International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 2017, Volume 29, Number 2, 233-244
http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/ ISSN 1812-9129

Demonstrating Empathy: A Phenomenological Study of Instructional Designers Making Instructional Strategy Decisions for Adult Learners

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Instructional designers are tasked with making instructional strategy decisions to facilitate achievement of learning outcomes as part of their professional responsibilities. While the instructional design process includes learner analysis, that analysis alone does not embody opportunities to assist instructional designers with demonstrations of empathy for learners. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the influence of empathy on instructional strategy decisions made by instructional designers for adult learners. Twelve expert instructional designers, having at least five years of experience, participated in the study (six females, six males). Telephone interviews provided the method for data collection to arrive at the essence of participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon. A brief questionnaire, which also collected demographics, established criteria for study participation. Findings indicated that empathy for adult learners was an important concept used by participants to identify and mitigate educational challenges faced by adult learners. Six themes emerged from data analysis: criticality/importance of empathy in instructional design, instructional strategies that should reflect empathy, knowledge of the audience/learners, hindrances to demonstrations of empathy vary, the understanding that online learning requires different considerations, and relevancy. Findings may extend discussions about empathy for adult learners in the instructional design process.

The word *empathy* invokes different viewpoints. Coplan (2011) viewed empathy as a process by which the psychological state of another is simulated by an observer while the observer maintains his or her own well-defined, separate perception of self. Consideration of self, while considering others, is a component of the process of taking another's perspective (Chadwick & Ralston, 2010). It is through this firsthand consideration of another that empathy, a multifaceted process of imagination, becomes possible (Coplan, 2011). It was proposed by Coeckelbergh (2007) that empathy, as a perspective-shifting process, can be mutual and beneficial in helping and caring contexts. Empathy, as viewed by Astleitner and Leutner (2000), is the balance of emotional states and is strongly associated with sympathy because an increase in empathy is part of the process of establishing sympathy. Trout (2009) offered a concise distinction between empathy and sympathy, stating that while the foundation of empathy is accuracy in understanding another, the foundation of sympathy is emotion for another. Trout also offered a viewpoint of empathy as an emotion that without a vehicle of expression by which sustainable change is effected, is limited in its scope and effectiveness.

Parrish (2006) proposed that empathy, as a perspective-shifting process, is the most fundamental instructional design skill. A study by Savage (1975) is a rare example of what Parrish (2006) termed the little discussed topic of empathy in instructional design literature. While the Savage study investigated the development of empathic relationships between instructional designers and clients, there has seemingly been a gap over the years explicitly relating to instructional designers and empathy for learners. More specifically, for the purposes of this research study, the gap encompassed the study's research question:

> How do instructional designers describe their experiences of demonstrating empathy when making instructional strategy decisions for adult learners in higher educational settings?

Regarding the demonstration of empathy for learners in the instructional design process, Parrish asked, "Can they do it intentionally, or is it simply a trait they possess that shows itself in the quality of their work?" (p. 72). Parrish posited that explicit cultivation, by instructional designers, of empathy will not only extend the concept of the design, but will also extend the concept of the design's anticipated achievements.

The first consideration in making instructional strategy decisions is to distinguish an instructional strategy—planning what will be taught and how it will be taught—from an instructional tactic, the implementation of an instructional strategy (Jonassen, Grabinger, & Harris, 1991; Rothwell & Kazanas, 2008). Once planned and written, instructional strategies become real products for (a) a prescription for new instructional material development, (b) standards for the evaluation of existing materials, (c) standards and prescriptions for the revision of current instructional materials, and (d) structure for the organization of instructional activities (Dick & Carey, 1990). As proposed by Dick, Carey, and Carey (2015), development of an instructional strategy includes features such as the characteristics that pertain to the media to be used for learner engagement, learner characteristics, and the instructional content.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Year-of-Birth Range	Years employed as Instructional Designer	Employment Status
Expert IDer A	Male	1956-1971	5-7	Full-time
Expert IDer B	Female	1972-1986	5-7	Full-time
Expert IDer C	Male	1956-1971	10 or more	Full-time
Expert IDer D	Female	1956-1971	5-7	Full-time
Expert IDer E	Female	1956-1971	5-7	Full-time
Expert IDer F	Female	1940-1955	5-7	Full-time
Expert IDer G	Female	1956-1971	5-7	Part-time
Expert IDer H	Female	1956-1971	5-7	Full-time

Instructional strategy features are used to select or develop materials; plan instructional interaction, mediation, online learning technology; and use other methods of instructional packaging and delivery (Dick et al., 2015). As interceders for learners, instructional designers continually probe subject matter experts (SMEs) to insure the accuracy of instructional content to develop content that is clear to learners (Smith & Ragan, 1993). After selecting an instructional strategy, an essential instructional design decision (Christensen & Osguthorpe, 2004), instructional designers have the foundation to develop content to help learners acquire knowledge and skills (Merrill, 2009).

Instructional design practitioners essentially plan and develop instructional resources and activities based on principles of learning and instruction (Smith & Ragan, 1993), along with the systematic analysis of performance problems and the identification of instructional solutions (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2008). Instructional design practitioners, much like engineers, reflect on past successes to determine appropriate action in the development of a new design, a product (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2008). To design a product that meets consumer needs, some effort must be put forth to discern those needs and to learn some details about the consumers (Leonard & Rayport, 1997); the process by which this is done in instructional design is called learner analysis. It is through learner analysis that information on learner characteristics, deemed pertinent as a result of client-designer communications, is gathered (Parrish, 2006). Learner analysis may be limited in that it provides a specific, different purpose, one that does not present empathic opportunities that include how learners will experience instruction (Parrish, 2006; 2008).

Methodology

This study implemented a qualitative methodology using a phenomenological approach to understand instructional designers' descriptions about their experiences with empathy for adult learners. Phenomenology provided a means by which the essence of the phenomenon could be explained (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Creswell, 1998, 2009, 2013; Flood, 2010; Moustakas, 1994). It is through phenomenological research that the researcher, through empathic understanding, attempts to view the participants' world from their perspectives (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010).

Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy for this study was purposeful and utilized criterion sampling. A purposeful sampling strategy that utilizes criterion sampling limits the sampling scope to recruit study participants who have experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013). The participants, instructional designers, were recruited from four Internet-based instructional design groups. Those who satisfied participation criteria shared similar demographics (Table 1), i.e., they designed instruction for adult learners in higher educational settings; had expert status (at least five years of experience); and worked either as full- or part-time, permanent staff or independent contractors.

Data Collection

Data were collected through recorded interviews guided by an interview protocol comprised of open-ended questions. While there are various qualitative data collection methods, data must be collected in a manner that exemplifies the sensitive nature of the research study's anticipated conclusions (Creswell, 2013). Intensive interviews (Charmaz, 2006) were utilized to investigate participants' insights and opinions about empathy for adult learners. As explained by Charmaz (2006), an intensive interview extends beyond basic conversation to facilitate a thorough exploration of a subject or experience. Topic

saturation was reached during each interview. Interview protocols were emailed to each participant.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this research study was based on a simplified version of the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological data organization and analysis (Creswell, 2013). Guided by the simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological organization and analysis, the researcher did the following:

- Completely described personal experiences in relation to the phenomenon;
- Developed a significant statements list;
- Grouped important statements into "meaning units" (p. 193), which are larger information units;
- Described what participants experienced in relation to the phenomenon; this is the "textural description" (p. 193);
- Described how participants' experiences with the phenomenon happened; this is the "structural description" (p. 193); and
- Created a composite description comprised of the structural and textural descriptions.

The researcher transcribed all interviews and read each transcript before beginning data analysis. Meaning units were developed as part of the horizonalization process of phenomenological data analysis (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Six themes emerged (Table 2).

Findings

The study's findings offer a description of the lived experiences of instructional designers making instructional strategy decisions for adult learners in online higher educational settings. Participants' responses offered insight into their empathic instructional strategy decisions and their advocacy for adult learners. The concept of empathy, or the state of being empathetic, is the ability to shift perspectives to assess, understand, and consider the feelings of an individual in a way that is free of judgment, uninvited advice, or disparaging remarks (Coeckelbergh, 2007; Coplan, 2011; Johnson, 2002; Parrish, 2006; & Savage, 1975). Concern about how learners experience instruction is the essence of the ability to demonstrate empathy for learners, the process in which the instructional designer seeks to comprehend the experience from the learner's viewpoint (Parrish, 2006). Therefore, taking the perspective of another—in this regard, adult learners—is reliant upon the concept of empathy.

Data analysis resulted in the emergence of six themes: the criticality/importance of empathy in instructional design, the need for reflection of empathy in instructional strategies, knowledge of the audience/learners, hindrances to demonstrations of empathy exist and vary, awareness that online learning requires different considerations, and relevancy. Each theme reflected viewpoints on the role of empathy in decisions about instructional strategies for adult learners.

Criticality/Importance of Empathy in Instructional Design

This theme established the level of importance participants placed on empathy in their roles as instructional designers. Findings showed that all (100%) participants considered empathy for learners to be an essential concept in the instructional design process. Participants seemed to regard empathy for learners in the instructional design process as not only important, but as an integral component of successful instructional design projects. One of the instructional designers stated the following:

> "I like how you word it in some of these questions you have here, and empathy is a great word, it's absolutely critical. There are so many facets to each and every student with their story and their experiences, and it's important to really think about what those learners are experiencing because you want to engage them".

Another instructional designer said, "I think it's [empathy] one or two of the most important skills, if you can call it that, that an instructional designer actually demonstrates." Participants discussed the importance of meeting adult learners' needs, the underrepresentation of empathy for learners in the literature, and the essentiality of empathy in high-quality course design. An instructional designer suggested that courses can be designed without empathy, "but they're not going to be as useful for a lot of people. They might reach a few, but I think they'll be more effective if designed with the user in mind."

The instructional designers also offered insights into their personally- and professionally-held beliefs about the vital role of empathy in instructional strategy decisions for adult learners. Some exemplary insights are included below:

- "I think in order to be successful at it you have to have empathy. You have to have empathy in a lot of different situations, it has to be in your mind all the time when you're making decisions."
- "We're looking at the course content and we're saying how this would best be organized to give the best student outcome and the best

Table 2
Themes and Meaning Units

Themes	Meaning Units
Criticality/importance of empathy in instructional design	• essential to high quality course design • essential to meet the needs of adult learners • seemingly underrepresented topic
Instructional strategies should reflect empathy	• consider adult learners' time constraints in respect to workload and extraneous content • be agile with instructional strategies • reflection on personal learning experiences strengthen empathic viewpoint on instructional strategy decisions
Know the audience/learners	• consider disabilities • ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliance • consider generational differences • provide resources/scaffolding as needed
Hindrances to demonstrations of empathy exist and vary	• instructors lack or do not understand empathy in online learning • subject matter experts (SMEs) • policies • time constraints • learners
Online learning requires different considerations	• provide explicit instructions • make it interesting • reduce boredom • consider technology skill levels
Relevancy	• relevancy • choices • consider life experiences

student experience, and if that's not empathy based, I don't know what is."

- "I think empathy plays a very important role. If you're not empathetic toward the student, then I don't think you're allowing the student to be successful."
- "I'm looking at what my subject matter expert has put together for an assignment, putting myself in that learner's spot and saying how would I take it? How would I perceive this if I were the learner?"

Instructional Strategies Should Reflect Empathy

This theme established that empathy should be evident in the instructional strategy decisions made for adult learners. Findings showed that all (100%) participants believed that empathy should guide the decisions that inform the instructional strategy for any given instructional design. Being empathetic included considerations about "things like the workload, what is the workload a student's going to do week in and week out? If you're not considerate and empathetic of the adult learner, you're going to pile on." A major goal of participants was to make instructional strategy decisions that presented adult learners with pertinent content to facilitate learning success. As stated by a participant: "I know you can't individualize instruction, but I like to have a couple of different things that I do as activities so people can join in a way that makes it feel most useful to them."

Participants often reflected on their own adult learning experiences to consider learners' viewpoints. As expressed by a participant, "I think my overall strategy is just to try to see things from the students' point of view and make decisions based on that." Another participant stated, "I try to implement or suggest things and use strategies that are empathetic

toward the learners, especially the adult learner." Participants also expressed concern about the responsibilities of adult life and the reality that some adult learners need help with learning. As an instructional designer expressed: "It's about bringing up that positive part, the uplifting pieces, but when you're looking at designing for them, what are things that you can do to scaffold that student to the learning strategy?" Clarity of instructions and authentic learning opportunities were also areas of empathic consideration for participants: "I look at the materials and I think to myself, if I were taking this class, would this make sense to me? Would I understand what the instructor is going for here?" Regarding authentic learning opportunities, an instructional designer stated:

> "In some ways, we could have made it more of a standard course where students were doing projects based on something that we gave them. Instead we worked with them and had them be able to use something in their life that they could really relate to and then build on in their personal way, and actually use."

Know the Audience/Learners

This theme established another way in which instructional designers demonstrated empathy when making instructional strategy decisions for adult learners. Findings showed that all (100%) participants considered it essential to know the audience when making instructional strategy decisions. One of the instructional designers stated, "You've got to have empathy. Not all instructional strategies are going to work for all types of people, but I also think you have more leeway in the strategy part of it regarding empathy." When designing instruction for adult learners, it helps to know the communities from which they come, as explained by one participant: "I think almost one-third of our students are military. These are people that have a full-time job but they can also be stationed overseas. We really have to understand what they're going through."

While it is impossible to know each learner, diversity can be addressed, as noted by an instructional designer: "How can you insure quality when you don't know the end user unless you build in multiple pathways for people, different types of people, different types of backgrounds, different types of purposes?" Additionally, knowing adult learners should include some awareness of their strengths and limitations related to social technologies. An instructional designer asked: "Do you want to force them into things that they maybe are not comfortable with at this point?" Just because a technology appears to be widely used does not mean that adult learners use or have awareness of the technology.

Much emphasis was placed on the acknowledgement of the individuality of adult learners, as expressed by an instructional designer: "I think it's a little bit myopic sometimes to judge learners in a group. In other words, one of the things about adult learners I know is that the individual differences are vast." As much as possible, it is important to make instructional strategy decisions based on the awareness that adults learn in different ways. An instructional designer stated, "While certainly, you can group them maybe by a series of preferences or learning styles, one of the things I think is a little shortsighted to do is to think that all of them will respond to every strategy." Yet another consideration about empathic instructional strategies is how learners may perceive certain activities. If an instructional designer, after interacting with an activity, views it as tedious or unnecessary, it may be reasonable to assume that learners will have the same response. An instructional designer explained: "We have Check Your Understanding, and there's this one thing where they're supposed to reflect, and it's supposed to be metacognitive, but when I get to that one, I'm like man, as a student I'd skip it."

Course feedback provides another way for instructional designers and instructors to understand what works or does not work within an instructional design. An instructional designer stated, "Usually, if it's a flop we'll find out later through the student evaluations or feedback that we get." Knowing the audience through course feedback can also change instructors' viewpoints, as explained by an instructional designer: "There are just some faculty who really have very firm opinions and positions about how they want the material to be delivered and there's nothing we can do about that." However, specific feedback like, "This exercise was really hard," or "This assignment didn't make sense to me," can be useful to instructional designers and instructors when it highlights problematic areas. Attention to learner engagement with course content can provide insight into unsuccessful as well as successful instruction: "Sometimes what I think isn't going to go very well is just fine."

Hindrances to Demonstrations of Empathy Exist and Vary

This theme revealed acknowledgement and awareness of hindrances to demonstrations of empathy as experienced from instructors, SMEs, policies, and learners. Findings showed that seven (87.5%) participants encountered hindrances to their demonstrations of empathy for adult learners when making instructional strategy decisions. Hindrances to demonstrations of empathy did not appear to deter participants' advocacy for adult learners. Insights from one of the instructional designers seemed to sum up

participants' experiences with hindrances to demonstrations of empathy for adult learners:

> "I don't think a lot of teachers are empathetic. In a face-to-face class you get to see who your students are, right? In an online course, they don't see the learners, I don't think they even realize that there might be different learners, different ages of learners and races, or whatever in their course. They don't take that into consideration so they just build the course I guess from their perspective on what they want done, they don't look toward the students or the learners at all, and that's really hard."

An instructional designer expressed concern about the scarcity of empathy from some SMEs': "Yes, there have been [hindrances], and some of that has come from the SMEs, the subject matter experts, who just don't understand beyond the bubble of traditional-student mentality." Some SMEs "just don't get it, and we have to educate and work with them on that." Also, "The other side of that is some of the people that are working on courses with us don't grasp fully the andragogical mindset that we're trying to do."

Occasionally, time itself is a hindrance to demonstrations of empathy as explained by an instructional designer: "If any hindrance, it probably took longer to get the training together, putting it online as opposed to if we had done a face-to-face workshop." If adult learners themselves have an aversion to unfamiliar instructional activities, another hindrance to empathy surfaces, as an instructional designer explained: "I think there are some people, some learners that appear to be more comfortable with that very lecture and test kind of mentality; when you do something really different, sometimes it throws them off their game."

Limited influence over final instructional strategy decisions sometimes hinders empathy, as an instructional designer indicated: "I think the major hindrance is that I don't get the final say in what goes into the courses. I can make recommendations and suggestions, but I can't make that final decision." Further hindrances to empathy may stem from instructors' unwillingness to implement recommendations, as expressed by an instructional designer: "Sometimes those faculty members don't want to do other than very lecture based, problem-practice kinds of approaches." Another instructional designer stated, "I feel like the underdog when I start talking about, 'Well, what about the students?' Very few instructors that I help are receptive to my suggestions."

Online Learning Requires Different Considerations

This theme revealed acknowledgement of the differences between online and face-to-face learning environments and instructional designers' concerns for adult learners. Findings indicated that six (75%) participants acknowledged the different ways in which their online as opposed to face-to-face instructional designs affect their instructional strategy decisions. An instructional designer indicated that some instructors need empathetic nudges, "and that's where the ID, if they're working with a faculty member, has to gently push . . . that may work in a classroom, but it may not work in an online environment." In essence, to encourage empathy for adult learners, instructional designers themselves have to be empathetic toward instructors and subject matter experts. An instructional designer offered insight about assisting teachers with demonstrations of empathy for adult learners: "You are kind of a teacher to the teacher that's putting the course together to try to help them understand the environment and to be empathetic to adult students. You can't leave them out."

A perceived lack of empathy for online adult learners presents instructional designers with opportunities to offer insight to all involved faculty. As stated by an instructional designer, "I just finished designing and then facilitated an online training for faculty who will be teaching online . . . I was thinking that they needed to experience being online students to fully get it." Participants discussed adult learners' need for clear instructions to avoid ambiguity, and the need for realistic technology requirements to reduce learner frustration. In a traditional learning setting, as expressed by one of the instructional designers, "I could go into a classroom, get to know people within a session, and we're good, and I kind of know that I can do these things and they'll follow me." Conversely, "in an online class I may have designed some things that this particular group is not ready for."

Online learning environments require different considerations because, as explained by an instructional designer, "in the online environment you're not standing up in front of those people: you're not going to be there to see the puzzled looks on their faces." Through an empathetic mindset certain predictions can be made about the areas where learners may need help: "You have to anticipate those places and build in those extra resources or stories or whatever in order to get them over the hump, and that's always kind of a revelation to them [instructors/SMEs]." To further alleviate learner frustration and to facilitate success, it is imperative that instructions be clear as expressed by one of the instructional designers: "I feel like this is all online courses, you need explicit instructions to tell the student exactly what it is that they need to do; you might need some videos or something." Empathic consideration in online learning, as explained by one of the instructional designers, is "basically everything, because not only is it important that you put yourself in the perspective of the online student, but then there's another complication on top of that," which is primarily, "How is this going to be

understood by an online student? How is this going to be understood by a student that might have a cognitive disability that can't process things the same way as our typical student does?"

Relevancy

It was through this theme that the importance of making instructional strategy decisions to include content that adult learners could find applicable to their needs became apparent. Findings indicated that four (50%) participants considered the necessity to design relevant instruction as a fundamental component of instructional strategy decisions. Pertinent, relevant instruction helps adult learners to understand what is in it for them regarding knowledge acquisition and transfer to authentic, real world environments. Basically, as expressed by one of the instructional designers, "Adult learners tend to need to see the immediate usage, or the way that they can use this material. What am I going do with this now? They need it to be relevant." Relevant, meaningful instruction can also provide the motivation that adult learners need to work toward successful achievement of instructional goals. One of the instructional designers stated, "I think it's even more important for adult learners to receive empathy because adult learners need to know that they learn more readily when the information is relevant and meaningful." Giving instruction a life beyond the courseroom is essential, as conveyed by an instructional designer: "When we're looking at those instructional strategies, how can we make that appeal to lifelong learning in a sense that they're not just learning it for this one time and this one exercise?" Relevancy and meaning are essential considerations for instructional strategy decisions as suggested by one of the instructional designers:

> "If the institution is open to it, competency-based instruction, looking at some different instructional design strategies and really making it engaging, meaningful, and relevant. I think those pieces really impact how we reach adult learners and I think that we have to really take it from their perspective and what they're going to be able to do with the instruction."

Discussion and Implications

This study's findings appear to support an expectation based on Mezirow's (1994) position about transformative learning. Mezirow's position is that adult learners are caught in their own history and continually add to, and experience iterations of, that history in ways that create continuous learning. It seems that participants' empathic instructional strategy decisions could assist adult learners with the acquisition of continuous learning and, therefore, transformative learning. Findings appear to support learning environments for adults that reflect andragogical and constructivist ideas as foundations for instructional strategy decisions. Study findings imply that study participants design instruction in ways that consider adults differently from children while providing supportive opportunities to construct new knowledge.

The Dick and Carey model of instructional design. Findings seem to confirm that participants, as proposed by Dick and colleagues (2015), effectively design instructional materials comprising many techniques or strategies naturally utilized by effective teachers. Findings also seem to confirm that participants' attention to adult learners' needs align with Dick et al.'s statement that instructional design necessitates the development of instructional strategies that reasonably utilize what is known about learning facilitation. Study participants did not specifically express adherence to any particular model of instructional design. However, it seemed that participants follow the structure and guidelines for instructional design as mandated by their learning institutions. Participants appeared to treat the development of instructional strategies, step six of the Dick and Carey instructional design model, with high regard.

Adult learning theory and andragogy. As a uniquely-adult learning theory, andragogy helped to alleviate the guilt some educators may have experienced in relation to their departure from some andragogical principles when teaching adults (Knowles, 1973). It was also suggested by Knowles (1973; 1989) that the theory of andragogy provided a separation of educator assumptions about childhood and adulthood learning. Forrest and Peterson (2006) indicated that andragogy and pedagogy are not techniques of education, but rather, they are philosophies to which educators may look for guidance, and that both offer an examination of the foundational goals of education.

Relative to instructional design, andragogy, as explained by Holton, Swanson, and Naquin (2001), offers essential learning philosophies and assumptions about adult learners that may assist in the design of effective instruction for adult learners. Knowles (1973) stated that the art of pedagogy, by which many adults, in school and professional settings had been taught, is a contradiction in terms. The contradiction exists according to Knowles because the Greek translation of the root words "'paid,' meaning child (plus 'agogus,' meaning leader of)" render the literal translation as "the art and science of teaching children" (p. 42).

Earlier educators, as explained by Knowles had to disobey some pedagogical conventions and conceptions in an effort to assist and retain adult learners, in many cases departing from acceptable academic principles. While andragogy is an adult learning theory, Knowles

(1973) suggested that as children mature, their instruction would increasingly become andragogical. Knowles (1989) posited that adult learning orientation is centered around their personal lives and that learning motivation is intrinsic. Andragogy, as well as self-directed learning, are vital components in the array of concepts, examples, principles, and rationalizations that comprise the adult learning information base (Merriam, 2001a). It is inaccurate, as explained by Merriam (2001b), to categorize andragogical, self-directed, and transformative learning as passé, because while they could be considered foundational, their development was intended to establish adulthood learning as distinguishable from childhood learning.

It was apparent that andragogical principles fueled participants' empathic decisions. It was also apparent that participants view learning in adulthood, as explained by Merriam (2001b), as distinct from learning in childhood. It was not apparent in participants' responses that there was a reliance on a particular adult theory of learning in making instructional strategy decisions for adult learners. However, the common thread of awareness that adults have different educational needs than younger learners was evident, as andragogical concerns seemed to be the underlying motivation for empathic decisions.

Constructivism. As proposed by Shabani, Khatib, and Ebadi (2010), the purpose of constructivism is to help learners discover significance and empowerment through learning processes. Findings supported Shabani et al.'s proposition because participants' empathy focused on helping adult learners achieve instructional goals through relevant and meaningful instructional strategies. In light of the regard participants demonstrated for adult learners' prior knowledge/life experiences, it appears that the purpose of constructivism was supported.

Transformative learning theory. As explained by Mezirow (1994), transformative learning theory acknowledges four ways in which adults learn: (a) "refining or elaborating our meaning schemes," (b) "learning new meaning schemes," (c) "transforming meaning schemes," and (d) "transforming meaning perspectives" (p. 224). Mezirow suggested that there is another type of learning, that adult learners are caught in their own history and continually add to and experience iterations of that history in ways that create continuous learning. Adult learners' new experiences are influenced by past experiences and transform into a "meaning perspective" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 101), which brings about a critical awareness of the psychological and social assumptions that shape perceptions, relationships, and life choices. For a meaning perspective to occur, according to transformative theory, critical reflection on the premise of a problem must occur (Mezirow, 1994).

Content and process reflections do not lead to perspective transformation; rather, they aid in the achievement of a change of mind, i.e., a transformation of meaning schemes; it is perspective transformation that can lead to substantial learning (Mezirow, 1994). Perspective transformation, as explained by Imel (1998), offers explanations about how a person's concepts, based on culture and experience, can influence their behavior and interpretations. As an example, Imel proposed that a person's meaning structures can be influential in the way he or she decides to react to or vote for women's issues. New experiences are assimilated into past experiences, which in turn create a personal model for learning.

Mezirow (1997) posited that the two kinds of learning exhibited by adults are (a) communicative, or expressed through feelings, and (b) instrumental, or cause and effect. It is through communicative learning that adult learners can make valid, or justify, their beliefs in relation to, or in response to, what someone else purports, which is different from instrumental learning, which attempts to discover a truth. Therefore, a main component of transformative theory is to help the adult learner to think autonomously through critical reflection on personally held assumptions in order to strengthen a worldview or to establish a new one (Mezirow, 1997). If the ultimate goal of transformative learning is to help adults to think autonomously (Mezirow, 1997), then it seems that empathy for adult learners could play a major role in this goal. Helping adult learners to interpret their experiences based on their own viewpoints, rather than adopt interpretations based on the viewpoints of others, which as pointed out by Mezirow (1997), is one of the central goals of adult education. Transformative learning can be interpreted as independent thinking (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger, 2015).

Within adult education transformative learning is persistently considered to be a purposeful and practical area of research (Taylor, 2007). It appears that continued interest has helped transformative learning to surpass andragogy as the icon of educational philosophy. Conversely, Newman (2012) argued that the abundance of literature on transformative learning has led to repetition and a generalized theory. Franz (2010) suggested that in training situations, the implementation of transformative learning could be difficult because instrumental learning tends to be the focal point of training. Instrumental learning involves the acquisition of new skills or information, and transformative learning requires dedicated trainers and learners, as well as clients' sustained commitment to resources (Franz, 2010).

Another critique of transformative learning comes from Newman (2012), who suggested that the verification of transformative learning is dependent upon learner confirmation, which is not a reliable measure of change.

Newman further suggested that while a learner can claim profound change, that change cannot be automatically assumed. Cranton and Kasl (2012) proposed that assuming whether or not someone has experienced transformative learning, is a problem because such assumptions are based on behavior observance, which probably suggests different types of change.

As described by Kitchenham (2008), transformative learning theory, despite having undergone adjustments and the incorporation of new concepts, continues to impact the practice of adult learning across numerous disciplines. Pilling-Cormick (1997) stated that it is when learners' assumptions change that the learning process becomes transformative. Through all learning, some type of change occurs, but it is through transformative learning that personal change occurs: the type of change that is major and substantial (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). The focus of transformative theory is how individuals learn to act on and transfer reasons, morals, thoughts, and implications without dependence on others and to arrive at decisions based on social responsibility and unambiguous thinking (Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

Transformative learning theory and the adult learner. Mezirow (2003) proposed that adult learners need help to gain skills, feelings, and empathies necessary to reflect critically on their assumptions in order to nurture their reasoning abilities. Mezirow further suggested that nurturing adult learners' reasoning abilities would also help them to more completely participate in "critical-dialectical discourse" (p. 62). Participants' responses did not directly support Mezirow's position on critical-dialectical discourse as a component of transformative learning. However, responses did reflect nurturing attitudes for adult learners in support of instructional strategies to facilitate learning, at times through group discussions, which could encourage critical-dialectical discourse. As stated by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), it is through conversations with others that an individual accomplishes understanding. Participation in discourse with similarly affected persons affords adult learners, in the process of challenging personally held interpretations, opportunities to develop thoughtful conclusions (Mezirow, 2003). It was also proposed by Mezirow (1997) that the mission of adult education is to (a) help learners gain critical awareness of their own assumptions and those of others, (b) provide opportunities to help learners with the recognition of frames of reference, (c) help learners to become imaginative in order to view problems from a different perspective, and (d) help learners in effective participation in rational discourse.

Implications of the findings for practice, based on participant experiences, indicated that:

- Expert instructional designers place a high value on empathy in instructional design. The implication is that expert instructional designers consider the design from the perspective of the learners: how those learners, the intended audience, will interact with and understand instructional content. This implication adds support to Parrish's (2006) suggestion that a vital skill of instructional designers is the capability to leave their own point of view to adopt the point of view of the learner.
- Expert instructional designers place a high value on empathy for adult learners in relation to instructional design. The implication is that a genuine empathetic mindset amongst expert instructional designers exists for adult learners during the instructional design process. This empathic mindset supports the importance of the explicit cultivation of empathy when designing in order to extend a design's concept and its planned achievements (Parrish, 2006).
- Expert instructional designers place a high value on empathy when making instructional strategy decisions for adult learners. The implication is that empathy for adult learners plays a strong role in instructional strategy decision-making. This implication indicates that while empathy in instructional design appears to be under-represented in the literature, as proposed by Parrish (2006), it is an important concept in the lived experiences of expert instructional designers.
- Participant experiences for this study indicated that hindrances to demonstrations of empathy exist in various forms when making instructional strategy decisions for adult learners. The implication is that hindrances to demonstrations of empathy in instructional design exist and should be acknowledged.

Limitations and Future Research

Findings provided insight into the importance expert instructional designers place on the concept of empathy in instructional design and their experiences with empathy for adult learners. Conversely, findings did not provide insight into how novice instructional designers might view empathy when making instructional strategy decisions for adult learners. Empathy, for the participants, appeared to be something that was natural for them when making instructional strategy decisions, natural aspects of their personal and professional mindsets. Since most of the participants seemed to have an inherent inclination toward empathy, the study was limited in the sense that it did not provide insight into instructional designers who may lack a natural inclination toward empathy.

A question asked by Parrish (2006) remains after analysis of the data collected for this study and influences the recommendations for further research.

Referring to instructional designers and empathy for learners, Parrish asked, "Can they do it intentionally, or is it simply a trait they possess that shows itself in the quality of their work?" (p. 72). Recommendations for further research include the following:

- Extend this study to use a purposeful sampling strategy to include novice instructional designers.
- Conduct a Delphi study to arrive at a consensus that might help to answer Parrish's (2006) previously stated question.
- Conduct a mixed methods research study (a) to survey universities offering instructional design degree programs to determine if empathy for learners is an official course component, and (b) to investigate whether or not hindrances to demonstrations of empathy exist as a secondary component to the empathy for learners component at the identified universities.
- Further research could assess whether or not opportunities to develop, demonstrate, and discuss the role of empathy in the instructional design process, through formal instructional design training, encourages demonstrations of empathy for learners.
- Further research could survey instructional designers to determine how they might perceive the possible inclusion of demonstrations of empathy for learners as a new competency to the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (IBSTPI, 2012).

Conclusion

Participants' responses about their lived experiences provided insights about demonstrations of empathy related to decisions about instructional design strategies. The insights provided by this study's findings will help to continue the dialog about empathy in instructional design and, more specifically, empathy for adult learners and the considerations necessary to provide them with relevant, meaningful instruction. Continued dialog could lead to the empowerment of instructional designers to empathically bridge any gaps between assumptions about adult learners and practices in order to anticipate obstacles to successful online learning. Adult learners, many of whom may begin or return to higher educational pursuits in the midst of considerable personal, family, and work responsibilities, could benefit from instruction that acknowledges their authentic educational needs.

Through empathic instructional design, instructional designers can anticipate some of the frustration, confusion, and fear that adult learners may face as they engage in online higher education, a mode of learning that for many adults may be intimidating. Limited or poor technology skills or a perception of online learning as something that is more difficult than face-to-face learning could present an initial source of intimidation for adult online learners. Empathic instructional design can become the catalyst to promote a better understanding of adult learners' authentic needs. Empathic instructional design can also help to transform the perception of the field from one of mechanics to one that empathically considers adult learners who engage with instruction to excel unhindered.

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