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Andragogy and the single session lecture: A critical reflection on the planning and delivery of a standalone postgraduate teaching event

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a lecture delivered each year to postgraduates within the Department of Information Science at City University. The teaching context is outlined at personal, institutional and national levels through which the challenges facing a visiting lecturer are illustrated. The relevance of andragogy to this piece is then introduced.

These andragogical principles provide a framework in which to examine how the challenge of student engagement was resolved or exacerbated by the single lecture format, and how planning and delivery may also have contributed to this challenge. Engagement in the postgraduate context can be seen to depend on how well each of these principles is supported by the teaching methods used, and so realistic alterations which could be made in the future to promote deeper engagement are also considered.

Keywords

andragogy, lecturing, student engagement

1. Introduction & teaching context

The focus of this essay is a single two hour lecture on an elective module entitled 'Libraries and Publishing in the Information Society' (LAPIS). The module is offered to postgraduates on several different Masters programmes and is usually elected by around 40 students. The cohort is diverse, as is the module programme which is delivered as a series of twelve standalone sessions given by a different visiting lecturer (VL) each week. The content is largely open to interpretation by each speaker.

I was invited to deliver a session through my PhD supervisors who are also the module leaders. I have limited teaching experience outside of this and had not

considered the various challenges involved, other than the desire to provide a stimulating experience for the students. Of course I wanted the content and delivery to engage the students, but I was unaware of the pedagogical and andragogical elements which may play a part in that engagement.

My PhD research forms the basis of the lecture's content, namely the relevance of speed and choice on information literacy in digital environments. My research is not intended to solve problems of information literacy but to illuminate those problems from an angle which is often overlooked in Library & Information Science (LIS) research. The lecture, therefore, aims to introduce students to a novel perspective from which to view such problems: that the accelerated speed and abundant choice of information in digital environments may be as much to blame for these issues as an individual's processing capacity, which is often taken to be the most important factor in theories of information behaviour.

Assessment for the module is via a 3000 word essay into which I have no input in my role as a VL. The relevance of my session to the module is therefore difficult to determine. In past sessions, I have not created opportunities to gather feedback about the impact of my lecture through other means, or to establish a relationship with the cohort beyond the two hour session that we are together. It had occurred to me that different students in the group would find the lecture interesting to varying degrees, but I took very few conscious steps to make the subject engaging to as many of them as possible, undoubtedly through my lack of knowledge of teaching and learning styles and theories.

In a wider context, LIS education, commonly perceived as library school but in actuality a much broader discipline, is subject to the same changes as the role of libraries themselves (Broady-Preston, 2009). What an LIS student can expect from library school depends on the school, the student and the field in which the learning is to be applied, and those expectations can change throughout the duration of the education (Olander, 2008). This fluidity is exacerbated by the ever-changing competencies desired by potential employers, meaning that it is difficult to pin down the skills and attributes a student should possess on completion of their programme (Han, 2010).

This fluidity of expectation, combined with the absence of curricular guidelines and my own vague understanding of what it meant to teach, created a challenging

environment in which to prepare and deliver my standalone session. With this background in mind, I will now look more closely at the relevance of andragogy to the postgraduate context and to my reflection, and the perceived inadequacies of the lecture format within that context. This will form a framework within which to assess the key andragogical principles which my lecture either undermined or supported.

2. The relevance of andragogy

I am using an andragogical perspective to reflect on this teaching session because it seems the most appropriate theory of learning with which to frame my analysis. I will use the four original key principles (Knowles, 1980) as a way of structuring the essay, and as a means of bringing theory to bear on my teaching practice and on the challenge of engaging students in this specific context.

Andragogy, “the art and science of helping adults learn”, was developed into a theory of education by Malcolm Knowles in the early 1970s who went on to describe its core principles in the early 1980s. These principles have been extended over time, by Knowles and by others, but at andragogy’s root remains the notion that the learning experience of adults is qualitatively different to that of children. In order to be effective, teaching methods should therefore be devised to explicitly support the principles which underpin the andragogical context. Doubts have been raised as to whether adult learning differs so drastically from that of children as to warrant a specific theory (Fry, 2005) and so I use the principles as a guiding framework whilst acknowledging that in practice, situations are rarely so clear cut as to square neatly with any one theoretical school.

In the LIS discipline, andragogy has been used on a number of occasions to illuminate the processes which adult users go through when accessing and using library services. There have been calls for librarians to be more aware of the specifically adult user group (Ingram, 2000), no doubt in reaction to the relatively intense attention paid to child and youth library services. The important relationship between library use and learning is often explicitly analysed when the user is a child, but this is often overlooked when adult users are involved (Gerdy, 2001). An awareness of andragogical principles may improve those library services aimed at adults, and may also help alleviate library anxiety amongst mature students (Harrell, 2002). As an interesting link to my own research, andragogy has also been invoked

as a tool for devising information literacy programmes specifically for adults (Stern, 2010).

Despite this use of andragogy in practical LIS terms, there is little or no evidence of it having been utilised in LIS education, that is in “training-the-trainers” (UNESCO, 2008). It is however relevant to my teaching practice in a number of ways, most obviously because this particular module is postgraduate and the cohort are therefore adult by definition. Moreover, the fluidity of expectation as outlined above is undoubtedly influenced by each student’s individual life experience up to the point that they join the Masters programme. There are very few LIS undergraduate courses in the UK and so there is no typical path to postgraduate study, nor is there a typical path which emerges from the other side. The individual’s experience and personal context are therefore key to their expectations of the subject generally, and to their engagement with my lecture in particular.

Whilst experiential theories of learning, such as Kolb (Kolb, 1984), may also prove useful here, I feel that the combination of principles in andragogy provides a broader and more comprehensive platform on which to draw the issues together. Ideas about experiential learning and self-direction are drawn from the andragogical perspective (Fry, 2009) which enables me to look at these alongside other relevant notions. I am basing this framework on the four original principles of andragogy rather than the later expanded list of six, because I feel that they adequately embrace the issues at hand without further complication. The two additional principles emerged from the original set as Knowles refined his thinking and can therefore be addressed within the relevant sections. The four principles to be discussed are:

- The learner’s self-concept
- The role of the learner’s experience
- The learner’s readiness to learn (which can be related to the need to know of Knowles’ later model)
- The learner’s orientation to learning (which can be seen to include the motivation to learn of the later model)

3. The challenge of student engagement

I have chosen the challenge of student engagement and motivation as the central theme to unite the principles of andragogy in the context of this single lecture. This is because I can see that in attending to the four principles outlined above, student engagement is likely to be encouraged. This challenge is particularly pertinent given the well-documented engagement problems caused by the lecture format (Brown, 2002) and given that the session I was invited to lead was indeed a lecture.

3.1 Principle One: the learner's self-concept

The notion of self-concept in andragogy is the assumption that an adult's awareness of their responsibility for personal life choices translates to education as an awareness of their responsibility for self-direction (Knowles, 2005). This extends to a need to be seen as capable of self-direction and a resistance to situations which seem to ignore that need or imply incapability. The lecture format can be seen as one such situation, traditionally employing a transmissive mode of one-way communication which excludes opportunities for autonomous learning. This then limits the extent to which adult learners engage with the teaching situation they are in.

In planning how to deliver my lecture, I did not consider the impact that the session's format may have on engagement. On reflection, I can see that this was for two related reasons. Firstly, within the institutional context of the module and with my primary role of PhD student in mind, it did not occur to me that changing the format was an option: the module is a series of lectures and I do not have the authority to change this. Secondly, I had (and to some degree still have) a relatively 'traditional' idea of how a lecture works because that fits with my preferred learning style, which rests predominantly in the Aural and Read/write categories of Fleming's VARK inventory (Fleming, 2010). In transferring this to my teaching style, I did not take into account the andragogical suggestion that many adults may resist this type of situation because it dismisses their autonomy during the lecture itself, despite aiming to encourage it beyond the classroom.

Whilst the limitations of a single session lecture make it very difficult to identify the learning styles of each student, I should in future be aware that I am defaulting to my own preferences and that these may not be shared by the group. In order to accommodate for the range of styles that is likely to exist within such a diverse cohort, and to embrace the related need for self-direction, I could introduce a variety

of techniques within the single session. For example, I could begin the lecture with a question that the students take five minutes to consider or discuss. The question could be aimed at exploring the assumptions within the LIS discipline that form the basis of the lecture, and the students could ascertain whether they agree with those assumptions in relation to their own information behaviour. This would give “permission to interact with the subject” (Davies quoted in Morton, 2009, p. 63), engender a sense of involvement with the lecture content and provide a background against which concepts developed later in the session can be appraised. It would also begin to draw in the students’ experiences from outside the classroom as they look for connections between the theories being introduced and their own observations. This would help ease the teaching style away from being teacher-centred (transmissive) to being more student-centred (facilitative) (Akerlind, 2003).

3.2 Principle Two: the role of the learner’s experiences

To turn in more detail to experiential influence, the next principle is that the adult learner’s life experiences shape their learning to a greater degree than is the case with children. This is not only because they simply have *more* experience than their younger counterparts, but they have had a different *kind* of experience too (Knowles, 2005). These experiences are a useful resource in themselves, and they also give rise to certain internalised habits and processes which combine to create a self-identity. Just as situations which deny or ignore a learner’s self-concept can lead to resistance, so situations which devalue a learner’s experiences can lead to a sense of personal rejection and disengagement (ibid.).

To a certain degree, I did consider the cohort’s stock of experience in planning my lecture. The perspective of information behaviour which I was proposing assumed a knowledge and experience not only of certain existing LIS doctrines but also of certain situations in life where the speed and choice of digital information environments causes issues of overload and illiteracy. However, I am aware that my lecture *assumed* this to be the case because of my reliance on transmissive delivery, and did not actively invite or explore the wealth of experience that existed in the lecture theatre. To do so would undoubtedly have increased interaction, engagement and ultimately critical thinking about the concepts being proposed.

Asking initial questions would help to bring the students’ experiences to bear on the lecture, and the use of rhetorical questions at crucial points would strengthen links

between concepts and experience (Morton, 2009). If access to the appropriate virtual learning environment (VLE) were possible, asking students to contribute their experiences of the lecture's key points *before* the lecture would create a greater sense of ownership and engagement with the content. It would also assist me in planning the content more specifically for the cohort in question. The danger here would be in addressing the experiences of those who contribute to a pre-sessional forum at the expense of those who do not, thereby alienating their experiences anyway.

3.3 Principle Three: the learner's readiness to learn

The notion that an adult learner becomes ready to learn when real-life situations demand it is clearly linked to what that learner has experienced (Knowles, 2005). In this sense, education is explicitly developmental because it resolves problematic situations and moves the learner on to a new stage in their life context. Related to this notion is, I think, Knowles' later addition to the andragogical model of a learner's need to know. If a real-life situation or experience requires that learning take place, the learner is aware of why they need to undertake that learning. In this context, if a student wishes to further their LIS career, a Masters programme is an appropriate developmental step to take and the need to undertake modules within that programme is self-explanatory.

Nevertheless, the content of elective modules is not necessarily self-explanatory. Whilst the students who elect the LAPIS module have made the choice to study it and could therefore be described as ready, the potentially isolated character of the standalone lecture means that the need to know may not be entirely obvious. There was no mandatory curriculum I needed to include or could refer to in planning the lecture, other than a brief overview of the module. I did not take into account how my lecture related to other lectures in the series, other than the knowledge that my PhD research contradicts the usual approach to studying information behaviour.

Greater attention to the cohesion of the module beyond my immediate responsibilities would have allowed me to clarify the value of my lecture with the students (and myself). This would emphasise why they need to know about the ideas within the lecture and support their readiness to learn and apply those ideas. For example, by attending one or more other lectures in the series, I would be able to perceive the broader picture of the module. By aligning the content of my session

more consciously with the content of others, I would be able to make a strong case for its value by signposting its relevance to specific examples (Morton, 2009). Bringing student experience into the lecture would also emphasise the pertinence of my content to the real-life situations they contribute to the session, thereby illustrating why they are ready to learn about these ideas.

3.4 Principle Four: the learner's orientation to learning

The andragogical perspective assumes that the adult learner's orientation to learning is life-centred, rather than subject-centred as is largely the case with children (Knowles, 2005). This links with the principles of experience, and of the readiness to learn and need to know: an adult learns more effectively when learning is shown to relate to a real-life situation or experience. Knowles' extended model also includes a motivation principle which emphasises that it is the learner's own perspective of their life that drives the desire to learn, rather than external factors (ibid.).

In many ways, the content of my lecture is geared towards supporting this perspective: it encourages the critical appraisal of LIS research in the context of personally and qualitatively experienced aspects of information environments. It emphasises what is felt by an information user in contrast to what is researched by the LIS academy. However, the situations used in my session are from *my* real-life experiences. Although the intention is to describe recognisable contexts, these examples do not actively engage the students as much as would be possible if the examples were taken from their lives too.

The use of pre-sessional communication would again be of benefit here to gather specific situations to which the concepts developed in the lecture can be applied. This would help stress the value of the content to the students' learning by being relevant, useful and allowing for personal identification with the subject matter (Pintrich, 2003). If adults, as Knowles suggests, do engage and learn more effectively when the learning is tied to life, problems or tasks, this lecture would possibly also benefit from some form of follow-up session or discussion. This might allow students to take the lecture material away and consider it in relation to tasks or problems which they themselves have faced. This opportunity for application of the content, and for subsequent discussion, would help tie the concepts to problems faced in everyday life. It would also give the lecture a sense of purpose and greater value to have a follow-up session given that there is no assessment tied directly to it.

Moreover, such a follow-up could constitute a student-generated evaluation of the session.

5. Conclusion

By exploring the principles of andragogy I have become more aware of the need to actively engage my students. I have relied on my enthusiasm for the subject to carry the lecture but I recognise that this may not be a strong enough justification or motivation for the students to be interested in the content. I also now recognise that my preferred learning style does not necessarily translate into a universally effective teaching style, and have been able to identify several steps I can take in the future to transfer ownership of the session from myself to the students in an effort to increase engagement and deep learning.

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