

Mentoring and Tutoring Online Learners: Personal Reflections: National Implications

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advances in technology has allowed for the continued development of online instructional theories and the application of the principals of adult learning theory to the virtual classroom. The theme central that pervades online mentoring and tutoring is that the online teaching and learning experience is a collaborative learning partnership between learners and faculty. The virtual classroom should provide an atmosphere that facilitates the exploration of meaning, in which students feel safe and accepted. A convergence on best practices in online instruction includes a focus on how to integrate high quality academic and scholarly work with professional relevance and application. The compelling challenge made to all aspiring online instructors is to transition from facilitators-of -learners to learner-center facilitators.

Introduction

Distance learning provides learners the option to participate whenever they wish, on an individualized basis, asynchronizes environment. For example, some students may want to review and reply to instructor comments during early morning hours or read their e-mail in the middle of the night. In addition, one student may wish to spend thirty minutes reviewing a Website, while another spends an hour reviewing a journal article.

Distance learning is convenient, and it is also effective. Several research studies have found that distance learning is equally or more effective than traditional instruction when the methods and technologies used are appropriate to the instructional tasks, when there is student-to-student interaction, student-to-content, and when there is timely faculty-to-student feedback (Verduin & Clark, 1991; Moore & Thompson, 1990).

This document will explore best practices in online instruction that concentrates on adult learning theory, the online instructional environment, faculty responsibilities in a learner-centered virtual classroom, and resources for online faculty instructors. Best practices can best be defined as those activities undertaken by an instructor to create a sense of partnership or collaboration between learners and faculty.

Adult Learning Theory

In 1990, more than seventy-five percent of the population was older than sixteen (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The shift from a youth-centered society to an adult-centered society holds critical significance for institutions of higher education across the nation that provide on line instruction. Understanding how the emergence of adult learners will impact higher education requires understanding adult learners themselves.

Mature learners who face schedule conflicts from career and family responsibilities, or who feel uncomfortable with the traditional classroom environments, seek different opportunities to learn. Educational inequity is a major issue in this country. Rural and inner city schools often have fewer qualified teachers, higher student-teacher ratios, and a greater need for technology. Distance learning offers real potential for addressing these issues and can be employed very effectively to remedy educational inequity. Distance education represents a way for communicating and connecting with individuals and groups who are geographically dispersed (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Part of being an effective instructor online facilitator and mentor involves understanding adult learning theory. Compared to teens, adults have particular needs and requirements that facilitate their learning. Malcolm Knowles pioneered the field of adult learning and concluded in his seminal work "The Adult Learner" by identifying the characteristics of adult learners that would be important for online instruction. Knowles (1984) identified rightly that adults are autonomous and self-directed. Adult learners need to be free to provide some direction for themselves. Online instructors should actively collaborate with adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators of learning. He concluded that adults have accumulated a wealth of life experiences and knowledge that includes career activities, family experiences, and previous education. Adult learners need to connect current learning situations to this past experience/ knowledge base.

Knowles identified adult learners as practical and goal-oriented. When adults enrolling in a course, they know why they are enrolling and what goal they want to achieve. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Finally, adults are relevancy-oriented. Online mentors and tutors should identify course objectives for adult participants before during the orientation.

Speck (1996) notes that the following important points of adult learning theory should be considered when professional development activities are designed; and supports the statements made by Malcolm Knowles. Speck acknowledges that adults will commit to learning when the goals and objectives are considered realistic and personally important to them. Real world application and relevance is important to the adult learner's personal and professional desires.

Therefore, professional development for adults need to give learners some control over the what, who, how, why, when, and where of their learning situation.

Creating an Online Learning Community

The idea that a community can be created in a virtual environment means fostering an atmosphere that facilitates the exploration of meaning, students feel safe and accepted. The virtual classroom should provide for involvement, interaction, and socialization, along with a business-like approach to achieving course objectives. Learners must be given frequent opportunities to confront new information and experiences in their search for meaning. These opportunities need to be provided in ways that allow students to do more than just receive information. Students must be allowed to confront new challenges using their past experience without the dominance of a teacher/giver of information. Creating a learning community includes the process of personal discovery; the methods used to encourage such personal discovery are highly personalized and adapted to the learner's own style and pace for learning.

According to Weimer (2002), manifestations of a "learner-centered" faculty member is one that focus their instructional efforts on achievement of student learning outcomes and acknowledge, value, and adapt to the diversity of student learning styles and needs. Experienced faculty members recognize and understand that no one instructional model is appropriate in every circumstance and they select approaches that maximize opportunities for student learning. Learner centered faculty optimize the opportunity for quality student-to-faculty, student-to-student and student-to-content interactions in support of learning objectives. They share information cooperatively with other faculty on approaches and innovations proven successful in enhancing student learning (Weimer, 2002). In addition, they provide adult students opportunities to use personal experience as a resource in learning. Active participation in the learning process is also a motivator for adult learners.

From the student's perspective, learner-centered approaches would appear to be a lot more work. According to Stephen Brookfield (1986), students who lack confidence in their abilities as learners will become filled with anxiety at the prospect of becoming responsible for decisions that might be wrong. Students who are not used to questions with no single, authority-approved right answer are fearful of being wrong. Learner-centered approaches involve losses. Moving from one stage to another requires a loss of certainty and the comfort that certainty brings.

Palloff and Pratt (1999) reported that some students' lack of self-confidence or intellectual immaturity may prevent their accepting responsibility for their own learning. The responsibilities are the same for those in the traditional classroom, and it may be easier for faculty members to identify student resistant to learner-centered approaches. The responsibilities of an online learner are not any different from that of a physical class, but there is a greater focus on the learner's ability to learn independently from the traditional classroom environment.

Some adult learning principles that would direct preparation to teach online would include the following: Adult learners what to know how course material and assignments relate to their current profession, future profession or, the improvement of current job functioning.

Learning should promote autonomy of the learner to encourage self-direction. This is an important principle because it implies that students must have an internal locus of control. Adults learn best when they feel a need to learn and when they feel they have a sense of responsibility for what, why, and how they learn active participation in the learning process improves content retention. Students should be given a variety of learning media to generate participation and ensure an approach that encompasses all learning styles (Knowles, 1986).

Faculty Responsibilities in the Virtual Classroom

The literature suggests that learners who are actively engaged in the learning process will be more likely to achieve success (Dewar, 1995; Hartman, 1995; Leadership Project, 1995). Once students are actively engaged in their own learning process they begin to feel empowered, a sense of ownership; and their personal ambition and self-motivation levels rise. A key to getting (and keeping) students actively involved in learning lies in understanding learning style preferences, which can positively or negatively influence a student's performance (Birkey & Rodman, 1995; Dewar, 1995; Hartman, 1995). It has also been shown that adjusting teaching materials to meet the needs of a variety of learning styles benefits all students (Agogino & Hsi 1995; Kramer-Koehler, Tooney, & Beke, 1995).

Faculty should advise students that the course is private, accessible to only the faculty, students, and technical support staff. The faculty must inform students of any non-affiliated persons granted access to the course (e.g. observers). Prior to anyone not affiliated with the course participating in or observing the course, they must obtain permission from the faculty facilitating the course. Faculty must maintain student privacy if they grant non-course participants access to the course (e.g. observers or guests of the course) (Verduin & Clark, 1991).

Concluding Remarks

No student identity can be released without prior written permission. Faculty must request and students must agree in advance if student-created information or work will be used outside of the virtual classroom (e.g. publications). Faculty's management of students' academic information must conform to the guidelines of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). FERPA is a federal law designed to protect the privacy of a student's education records. The faculty should collect the least amount of personally identifiable student data necessary to meet legitimate institutional purposes. Faculty will advise the students that names of students registered in the course are listed in the course roster. Students have control over the release of any additional personal information and can set privacy ratings on who has access (Hartman, 1995).

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