Chapter 10
Real World Collaborative Projects Increasing Self-Directed Learning in Online Master’s Programs

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ABSTRACT
College students learn effectively when they engage in academic materials and make meaningful connections with faculty and peers, applying information as it is learned (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005 in Holzweiss, et.al., 2014). Although there is much research on the undergraduate student experience, the experience of adult learners in graduate programs is sparse. Adult students are a growing presence on college campuses and it is expected that the number of adult learners will continue to increase. This chapter provides foundational information to teaching adult learners in the online format. Theoretical constructs of andragogy and self-directed learning are reviewed and applied to real-life examples of successful collaborative learning activities in the online environment. Discussion questions are provided to promote the application of chapter content to the instructional environment of the reader.

INTRODUCTION
College students learn effectively when they engage in academic materials and make meaningful connections with faculty and peers, applying information as it is learned (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005 in Holzweiss, et.al., 2014). Although there is much research on the undergraduate student experience, the experience of adult learners in graduate programs is sparse. However, adult students are a growing presence on college campuses and it is expected that the number of adult learners will continue to increase (Hussar and Bailey, 2009). Adult learners differ from younger learners due to many factors including...
age, marital and parental status, full time employment, and financial independence (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Adult learners may also have constraints on their time and focus that younger students do not face. Further, adult learners may have extensive life and work experiences that strongly influence their learning decisions and choices. To accommodate the qualitative difference between adult learners and their younger counterparts, perspectives on learning theory shifted from the traditional pedagogical perspective, to “andragogy” (Knowles, 1980). Developed in the late 1960s by Malcolm Knowles, andragogy takes into account the unique perspectives specific to adult learners. Andragogy is defined learning for adults described as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980, p.43). Since its introduction, andragogy has been viewed as foundational to the study of adult learners. The theory of andragogy as posited by Knowles “stressed the connection between learner characteristics and the learning process” (Carpenter-Aeby, 2013, p. 3). Adult learners use previous experience to create meaning in new learning situations. Knowledge is interpreted by the adult learner in the context of his or her specific life experience and integrated into that context. Knowles further postulated four necessary aspects of adult learning; self-directedness, abundant experience in the learning process, readiness to learn and problem-centered learning (Knowles et al. 2005 in RJ-C. Chu and C-C. Tsai, 2009).

This chapter will use the construct of andragogy, and its ancillary postulate, self-directed learning, as foundational to best practice in collaborative activities in adult online learning experiences. The following tools and techniques well suited to aiding in successful adult learning in the online environment will be discussed: clarity in course organization through course mapping, ongoing formative and summative feedback, synchronous chats and discussions, strong course facilitation through the use of video casting, collaborative grouping and projects, and consistent use of discussion boards. Further, efficacy of each tool and technique in relation to student success and self-direction will be demonstrated using examples from online graduate program course work at a Southern California University.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self Directed Learning Connected to Best Practice Tools of Teaching

Self-directed learning, an aspect of andragogy in which adult learners choose their own learning paths and follow through according to interest and career benefit, has become a frequently studied aspect of adult learning. Researchers and practitioners alike strive to find best practice for aiding adult learners to successfully traverse graduate and adult educational programs. Additionally, technology has undergone continuous change over the last several years, making it critical that adult technological experiences and preferences be taken into account and even built into the learning experience in order to allow the adult learner to direct his/her own learning processes. In 2009, Chu and Tsai explored patterns of adult learner use and preference in Internet learning environments in connection to readiness for self-directed learning (2009). They noted that an adult learner’s readiness for self-directed learning may predict preferences in online learning environment and increase Internet self-efficacy, or the student’s feeling of confidence in using the Internet to find resources and to learn (2009). Further, in a 2011 study by Lai, the Self-Directed Learning Readiness (SDLR) of adult civil servants was examined in relationship to online learning readiness in a web-based training program. Results indicated that “three factors of SDLR (active learning, love of learning, and independent learning) and two constructs (Internet skill and information evaluation)” were significant predictors in learning effectiveness (Lai, H-J, 2011, p. 1).