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ABSTRACT

The population of college students contains an increasing number of students who are over 25 years old. Therefore, more adult-focused courses in communication are needed because adults tend to be interested in communication problems rather than communication subjects and value learning that makes use of their experiences. One model that fulfills those requirements and could be used as the basis for curriculum change is the Adkins Life Skills Structured Inquiry learning model. This model consists of four stages: (1) Stimulus Stage, in which students are stimulated to learn by a provocative presentation; (2) Evocation Stage, in which goals for the curriculum are established; (3) Objective Inquiry Stage, in which students explore what outside sources know about their subjects; and (4) Application Stage, which allows students to evaluate their behavior to determine if objectives have been achieved. Two prerequisites are required for instituting the program. First, the curriculum director must evaluate the target population. Second, the instructor must maintain a nonthreatening classroom climate. The program will allow students to develop their skills in ways most valuable to them. (DF)

UNDERGRADUATES AS ADULT COMMUNICATORS:

A LIFE SKILLS MODEL FOR CURRICULUM CHANGE

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A B S T R A C T

Because the demographics relating to the age of college undergraduates is changing, more adult-focused courses in Communication are needed. Adults are interested in communication problems rather than communication subjects and value learning that makes use of their experience. The Life Skills Structured Inquiry learning model, designed by Adkins, fulfills these requirements and is offered as the basis for curriculum change. Use of the model restores teaching to its place in human resource development.

It is customary, when asked to describe the contemporary American college student, for faculty to begin with the obvious: "They're young. A little naive about realities (having spent too much time in school). Of course, most of them are aware that to succeed in today's business or professional world requires an investment of the one commodity they have plenty of ...time".

If this composite contains some verity, it also is applicable to a declining percentage of college students. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that enrollment rates for students under the age of 25 are falling, and the loss will be offset by an increase in the number of older enrollees. The Center projects that by 1990 older students will account for 47% of the expected 12.1 million total college student population (Frankel & Gerald, 1982).

The change in the character of American higher education comes as no surprise to the American Council on Education which notified college faculty as early as 1969 of the shift in the university "from an institution primarily serving youth to one serving at least equally adults and community" (Knowles, 1969).

Despite these prognostications, academic departments in institutions of higher learning continue to demonstrate a reluctance to incorporating adult-focused courses into the main body of their educational activities. As such, they have chosen to ignore the learning needs of a sizable portion of

the student body. Older students presently enrolled as undergraduates in senior colleges face the option of participating in classes directed to the learning styles of their younger colleagues or forego course credit by registering in adult classes housed outside the academic department. As to the remainder of the student population, they continue to be the recipients of a pedagogic tradition that commenced with grade school.

Because the changing demography in the age of college students demands a reordering of priorities, this paper reiterates the characteristics associated with youth-oriented and adult-oriented learning styles and offers the Adkins Structured Inquiry learning model for consideration as a means of developing adult-focused curricula in Communication.

Malcolm S. Knowles, the respected authority on adult education, jarred the college community in 1968 by announcing that whatever faculty knew about teaching they learned, "either from being taught as children, or having been taught to teach children (Knowles, 1968, p. 351). Since then the distinctive differences in the methodology for teaching children (pedagogy) and for teaching adults (andragogy) has been the subject of considerable research. In our own field, speech communication scholars have urged the adoption of andragogical principles to benefit particular college programs (Engleberg, 1984; Fink, 1982; Schuetz, 1980, 1982; Smeltzer & Arnold, 1982). However, if all college students are thought of as adult and

we begin to translate this concern into curriculum change, then the contrasts between pedagogy and andragogy are a matter for investigation and fundamental to any faculty retraining effort. The differences emerge in three distinct patterns.

First and foremost is the concept of dependency. Young students are conditioned to believe they are absolved from the responsibility of determining the direction of course content. The planning and distribution of information and the evaluation of their performance competencies, they believe, are the sole domain of the traditional authority figure, the teacher, who is also the expert on the subject. Older students, on the other hand, expect a certain amount of autonomy; either to be given the opportunity to determine the way in which the course can serve their needs or to be given the responsibility for carrying out their own learning by alternating the learner/teacher roles. They are less subject-oriented, in that learning is connoted to mean, "How is this material applicable to a problem in my life"? In addition, mature students feel secure enough to assess the competencies they don't have with those they do have. Given the chance to view his or her performance behavior, especially in contrast with others, the older student will cite both strengths and weaknesses in the performance.

A second pattern to emerge in the difference between pedagogy and andragogy is faculty attitudes toward the learner's experience. Because college students are thought of as young, instructors have a tendency to devalue the students' experience.

Knowing this, youthful learners come to think of their experience as something that occurs to their families or in their social communities--- events external to themselves. Adult students build their identities on the basis of what has happened to them and what they have accomplished. Moreover, they feel rejected if their experience is discounted by the instructor's educational plan.

To value college students as adults, therefore, requires a movement away from the lecture-style transmittal techniques employed in teaching to use of a laboratory-style instructional design. The learner's experience is thought to be better employed in case study method, simulation exercises, community action projects, plus a variety of group process techniques (Knowles, 1968).

A third distinction occurs when adults and youth find themselves in an educational situation. A remarkable reversal in their time perspective takes place. In most aspects of life, we are inclined to associate instant gratification with the young and postponement of gratification with the mature. In regard to education, however, young people are accustomed to accumulating subject material that may eventually prove useful in some future time and place. Encouraged to think of college as a preparation for adult life, the young postpone application of their studies until after graduation. In contrast, the adult students' reaction to learning is one of immediate application; course work satisfies a pressing

need, is used to solve a problem or to activate their behavior. In all likelihood, some problem of inadequacy prompted admission to college and the function of education, according to most adults, is a means to compensate for these shortcomings. When designing curricula for this age group, therefore, educators usually begin with the concerns learners bring into the classroom. (Adkins, 1984; Knowles, 1970).

One method for delivering a learning system based on the concepts of andragogy just discussed, is the four-stage, Structured Inquiry learning model developed by Winthrop R. Adkins, director of the R&D Center for Life Skills and Human Resource Development at Teachers College, Columbia University. The model, originally designed for use within a psychoeducational framework, provides a series of pre-planned but open-ended structured learning experiences that can be implemented by faculty without massive retraining. Although the term "life skills" has come to be associated with a variety of popular educational programs, Adkins uses it to describe "the kind of behavior-based psychological learning needed to help people cope with predictable developmental tasks" (Adkins, 1984, p. 46). Adapted by this writer, the Structured Inquiry learning model formed the basis of a unit on Employment Interviewing as part of a curriculum in Business and Professional Communication. The model's four-stage design breaks problems down into sharply defined sequences:

Stage One: Stimulus Stage. The students' readiness to

learn is stimulated by means of a provocative, emotionally-charged presentation that demonstrates the communication problem. A video cassette tape depicting adults confronting difficult situations is generally used, but the stimulus can take the form of a classroom sociodrama or some other role-playing devise exhibiting a critical incident. The object of this stage is to provide a life script that will increase the personal involvement of each learner and to provoke discussion.

Stage Two: Evocation Stage. The role of educator as professional facilitator is essential once discussion is initiated. By means of a pre-planned pattern of questions, the educator attempts to get the respondents to identify the critical problems presented in the stimulus, to project themselves into the same situation, and to disclose descriptions of their similar experiences. Whenever possible, learners are encouraged to suggestion solutions or to raise areas that require further inquiry. As comments are made, they are recorded on flips charts and later retrieved by the group as a system of learning priorities are developed. In this way, goals for the curriculum are mutually established based upon the amount of "self-induced dissatisfaction" participants feel coupled with a "clear sense of the direction for their self-improvement" (Knowles, 1970, p. 42).

Stage Three: Objective Inquiry Stage. Having probed the limits of their own knowledge, the group is ready to explore what outside sources know about the problem and the suggestions

for solving it. With the educator as resource person, the group makes use of printed materials, audiotapes, questionnaires, simulation exercises, 'live' or videotaped modeling illustrations, and other media to expand their knowledge. In this stage practice exercises are diagnosed and new concepts are either challenged or confirmed (Adkins, 1984).

Stage Four: Application Stage. Provisions for helping the learner test out his or her newly acquired knowledge and skills are an essential part of the model. By engaging in role-playing simulation or in actual situations, adults can evaluate their behavior to determine if their objectives have been achieved. Where possible, videotaped performances that can be reviewed and rated by both educator and learner, provide the feedback and the self-diagnosis required.

Utilization of the Adkins Structured Inquiry learning model requires two prerequisites. Prior to running the program, the curriculum developer is required to conduct what Adkins refers to as a "reconnaissance" of the target population (Adkins, 1984, p. 49). Using a series of sensitive probes, the areas troubling the participants are uncovered and categorized for possible inclusion into the syllabus design. Once the most pressing needs are pinpointed, planning the sequential tasks and the materials required for use in the model can be initiated.

In addition to the reconnaissance, a second prerequisite involves the qualifications of the life skills educator. Throughout all four stages of the model the educator is re-

quired to "maintain a cohesive, supportive learning group and a nonjudgmental climate in which learners have the freedom to express their feelings, to ask questions, to disagree, and tc make mistakes" (Adkins, 1984, p. 49). In return for their ability to relate to the target population, the Structured Inquiry model offers faculty a tested, reliable, pre-designed learning/teaching system which, once established in a curriculum, can take the burden off lesson planning and free the instructor for developing more effective educational relationships with their students. Departments of Communication should welcome the opportunity to innovate an adult-based curriculum for undergraduates that produces so many rewards.

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