Theory to Practice

Situational Pedagogy: How Adult Educators Effectively Teach Leisure Education Classes to Mature Adult Learners

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Abstract

This discussion focuses on how to best teach mature adult learners in leisure learning environments, such as those provided by OLLI chapters and many universities. There has been a significant increase in the number of mature adult learners who are pursuing leisure education classes, trips, and experiences, an increase partially motivated by the better health and education of these adults. Drawing on the expertise of 15 adult educators, this discussion highlighted ten strategies that they believed were the most effective for teaching. Some of the strategies identified were counter-intuitive to the traditions of adult education while others reinforced the learner-participation traditions of andragogy.

Introduction

Americans are living longer due to a wide number of variables, including better general health practices, life extending technologies, and even natural environments that are more predictive of problems that lead to cleaner air, water, and food. The result of these combined factors is that Americans are living longer, with the average life expectancy up nearly 20 years since 1970s. Increased longevity and a graying Baby Boom generation, contributes to a population projected to be over 83

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million adults over the age of 65 by the year 2050 (Ortman, Velkoff, & Hogan, 2014).

As the population of those mature adults over the age of 65 age, and since they are in better health better educated than previous generations, they are engaging in activities far different from their predecessors. The new population of mature adults participates in adventure travel, they seek activities with their peers living in retirement villages that are ripe with clubs, lessons, and activities, and across the country, this population of mature adults are engaging in leisure learning activities in record numbers.

Leisure education has traditionally been a smaller part of the mature adult education industry for a variety of reasons, including the limited range of interests of past populations. As these healthier mature adults look to satisfy their interests, they have greater expectations, desires, and needs. Some communities have responded through public education, such as secondary schools, where adult education offerings have grown far beyond basic education and GED programming to include classes for retirees. Similar programs have grown in community colleges and four-year universities, and the Bernard Osher Foundation has encouraged leisure education for those over the age of 50 by supporting a growing network of Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes. However, despite this growth in program offerings and providers, little research or exploration has been undertaken to identify how mature adult learners best engage in leisure learning.

Adult learning has been well grounded in the concept of andragogy, a framework for learning that highlights the personal relevance of education, but also ties it strongly to desired outcomes and expectations and personal experiences. Although this does help to explain why many mid-life adults return to school for professional reasons, or why they engage in learning to tie it to their leisure pursuits, it may not fully explain the learning patterns of mature adults in entirely leisure settings. The significant issue for these learners is that the learning experiences have little to no explicit application, and that they are interest-based pursuits.

To effectively meet the mature adult learner's need, instructors, policy makers, and administrators must find ways to identify effective teaching strategies. The purpose for conducting the current study was to identify such strategies, drawing upon the experiences and expertise of a group of instructors with expertise in such programming.

Background of the Study

With the growing number of mature adults engaged in society, this segment of the population is finding themselves to be in better health than all previous generations of citizens in this age bracket. With their better health and longevity projections, they are finding that they can make more demands on the world around them in an effort to maximize their quality of life. Such may be part of the reason that large-scale planned retirement communities that offer classes, activities, and social opportunities are in such demand, and may be part of the reason that The Villages, a retirement community with such amenities, is the fastest growing metropolitan area in the US (Olorunnipa, 2014). As this segment of the population places more demands on the world around them, they also expect more from the services that they access, including education. The subsequent question for educators working with mature learners then, is whether or not they truly learn differently in leisure education settings.

A variety of research has suggested that mature adult learners process information and ultimately learn differently than younger adults. Anshel (1985) noted cognitive differences in four areas for mature adults, including how imagery is used, the role of anticipation in approaching new material, how information chunking is processed in the brain, and how attention is focused. The concept of andragogy largely predicates it's assumptions on the use and applicability of knowledge, but for these adults in leisure settings, there may actually be a different processing of information and relating to previous experiences. Both elements, speed of process and relational attaching can be important to consider for mature adults, as both can become modified with advancing age (Ball, Berch, Helmers, Jobe, Leveck, Marisiske, & Willis, 2002; Dinmore, 1997). This has even led to acknowledgement by commercial firms that mature adults interact and experience technology differently, and subsequently need modification to meet their unique needs (Ureel & Wallace, 2013).

How individuals learn impacts how teachers can effectively communicate their content. Much work has been done in this regard in public education under the concept of culturally responsive teaching, (Giroux, 2009; Kumashirio, 2009) where the context and culture of an individual can lead to more or less effective instruction (Gruenewald, 2003). Additionally, the motivation of the learner can influence the selection of effec-

tive teaching strategies, and for mature learners, this can be particularly true for voluntary leisure education programs (Patterson & Pegg, 1999).

Research Methods

Data for the current study were collected in two phases. Initially, nomination requests were sent to 15 mature adult learning providers that were nationally representative of the different regions of the United States. These individuals were selected through a review of web-based resources, and included university providers, Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, and community education providers. The web-search resulted in a listing of 70 possible providers, and the initial listing of possible nominators was reviewed and ultimately selected on the information obtained from their websites. This verified that their primary service audience were mature adult learners and leisure education programs. The initial 15 program directors were selected form the 70, to nominate who they perceived to be their best or most effective instructor of mature adult learning programs. This allowed for some element of possible discrepancy, but considering the exploratory nature of the study, the discrepancy was accepted as a limitation and is noted that it may ultimately impact the generalizable nature of the results.

Following the identification of program directors, a request was sent to them to nominate their best or most effective mature adult learner instructor. These nominated individuals then participated in a three-round Delphi study, with individuals responding to the prompt "what strategies do you perceive to be the most effective in teaching mature adult learners in a leisure education program?" Each instructor was asked to identify up to five teaching strategies.

Upon receipt of the teaching strategies from each individual, a composite listing was developed and submitted back to the instructors. The lists asked each to rate what they perceived to be the effectiveness of each teaching strategy, using a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with 1=Strongly Disagree that the teaching strategy would be effective with mature adult learners in a leisure education course, progressing to 5=Strongly Agree.

Invitations to participate in the study were sent to all nominees until 15 expert mature adult educators were identified and consented to participate in all three rounds of the study. These 15 individuals identified 37 duplicated teaching strategies in response to the prompt: "what strategies do you perceive to be the most effective in teaching mature adult learners in a leisure education program?" After editing the teaching

strategies, only 22 remained to be rated, and 12 of the 15 expert teachers completed the second round where they were asked to rate the perceived effectiveness of each on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with 1=Strongly Disagree that the strategy would be effective, progressing to 5=Strongly Agree that the strategy would be effective.

Findings

The results of the second round of ratings had 12 teaching strategies with an overall mean rating below 3.75, leaving 10 strategies with a level of agreement (consensus) that the strategy would be effective. The strategies that were rated above 3.75 on the 5-point scale were then included in the third and final round of the Delphi study. All 12 of the expert teachers who participated in the second round of the study completed the third round survey where they were asked to consider group data, including mean, median, range, and mode of each strategy's rating.

Between rounds 2 and 3, the experts made 36 rating changes, averaging three per respondent. These changes resulted in four items having a higher mean rating in the third round, five having lower mean ratings, and one keeping the same rating between rounds. These second and third round ratings, along with the second round ratings for the lower-agreed upon teaching strategies are presented in Table 1.

In the final rating, three strategies had an overall mean rating between 4.5 and 5.0 (the highest level of agreement among the expert teachers). These three teaching strategies were use of the lecture, the use of media, and taking field trips. One comment about the lecture (mean 4.89) written by a respondent was, "just a traditional lecture, with good humor sprinkled in, some cartoons, strong projection, logical structure, and an understanding that you need to keep the content moving."

For media (mean 4.77), a respondent wrote that she used movie clips from Downton Abbey and that "pictures speak a thousand words!" A similar perspective was seen as a motivation for taking group field trips (mean 4.64). In the first round of the survey, a teacher wrote "give the learners hands on opportunities to see, smell, and feel battlefields, old buildings, history. The smell of a musty historic home can make a big impression."

The use of simulation exercises, such as pretending to buy, monitor, and sell stocks had a third round final mean rating of 4.49, and one instructor wrote "I'm amazed at how well some of the 'students' get lost in the simulations." The discussion method was also rated with a high

degree of agreement in its effectiveness, (4.35) with the warning that it must be "issue-centered and structured with the instructor leading the discussion in a specific direction." Task analyses, such as the deconstruction of an issue, problem, or process, had a mean of 4.34, and an instructor described its use as particularly effective in technical-leisure instruction, such as how to quilt, knit, cook, or repair small engines.

For the strategy of bringing in guest speakers (mean 4.21), one teacher described it as the "Merv Griffin method," referencing the formerly popular personality famous for hosting controversial guests in

Table 1.
Effective Teaching Strategies

	Rd 3 Mean	Rd 2 Mean
Lecture	4.89	4.90
Media	4.77	4.75
Field Trips	4.64	4.70
Simulations	4.49	4.50
Discussion	4.35	4.35
Task analyses	4.34	4.25
Expert guests	4.21	4.13
Individualized learning	4.20	4.00
Combination of strategies	3.95	4.00
Sensory Teaching	3.90	4.00
Experiential classes	--	3.70
Roundtable discussion	--	3.68
Self-paced instruction	--	3.66
Workbooks	--	3.50
Group presentations	--	3.50
Reading intensive	--	3.23
Online modules	--	3.12
Writing based	--	3.02
Short-term travel (overnight)	--	2.99
Personal instruction	--	2.87
Observation	--	2.82
Testing based	--	1.40

his daytime television program. He also commented "you have to keep the panelists or speakers on topic and be able to go to the class for deeper questions – it really is a talent that is hard to refine!"

The last of the ten highest rated items was the use of group individualized learning (mean 4.20). One instructor noted that this could be something like a book club, and that the main job of the teacher was to facilitate the group's learning, assuming that the group has come together about some common interest or idea.

Discussion

The strategies identified in the study reflect both traditional approaches to andragogy, such as the facilitation identified in individualized instruction, but also suggest a level of directedness that is not traditionally associated with adult education. It is interesting to note that some of the most effective teaching techniques (simulation & media) used with mature leisure learners became institutionalized during their generation, whereas lecture and field trips have been part of the educational repertoire for decades. Each technique seemed to build engagement in the learning process by tapping into its creative and sensory components. One wonders if combining active, experiential forms of learning with ambiguous and paradoxical content represents the need for what constructivists consider discovery-oriented pedagogy (Dirx, 1997). These teaching techniques seem to invite self-reflection, and the opportunity to "make sense of the changes and the empty spaces we perceive both within ourselves and our world") (Dirx, 1997, p. 79). Since many mature adults are not occupied solely by technical-rational performance outcomes associated with work and formal training, they can attend to transformative learning experiences where there exists "the struggle to wrest consciousness and knowledge from forces of unconsciousness and ignorance" (Dirx, 1997 p 79.)

The pedagogy of learning through "soul", "which beckons to a relationship between the individual and his or her broader world" (Dirx, 1997, p 82.), "requires a more central role of imagination and fantasy that bring one's inner life together with the outer world and less structured environments and activities." (Dirx, 1997, p 85.), One might conclude that because adults have a deep repertoire of experience from which to draw, the teaching strategies that instructors identified as successful are those that provide imagery and exercises that build on the tension between the learners' conscious and unconscious processing.

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