Merging Business and Adult Education to Create an Online MBA Degree Program: Concern over Sustaining the Andragogical Approach

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Abstract: Merging business and education models for transformative change is possible and desirable, though not a natural fit (Isenberg, 2009). Further, sustaining the transformative change requires a leader who is educated in the practice and principles of andragogy—“the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1970, p. 43). A private university in the Midwest is adding an MBA online program starting in Fall 2010 based on its traditional program. The School of Business sought professional development in applying andragogical principles to online learning. The MBA online professors participated in an 8-week online course on the topic. The practitioner concern is that although the new MBA online courses may somewhat apply andragogical principles because of the MBA professor development, the andragogical focus may not be sustainable because those managing the program may not be educated in the practice and principles of andragogy. A sample of postings by the MBA professors show positive changes in knowledge, understanding, attitude, value, and interest in the topic, but there is concern, too, that skill may not be developed in applying the new learning. Perhaps an 8-week professional development course is not enough to create transformative sustainable change to a new MBA online program.

Introduction

At the MWR2P 2009 conference in Chicago, I presented research on merging business and education models for transformational change—a lived experience about a struggling community hospital that added an andragogical process to the preexisting unsuccessful business process to create and sustain transformational change. The new employee driven change cycle that I facilitated as Director of Transformation was discovered to parallel a learning process (as perceived by the learner) toward self-direction (Taylor, 1986), and a business process called Six Sigma’s DMAIC (define, measure, analysis, improvement, control) for quality improvement created for manufacturing by Bill Smith at Motorola in 1986. An important finding was that the president who was responsible for creating the change was unable to sustain the change. A new president is now managing the change and the hospital is thriving. The first leader was the visionary but the second leader was a creative leader (Knowles, 1990) characterized by “releasing the energy of others” (p. 183) and was educated in and practiced the principles of adult learning—prerequisites for managing the change process (Isenberg, 2007). This grounded theory study resulted in a new merged model and a new theory. The theory was that merging business and education models can result in transformational change, but sustaining change requires empowered and creative leadership (Knowles).

One year later, I embarked on a similar experience in a very different setting. As a faculty member teaching in the new andragogy specialty emphasis area EdD program at a large private university in the Midwest, I was invited to educate the School of Business professors this spring/summer in applying adult learning principles to online learning as they create an online
MBA (Masters of Business Administration) degree program – the university’s first online degree based on a long-standing successful face-to-face program. In other words, the courses will be the same, only online. The business school’s goal was to begin teaching online MBA courses in fall-spring 2010. The concern is that although the online MBA program may be designed with an andragogical focus as a result of four MBA online professors taking the summer course for credit and four more MBA online professors auditing the course, the andragogical focus may not be sustainable because the online learning process will be managed by the School of Business with a dean that may not represent empowered and “creative leadership” (Knowles, 1990).

**The Importance of the Concern to both Research and Practice of Adult, Community, and Continuing Education**

One of my 2009 research findings was that merging business and adult education to create change is critical but not a natural fit. Online degree programs are very popular among students and universities because of their convenience and efficiency. The challenge for a new online degree program that addresses the needs of the adult learner is “not simply to provide teaching that is as good as in the traditional classroom but to use the instructional tools and methods in ways that achieve better or different learning outcomes” (Latchem in Carr-Chellman Ed., 2005, p. 190). Universities enlightened by the research on improving adult learning that apply andragogical principles to the design of online degree programs but do not apply andragogical principles to the management of an online degree program may not achieve better or different learning outcomes. Such a program may end up being something very different if managed by a traditional education leader.

**Various Approaches to Deal with the Concerns**

There has been a natural fascination with the topic of andragogy among the business professors that began over a year ago when I facilitated a voluntary university wide faculty development session on the adult learner. Two business professors attended and saw the application of the learning to their school. Then, one of the same professors took the first two courses in the andragogy emphasis specialty area EdD program last fall. Interest in andragogy has increased and the program is growing. Meanwhile, the business professors are aware of my published research on applying andragogical principles to online learning and said “we think you can teach us something that we need to know” as they begin to design courses for their new program. As a result, I met weekly with the business faculty as part of a task force to plan the program and have agreed to continue to meet with the task force for the next several months as the team finishes the online course development and the program is implemented. Initially, they asked me to conduct a “one-day training session” for the MBA online staff to learn about the andragogical approach, but were agreeable to enroll business faculty in an 8-week online summer course titled Applying Andragogical Principles to Online Learning in which the final project is to design or design and create an andragogical online learning experience. At the time of this writing, the 8-week course is over. Course artifacts in the form of MBA online professor posts will be shared for discussion.

**Discussion of the Conference Theme – Linking Theory and Practice**

If the new online MBA program has an andragogical design, it should have an andragogical leader to manage it, so it does not slip back to being a traditional program. But, perhaps a one-course learning experience for business professors and an andragogically designed
online program is not enough. Perhaps university structure should be addressed to change the role of andragogy faculty from resource to consultant, not seeking to have power over other university programs, but instead seeking to have power with other university programs to improve adult learning.

**The 8-week Course**

**Description of the Course**

The 8-week online course was held in June and July 2010. There were eight MBA online program professors who participated – four audited the course and four took the course for credit. Other participant backgrounds included public school teaching and administrating, university teaching and administrating, librarian services, mathematics, public school finance, nursing school, and the military. The total number of participants was 14, 12 at the doctoral degree level and two at the master’s degree level.

The course was based on the principles of andragogy and the syllabus was underpinned with the Knowles (1973) five adult learner assumptions: (a) increasingly self-directed, (b) learner experience is a rich resource for learning, (c) learning readiness is the result of developmental tasks of social roles, (d) need for immediacy of application, and (e) learning is problem-centered. The learning objectives were created from the six adult learner competencies: knowledge, understanding, skill, attitude, value, and attitude (Knowles, 1980, p. 240) and the required activities were each matched to one of the learner competencies – weekly postings, leading a reading assignment discussion, giving an online presentation on a topic of interest related to the course, and designing or designing and creating an andragogical online learning experience. The learning process was based on Knowles (1984, 1995) eight elements of an andragogical model: (a) preparing the learner, (b) establishing a climate conducive to learning, (c) having a mechanism for mutual planning, (d) designing their own learning plan, (e) helping the learners carry out their own learning plans, and (f) involving the learners in evaluating their learning. Participants were called course colleagues and the learning was carried out using individual learning contracts. My challenge to the course participants was to “not simply provide online teaching that is as good as in the traditional classroom but to use the instructional tools and methods in ways that achieve better or different learning outcomes” (Latchem 2005, p. 190).

Three elements of the course were potentially new and different for participants who had never experienced an online course or who had experienced only a traditional online course. First, participants were only required to post once in response to the weekly assigned reading discussion strand, which were facilitated by course participants. My intent was to avoid what participants could perceive as busy work. I did not respond to every student post to avoid being the dominant voice, but responded to each student with an equal number of posts. Just as in a face-to-face classroom, I sought to be effective by not being the “sage on the stage” but instead the “guide on the side” (Zemsky & Massy, as cited in Carr-Chellman, Ed., 2005, p. 247) jumping in when I had an opportunity to expand, clarify, or add to an important topic raised by a participant. A second course element that was potentially new was my trust in the participants to contribute in their own unique way as a result of the course assignments, my instructions and feedback, and resources, without telling them what to do. And third, participants were involved in the mutual planning of their own learning through learning contracts and in re-evaluating their own learning.
Participant Postings

Participant postings provide fodder for discussing the practitioner concern regarding sustaining an andragogical approach in applying the andragogical principles to an online MBA program. A research study has not been conducted on the results of this course, but I will share some MBA online professor posts that may provide some structure on which to build a discussion. I modeled what I was teaching, which was to foster course participant self-directed learning. Therefore, using Taylor’s (1986) four phases of the journey toward becoming self-directed as perceived by the learner (disorientation, exploration, reorganization, and equilibrium) seemed like a logical way to organize the posts of the MBA online professors as they progressed through the 8-week online course.

**Weeks 1 and 2 – Disorientation**

In the first few weeks of the course, the MBA online professors were learning about andragogy for the first time from the required reading assignments. There seemed to be a disorientation tone to their posts (Taylor’s [1986] Phase 1 of the journey toward becoming self-directed). Here are a few examples from MBA online professors from weeks 1 and 2:

- “I have been teaching college for 32 years, including graduate level teaching for 29 years. In all that time, just about everything I have learned about teaching has come from either direct experience or from comparing notes with colleagues. In common with most American higher-ed academics whose careers grew outside schools of Education, I have never had a course in how to teach. . . .

- “I am amazed at the fact that all of the information I have read in the foreword . . . thus far seems like a foreign language to me. I am embarrassed to admit that I have never taken any education classes.”

- “One of my concerns regarding . . . self directed learning theory is a fear of being criticized for not teaching, not providing value, etc. . . . I’m curious about the evidence that indicates that students expect to be more self directed, than teacher directed - I suspect there are many adult learners who want to be directed and influenced by the teacher’s thoughts. Might some of these students flounder or feel like they’ve been ripped off, if a purist approach is taken? ”

- “We do not have captive audiences that will read and respond as we think they will during their self directed learning experiences because they may be concurrently chatting, my spacing, . . . while listening to music, texting, surfing and emailing – constant information overload, while taking our courses. . . . This is a completely different paradigm for most who know controllable the factors of a physical classroom.”

**Weeks 3 and 4 – Exploration**

In weeks 3 and 4 of the course, the tone of the MBA online professors seemed to change to more of an exploration tone (Taylor’s [1986] Phase 2) – a tone more open to possibilities. Here are a few posts from weeks 3 and 4:

- “The self direction should apply for pursuing those individualized contract items.”

- “As facilitators of learning, how do we encourage the students in our classes to learn enough from the class and make it worthwhile if they do not have interest in the topic?”

- “I guess environment does matter, but I think it could be argued at any level that if someone doesn’t want to learn, they’re not going to.”
“Relevance. This is the key. . . The art and science of teaching includes finding the common ground to make any topic relevant to the student.”

Weeks 5 and 6 - Reorganization

Taylor’s (1986) reorganization phase of the journey of the learner (as perceived by the learner) toward self-direction is when there is a new understanding that emerges, a sense of resolving the issues that surfaced in the disorientation phase. Here are some MBA online professor posts from weeks 5 and 6:

- “When it comes to concepts, as instructors, we are all probably good at setting the right context for our concepts and applications – but, it may be more challenging since you won’t readily be able to conduct conversations or read body language or facial impressions . . . More frequent assessment and follow-up will probably be needed.
- “Online could be better for the students who have a more difficult time grasping the material, but it seems that several barriers will have to be overcome.”
- “I am beginning to come around with respect to my own feelings about online education. On a larger scale, I think there will be a lot of prejudice to overcome, for a long time and especially at higher levels.
- “I think that allowing the students to learn at their own pace will be a benefit for both the advanced learners and those that struggle with the material.”
- “I think that once the adult learners see that the material is relevant regardless of where they fit in their company’s organization chart, they will want to learn and master the material.”

Week 7 and 8 – Equilibrium

Taylor (1986) argued that “sharing the discovery” is the transition that leads up to the final phase of the journey toward becoming self directed, equilibrium, when the learner’s new perspective is applied and refined. A few MBA online professor posts in the final two weeks of the course seem to indicate a consolidation of course material with less emotion.

- “This course has made me more empathetic to the students as well as opened my mind to more approaches for them. I will try to build in more self directed learning and have more trust in my learners.”
- “I absolutely now know how much I do not know about andragogical principles, which means I have a lot more to learn. I hate to say that I found out how ignorant I am, but it is the truth.”
- “I think I’ve found out that I’m not as open-minded as I may have intended to be, especially with regard to adult learning. In a review of my Internet learning project, I am still wrestling with the notion of trust and perhaps self-direction. I do understand and appreciate the concepts, but I think that putting them into practice, either from wanting to conduct an efficient class, or where I’m wanting to ensure that the student is acting with integrity, i.e., when it comes to assessments, or being self directed enough to learn the fundamentals of the course, as I see them. You could say that I am more sensitive to the principles, but still not living and breathing it.”

Conclusion

A sampling of posts from MBA online professor over the 8-week course, Applying Andragogical Principles to Internet Learning seems to show movement in the following
competencies: knowledge, understanding, attitude, value, and interest. Skill in applying the concepts is not well developed. The pattern of the posts seems to follow Taylor’s four phases toward becoming a self directed learner. The practitioner concern is that one course may not be enough to cause sustainable change in the behaviors of the MBA online professors toward their application of andragogical principles in what they do and how they do it. Additionally, though the Dean of the School of Business asked the MBA online professors to take my course, he has not taken the course. I will continue to work with the business professors for the next several months to finalize the implementation of their new MBA online program, but there remains a concern that andragogical changes to the program can not be sustained without an andragogical leader managing it.

References


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