Toward an Invitational Andragogy: Articulating a Teaching Philosophy for the Andragogic Classroom

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Abstract: Students older than 25 years are a growing population on our campuses. However, separating these students and labeling them as "nontraditional" further isolates them from campuses that are already geared toward younger learners. This reflective essay explains the need for a philosophy of invitational andragogy—a classroom approach rooted in invitational rhetoric (S. Foss & Griffin, 1995) and Knowles's assumptions about older learners (1980, 1984). While inviting transformation is important in all classrooms, it is especially important for older learners who often feel separated from the campus at large. To explain how an invitational approach to the andragogic classroom can be achieved, we identify opportunities to apply the strategic prongs of invitational rhetoric: (a) offering perspectives and (b) creating external conditions that promote safety, value, and freedom.

Adult learner. Older learner. Nontraditional student. Colleges and universities have many names for students who did not attend college immediately after finishing high school, who work full- or part-time, who may have children or other dependents, and who bring a wealth of life experience to the classroom. Naming this growing student population has been a source of controversy (Gulley, 2016), with some arguing that the term *nontraditional* both "others" and isolates these students. Andragogy, the method and practice of instructing adult learners (Knowles, 1980, 1984), provides descriptive language to address this cohort's unique needs. Invitational rhetoric (S. Foss & Griffin, 1995; S. K. Foss & Foss, 2012) provides prescriptive knowledge for creating an inclusive environment for students who are often left out of *traditional* college experiences.

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The authors began teaching "adult accelerated" courses while still attending graduate school. As a result, all students were older than the instructors, most had families, and two even had children the same age as the instructors. Two cared for a parent in their home and all had full-time jobs. Despite training in the principles of andragogy, we struggled to connect these principles to practice without an instructional framework and were further hindered by administrative language (in policies, web copy, or other materials) that labeled these learners as nontraditional. This reflective essay provides the framework for a reflective teaching philosophy rooted in invitational andragogy we eventually created.

Differentiating Between Andragogy and Pedagogy

Andragogy, the method and practice of instructing older learners, was introduced by Malcolm Knowles (1980) as a means to distinguish the unique needs of adult learners from that of younger learners (Chan, 2010). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) defines adult learners as those who fall into one or more of the following categories: individuals who delayed entry into higher education, those with children or other dependents, single parents, full-time employees, those who are financially independent from their parents (AACU, 2011). This manuscript focuses specifically on those who are 25 years old or older, as they are a major recruitment target for colleges and universities in the United States (Ritt, 2008).

According to Knowles (1980, 1984), andragogy differs from pedagogy in its unique assumptions about older learners. These learners are characterized by: (a) self-directedness, (b) need to know, (c) use of experience in learning, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learning, and (f) internal motivation. Since Knowles's introduction of these concepts, they have been used to shape the education of older learners across various disciplines including agricultural communication (Coldevin, 2001), police training (Paterson, 2011), health literacy (Champlin et al., 2020), and others.

The Five Assumptions of Andragogy

1. Self-directedness and internal motivation: Just as children are intrinsically motivated to learn and understand the physical environments and social situations around them (Ryan & Deci, 2016), adult learners are intrinsically motivated to apply learned knowledge to their unique lived experiences in the workplace, home, and community. According to Knowles (1984), "Andragogy assumes that the point at which an individual achieves self-concept of essential self-direction is the point at which he [she, they] psychologically becomes an adult" (p. 45).
2. Need to know: Learners seek knowledge based on what they need to know for the various roles in their life (work, family, community, etc.) and becoming credentialed.
3. Use of experience in learning: Learners have unique areas of expertise from which to draw on while learning new content.
4. Readiness to learn: As individuals mature, their readiness to learn increases as they apply what is learned to their various roles.
5. Orientation to learning: Older learners are oriented toward using knowledge to solve problems.

These assumptions about older learners complement the tenets of invitational rhetoric (S. Foss & Griffin, 1995), which include creating relationships of equality, the immanent value of all living things, and the self-determination of individuals.

Invitational Rhetoric

Knowles's assumptions about older learners complement the tenets of invitational rhetoric (S. Foss & Griffin, 1995), which include creating relationships of equality, the immanent value of all living things, and the self-determination of individuals. Aristotle defined rhetoric over 2,600 years ago as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Furley & Nehamas, 1994). S. Foss & Griffin (1995) coined the term "invitational rhetoric" to critique the theories of persuasion that limit rhetoric to an expression of power. They explain, "As far back as the Western discipline of rhetoric has been explored, rhetoric has been defined as the conscience intent to change others," (p. 2), which infantilizes the audience as it positions the rhetor as empowered and the audience as submissive.

Implicit in S. Foss & Griffin's (1995) argument is the understanding that all forms of communication include a persuasive element. This includes the classroom wherein the very process necessitates the acceptance of a persuasive claim that the material is both correct and useful. We extend S. Foss and Griffin's argument by claiming that invitational rhetoric is uniquely positioned for the andragogic classroom.

Invitational rhetoric is grounded in three key principles: equality, immanent value, and self-determination. The authors explain that the goal of equality is to eliminate "the dominance and elitism that characterize most human relationships" (S. Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 4). To do so, instructors must decenter themselves as the sole arbiter of the education at hand. Of immanent value, the authors explain, "every being is unique and necessary" (p. 4). This principle highlights the validity of lived experience in the (co)construction of learning. The authors explain that self-determination is "grounded in a respect for others . . . Self-determination involves the recognition that audience members are the authorities on their own lives and accords respect to others' capacity and right to constitute their worlds as they choose" (p. 4). In the andragogic classroom, learners are recognized as fully functioning members of society with a multitude of unique responsibilities based on life experience.

Taking these principles into account repositions rhetoric from a display of power to an invitation to understand where the learners are invited to share in knowledge creation. The role of teacher-as-rhetor also requires them to suspend personal judgment on student contributions. For example, in invitational rhetoric, "rhetors recognize the valuable contributions audience members can make to the rhetors' own thinking and understanding, and they do not engage in strategies that may damage or sever the connection between them and their audiences" (S. Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 6). In essence, the roles of teacher/student or rhetor/audience are fluid and the teacher knows they will likely learn as much from students as students learn from them.

Instructors that adopt an andragogic philosophy employ two key strategies: offering perspectives and creating external conditions. Offering perspectives is described as a process that operates "not through persuasive argument, but through offering—the giving of expression to a perspective without advocating its support" (S. Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 8). Understandably, this requires a more subjective approach to the dissemination of information that may not be appropriate for all disciplines. However, communication studies should be a particularly fruitful site for this type of discourse. Offering perspectives occurs when "they enter the interaction with a goal not of converting others to their positions, but of sharing what they know, extending one another's ideas," and focusing on lived experiences, for example, "I tried this solution when it happened to me . . . or what would happen if?" (p. 8).

The creation of external conditions involves cultivating safety, value, and freedom. Safety involves the perception of being free from harm, either physically or mentally. In the andragogic classroom, learners' ideas must be met with respect and care, especially if learners already feel "othered" on campus. Value has to do with honoring the lived experiences of students as what makes them a unique and productive member of the educational process. Finally, freedom involves not imposing unnecessary limitations. In other words, "participants can bring any and all matters to the interaction for consideration; no subject matter is off-limits, and all presuppositions can be challenged" (S. Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 12).

Applying Invitational Principles in the Andragogic Classroom

Although both authors were trained in the principles of andragogy, much of this training was not specific to the communication discipline. We had previously taught *units* about invitational rhetoric in advanced public speaking and persuasion courses but had not developed a teaching philosophy informed by invitational principles. Thus, this section explains how we use the strategic components of invitational rhetoric as our organizing structure (creating external conditions and offering perspectives) and provides examples of invitational andragogic principles in action. We focus specifically on courses in communication theory, interpersonal communication, and group communication.

Creating External Conditions

We begin each class with the assumption that all learners have unique areas of expertise that can inform coursework. To foster *relationships of equality* that highlight the *immanent value* of learners' experiences and thoughts, we focus specifically on ways to incorporate learners' *self-directedness* (assumption #1), *need to know* (assumption #2), and *use of experiences in learning* (assumption #3). While we believe all course content is important, we know that learners are most likely to engage with content they need to know to carry out their roles in home, community, and work settings. To support learners as they apply course concepts to their own experiences, we highlight and reinforce the external conditions that make this approach fruitful: safety, value, and freedom.

We saw these assumptions applied in a 400-level communication theory course where learners were asked to use a theory to analyze a specific communication problem and then present solutions to it. Learners were encouraged to use their own experiences for self-directed topic selection, rather than case studies or examples from media or culture (though case studies certainly have their places in the classroom). To support learners as they analyzed communication problems in their own lives, we highlighted the safety of the classroom by describing the importance of lived experience to learning, the idea that no learner's experience was unimportant, and a set of learner-developed guidelines for discussing difficult topics.

One learner, Debbie (pseudonym), worked as a certified nursing assistant in a nearby assisted living facility. Debbie reflexively took notes during and after one of her shifts, focusing on her communication with patients. Using communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2008), her analysis categorized the examples of convergent and divergent communication she either used or witnessed during a typical shift. Debbie concluded that she and her colleagues frequently used "elderspeak" when addressing patients and argued that this negatively impacted the caregiver-patient relationship. She proposed a two-pronged solution wherein she spent a shift deliberately trying to avoid elderspeak and noting any improvements in her interactions, followed by sharing her findings with her supervisor in hopes of presenting the findings to her colleagues.

Debbie used her *need to know* and understand her patients to guide her interactions, and her *use of experiences in learning* helped develop tangible solutions to a communication problem in assisted living facilities. Without stating it, Debbie also highlighted the immanent value of her patients, thus extending the invitational classroom environment outside our four walls. Another learner, who was a caregiver for an ill parent, recognized her own tendency to use elderspeak in interactions with her parent and her plans to become more aware of her communication. This interaction was supported by the safety learners felt and the freedom to choose to use Debbie's findings, if appropriate, for their own experiences.

In another 400-level group communication class, the semester-long project centered on identifying a problem within an organization and creating a proposal to fix it, while cooperatively learning tactics for successful group communication. Given time constraints of the accelerated 7-week course, the assignment was tailored to highlight their common experience in the adult classroom; namely, their collective experience of attending a university in a "school of adult learning." In order to engage with the assumptions #1–3, the assignment description provided little direction on how to find a problem at the university other than to engage their own experiences as a student.

Based on group discussion, the following problems were identified: parking on campus, access to student organizations, and the lack of proper attention to vending machines. As a professor, I was familiar with complaints about the first two issues, but not the third. One learner explained that most people in the program come from jobs that end at 5:00 p.m. and need to be in class by 6:00 p.m. Dining services hours of operation are limited and typically crowded with learners who do not have evening classes, so students are forced to rely on vending machines. Faculty and staff were not aware that vending machines were not located appropriately throughout the university or that supplies were often depleted by this time of day.

Interestingly, learners' unique *experiences* (assumption #3) and *self-directedness* (assumption #1) fueled their motivation and *need to know* (assumption #2). As the project progressed, groups were led to explore the organizational structure of the university and identify resources to foster change. Thus, learners were reflexive as they used their agency and experiences to solve a problem specific to their life roles as older learners and employees. The creation of external conditions that promoted safety, value, and freedom led to a shared experience that incorporated group communication concepts, highlighted an organizational problem at the university, and provided the rhetor/professor with new knowledge of how to help a particular population of learners.

Offering Perspectives

As noted earlier, offering perspectives is an invitational practice where the instructor shares experiences and perspectives on subjects in ways that encourage listeners to consider them and share their own. This strategy highlights learners' *readiness to learn* (assumption #4) and *orientation to learning* (#5). Though many scholars have highlighted the ways in which teachers and learners use social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and active learning (Prince & Felder, 2006), older learners have historically been excluded from these analyses, despite their growing presence in the classroom. According to the principles of andragogy, older learners' readiness to learn is incredibly high because they are able to draw from the many roles they hold in their lives (e.g., student, spouse, parent, caregiver, employer, employee, community member). Important to note here is that we do not advocate transforming every class in these ways. Rather, the accelerated courses taught in the evenings may better serve the learners that enroll in them by peer-to-peer learning and group-based projects that take place

during class. To encourage perspective offering, we tell learners that class time is for discussing and applying concepts. Reading materials and watching videos should take place outside of class.

We experienced this in a 300-level 7-week interpersonal communication class. The evening class, which lasted 4 full hours, necessitated that a variety of activities, discussions, and assessments take place during class time. During the week when we discussed in-group/out-group communication and social identity theory, learners were asked to plan and lead a discussion about a group they were a member of and how the group uses communication to distinguish members from nonmembers. To begin the perspective-offering process, I shared a brief presentation about language, accent, and dialect (ways groups identify members) in Appalachia (where I am from, but do not currently live or teach). I shared the example of pronouncing "Appalachia" as an indicator of in-group status. In the southern region of Appalachia, it is commonly pronounced Ap-uh-latch-uh (with some regional variations, though most keep the short third "a"), while those from outside this region may say Ap-pa-lay-shuh. I followed this with discussion questions about how language, dialect, and accent can "other" individuals. I shared my own experiences of being stereotyped and how I had evaluated others as in-group or out-group based on their pronunciation choices, in hopes that doing so would highlight safety and freedom to share their offerings in the classroom as well.

After a short discussion, Lakeith (pseudonym) used his time as discussion leader to offer perspectives on his experiences with colorism in his Jamaican American community. This led to a conversation about the differences between colorism, prejudice, racism, and discrimination. Another learner, Laurie, shared her experience of working in a large financial company and the ways clothing was used to differentiate between custodial, administrative, managerial, and C-suite employees. She asked questions about gendered experiences around what constitutes "business attire." In each instance, learners felt comfortable sharing their experiences of being evaluated as an in-group or out-group member and how these frames shaped their evaluations of others, as well.

Some of our most fruitful discussions stem from the rhetor/professor first offering perspectives of their experience, and framing these offerings as opportunities for engagement, rather than textbook examples of "the way it is." While we frequently also share concrete definitions, we encourage perspective-sharing by using our own experiences as jumping-off points rather than the focus of the discussion.

Creating External Conditions and Offering Perspectives Before Class Begins

Whereas the previous examples focus on in-class activities, we now offer a few suggestions to consider when planning the course. We focus these suggestions on the syllabus, course LMS, language, and teaching philosophy.

The syllabus: To create the external conditions necessary for learners to feel safe offering perspectives, we recommend including a statement about the nature and structure of the class, clearly stating that perspective-offering is not just helpful but also *welcomed*. This can be done by using possessive pronouns and "we" language that highlight the collective nature of the class, such as, "we will discover," "our class focuses on . . . ," and similar statements.

The course LMS: Online learning management systems are ubiquitous. To begin the invitational process, we recommend including designated locations in the LMS (e.g., discussion board) where the rhetor/professor offers their plan for the course and invites feedback and questions. This will mirror the

invitation to offer perspectives that will occur in-person and allow learners who may be nervous to ask questions during class.

The language: Labeling and defining key concepts is standard practice in communication studies. However, potential research on the impact of identifying a group of learners as "nontraditional," "accelerated learners," or "adult learners" has been met with mixed reviews. To operate within this lacuna in literature, we suggest inviting learners to self-identify. In the communication classroom, the topic of language has universal importance and so it is a prime site to explore student views. We often introduce the importance of language by opening a discussion about how the learners feel they are labeled or named by the university. Taking this discussion a step further and encouraging learners to decide how their cohort will be identified within the classroom promotes agency as well as insight into an important concept in the study of communication.

The teaching philosophy: We recommend including a brief summary of your teaching philosophy in the syllabus or on the course LMS. This provides an opportunity to explain what an invitational approach looks like and how this approach will benefit learners in their specific situations.

Finally, we encourage everyone to review assignment descriptions, course navigation, and required readings to look for additional ways to invite learners to offer perspectives. This approach is an ongoing reflexive process that we engage in continually from the point of drafting syllabi to entering final grades.

Conclusion

By exploring the tenets of invitational rhetoric and the assumptions of andragogy, we hope that those who teach in programs targeted at adults, older learners, or those individuals who are otherwise separated from the larger undergraduate population will develop an andragogic classroom philosophy. An invitational andragogy is rooted in both theory and practice. As this unique population continues to comprise an increasingly larger percentage of our campuses, practices like these will honor their lived experiences by fostering a climate that embraces equality, the immanent value of all, and the self-determination of individuals.

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