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The Lincoln Paradigm: An Educational Vision for the Future

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Abstract

Drawing on lessons included in Abraham Lincoln's works can help inform adult education practices. This chapter utilizes excerpts from one of Lincoln's law lectures to highlight points that are important in the delivery, development, and evaluation of adult education. Throughout the chapter, quotations from Lincoln are used to set the context for best practices in adult education. Each of these practices is then further described along with its relevance to an overall educational vision for adults.

Introduction

The rapidly evolving classroom impacts both learning and performance. Technology enhances increased dissemination of knowledge, but the essence of adult learning remains the development of marketable skills and competencies for application in real-world scenarios.

Abraham Lincoln certainly never touched a computer, but his advice to prospective lawyers creates the perfect guideline for successfully facilitating communication and learning. He proposes a combination of diligence, honesty, and a proactive facilitative approach outlining a clear purpose that helps everyone succeed.

With Abraham Lincoln as mentor and guide throughout, this chapter proposes a “teachable vision,” a vision for the future that acknowledges differences and overcomes barriers through honesty, diligence, and a willingness to both listen and learn. Lincoln proposed a vision for the future that everyone can understand, work toward, and accomplish together.

Diligence and the Adult Learner

In Abraham Lincoln’s Notes for a Law Lecture (July 1, 1850) he states,

I am not an accomplished lawyer. I find quite as much material for a lecture in those points wherein I have failed, as in those wherein I have been moderately successful. The leading rule for the lawyer, as for the man of every other calling, is diligence. Leave nothing for tomorrow which can be done today. Never let your correspondence fall behind. Whatever piece of business you have in hand, before stopping, do all the labor pertaining to it which can be done...

Diligence requires a solid foundation predicated on an adult-oriented education system encompassing essential processes, including creative thinking, problem solving, brainstorming, and follow-through. The cornerstone of this foundation is the realiza-

tion that teaching adult learners is a vastly different process than teaching children or adolescents. Pedagogy refers to the teaching of children where the teacher is the focal point of learning. Andragogy is the process of teaching adults and is based on “informed professional opinion; philosophical assumptions associated with humanistic psychology and progressive education; and a growing body of research and theory on adult learning, development, and socialization” (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982, p. 143).

Essentially andragogy shifts the focus from the educator to the learner. This creates a learning environment whereby the learner has substantial self-direction and control over the process. For example, the educator should:

- Determine learner interests and motivation for enrollment in the course. Course goals and objectives can thereby be modified to accommodate learner needs (Cranton, 1996).
- Facilitate an environment where students can learn from each other. Peer Learning Groups, including online Discussion Forums, create a support system for self-directed learning, information exchange, the stimulation of new ideas, and the allocation of relevant resources (Brookfield, 1986).
- Encourage periodic learner feedback, including discussion of the quality, sequence, and pace of the activities (Cranton, 1996).
- Provide access to additional resources and learning materials reflecting varying viewpoints are valuable tools (Cranton, 1996).
- Value and encourage participation and acknowledge the accumulated experience of adult learners as an important educational resource (Brookfield, 1986).

Ultimately, the success of the learning process depends on the instructor’s ability to listen. Every adult learner is different, and everyone learns at his/her own pace, taking into account variables such as cognitive style, culture, and personality. Studies have shown that implementation of andragogy itself may require a modified teaching style when dealing with cross-cultural issues

(Ziegahn, 2001). Examples of cross-cultural concerns requiring acknowledgment and accommodation are as follows:

- Tradition vs. Modernism: andragogy emphasizes progress and a future-oriented perspective; more traditional cultural perspectives emphasize historical status quo.
- Andragogical vs. Pedagogical: individuals may be comfortable with the familiar passive role of the pedagogical learner and uncomfortable with the concept of independent learning.
- Egalitarianism vs. Collectivism: andragogy supports equal access and individual reward; traditional cultures may value hierarchy and social status.

Adults are inherently diverse in their life experiences as well as diverse in their motivations for enrolling in a particular class. Although it is important for every instructor to consider his/her students as individuals, three common motivators encompass the majority of adult learners (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Most adult learners are:

- Goal oriented: classes are taken to reach a pragmatic goal, such as career advancement.
- Activity oriented: social interaction is an important component of the learning process.
- Learning oriented: the seeking of topic specific knowledge.

Because of this motivational diversity as well as the underlying cultural diversity of adult learners, open dialogue is essential to facilitate the incorporation of new facts and skills into experience. Remembering that every new skill takes time to learn, it is important for instructors to encourage participation and opposing viewpoints while maintaining a civil and respectful atmosphere.

Creation of an organized, timely, and positive learning environment is essential. Instructions should be clear, concise, and part of an ongoing communication process throughout the term. Although the andragogical framework emphasizes learner self-direction and control, it is the educator's responsibility to present the information in a format that will encourage learning. The goal is to create an environment whereby learners will acquire and

retain knowledge (cognitive), increase their awareness (affective), and develop new skills (behavioral).

The classic evaluation model for organizational training programs is applicable to the classroom as well as the business environment (Kirkpatrick, 1994). The Kirkpatrick model creates four evaluation levels:

- Reaction: learner overall satisfaction with the course, taking into account diverse learning styles.
- Learning: evaluation through the use of tests, written assignments, observations, discussions, and interviews to determine cognitive impact.
- Behavior: learner development and application of new skills.
- Results: In the business environment, this evaluation measures the economic impact of training. Economic impact can be evaluated in academics in terms of student retention.

Providing guidance and encouragement is essential to the educator's role. New skills and the assimilation of new knowledge take time and effort. Learners who quickly acquire information may appear impressive, but the real test is retention and application of skills. Speed at the cost of retention is ill advised, and detailed developmental feedback can provide a valuable learning tool. Successful teaching balances a variety of active learning techniques as well as cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning.

From Lectures to Learning

...Extemporaneous speaking should be practiced and cultivated. It is the lawyer's avenue to the public. However able and faithful he may be in other respects, people are slow to bring him business if he cannot make a speech. And yet there is not a more fatal error to young lawyers than relying too much on speech-making. If anyone, upon his rare powers of speaking, shall claim exemption from the drudgery of the law, his case is a failure in advance.—Lincoln

The traditional pedagogical lecture has been supplanted by the active learning andragogical model. However, lectures can be memorable and dynamic (Reinsmith, 1994) as well as an effective tool for teaching inexperienced active learners. Studies show that adult learners with limited active learning experience feel uncomfortable forming their own opinions and judgments and have a structured educational expectation (Tice, 1997).

Diverse expectations and learning styles can be accommodated through structuring and modifying the andragogical model. For example, instructors can consider using:

- Knowledge Hunt: rather than supplying knowledge in a lecture format, create small teams to search for the information.
- Question Generation: each team member creates a question relevant to the course materials, and the group researches the answer.
- Summation: learners review course materials and summarize the information.
- Group Review: divide the course materials into study segments assigned to each team. The teams will then present their area of knowledge to the class as a whole.

Adult learners in active learning classes and their counterparts in strictly lecture courses received similar grades on knowledge tests. However, active learning participants scored substantially higher on tests measuring the relationship of theory to practice, the ability to understand multiple perspectives, and the ability to self-correct (Wright, Miller, & Kosciuk, 1997).

Cooperation over Conflict

Discourage litigation. Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can. Point out to them how the nominal winner is often a real loser in fees, expenses, and waste of time. As a

peacemaker, the lawyer has a superior opportunity of being a good man. There will still be business enough.—Lincoln

It is the responsibility of the educator to be a role model for class discussion, interaction, and inclusiveness. When conflicts occur, resolution involves calm discussion to mediate misunderstandings in a timely fashion to prevent escalation. The classroom is the perfect environment to practice tolerance and inclusion. Instructors need to pay attention to the quality and tone of learner questions and responses and give developmental feedback when appropriate. Troubling behaviors should not be ignored. Problems will not resolve themselves, and learners should be made aware of their inappropriate behavior.

Cooperative learning, defined as “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991, pp. 147-148), used in conjunction with the andragogical framework, will help to alleviate the need for conflict resolution. Group learning provides a practice environment introduction to real-world project teams and self-directed work groups.

Studies indicate that cooperative learning creates higher achievement, positive learner relationships, and improved psychological adjustments as opposed to individual learning (Johnson et al., 1991). Cooperation and compromise are encouraged through interdependence resolving conflict and encouraging change.

From Mistakes to Motivation

Never stir up litigation. A worse man can scarcely be found than one who does this. Who can be more nearly a fiend than he who habitually overhauls the register of deeds in search of defects in titles, whereon to stir up strife, and put money in his pocket? A moral tone ought to be infused into the profession which should drive such men out of it.—Lincoln

People make mistakes. When this occurs instructors should acknowledge the mistake, find an acceptable solution, and move on. Otherwise an environment of denial and blame will be created, with participants so frightened to be wrong that it becomes impossible to learn from mistakes and move forward.

One way to learn from mistakes within the andragogical framework is to learn skills within the context of problem solving. This concept of practical application, the idea of doing while learning, is the key difference between the traditional and the active teaching styles (Vella, 1994). When the learner is actively involved, knowledge retention and practical application increase.

The andragogical model assumes that adult learners are problem centered in their orientation and that problem solving provides the most beneficial educational opportunity. Further assumptions include adults self-direct; life experience is a valuable learning resource; and adults are often motivated to learn by internal or intrinsic factors as opposed to external or extrinsic factors (Knowles, 1975). Additional reasons often cited include that adult learners desire to teach the newly acquired skill to others; they have specific job requirements; they have future aspirations; and they have a need to earn the course credit (Tough, 1979).

Many adult learners come from highly competitive backgrounds emphasizing winners and losers. Instructors need to discourage the impression that a lower grade given to one classmate results in a higher grade to another while encouraging the idea that the classroom environment is the perfect forum to practice team building skills. As a practical exercise, team members can also be required to assist one another in the completion of assignments.

Build Interest in Learning

And when you lack interest in the case the job will likely lack skill and diligence in the performance...—Lincoln

As previously discussed adult learners acquire formal education for diverse reasons. If the course materials address non-relevant motivation, the individual will lose interest and retention. For example, if the reason for taking the course is team-building practice and the course is strictly lecture, the learner is very likely to not complete the course due to lack of interest.

Constructivism is a context-based approach to adult learning based upon the theory that learners gain understanding when they act on new knowledge with their present knowledge and resolve discrepancies as they arise. Often referred to as discovery learning, the constructivist framework recommends the following approaches: the educator's goal is to create self-directed learners; learner curiosity should be encouraged; activities should be done both independently and collaboratively; information is retained when learners reach understanding on their own; and when learners are given the opportunity to discover knowledge for themselves, they learn how to learn (Cruikshank, Bainer, & Metcalf, 1995).

Using constructivist theory, when learners receive information that conflicts with present knowledge, they experience an internal sense of discomfort. Adults are motivated to alleviate this discomfort by modifying knowledge structures, thereby engaging in learning (Dixon, 1994).

To learn, information must be retained. Generally adults retain between five and nine pieces of information in short-term memory. Because short-term memory is immediately lost, retention occurs in long-term memory and is often related to repetition and contextual relevance (Miller, 1956).

"Teachable Moments" theory takes the concept of repetition leading to retention a step further. A developmental task, when learned, makes the achievement of succeeding tasks possible. When the timing is right, the ability to learn a specific task will be possible, and this "timing" creates the "teachable moment." Therefore, repetition is paramount so that when the learner's "moment" occurs, the knowledge can be assimilated and retained (Havighurst, 1953).

Dispelling Incorrect Beliefs

There is a vague popular belief that lawyers are necessarily dishonest. I say vague, because when we consider to what extent confidence and honors are reposed in and conferred upon lawyers by the people, it appears improbable that their impression of dishonesty is very distinct and vivid. Yet the impression is common, almost universal.—Lincoln

A “vague popular belief” exists that older adult learners are less capable of knowledge retention and the acquisition of new skills than younger adults. Scientific studies conclude that, in the general population, memory deterioration is minor until extreme old age. Memory problems occur when adults are forced into meaningless learning, pure memorization, or learning that involves only reassessment of old knowledge (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). New information related to existing knowledge increases the likelihood of long-term memory retention regardless of age (Dixon, 1994).

If possible some flexibility concerning deadlines and due dates should be built into the class. Research shows that when the pace is controlled, middle-aged adults have the same ability to learn that they had in their youth. Young through middle-aged learners score high in self-confidence and goal focus while older learners are generally more responsible and detail oriented (Merriam & Cafarella, 1991).

All adults, regardless of age, learn best when they discover concepts, ideas, new skills, and useful knowledge through active participation and well-planned structured experiences. Older learners may also appear less capable due to lack of technical expertise. When encountering diversity, whether based on age, race, gender, or culture, the most important role-model skill for the educator is to show respect. Showing respect for learners benefits everyone and creates an atmosphere of tolerance and understanding. It recognizes that everyone learns at a different pace and everyone has something important to contribute.

Honestly Respect the Learner

Resolve to be honest at all events; and if in your own judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation, rather than one in the choosing of which you do, in advance, consent to be a knave.—Lincoln

It’s an old adage, but nonetheless true: “Treat people the way you would want to be treated.” Teach with enthusiasm; respect your learners as well as yourself; and be a role model worthy of emulation.

The curriculum must be inclusive to retain relevance for diverse learners. An honest examination of class materials often reveals a dominant-culture world view. Suggestions for creating an inclusive learning environment (Imel, 1995) include:

- Allow reasoned, respectful disagreement between learners as well as between learners and the educator.
- Value and integrate into class discussion the life experiences of adult learners, both as individuals and as members of cultural/social groups.
- Accommodate diversity in learning styles. If specific analytical skills are required, teach them within the course structure.
- Acknowledge and celebrate multiple perspectives due to ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, class, religion, physical abilities, etc.

In conclusion, although diverse in their approaches, researchers generally agree that outstanding adult educators encourage a team mentality in environments where learners participate in active dialogue between equals; diversity is valued and accepted; life experience is acknowledged; and all perspectives are respected.

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