

# **THE OPPRESSION OF ADULT LEARNERS: THE IMPACT OF TRADITIONAL PEDAGOGY, BANKING THEORY, AND UNIVERSITY BUDGET CONSTRAINTS ON INTERNATIONAL LEARNERS**

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**ABSTRACT:** Current higher education practices do not sufficiently address the needs of international adult learners. With higher education's emphasis on pedagogical assumptions, adult learners are both isolated and oppressed by higher education. This article focuses on the following: assumptions of pedagogy versus andragogy, oppression of adult learners through banking theory and hegemony, and budget constraints that create an inhospitable environment for international adult learners. The author offers suggestions to address current issues in higher education using experiential learning, an andragogical model, intentional professional development for professors, and deliberate classroom experiences.

*Keywords:* andragogy, pedagogy, banking theory, hegemony, oppression, international

Higher education is experiencing a crisis of character. With decreases in state allocations, many institutions are forced to find alternative sources of funding. Over the past ten years, state funding for higher education has decreased by nearly nine billion dollars (Mitchell, Leachman & Masterson, 2017). This decrease has led to a much more business-focused approach with strategies such as cost-benefit analysis, centralized approaches to budgets, and a focus on doing more with less. Mandates from the federal government such as Title IX, FERPA, HIPPA, and OSHA continue to affect higher education. These mandates are costly to implement and stretch higher education budgets. The University of Virginia measured the overall cost of unfunded mandates and found they spent nearly 20 million dollars to stay in compliance (Kapsidelis, 2017). With a focus on cutting costs, departments find themselves with less money and have moved to cost-cutting measures. In addition, higher education tuition is increasing. The average tuition and fees for in-state tuition at a public university has increased over 237% in the past 20 years (Boyington, 2017). To save money, full-time professors are being replaced with adjuncts and class sizes have increased. With these changes, many higher education institutions are exploring internationally to subsidize their programs. International students are considered excellent sources of revenue by many institutions. However, with this increased focus on international learners, one must ask, are higher education institutions aware of the diverse needs of international learners? Do institutions acknowledge the difference between traditional and post-traditional international students? What is the educational price that international learners pay to accommodate the growing budget constraints of the institution? Finally, do international students gain more resources on campus despite the increased tuition? Adult learners are an ever-increasing college population. The last census showed "4 out of 10 undergraduate students are over 24 and enrolled on a part-time basis" (Wyatt, 2011, p. 1). This changing dynamic for undergraduate students indicates a rising trend of adult learners as the new

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face of higher education. With differing needs than traditional students, adult learners benefit from access, but are they profiting from education? This author explores the necessary changes higher education needs to make regarding budget constraints, pedagogy, banking theory, and the needs of international adult learners.

### **Pedagogy Versus Andragogy: Assumptions**

Higher education systems have historically catered to traditional students with their use of pedagogical frameworks. Though a pedagogical framework has many applications, the assumptions of a traditional student's needs are different from the needs of adult learners. Malcolm Knowles (1980) is well known for his work with Andragogy and provides a cohesive framework for understanding the difference between pedagogy and andragogy. Knowles points to four assumptions that show how pedagogical frameworks oppress adult learners. These four areas are outlined below and include Concept of the Learner, Role of the Learners' Experience, Readiness to Learn, and Orientation to Learning. By understanding the differences in assumptions, higher education can become more intentional in their delivery of education both locally and internationally and support adult learners throughout their time in higher education.

#### **Concept of the Learner**

Knowles (1980) states that there are four assumptions of andragogy that differ from pedagogy. The first is the "Concept of the learner" (Knowles, 1980, p.43). Traditional students differ from adult learners in their independence. For traditional students, the role of teacher and student is a dependent one. Traditional students rely on the teacher to determine "what is to be learned, when it is to be learned, how it is to be learned, and if it has been learned" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). The teacher designs the entire process for the student and takes full responsibility for the student. In this way, the student is dependent on the teacher for everything. Adult learners, in contrast, have very different needs from the teacher. Unlike traditional students, adult learners "have a deep psychological need to be generally self-directing" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43), and this need changes the role of the teacher from controlling the education to supporting the learner. This difference in support is essential. Merriam and Bierema (2014) explain, "Second, there should be a psychological climate of mutual respect and trust and an atmosphere of collaboration" (p. 48). The emphasis on collaboration is the main aspect missing from many higher education classrooms. Increases in classroom sizes and a focus on large lecture hall styles may suit traditional students' needs through passive lecture but will not fulfill international adult learners' needs to be self-directed. In 2011, the Gensler Research Institute conducted roundtable exercises with students to explore pedagogy and class size. The study found that "the one-size-fits-all lecture hall is becoming obsolete" (Burke-Vigeland et al., 2011, p. 1). Lack of flexibility and minimal one-on-one interactions were some of the most significant cited concerns for students, and as we've seen with the increase in adult learners, the traditional mold no longer benefits many students. The difference in a learner's dependent or independent concept dramatically affects the needed delivery method of education for a learner.

## **Role of the Learner's Experience**

A student's experience outside the classroom can heavily affect education inside the classroom. The ability to synthesize information related to a student's previous experiences with a concept can speed up the learning process. Unfortunately, many traditional pedagogical frameworks do not account for student experiences. Knowles (1980) explains the low value of the learner's experience in pedagogy, which leads to a focus on "...transmittal techniques-lecture, assigned readings, AV presentations" (p. 44). These techniques rarely use a student's experience to help inform learning. For international students, this emphasis on passive learning can be devastating to the learning process because it does not allow prior knowledge to be shared in the classroom. In contrast, andragogy places much more emphasis on the need for adult learners to share and use their experiences. The method of education also changes for andragogy with a focus on "experiential techniques – laboratory experiments, discussion, problem-solving cases, simulation exercises, field experience, and the like" (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). The emphasis of andragogy on experiential learning rubs against the traditional model still used in many universities today and prevents adult learners from staying engaged and gaining the knowledge necessary to be successful students. Gibbs (1981) detailed twenty reasons that lectures are still used despite their ineffectiveness. As with assigned readings, he argues that the evidence is clear:

However, many of the clearest findings are easy enough to observe in one's own teaching: students' lack of attention after half an hour, the inadequacy of their notes, their poor memory for the content of the lecture evident in subsequent tutorials and their even poorer understanding (Gibbs, 1981, p. 7).

Despite these explicitly documented issues, ignorance about the weaknesses of lectures continues as it is still a preferred style at many universities. Ignorance of preferred educational techniques extends to many transmittal techniques, which continue to place international students in a passive role, denying them the ability to share and use their experiences in the classroom.

## **Readiness to Learn**

As noted, traditional pedagogy and andragogy differ in how they view student independence and experience. These differences in assumption continue as we look at why students learn. Pedagogy assumes that a student is ready to learn specific concepts at certain ages and grades. The motivation behind a student's desire to learn in a pedagogical framework is based off external pressures such as feelings of fear, failure, or social rejection (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). This external motivation allows educators and administrators to force students to conform to their educational plans and work through a "...step by step progression" (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). Unlike traditional students, adult learners view education differently. The desire for education comes from a real-life need, task, or problem, rather than external pressure from a source. As with the concept of the learner, the teacher's role in education is one of support with an emphasis on discovering what the adult learner "needs to know" (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). This role provides ideas, opportunities, and tools for the adult learner, rather than a step-by-step progression seen in pedagogy. In higher education, many administrators attempt to push a pedagogical

framework onto students with gateway classes, pre-requisites, and liberal arts requirements. Though there is inherent value to learning outside of a specific discipline, many of these requirements force students to balance the desire for education in a particular area with the external pressure of degree requirements needed to graduate. For international students in particular, this emphasis on external influence may be felt by many traditional international students but may become less of a factor for international adult learners. This focus on step by step progression belies the true nature of international adult learners who have specific desires for education, rather than being bogged down by a system designed for those who are externally pressured.

### **Orientation to Learning**

The final assumption difference between pedagogy and andragogy is a student's reason for learning. Whether we look at undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral work, higher education designs curricula focused on subject areas. Student major in a specific field, and that field defines worth in the workforce. Knowles (1980) explains that for students in a pedagogical framework "learners see education as a process of acquiring subject-matter content, most of which they understand will be useful only at a later time in life" (p. 44). This focus on usefulness later in life contrasts andragogy, which explains adult learners' need for immediate application of knowledge gained. This difference in assumptions continues to show the rift between current higher education standards of teaching and learning frameworks.

### **Adult Learners, Oppression, and Banking Theory**

As explained in previous sections, the basic underlying assumptions that higher education uses to work with their adult learners is fundamentally flawed. Assumptions in pedagogy versus andragogy are opposite in their evaluation of students, which leads to the concept of banking theory and the oppression of adult learners. Paulo Freire (2000) first brought up the idea of banking theory when explaining the concept of oppression. Banking theory shares commonality with pedagogy in several elements. In banking theory, teachers educate students by "depositing" (Freire, 2000, Chapter 2, para. 5) into them. Students are empty vessels, and the teacher consistently makes deposits of information to the student, limiting student actions "...only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (Freire, 2000, Chapter 2, para. 5). This lack of student engagement and critical thinking in classrooms occurs throughout higher education. Professors use the pedagogical assumption that the learner's experience is limited and not necessary and therefore may inadvertently subscribe to banking theory by using their authority as teachers to deposit knowledge and avoid anything aside from their role of depositing knowledge. This practice utterly dismisses adult learner assumptions because it removes the chance for self-directing experiences and the use of prior experiences as a part of the learning process. This lack of opportunity to use self-directed experiences is a fundamental issue that forces international adult learners into passivity despite rich experiences that can benefit other learners in the classroom.

Higher education also runs into issues with adult learners through hegemony. “Hegemony is a process of influence where people willingly consent to political decisions, economic interests, and even pedagogical techniques that serve to reinforce the status quo, thereby protecting the privileged and continuing to disenfranchise the culturally marginalized.” (Davis & Harrison, 2013, p. 92). As an institution, higher education’s obsession with pedagogy continues to oppress adult learners. Consider the pedagogical assumptions mentioned earlier. Students are raised using these assumptions, become accustomed to them, and in turn, believe that these assumptions are absolutes for education. Students assume that the teacher provides them with all of the learning needed, that lectures are the best method of educational delivery, and that to become a master of a topic, they must earn a degree. By continuing to treat students with pedagogical assumptions learned in K-12, both traditional students and adult learners become convinced that the assumptions used when they were young are the only option if they wish to become educated. Ingratiating these ideas into students maintains a status quo for higher education as the master of knowledge and continues to deny students their ability to move toward being more human. The most significant challenge for higher education is its ignorance on the subject. Higher education is generally viewed as a bastion of student rights focused on social justice and providing opportunities for critical thinking Freire (2000) explains:

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion (Chapter 1, para. 12).

Torres (1994) corroborated Freire’s position above by contending that most college professors “do not address objective reality” (p. 23). They are more focused on objective reality as contained in the lingo of books and journals. According to him, college Professors turn their book-initiated reality into “the object of knowledge, within (the) struggle for power, focusing upon accumulated knowledge” (p. 23). For higher education to become a genuine platform for adult learners, it must reject the guidelines received from our ancestors and free itself from the entrapment of “experts” as contained in books and journals. Pedagogy has its uses, but to genuinely free adult learners from the previous assumptions regarding students, we need to change our practices toward andragogy. Removing traditional pedagogy will require courage by both administrators and professors as we seek to move toward an intentional model designed to serve our students better and free them from oppression.

### **Budget Constraints on Adult Learners**

Higher education has seen a downward trend in funding. Additionally, outside groups question the validity of higher education. Fifty-eight percent of Republicans “now say that colleges and universities have a negative effect on the country, up from 45% last year” (Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 1). What used to be a public good is now becoming

more heavily scrutinized with additional federal oversight and a focus on accountability with less funding. With these changes come financial squeezes that negatively affect the freedom of departments to administer proper education. The first source of contention due to budget constraints is instructor knowledge. With budget constraints, jobs shift from full-time professors to adjuncts. By 2011, 70% of faculty were considered contingent, which includes all faculty who did not qualify for the tenure track (Edmonds, 2015). This trend comes at the benefit of saving money, but the service to the institution and faculty-student relationships suffer. Budget constraints also hinder the faculty-student ratio. Often, this presents itself in the classroom. Classroom sizes have increased to accommodate more students to the detriment of students and faculty. Monk and Schmidt (2011) explain the detriment to both students and faculty. Monk and Schmidt (2011) state, "The evidence found in this analysis unequivocally leads to the conclusion that class size has a negative impact on the student-rated outcomes of amount learned, instructor rating, and course rating" (p. 15). This increase in overall size is a cost-saving technique but has the potential to lower the interactions professors have with their students. Fewer interactions and more students is a formula that pushes a professor toward transmittal techniques, including lectures, videos, and other methods that do not require student interaction which in turn lead to the cited negative impact on student-rated outcomes. With the proliferation of technology, professors can remove themselves from much of the conversation through pre-crafted PowerPoints and video sources while Higher Education looks away due to the money they save. Additionally, international students become 'lost' in the classroom and regarded as merely another student with a lack of intentionality toward the specific needs of the learner.

### **Improving the International Adult Learner Experience**

With the emphasis on cost saving, pedagogy, and banking theory, higher education needs to shift its attention and change several practices to better assist adult learners.

The first change would be a de-emphasis on transmittal techniques and an emphasis on experiential techniques. By focusing on experiential techniques, the previously mentioned assumptions surrounding adult learners become fulfilled. Experiential techniques allow adult learners to be generally self-directed because they will have the latitude to be hands-on with their education. This change of technique provides a venue for international learners to gain more knowledge while drawing on previous experiences. Experiential techniques enable students to bring in prior experience as they work through case studies, discussions, or other forms of experiential learning. International adult learners' need for the immediate application of material would also be fulfilled through experiential learning, as would their need to be directly involved in their education, using the teacher as support. Despite larger class sizes, experiential learning is still possible using group work and case studies. Knowles (1980) echoed this sentiment almost forty years ago, stating "Because adults are themselves richer resources for learning than is true of children, greater emphasis can be placed on techniques that tap the experiences of the adult learners..." (p. 50). As we consider the direction and future of higher education, an emphasis on these experiential techniques would provide solutions to several of the problems plaguing higher education.

A second solution would be for higher education to acknowledge the gap between current pedagogical assumptions and Andragogical assumptions and move toward andragogy. Though higher education has used pedagogical principles since its inception, an emphasis on andragogy will better prepare students for the real world. Using experiential learning will help develop student soft-skills, which are heavily sought after by companies. Project Oxygen, an initiative by Google to find common behaviors of effective managers, saw the value of soft skills. Managers who were "better at coaching, decision making, collaboration, empowering teams, managing team energy, staying results-oriented, communicating, developing teams, and sharing a vision" (Google, 2017, p. 1) showed an overall improvement in both their team and management style. Following employer needs, a study by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (2015) found that "Nearly all employers surveyed (91 percent) say that a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate's] undergraduate major" (p. 1). By identifying what employers are looking for in recent college graduates, andragogy becomes a clear choice for higher education when considering the soft skill gains in experiential learning. By focusing on teamwork, group development, critical thinking, communication, and an emphasis on real-life applicability, not only will the value of education increase, but students' soft skills will continue to improve. It is important to note that this change would benefit not only adult learners but traditional students as well.

A third consideration should be the training of professors on andragogy to help thwart issues related to oppression and banking theory with an emphasis on STEM professors. Though higher education has moved toward service learning to equip professors on multiple pedagogy, there are disparities between which departments on campus utilize service learning. Butin (2006) states, "What becomes immediately clear is that service-learning is overwhelmingly used in the "soft" disciplines" (p. 479). Oversight on who uses service learning allows specific disciplines to continue to teach in traditional pedagogy, creating a barrier between disciplines considered as soft and those such as the hard sciences. If this trend continues, traditional pedagogy will dominate pockets of higher education, and there will be little chance that we fulfill the needs of both the students seeking knowledge and the employers looking to hire competent students. Through intentional training of both new and current professors, the chance of a professor inadvertently oppressing a student will be reduced and will provide a student with more opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. This measure would positively affect international students who often seek degrees in the 'hard' disciplines noted above.

A fourth consideration is to change the way we view our undergraduate degree curricula. As explained by Knowles (1980), adult learners need immediacy in learning. Higher education institutions are not meeting this need for immediacy. Many current liberal arts degrees do not provide adult learners a focus on the immediate knowledge gain they require for their lives and instead place them back into a pedagogical framework that teaches knowledge that may not be pertinent or relevant to their path in life. A shift toward allowing students a more intentional path would better prepare international adult learners to not only gain the immediate knowledge they require but to not waste precious time when they are juggling so many other roles.

A final consideration is that of intentional use of international adult learners in the classroom. As stated previously, “4 out of 10 undergraduate students are over 24 and enrolled on a part-time basis” (Wyatt, 2011, p. 1). With this large number of adult learners, higher education should emphasize not only supporting adult learners, but also using their talents, knowledge, and experience to inform traditional students. Adult learners utilizing their previous experience will provide a more productive classroom experience for both traditional and adult learners, allowing the teacher to take on the supportive role required by adult learners and provide the tools for both traditional and adult learners to be successful.

Despite the perilous path of higher education path due to budget concerns and outdated frameworks, by addressing the needs of adult learners and focusing on andragogy, there could be real change. This change would positively affect student soft skill development, knowledge retention, and overall satisfaction for both traditional students and adult learners.

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