

Andragogy and Transformative Learning:
Knowledge Transfer Alchemy for the Workplace and Beyond

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Abstract

Learning and instructing are at once simple and complex. At the foundation of this proposition, a learner seeks to gain new knowledge and an instructor facilitates that learning. In order to build the experience that enables this process, the instructional designer uses theories based on the needs of the learner, information to be conveyed and the learning philosophy of the designer. In my experience employing the theories of andragogy and transformative learning have been key to meeting the learner where they are experientially as well as impacting the learner in the moment of instruction and beyond. This paper briefly describes these two theories and outlines examples of their potential and actual use in diversity and inclusion training and learning design.

Keywords: andragogy, transformative learning, instructional design, diversity and inclusion

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In a paper outlining basic learning theories, Ertmer and Newby (2013) sought to “provide a more structured foundation for planning and conducting instructional design activities” (p.45). This is the primary role that learning theory plays in the learning design process. Theories are the tools in the toolbox of learning design. I believe that the most dynamic learning takes the entire learner, the vastness of his or her experiences and levels of openness to expanding knowledge, into account in learning design. It is also important that learning design and training recognizes the ability of knowledge to have broad implications in the life of a learner. Therefore the most applicable theories to support my learning philosophy are andragogy and transformative learning.

Literature Review

Adult learning is distinct and complex. The theory of andragogy seeks to define premises on which to build impactful adult learning. Andragogy is a term coined by the German educator Alexander Kapp in 1833 and expanded into a broader theory by Malcolm Sheppard Knowles in the United States in the early 1970s (Holton, Knowles, Swanson 1). Knowles proposed that adult learning should be approached differently than teaching children based on five assumptions about adults and learning; 1) maturity allows adults to move from dependence to self-direction in learning, 2) learner experiences are vast and valuable to learning, 3) adults are ready to learn when their experiences and the learning at hand are congruent, 4) learning must be relevant and applicable, and 5) adults are internally motivated to learn (Knowles, 45).

While andragogy seeks to define and encapsulate adult learning based on experiences of the learner, transformative learning works to expand the preexisting knowledge base of the learner with new ways of thinking and being. Nemec (2012) explains transformative learning as “a dramatic shift in perspective. This shift results from a critical examination of one’s assumptions, values, and beliefs, and of the foundations and expectations of the system in which one operates. (p. 478)

Developed by John Mezirow in the late 1970’s this theory seeks to transform learner presumptions via interdependent core elements of: 1) individual experience, 2) critical self-reflection, 3) dialogue, 4) holistic orientation, 5) awareness of context, and 6) authentic practice (Mezirow, Taylor 2009). Nemec continues by explaining that learning should be organized and delivered based on learner needs, a safe environment for sharing should be established engendering trust, a sense of discovery based on experiences should be fostered, open dialogue with agreed upon rules is needed, and time to fully explore the topic and discussion are important elements of transformative learning (Nemec, 2012, p. 478-479).

Philosophy

Human beings are extremely complex and multifaceted. We process, apply, and evaluate information constantly. In my opinion the alchemy of learning design is to meet the learner where they are in their development and to support them as they build on their extensive knowledge base in a way that positively impacts them in the learning environment and optimally outside of the learning environment. My experiences as an association professional and mental health counselor account for my comfort with both

the structure of andragogy and the more social emotional underpinnings of transformative learning. While I am not in agreement with all aspects of andragogy and transformative learning theories, they are tools that can be used to define and guide meaningful learning experiences.

A fair amount of my training experience has occurred in the area of diversity and inclusion. Very few people would refute the need for cross-cultural understanding, communication and inclusion in an increasingly global and diverse-rich working environment. Although this perspective seems very straightforward, getting everyone in a work environment “on the same page” about the value of diversity and inclusion and how to foster it can be extremely challenging.

Mary Shepard Wong describes transformative experiences as “first-hand concrete experiences, often when one is vulnerable and ones’ limitations are exposed such as in encounters with difference. They can be emotional and contain adversity causing one to rethink former ways of understanding challenging basic assumptions” (Wong, 2007, p.11). In discussing the use of Andragogy in designing police training, Michael L. Birzer and Ronald Tannehill explain that “Andragogical techniques applied to cultural diversity training can develop understandings on the part of the trainee and may aid in identifying any problems that a trainee might have with members of the opposite race or ethnic background” (Birzer & Tannehill, 2001, p. 244).

From my perspective, andragogy is useful because it levels the playing field by defining basic assumptions about how adults approach learning and the assets they bring to learning. Although not all adults are at the same level of self-direction or motivation, they all come to learning with useful experiences, require that learning be

useful and relevant, and should to be at a stage of development where they can transition from what they know now to what they need to know next.

As an instructional designer, I would use these presumptions to: 1) use a tool to assess attitudes and motivation prior to a diversity and inclusion training, 2) use past experiences of learners to expand and clarify thinking around diversity and inclusion, and 3) ensure that actionable knowledge is gained to ensure that training is relevant and can be used to implement or refine approaches and processes.

Due to the nature of the topic and various opinions and emotions that it can engender, transformative learning can be essential in diversity and inclusion training. Experiences and perceptions about diversity and inclusion vary widely among Americans. A history of enslavement, genocide, diverse immigrant experiences, religious strife, sexual orientation intolerance, gender inequality, disability perceptions and current political rancor can make diversity and inclusion discussions ripe for Transformative Learning.

There are detractors that believe that this type of learning is not appropriate for most learning environments (e.g. Newman 2014, Rachal 2002). In my experience, transformational learning works best with social emotional learning and skill acquisition. A vital aspect of one of my trainings was to facilitate a process of defining inclusion. Instead of putting a definition on a slide, I informed participant that they were in a safe space, and asked them to close their eyes and think of a time when they felt excluded. I made sure to ask people not to go to a traumatic space, but one where they felt uncomfortable and out of place. The goal was to access the feeling associated with being excluded. Instead of asking people to share these experiences, I asked them to use three words to describe how they felt during that experience while they continued to

keep their eyes closed. Words like “painful”, “defeated”, and “worthless” surfaced and were written down on a whiteboard. I thanked them for their honesty and willingness to trust me. An in-depth and fruitful discussion of how to move people from the feelings and experiences presented on the whiteboard to a sense of inclusion in the workplace ensued. These recommendations were organized into categories, clarified, and translated into goals and tactics.

Several participants shared that this exercise helped them understand inclusion in a different way. Even learners who were resistant to the term and concept gained a deeper understanding and appreciation for the importance of inclusion because they could identify with it on a personal level. There was no formal evaluation to ascertain if this learning impacted participants beyond the training. However, anecdotal responses from participants indicated an altered perspective and intent to use the exercise in other contexts.

I recognize that andragogy and transformative learning are not appropriate for all training settings. I believe that the principles of valuing the experiences of learners and meeting them where they are in their development in order to expand knowledge in the workplace and beyond are valuable. Andragogy and transformative learning are powerful tools in facilitating workplace and societal change.

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