Applying Adult Learning and Development Theories to Educational Practice

Richard S. Baskas

Walden University

May 22, 2011

Abstract

A study was conducted to determine the degree of correlation that adult learning theories and

adult developmental theories have with educational practice. Two adult learning theories,

Malcolm Knowles' phase theories and Daniel Levinson's developmental theories, were

researched to determine their relevance to three components of a nontraditional Doctor of

Education program (lecture/discussions, scholarly papers, and reflections). Research was

conducted through Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and six articles were

retrieved. A literature review was conducted to determine their application in the subject

material. Research revealed that both adult learning theories were prevalent in correlating the

components that were required of the program.

Applying Adult Learning and Development Theories to Educational Practice

Post secondary educational programs, traditional or nontraditional, are comprised of many components (only three will be discussed, lectures/discussions, scholarly papers, and reflections) that are developed to enhance a student's education. The importance of these components can be justified as they relate to two adult learning theories which provide an in depth connection to student-centered learning. Malcolm Knowles, a phase theorist, continued the work of Alexander Kapp's initial definition of andragogy as the "normal process by which adults engage in continuing education" (Abela, 2009, p. 11). Knowles, according to his own theory, assumed that adults are independent and self directing, have experience, have integrated learning into their daily lives, are more interested in problem solving, and are more motivated by internal drives than from external drives (Abela, 2009; Hines, 2006; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Strange, 2009). Daniel Levinson, a developmental theorist, developed 10 development stages (Allen & Wergin, 2009; Levinson, 1986) or "seasons" of what adults move through (Allen & Wergin, 2009, p. 5; Levinson, 1986, p. 3). These theories will determine their effectiveness as they will be compared to the four components of the online Doctor of Education program.

Online Doctor of Education

An online program shares some of the same characteristics as traditional schooling, but its services are offered as distant learning through the use of technology in the absence of the physical classroom. This program provides a medium where instructions are outlined in detail to direct students on how to write and deliver lectures/discussions, write scholarly papers, and write reflections. This service is available for students' convenience at any time. Due to its wide

availability as an online curriculum, this would motivate full-time working students who wish to return to school.

Developmental Theory

The online doctorate program most likely would attract those students who are, as Levinson (1986) described, in the early adulthood era, between the ages of 17 and 45. Adults at this age range most likely have already achieved their post secondary and graduate level degrees, and have started a career and family. These students have already been bombarded by their own passions and ambitions and demands of their families, communities and society (Levinson, 1986). When adults transition from the ages of 40 to 45, they are about to partake in a developmental task to becoming more compassionate, more reflective, and more judicious (Levinson, 1986).

Phase Theory

Abela's research (2009) suggested, from Knowles' adult phase theory, that since not all adult learners are equally intrinsically motivated, the need arises for a variety of learning strategies from teacher-directed to student-directed. As there is a variety of students involved in online instruction, instructors need to be flexible in being sensitive to students' needs. Instructors would need to perform a needs assessment to determine what type of instruction to perform and when to perform these instructions (Abela, 2009). Upon assessment, instructors can then begin fully involve their students in class activities.

<div align="center">

Lectures/Discussions

</div>

Developmental Theory

This program is designed to provide more for a discussion forum than for a lecture forum for students to develop scholarly discourses among students and instructors. Instructions provide

a means of how to perform research and discussions to facilitate these discourses. Instructors provide an open-ended discussion question for students to provide researched based answers. Students read textbooks, provided for the course, according to assigned topics, and research articles to accompany and further enrich the discussions. Instructors monitor all discussions and, with additional student input, also participate by asking deeper opened-ended questions to further these discussions. According to Levinson (1996), all students and instructors consist of personality attributes, social roles, and biological characteristics that they convey to the class. Levinson (1986) defined this as life structure, an underlying pattern or design of a person's life at a given time. He revealed that these components further develop to make what relationships may exist between individuals in class or between a person (e.g. the instructor) and the class as a whole.

Phase Theory

As this would be the first time students begin learning online, they may question themselves as to how they may react to other students and the instructor, especially if it is not face to face. According to Peyton (editor, 1998) (as cited by Abela, 2009), most adult learners who are new to the program require the motivation (encouragement and empathy) of the instructor for effective learning to take place. According to Abela (2009), Knowles' theory stated that for an online doctorate program to succeed, it has to be assumed that all individuals within the class would have common knowledge of respect for each other and for the instructor. Since respect is the most important component in classroom learning, it is, therefore, a mechanism that is required for a safe environment. If respect is continuously shown, motivation will mostly likely be encouraged accompanied by continued student participation, resulting in

possible increased likelihood of success. With increased discussion participation, students are able to feel more confident in performing scholarly research.

Scholarly Papers

Phase Theory

Common among all nontraditional scholastic adult learners is their life experiences (busy work, family and personal schedules). These experiences are mostly used in composing scholarly work where students discuss issues in their current practice or what is used in researched practice (Abela, 2009). Students are asked to compare certain aspects of their lives to that of the doctorate program so that concepts of adult learning are understood. Since students work online with each other, they are occasionally asked to evaluate other's work so that ideas can be exchanged and redefined (Himes, 2006). Students produce their own evaluation forms, critique other's work, and provide constructive feedback that could offer additional insight.

Developmental Theory

For nontraditional students, writing professionally for the first time can pose as a challenge. Individuals who are stagnant at a particular development stage may require assistance to help work through that stage before they are able to learn anything new (Allen & Wergin, 2009). An online doctorate program provides the advantage of writing services for those students who need the additional help. Submitting scholarly work to be critiqued by others proves that these writing services can be trusted. As Abela's research (2009) previously indicated in Knowles' stage theory, adult learners may eventually show respect for those individuals who had been involved in their adult developmental era. This relationship may develop professionally between the student and agency which may lead to academic success.

Upon completion of discussions and coursework, students begin reflecting on their progress and its applications to their professional careers and lives.

Reflection

Phase Theory

To increase motivation for themselves in continuing their educational career, it is important for students to reflect upon their own learning process (Abela, 2009; Himes, 2006). In defining their professional writing and research skills, there are opportunities for adult learners to reflect upon how their careers and educational goals coincide. Strang (2009) discovered that when students reflected, they became involved in meta-learning; they learned how to learn through reflection which is a critical andragogical principle especially for doctorate students. Mezirow's research (1991, p. 6) (as cited by Strange, 2009) suggested that as students reflected, they assess or reassess assumptions they discovered in their research, and become transformed when they find that these assumptions have become distorted, inauthentic or invalid.

Developmental Theory

For nontraditional adult learners between the ages of 40 and 45 returning to school, researchers (Allen & Wergin, 2009; Levinson, 1986) consider these adults in the midlife transition phase. These adults more than likely would prefer a program that will help them to reflect on where they have been and where they want to go next. By reflecting on what they have already done in their life and what they can do in their future they become less of a dictator due to inner conflicts and external demands, and become more genuinely loving of themselves and others. Without reflection, their lives become increasingly invaluable or stagnant (Levinson, 1986).

Conclusion

With all the components (lectures/discussions, scholarly papers and reflections) comprising an online Doctor of Education program, nontraditional, professional adult learners are able to take advantage of these services to continue their education. Developmental and phase theories research has shown support for these components. Adult learners are able to work with the class at their convenience with arranged lecture and discussions, and assignments. Instructors and available writing services assist students in improving their writing skills for their scholarly papers. As adult learners have accumulated a wealth of experience and education, their work encompasses research and reflection of past experiences.

References

Abela, J. (2009, March). Adult learning theories and medical education: A review. *Malta*

   Medical Journal. 21(1), 11-18. Retrieved from http://www.um.edu.mt/umms/mmj/

   PDF/234.pdf

Allen, S. J. & Wergin, J. F. (2009, Winter). Leadership and adult development theories:

   Overviews and overlaps. *Leadership Review. 9*, 3-17. Retrieved from http://www.leader-

   shipreview.org/2009winter/article1.pdf

Hines, M. (2006, Spring). A day at the SPA (Successful Practices of Andragogy): How to use the

   ELCC standards and adult learning theory to sustain a "self-as-principal" voice in

   principal preparation students. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*. *3*(1), 44-50.

   Retrieved from http:// www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/AASA_-

   Journal_of_Scholordship_and_Practice/Spring2006_FINAL.pdf

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. G., & Swanson, R. A. (1998). A theory of adult learning: Andragogy.

   The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resources

   development. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing Company. Retrieved from http://www.get-

    cited.org/pub/100321065

Levinson, S. J. (1986, January). A conception of adult development. *American Psychologist.*

   41(1), 3-13. Retrieved from http://www.imamu.edu.sa/topics/IT/IT5206/A%20-

   conceptions%20of%20Adult%20Development.pdf

Strang, K. D. (2009, in press). Measuring online learning approach and mentoring preferences

   of international doctorate students. *International Journal of Educational Research*,

   1-13. doi: 10.1016/j.ijer.2009.11.002