

# PROVIDING DEEP LEARNING THROUGH ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF ADULT LEARNERS IN BLENDED COURSES

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## ABSTRACT

*Malcolm Knowles (2011) indicates that adult learners are most likely to be actively engaged in learning when they are given some choice and control over the learning process. When the curriculum relates to the adult learner's interests, is individualized, and authentic; the adult learner becomes actively engaged in the process by making a 'psychological investment' in learning. Teaching a blended course presents certain challenges for the instructor when creating lessons to actively engage adult learners. This paper discusses how active engagement is defined and determined, barriers that impact adult learners attempting to actively engage in learning, and various strategies to actively engage adult learners that directly align to the characteristics of the adult learning process, in a blended course.*

## INTRODUCTION

Changes in adult learner active engagement have occurred due to the instructional delivery of blended courses. The way online adult learners engage in their studies has taken on a new dimension due to the widespread uptake of learning management systems by universities and colleges. This change in learning environments has created changes in ways that adult learners are engaging with instructors, course resources, and peers. Distance learning via learning management systems can occur with limited face-to-face contact between adult learners and instructors (Douglas & Alemanne, 2007). Traditional ways used in face to face classes for actively engaging adult learners to facilitate deep learning need to be adapted and aligned to the adult learning process for use in blended courses.

## MALCOLM KNOWLES PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING

Malcolm Knowles (2011) views adult learning as problem-based and collaborative not didactic. Adults are self-directed and autonomous and determine individual learning goals. As self-directed learners, they want to determine the knowledge that will be learned, the projects in which they will participate, and how they will demonstrate the knowledge gained. Adults who are self-directed take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in determining their learning needs, obtaining human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and assessing learning outcomes. Knowles argues that self-directed learning is

closely related to the natural process of psychological development where adults take on increased responsibility for their own lives and their own learning. Self-directed learners are proactive, learn more things and learn better, than do learners who are reactive learners and are passively engaged in the learning. They enter into learning with greater motivation and purpose. As a result, new knowledge is retained better and longer, as well as applied with greater ease to new situations. Adult learners have a variety of life experiences and prior knowledge from work, school, family, and community involvements. Respect for adult learners needs to be demonstrated during the learning process, in particular acknowledging the wealth of knowledge and experiences they bring to the learning situation. Adult learners need to be treated as equals in the learning situation and be given opportunities to communicate freely. Connections need to be made by the learner between prior knowledge and the new knowledge. These connections help the adult learner see the value of the new knowledge to real life situations and enable the learner to apply the new knowledge to meaningful circumstances. Adult learners are goal oriented. According to the Adult Education Center (2005), most adults engage in a learning experience to create a change in a skill, behavior, current knowledge, or attitude. Learning needs to focus on tasks involving a component of the adult learner's social roles. Adult learners are motivated to knowledge that can have immediate application to their real life. The adult learner needs to have a reason for the learning. Application to the learner's work or other responsibilities, help the adult learner see value in gaining the new knowledge. Adult learners are practical and focus on the parts of the new

knowledge that are most useful to them; either in their work or other areas of their life. What this means is that adult learners what to be actively engaged in the learning process and need to have an environment that supports this active engagement.

### MOTIVATION IN ADULT LEARNERS

Motivation in adult learners is both extrinsic and intrinsic. The factors that impact the motivation of adult learners include:

1. *Needing to make new friendships and develop social relationships with new associates.*
2. Meeting the external expectation or recommendation to participate in new learning from someone in authority.
3. Personal advancement such as achieving a job promotion, obtaining advanced status in employment, or staying competitive.
4. Obtaining or maintaining a license/certification.
5. Maintaining skills, developing skills, or adapting to changes within a job
6. Obtaining new knowledge to assist the community, becoming better prepared to participate in community work or serve mankind.
7. Escaping boredom or acquiring relief from the ordinary daily routines of work or home with a contrast of other more exciting opportunities.
8. Learning for the sake of gaining new knowledge, obtaining knowledge for its own reward and appeasing an inquisitive mind.

Retention is an important part of the adult learning process. It is directly impacted by the amount of practice and use during the learning process. What this means is that adult learners need to be actively engaged in learning, have predetermined motivation for engaging in the learning, and need a learning environment that supports this active engagement and motivation.

### DEFINING ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Active engagement represents both the time and energy adult learners invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices. (Kuh, et al 2008) According to Barkley, (2010), "Student engagement is the product of motivation

and active learning. It is a product rather than a sum because it will not occur if either element is missing." The extent to which adult learners are motivated and committed to learning, have a sense of belonging and accomplishment, and have relationships with adults, peers, and family that support learning will impact the active engagement of adult learners. Adult learners need to experience certain conditions for deep learning to take place through active engagement in the learning process (Barkley, 2010). A sense of a learning community needs to be created by the instructor through the promotion of interactions between the instructor and the adult learner as well as interactions between the peers and the adult learner throughout the course. A learning community is created when the instructor is seen as helpful and approachable while listening to the adult learner and not talking to them in a derogatory way. Instructors should provide a psychologically safe and inviting learning environment (Learning First Alliance, 2001). Instructors of adult learners should organize the classroom environment as communities that foster caring relationships between all members of the class and treat all members fairly. Adult learners are motivated to learn when they believe that their instructors care about their education and about them personally. Therefore, they must have opportunities to share their ideas and perspectives, and instructors must demonstrate to them that their perspectives are valued (McCombs, n.d.). Instructors should create a sense of community and common purpose; at the same time, they should recognize the diversity and individuality of each member of the class community. An atmosphere in which civility, order, and decorum are the norms and antisocial behavior such as bullying, intimidation, and taunting are clearly unacceptable. By establishing this atmosphere, the instructor helps to create a safe environment. Instructors set a classroom climate where learners feel free to experiment, discuss, question, and take risks.

Blended courses are online and require adult learners and instructors to get together at least once (or sometimes several times) in person, by conference call, or through closed-circuit television links. They can be asynchronous or synchronous. In an asynchronous course, communications and activities take place outside of real time. There is a time lag between when the message is sent and a replied is given. Messages can be added at any time and read at the recipient's leisure. Messages are not read as they are being created and as much time can be taken as needed to craft a respond to the post. Asynchronous activities take place whenever adult learners have the time to complete them. Messages can be read and responded to at any place there is internet access. For example, viewing videos linked to the course site, reading a textbook, and writing a paper are all asynchronous activities. In contrast, synchronous, or

real-time communication takes place like a conversation. Some courses use only writing-based tools to communicate as a result, the only synchronous communication possible is a chat session. Everyone gets online in the same chat room and types questions, comments, and responses in real time. Synchronous activities may include chat sessions, whiteboard drawings, and other group interactive work. Some courses involve multimedia tools, and a synchronous communication might involve audio or video feeds to the computer.

There are some key advantages to asynchronous collaboration tools. They enable flexibility. Participants can receive the information when it's most convenient for them as well as any place there is internet access. There's less pressure to act on the information or immediately respond in some way. Adult learners have time to digest the information and put it in the proper context and perspective. Another advantage is that some forms of asynchronous collaboration, such as email, are ubiquitous. One of the advantages of synchronous collaboration is its immediacy. Information can be sent and received right away. Synchronous collaboration, in general, is more interactive than asynchronous.

The drawbacks of asynchronous collaboration are that they can lack a sense of immediacy and drama. There's less immediate interaction. Sometimes people have to wait hours, days, and even weeks to get a response to a message or feedback on a shared document. The downside of synchronous collaboration is that not everyone uses it. Although instant messaging, chat, and other such tools are becoming more common, they're still not as ubiquitous as technology such as email. Another drawback is that synchronous collaboration is not as flexible as asynchronous. All the parties involved must be ready and willing to collaborate at a given moment or the session doesn't work as well. Also, not everyone does well with this kind of collaboration, particularly people who like to think over what they want to communicate (Allen, I. E. & Seaman, J. 2006). Both asynchronous and synchronous courses can help to create a safe, risk free learning community to actively engage the adult learning in the learning process.

The instructor needs to help adult learners work to their optimal level of challenge. This goal is reached by the instructor using strategies that assess prior knowledge to determine where to begin the instruction and help the adult learners make connections between known and new knowledge, teach metacognitive skills, and empower the adult learners as partners in the learning process. Instructors should expect active engagement and can share this expectation by inviting adult learners to suggest activities that will help them

achieve their individual learning goals as well as choosing learning materials and resources.

### ANTICIPATION GUIDE

On strategy that can be used to activate the adult learner's prior knowledge and set a purpose for reading is the anticipation guide. The instructor chooses 5-7 major concepts from the reading. The concepts are put into statements which are read by the adult learners who decide whether they agree or disagree with each statement. During the reading the learner indicates after the statement whether they continue to agree or disagree with the statement as previously indicated or if evidence from the reading leads them to change their understanding. The adult learners list where evidence can be found in the reading to support the after reading decisions. For each statement, each learner shares what was indicated for each statement before reading and after reading with evidence from the text for support (Duffelmeyer, 1994).

### LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACHES

Adult learners are more actively engage in learning when they determine the learning to be meaningful to their lives. Instructors who help adult learners obtain deeper understanding of their values and beliefs as well as an increase self-understanding in relation to others and the larger world help the adult learners become more actively engaged in the learning process. Promoting the understanding of the purpose and the importance of course activities will help the adult learner make connections between the learning and their respective lives. Social interactions, discussions, and hands-on activities increase the active engagement of adult learners. They become more actively engaged in learning when there is increased the time and effort in these purposeful activities. Interactions with the instructor and the adult learner as well as interactions between the adult learner and their peers regarding important issues for extended periods of time also increase adult learner active engagement. Instructors using a learner-centered approach encourage adult learners to construct their own meaning of the new knowledge. They structure assignments so each adult learner finds some value in the assignment, motivation to complete the assignment, and actively engage in the learning process. Strategies are used so the course becomes an uncovering of the content with application to real life situations. To accomplish this, the instructor articulates objectives that can be applied to various topics. Diverse experiences using appropriate instructional strategies that promote new ways of thinking and responding to new information help adult learners more actively engaged in the learning process (Barkley, 2010).

Whenever possible, instruction should be tied to topics and problems that naturally interest adult learners (Ormrod, 1995; Stipek, 1996). Instructors should make connections between adult learners' prior knowledge and experiences and illustrate the connection between the curriculum and the real world (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Rather than emphasizing that adult students learn material because it will be on the test, instructors should underscore the relevance of instruction to the adult students' personal lives and future aspirations (Ormrod, 1995; Sheldon & Biddle, 1998). Motivational researchers insist that curriculum and instruction should be culturally relevant to promote adult learner engagement where all voices in the adult learning community are represented and valued in the curriculum and adult learners do not feel silenced in the instructional activities" (Kordalewski, 1999). Instructors can help adult learners be actively engaged in the learning process by providing instructional activities that 1) require the transfer of new knowledge to other content areas or disciplines, 2) help move content from short-term memory to long-term memory, 3) assist the learner in making an emotional connection to the new knowledge and 4) go beyond the text, so that the new learning takes on the human dimension.

**FOUR SQUARE  
READING-RECIPROCAL READING**

A during reading strategy that will provide active engagement for the adult learner is Four Square Reading. In a blended course, this strategy can take place over five weeks. The instructor divides the learners into four groups of four and the reading into four parts. For each of the four weeks, each learner rotates through each of the four roles: the summarizers summarize the content; the connectors make connections from the readings to self, text, and the world; visualizers make visual connections to their understanding of the text; and the predictors/questioners make predictions about the text before reading, ask questions during the reading and after the reading. At the end of each week, each group will discuss through online threaded conversation, the information that was gained. After consensus is reached, an online group summary is submitted to the instructor. By the end of the four weeks, each group member will have taken on the responsibilities of each of the roles and all four sections of the reading will have been completed. For the fifth week, an individual final summary of the four sections will be submitted online to the instructor. Other forms of assessment could be completed on the fifth week including applying the concepts to a case study or a simulation (CONDOR at CCNY).

**MAXIMIZING ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT**

Research on adult learning, (Knowles, 2011), indicates that adults are most likely to be engaged in learning when they are given some choice and control over their learning process and when the curriculum is individualized, authentic, and related to adult learners' interests. They make a psychological investment in learning. Pride is taken not simply in learning the formal indicators of success, but in understanding the material and applying it in their lives. According to this definition, an engaged student is one who is intrinsically motivated to learn. This motivation is from a desire for competence and understanding, or simply from a love of learning, rather than a desire for a good grade or an instructor's approval. Actively engaged adult learners are more likely to approach tasks eagerly and to persist in the face of difficulty. They are also more likely to seek opportunities for learning when the extrinsic awards are not available. This happens because intrinsically-motivated adults are more wholly engaged and absorbed in their activities and bring more of their prior knowledge and integrative capacities to bear in their pursuit of new understanding and mastery. Instructors who want adult learners to understand what they learn in school and apply the knowledge and skills to real-life situations, provide engaging learning opportunities that go beyond restating basic facts on multiple-choice or short-answer exams. Adult learners are driven to engage in authentic, personally meaningful, and relevant work. According to motivational researchers, tasks that have personal meaning for adult learners are more likely to promote engagement (McCombs, 2002.; Stipek, 1996). As Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999) indicate, adult learners are more motivated when they can see the usefulness of what they are learning. Similarly, adult learners are driven to exercise control over their own activities, and are more likely to be motivated to learn when they believe that their actions are internally initiated and when they have opportunities to regulate their own actions and make choices (Alderman, 1999; McCombs, 2002.; Sheldon & Biddle, 1998). Adult learners who do not believe that they have control or choice are less likely to expend the effort necessary to learn. Researchers agree that schools that maximize student engagement should have the following characteristics:

1. Each adult learner should have a curriculum at an appropriate level of difficulty.
2. Instructors must have high but achievable expectations for all students (Alderman, 1999; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Learning First Alliance, 2001).

3. Instructional tasks should be of "intermediate difficulty"; they should be tasks that the adult learner can complete with some effort to help the adult learner develop feelings of increasing competence and pride (Stipek, 1996).
4. Adult learners should also be provided with clear, frequent, and constructive feedback so that they are able to see growth in their capacities and skills (McCombs, 2002.; Stipek, 1996; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

All adult learners need to have opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes to regulate and direct their own learning. Instructors should encourage adult learners to take responsibility for regulating their own learning and for being self-determined and autonomous learners when choices are given to them. The evidence is clear that student motivation, learning, and performance are enhanced when adult learners make these decisions (McCombs, 2002.). Researchers emphasize that the choices adult learners are given must be authentic and not token measures intended to pacify.

**METHODS OF ASSESSMENT**

Assessment of learning provides important feedback to the adult learner. There are several authentic ways to assess the knowledge gained including: applying the knowledge to multiple scenarios, asking students to generalize the information, and relating the learning to diverse scenarios. Frequent and, at times, immediate feedback specific about their performance helps adult learners maintain active engagement. Adult learners value feedback focused on the content, is informational, is performance based and behavior specific. Prompt feedback given in private is important to adult learners. They need to understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. Instructors provide this understanding by using rubrics for grading procedures or detailed explanations as to what is expected in each assessment. When instructors provide this information, adult learners will be able to also describe the criteria by which their work will be assessed.

**RAFT POST READING ACTIVITY**

Adult learners will actively engage in the concepts being presented if they know a RAFT writing assignment will be completed. In this post reading activity, the instructor chooses a text that contains concepts that provide opportunities to share the information to an audience. After reading, the adult learner is directed to choose one or more important concepts from the reading to share with a particular audience who would benefit from this informa-

tion. The adult learner will also choose who will be the writer of the communication, the format of the writing, and the topic. RAFT assignments encourage adult learners to uncover their own voices and formats for presenting their ideas about content information they are studying. Adult learners respond to writing prompts that require them to think about various perspectives such as:

- Role of the Writer: Who are you as the writer? The President? A board member?
- Audience: To whom are you writing? A senator? A teacher? A company?
- Format: In what format are you writing? An editorial? A newspaper? A memo?
- Topic: What are you writing about?

The writing is shared on line as part of the weekly threaded conversation. Students can be assigned to respond to one or more of their peer's written communications. Instructors can divide the adult learners into two groups-one group is the writer and the other group is the audience and responder to the written communication. Then roles can be reversed in another week's assignment where another RAFT would be assigned (Santa, Havens, & Valdes, 2004).

**BARRIERS TO ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF  
ADULT LEARNERS**

Adult learners have barriers to their motivation to learn. They have many personal and work responsibilities that must be balanced with the demands of learning. Lack of time, financial resources, confidence, or information regarding opportunities to learn, scheduling difficulties, as well as child care and transportation issues can impact the adult learners' motivation to learn. Past educational or work experiences may be barriers to learning. This occurs if the new knowledge is in conflict with past education or life experiences. This conflict needs to be addressed before the learners can actively engage in the learning (Knowles, 2011).

**WAYS TO MEASURE ENGAGEMENT**

In blended courses, the instructor has to use different methods to measure the active engagement of adult learners. When building a learning community in a blended course, adult learners need individual attention. Feeling comfortable in seeking help and asking questions using technology is important (i.e. Learning Management System and email). An actively engaged adult learner can describe the purpose of the lesson to show clarity of learning. This is more comprehensive than describing the activ-

ity and shows a greater depth of engagement in the learning. The activities that the actively engaged adult learner is asked to do are found to be interesting, challenging, and a connected to real life situations. The work is viewed as meaningful. Actively engaged adult learners participate in rigorous thinking by working on complex problems, creating original solutions, and reflecting on their learning and the quality of their work. Adult learners who are actively engaged are performance oriented. They understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. The criteria by which their work will be evaluated can be described by the adult learner (Douglas & Alemanne, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

Active engagement by adult learners is critical for learning to take place. Understanding the principles of adult learning helps the instructor to develop learning opportunities that facilitate active engagement and ultimately successful acquisition of new knowledge by adult learners. Adult learners will be motivated to engage in educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to a variety of desired outcomes determined by the learner. Active engagement appears to be comprised of focused and collaborative learning, involvement in challenging academic activities, regular interactions with instructors and peers, and believing they are respected and supported by the university learning community. Active engagement is particularly critical in online blended courses. For adult learners to be academically successful, university instructors in the 21st century need to utilize the tenets of adult learning theory and strategies for active engagement in blended course preparation.

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