

A Community-based Approach to Graduate-level Education: Teaching Implications and Considerations for Adult Learners in the Digital World

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Abstract

The world of higher education has evolved significantly in the past two decades in both practice and theory. Traditional, residential educational programs have frequently morphed into on-line hybrid offerings and on-line distance options for the adult learner have exploded in number and scope. How, when, who, and where we now teach produces new challenges and opportunities to consider. Additionally, the rising cost of higher education, along with steep competition, requires planners of new programs to consider factors of budgets, productivity, efficiency, and return of investment. Along with pragmatic issues, current educational theories have further extended the ideas of successful teaching to include various constructs such as educational transformation, critical thinking, creativity, interprofessional development, critical discourse, inclusiveness, embodied and experiential learning, constructivism, apprenticeship, learning motivation, and more. These theories do provide a structure to design, critique, and assess outcomes for programs and degrees but suggest careful consideration in their application. The predominate approach in designing and delivering educational programs has historically stemmed from a top-down model where educational theory provided the crucial structure and curriculums were built on such principles. Conversely, the development of educational programs to meet the needs of current society and the communities, in which students will ultimately engage, suggest planning is needed from a community-based perspective or a bottom-up approach. While the constructs of theory and practice may be problematic to consider simultaneously at times, the need to make sense of both is required for successful program development in the 21st century.

1. Introduction

In the United States, the eligible number of traditionally aged students, ages 18-24, entering college has been dropping and will continue to decline over the next decade [1]. In addition to this trend, the number of adult learners desiring innovative educational opportunities, whether through certificate

programs or advanced degrees, continues to rise, extending the highly competitive on-line educational markets [2, 3]. As a result, the financial and institutional resources needed to offer quality education programs are limited, and often dwindling. Nevertheless, the opportunities and benefits to develop community-based programs for non-traditional, adult learners is now available with our current digital and global technologies, further expanding educational options and maximizing limited resources. Beyond the student demographic shifts and a refocus to community-based programs, the educational approaches currently needed to design programs for adult learners takes on nuances when delivering effective teaching strategies. Concepts related to community-based education, traditional pedagogy, and andragogy, along with a nuance to heutagogy are further explored in this paper. A case example follows.

2. A Community-based Approach in Higher Education

Paulo Freire introduced a community-based, participatory approach in which adult learners were empowered to find solutions to identified social concerns. His assertion was that a participatory approach to community development was better supported by the individuals living and working in that context than expert-imposed constructs and pre-designed solutions [4]. The adult learner was encouraged to transform the community through action and critical reflection, gathering new information and questioning one's own assumptions about the identified problems. While Freire's philosophy encompassed the support of local communities tackling concerns, and his educational approaches facilitated an ethical-critical consciousness, his primary focus was on Latin-American liberation from Eurocentric perspectives and challenging the dominate class and ethos [4]. What Freire espoused, however, led future educators to question the purpose of education, beyond one that was (and is) frequently devoted to individualism and personal student gain. As educators and leaders, we

were asked to consider a different perspective of education, one being a catalyst to meaningful contributions in one's own community.

The contemporary ideals of community-based education further the notions that meaningful engagement and collaboration between local groups, students, and educators are more than just valued and espoused but intentionally facilitated [5, 6]. Academic engagement includes the delicate balance of content and inclusion of evidence-based information with the perceived realities of the community and the lived experiences of its members. When considering educational models for the global 21st century, where students can engage in a myriad of educational on-line opportunities, it is now especially valid to further consider the unique aspects of community and context. How does theory, educational materials and content, and its application to real world concerns continue to support context-rich engagement in one's own communities while addressing complex social scenarios [5, 6]?

3. Principles of Community-based Education

Principles of a community-based approach applied to educational development further asks the following questions:

- Where and who are our communities?
- Who are the stakeholders of our communities and where are their voices heard?
- What is really needed in these communities?
- What are the lived experiences of our adult learners (one of the stakeholders)?
- What do students bring to their education and what might they need to "learn" to enhance community-based practice, equity, and inclusion?

Going beyond the philosophical foundations of a community-based approach, resource allocations are always to be considered. Thus, the other questions that should be asked with program development are, what are the current resources available and how do we maximize those resources, within and outside, the structures of our institution. These proposed questions require deep listening to various constituents, including prospective students, educators, and the administrators of our respective educational institutions. What is more implicit, but just as important, is understanding and respect for the stakeholders in the students' communities. Conversations further invite creative problem-solving and resource building. The case example provided later in the manuscript will elucidate these ideas. An

additional consideration, as part of these conversations, is the exploration of teaching approaches that best supports the conceptualization and development of new programs.

4. Three Teaching Approaches Reviewed

4.1. Pedagogy

Pedagogy, the art and principles of teaching, has a long and varied history that remains in the forefront of most educational programs in higher education. This top-down approach relies on the identified expertise of scholars and practitioners to design and deliver educational content [7]. Beyond traditional lecturers and assigned readings, principles of pedagogy may also include dynamic student learning activities, experimentation and scholarship opportunities, and highly structured learning outcomes, particularly if the educational program has accreditation standards to meet. Ultimately, the educational offerings are constructed and influenced by the expertise of the instructor.

Theoretical principles used to inform the curriculum may be applied as the educational program is in the developing stages. Contemporary theories that are frequently employed highlight the development of critical thinking [8, 9], critical discourse [10], interprofessional and team relationships [11], and integration of knowledge and skills through apprenticeships and internships [12]. However, the overall ethos surrounding a traditional pedagogical approach in education is that the learning experiences are well-designed, planned, and executed and learning outcomes are assessed systemically and continuously.

4.2. Andragogy

Principles of andragogy apply to the adult learner and emphasizes what the learner brings to the educational opportunity. This bottom-up approach acknowledges that the learner has varied personal life experiences and may have previous educational backgrounds that will inform their own learning [13]. The adult identifies their own specific learning needs and the instructor becomes the mentor or coach through the educational experience.

Some of the underlying assumptions of andragogy is that adult learners come with their own socio-political-cultural contexts and integrate learning through those lenses [13]. Learning then takes the approach that adult students can and will make meaning of newly constructed ideas and integrate these ideals in unique ways. Additionally, the adult learner brings an awareness of the needs of their personal lives, their workplaces, and their communities, often looking for some resolution to identified concerns. Theoretical principles that

highlight an andragogical approach to learning often include constructivism [14], creativity [15], and embodied learning [16].

While the ethos of andragogy supports active and focused learning, it may not be assumed that all adult learners come to educational programs with the same enthusiasm. Students who have thrived in previous educational programs where a pedagogical approach is dominant, may look to the new learning opportunities with expectations that are more aligned with pedagogical principles.

4.3. Heutagogy

Heutagogy refers to the ways in which students learn and demonstrate their knowledge about a particular topic or assignment. The principles focus on the diversity of student learning approaches and focuses on how students best learn and demonstrate mastery of their learning. This teaching and learning approach has been linked with students with neurodiverse learning styles, and the use and integration of the internet in self-discovery and learning [17]. However, the principles of heutagogy with adult learners can be applicable to any student. The primary focus is teaching students how to teach themselves [18]. Theoretical approaches that undergird heutagogy include reflective practice [18], collaborative goal setting between the student and the instructor, and coaching strategies that combine pedagogy and andragogy principles [18].

5. A Case Example

The following case example highlights the development and evolution of an online, clinical doctoral program, designed for licensed therapy practitioners with an earned master's degree.

5.1. Community-Based Needs Assessment

A preliminary needs assessment was completed with two areas educational opportunities identified for the potential development of content, application, and skill acquisition. One area encompassed the awareness, support of, and resources for the Autistic community. The second area focused on trauma informed care, primarily in child development and early education. Two potential graduate-level certificate programs were then drafted and reviewed with prospective faculty and students. The feedback received from the prospective students was that while the courses were relevant to current needs of the community and to the practice of educators and therapists, the proposed certificates alone were not sufficient for the market demands; instead, the courses needed to lead to an advanced degree to maximize enrollment. In the case of therapy practitioners, this would entail the development of a post-professional,

clinical doctorate requiring the necessary credits from these two tracks plus a methodology course and a doctoral-level capstone project.

The model utilized for the graduate-level capstone project included Boyer's Model of Scholarship [19], known to and utilized by the developers. Within this broad understanding of the scholarship model, students could elect to complete a capstone project that focused on a traditional methodology of research (Scholarship of Discovery) or a program of assessment and implementation (Scholarship of Integration or a Scholarship of Application).

assessment

As the clinical doctorate was further developed and implemented, it became clear that additional certificate options were also desired by prospective students. The financial resources for future development of new tracks were limited so the strategy was to assess what additional courses, that were already developed and used in other programs, could be used to meet the needs of the prospective students. Ultimately, courses focused on healthcare administration, entrepreneurial business, strategic leadership, teaching in higher education, mental health intervention, and scholarship eventually became options for the students to take. Courses and programs were developed around the professional goals of the clinicians/students.

Lastly, as part of the assessment needs, it became clear that licensed, therapy practitioners with an undergraduate degree who wished to further pursue their education needed additional coursework to develop their understanding and application of scholarship and evidence-based practice. Another track, with newly developed and existing courses, was developed for those prospective students as part of a prerequisite to the clinical doctorate, if needed.

5.2. Student Considerations and Teaching Approaches

As the clinical doctorate program grew, and the number of students expanded from the first cohort through the second and third cohorts, it became apparent to the instructors that the students came with a wide diversity of educational and clinical, practice backgrounds. Some of the students had a strong scholarship background; others did not. Some of the students came from previous educational programs that fostered an andragogical approach; some of the students were most familiar and comfortable with a top down, pedagogical application to their education. In addition, some of the students were comfortable with the use of technology and computer applications, others had limited exposure and comfort. It became apparent that a part of the teaching needed to include the instructors speaking with each student to further assess their best learning style and what teaching approach not only supported effective outcomes but

could also progress the student to higher levels of critical analysis.

What each of the students did bring to their learning were rich clinical backgrounds and communities in which they practiced. This provided the students, real-life considerations from their communities in which they could devote the time and attention needed to begin addressing those concerns through the capstone project. An informal teaching plan was developed for each student, appreciating the nuances of the students' clinical and educational background. What was required of the instructor was the ability to assess each of the student's needs and to apply relevant coaching and teaching approaches, while having an appreciation for what level of critical thinking was needed to complete the proposed capstone project.

5.3. Active Listening and Creative Problem Solving

The process of developing the courses and educational tracks, along with the capstone project for the clinical doctorate entailed active listening throughout the entire process including the current and needed resources from the institution, the pre-course development process, the admissions process to the program, the progression within the educational program including the capstone project, and post-graduation outcomes. When concerns were raised, as in the example of limited course offerings, the role of the program director was to actively listen and use creative problem solving to address the concerns within the limited financial resources of the institution. This approach required the program director and instructors to have some comfort with ambiguity, continued growth, openness to new paths of learning, and the diverse resources in the communities. For example, the avenues of on-line, distance education enabled students from all parts of the United States and other countries around the globe to join the program. While many of the students had similar clinical practice backgrounds, the communities in which they lived and worked utilized different theories and approaches to therapy. This required the instructors to shift from being content experts to one of teaching expert. The students brought their lived experiences and their community values and approaches to the capstone project; the instructors needed to respect those differences while promoting critical reflection with the students.

6. Conclusion

The world of higher education, particularly as it relates to the ongoing learning needs of adult workers who are seeking educational opportunities that support ongoing professional growth, requires program developers and instructors to consider both

community-based practice and divergent learning approaches. Instructors move from primarily content experts to teaching and coaching experts. In addition, the financial and faculty resources with distant learning are often limited when developing such programs, thus, the approach to program development requires additional analysis of current educational resources and creative problem solving in the development and implementation of applicable courses from existing resources, and when needed, new course development.

7. References

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