Chapter 5

The Intersection of Andragogy and Dissertation Writing: How Andragogy Can Improve the Process

John D. Long

Lindenwood University, USA

ABSTRACT

Andragogy is a theory that attempts to explain how adults learn in contrast with pedagogy which attempts to explain how children learn. In many universities, doctoral students struggle to complete the final requirement for graduation, the dissertation. Little research has been conducted on this issue. Two studies were conducted to assess the effectiveness of the ten-year-old doctoral program in education at the author’s university. The author believes that using andragogy theory it is possible to modify the doctoral program to allow a higher percentage of students to complete their dissertation and for all students to experience less frustration with the process. Both interviews and statistical analysis were used to better understand what was working, what was not, and to suggest potential modifications to the program. Certain variables such as dissertation advisor, emphasis area, and previous teachers proved to not be significant. A student’s reported self-motivation emerged as significant.

INTRODUCTION

To realize the goal of becoming a full, or even adjunct, faculty member at a college or university the first step is often the hardest. Specifically, this step is completion of a doctoral degree. Every doctoral program worth mentioning has the requirement of completion of a dissertation. This step often proves the undoing of many doctoral
students as the process, required research, and sheer length of the document leave some doctoral students unable to complete the task. Kelley and Salisbury-Glennon describe the dissertation process as, “The doctoral student is expected to engage in a high-stakes, complex academic task that is often very different from anything that has been done before” (2016, p. 88). The process of doing something this new to the student is often fraught with difficulty. The author’s university began an Educational Doctorate program in 2007 and intentionally included a variety of assistance measures designed specifically to make this difficult task more possible to complete. Now, ten years later, two separate studies of the program reveal that additional changes are needed to meet the needs of students who are either in the program or are considering the program.

Child prodigies aside, most doctoral students are adults. As such they seem to learn in different ways and for different reasons than the children who populate our K-12 schools. It stands to reason that if adults learn differently than children, then what is perhaps the ultimate example of adult learning, the dissertation, could benefit from the specific adult learning theory know as Andragogy. Malcolm Knowles is regarded as the father of modern Andragogy. His theories, which were advanced and augmented by John Henschke and others, point to a specific set of conditions that must exist for adult learners to most effectively learn. These theories are particularly important in the review of the EdD program. Perhaps unknowingly, some professors in the program have gravitated towards the andragogical assumption of self-directed learning as the key to students’ success in the program. At the same time, many students have gravitated towards the andragogical assumption of need based learning as the key to student success. This disparity has led to a lack of success for some and negative feelings towards the University for others.

Some educators discount the idea of a separate set of learning conditions and strategies which are specific to adults. Instead they claim that effective instruction is effective instruction, regardless of the age of the student. This view discounts the more unilateral nature of most children’s education, although the nay-sayers argue children’s education should perhaps not be so unilateral.

These specific conditions will be more fully explained in the following Background section. Once we have reviewed the relevant Literature on both dissertation writing and Andragogy, the author will turn to the specific intersection of the two and where Andragogical theory might assist in bettering the dissertation process. Research into the dissertation writing process is not common. While it is a passion for the author, it is seemingly a lonely pursuit. However, the author is hopeful that this chapter will spur some additional academic investigation. Finally, the chapter concludes with a call for improving this important process in the life of everyone pursuing an academic career.
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