening in a non-face-to-face setting. This potential problem magnifies when "soft skills" and the behavioral dimension are in play.

WPL BEHAVIORAL DIMENSION CHALLENGES

The behavioral dimension of whole person learning can be viewed as the foundational element of WPL, especially if skill development of part of the educational system intent. This is because good behavioral choices are guided by emotional maturity and comprehensive cognitive frameworks. Many aspects of experiential learning and simulation exercises are based on taking advantage of the levels of learner engagement generated by immersive educational experiences. ABSEL has a

history of over 40 years of scholarship dedicated to this field of study. However, any practitioner using behavioral exercises in the classroom, even a face-to-face classroom, will tell you that a certain special set of instructor deftness and techniques for instructor effectiveness, student-learning impact and exercise efficacy. With simulation having a possible edge over experiential learning, the online and distance learning environments offer additional challenges when it comes to the behavioral dimension of whole person learning.

WPL SPIRITUAL DIMENSION CHALLENGES

Interestingly, the online and distance learning setting may have some advantages over the face-to-face classroom setting when it comes to the spiritual dimension of whole person learning. It is often difficult to pierce the shell of student indifference, the short attention span of modern students, and the complexities of the values-driven aspects of the spiritual dimension in a high noise face-to-face classroom. However, online and distance learning can afford the luxury of contemplation and the opportunity for student reflection. Using tools such as journaling, reflective learning feedback exercises, and even creative writing exercises focused on personal insights, the online and distance learning environments can foster the space needed for meaningful spiritual reflections.

Implications for the Practice of Online Education

As we reexamined the theoretical frameworks of experiential learning and adult learning theories, it is worth pointing out that effective online courses that make a difference in student learning should be based on instructional design decisions. These decisions include selection of online activities, the delivery method, and the teacher-student relationship. It is equally important for instructors and designers to pay close attention to student learning styles and tailor the learning activities to their needs (Maddux et al., 2002; Thiele, 2003).

Experiential learning manifests itself as an attempt to make use of human experience as a focal part of the learning process (Burnard, 1989). This implies that the learner is an active participant that can express his/her ideas and values and be considered in planning learning events. The instructor's role is that of a facilitator who designs and implements experiential activities based on the learner's experience (Cranton, 1989). It is recommended to have a good understanding of online Adult learners' background before planning course materials. Learners come from various backgrounds and can have different styles and experiences. Effective course design starts with identifying the current mental and cognitive levels of learners and their past experiences (Boud et al., 1993). Once well defined, the instructor and course designer should take these past experiences in consideration while planning learning activities. The more related and meaningful course materials are, the more likely online adult learners will feel involved in the process and motivated to be part of the new learning experience. When trying to build new mental frame, it is very important to deconstruct the old misconceptions and provide learners with opportunities to exercise self-direction in the identification of personal goals, keeping in mind their prior knowledge and experience (Grow, 1991). A deep understanding of students'

learning styles is key to effective course planning. This can be done through creating course introductions where online students can share their preferences and their experience with different learning modalities. Once the instructor recognized that the cognitive development continues well into adulthood, he will be able to make use of course design principles to balance adult students' mixed preferences and stimulate their cognitive development and problem-solving skills (Kegan, 1994; King and Kitchener, 1994).

Another critical part of effective online instruction is planning. The process of systematic planning for instruction is the outcome of many years of research (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2009). Planning to teach at a distance is different from a face-to-face class. Distance learning faculty should avoid using the same materials that were designed for a previously taught face-to-face class (Orellena, Hudgins, & Simonson, 2009). In revising traditional classroom materials, instructors need to be creative in using activities that allow adult learners to build on their previous experience and relate to problems in their real life. Planning activities such as discussions, group projects, and case studies can create a supportive environment for students to construct their own knowledge and interact with each other. Learning is often perceived as a transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). A good technique that can encourage adult learners to work more collaboratively in discussions is to divide the class into small group discussions. Groups do not have to include learners from the same background, but it is easier to share ideas and give feedback to each other when the groups are smaller and the students worked together before. It is important, however, to pay attention to adult's previous experience that might be a barrier to further learning. A student who did not have a successful learning experience may be reluctant to try it again. Online teaching involves not only maintaining good relationship between instructor and students, but also guiding the communication between students because their exchange of ideas, beliefs, and team-based activities will all contribute to transformational experiences (Chaves, 2006). Adam and Freeman (2003) have also emphasized the importance of interactions in online classrooms where students can exchange information and provide fellow students with a shared feeling of presence that reinforces their membership in the community. This can be done through, but not restricted to synchronous discussions via chat and video conferencing tools.

CONCLUSION

Educators working in the areas of online learning, distance learning and independent learning have probably been using elements of whole person learning and insight learning in their pedagogical and andragogical practices without fully recognizing it. Nevertheless, it is necessary to make the benefits and implications of andragogy and these learning models more explicit. This allows for a proactive posture that could illuminate practices adopted in adult learning situations that have too much of a focus on pedagogy. That said, the integration of andragogy and pedagogy is not only possible but also necessary and meaningful, depending on the context of the learning situation and learner differences.

Adult distance learners benefit from activities that induce and encourage them to utilize their life experience and work

experience. Experience can also be made part of the classroom activities. These activities could be experiential learning exercises, simulation exercises, group discussions and “live case” group dynamic exercises, and group projects. Skillful adaptation of advances in information technology and Internet interfaces can allow online courses to have these activities much as in a traditional classroom.

The students active role in insight learning processes, especially those stages where the student assumes a larger or shared role in the operative learning processes, are also important. Instructors and instructional designers need to understand and address adult learners’ motivators, especially intrinsic motivators. This is because adult learners have a tendency to self-define the parameters of their learning, and intrinsic motivators are generally longer lasting and more sustainable.

In conclusion, the quotation below from Gallos (2007) sums up many of the positions taken in this paper. Gallos is describing a program teaching change management, but the points made can be seen as applying to andragogy, whole person learning and insight learning.

“Expanding student understanding of human nature and fostering the savvy needed for effective change management is a first step; however, doing that involves more than imparting theories and models. It requires *stretching how students see and make sense of their world* (emphasis), exposing them to situations and challenges that cannot be fully explained by the current internal frameworks they use to structure their world and from in which they perceive it (2007: 287).

Experimental research for evaluating and confirming the learning theories described in this paper, including andragogy, is still rare. Future research is needed to test the relative efficacy of these theories for adult learning in general and for online learning, distance learning and independent learning in particular.

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