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## Seeing College Students as Adults: Learner-Centered Strategies for Information Literacy Instruction

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## Seeing College Students as Adults: Learner-Centered Strategies for Information Literacy

Instruction

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### **Abstract**

Information literacy instruction is a responsibility of many academic librarians and much has been written about approaches to this endeavor. This article explores ways in which pedagogy from the field of adult education can inform information literacy instruction in higher education. A review of the literature on adult learning is followed by suggested ways that academic librarians can incorporate these learning strategies into their instruction. A case description examines how librarians at one institution have addressed adult learning styles and classroom realities by using surveys for instructional pre-assessment. While further research is needed to assess the impact of these techniques, this article suggests that academic librarians can provide effective information literacy instruction and promote lifelong learning by treating students as adult learners.

## **Introduction**

Academic libraries are charged with providing information literacy instruction to students who, while legally adults, most often come straight out of the K-12 educational system. In this era of “No Child Left Behind,” students have been taught to focus on test-taking skills rather than critical thinking or problem solving. Rather than reinforce these ways of teaching and learning, academic librarians have the opportunity to employ pedagogy focused on adult learning styles, thus encouraging students to rise to the next developmental stage as learners. Many of the key concepts of adult education discussed in this paper can be effectively applied to information literacy instruction in higher education, thereby giving instruction librarians a foundation for their teaching practices.

For new instructional librarians without a background in teaching, providing information literacy instruction can be a source of anxiety. The inspiration for this article came from the recognition that my previous career as an adult educator had informed my library instruction practices in a number of ways, including the employment of learner-centered strategies focused on intentionality, transparency, and multi-level instruction. This background has allowed me to quickly adapt to my instructional responsibilities at my current institution, which prides itself on its participatory, learner-centered, outcomes-based education. Based on the premise that academic librarians can provide effective information literacy instruction and promote lifelong learning by treating students as adult learners, this article is intended to equip new librarians with an understanding of the key concepts of adult education as well as practical examples of how to apply these concepts in the classroom.

## **Background**

Signed into law in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act significantly changed the landscape of public education in the United States. By requiring that public schools report numerical data on student outcomes and by tying federal funding to these outcomes, No Child Left Behind has prompted schools to place additional emphasis on standardized examinations. Because of the high stakes of the outcomes, teachers tend to focus their instruction on areas that they know will be assessed, concentrating more on math and reading at the expense of science, social studies, humanities, and other areas (Berliner, 2009). Standardized testing encourages factual recall over other aspects of thinking and learning (Cole, Hulley, & Quarles, 2009), and critical thinking in particular may be deemphasized by this focus on test preparation (Berliner, 2009). It should be of no surprise that college students coming out of the public school system may, through no fault of their own, be underprepared for the critical and reflective thinking required of them in higher education. In the context of information literacy instruction, librarians may observe this lack of preparation in students' difficulty in evaluating the credibility of information, as well as in other areas.

Academic librarians and other educators have often been enjoined to meet students "where they are" with regard to their levels of knowledge and experience in a particular area. The critical and more challenging next step is to help students move beyond their current developmental level. Kitchener and King (1990) have addressed this concept as it relates to reflective thinking, defined as the ability to identify a problem and analyze it or solve it using critical judgment. To describe developmental stages of reflective thinking, these authors have developed a "Reflective Judgment Model," comprised of seven stages. Kitchener and King suggest that many first-year college students are at stage three, characterized by trouble

differentiating fact from opinion, a lack of understanding that evidence can be used to support a viewpoint, and difficulty recognizing that certain authorities are better positioned to make judgments or draw conclusions than students are themselves. In order to promote the transformative learning that will move students to the next developmental stage, Kitchener and King posit that educators should structure their assignments to require critical reflection skills one level above where students are currently. For first-year college students, this might mean having them evaluate arguments based on evidence or identify multiple points of view.

Kitchener and King's (1990) model addresses the types of activities that should be assigned to students in order to help them move to the next developmental stage, but does not speak to the pedagogical techniques to be employed to this end. If the level of reflective thinking can be raised by challenging college students to perform at a higher developmental stage, it may follow that using pedagogical practice designed for adult learners would have a similar effect, that of encouraging students to adopt characteristics of adult learners. These characteristics include being self-motivated, goal-driven, and able to connect new knowledge to prior experience, each of which can be viewed as contributing to a propensity toward lifelong learning (Knapper & Cropley, 2000). In this vein, I propose that academic librarians, as well as other educators, can best help to free college students from the constraints of K-12 learning habits and promote lifelong learning by treating students as adult learners. In addition to the value for students matriculating immediately after high school, adult learning approaches may also address the needs of non-traditionally aged college students and those with varied learning styles better than more traditional approaches to instruction. While treating college students as adults will seem self-evident to some, it may have unexplored implications for the ways in which we teach.

In the following section, I will review the literature on adult education to address the characteristics and preferences of adult learners and the resulting approaches to their instruction.

### **Literature Review**

In its broadest sense, adult education is the practice of teaching adults. Practically speaking, however, the term is typically applied to adults learning basic or vocational education in a non-traditional setting. This includes adult basic education (ABE; educational proficiencies through an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level), preparation for the General Educational Development (GED) test, English language acquisition (ELA), and vocational or life skills courses. A typical ABE or GED student did not complete high school and has spent years (sometimes decades) in the work force before deciding to improve his or her knowledge or job prospects by enrolling in adult education. A typical ELA student is more difficult to define, as cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds vary widely. While I will follow Brookfield (1986) in cautioning against the over-generalization of adult learning behavior and preferences, the literature suggests that there are certain commonalities shared by many adult learners that are relevant to the practices of teaching and learning.

Throughout the literature, many have differentiated the characteristics of adult learners from those of younger students (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1980; Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Mezirow, 1990; Pascual-Leone & Irwin, 1998). Four major themes emerge: adult learners are self-motivated, they are goal-driven or problem-centered, they benefit from connecting their new knowledge to their life experience, and they come from a variety of backgrounds, often creating a multi-level classroom. These characteristics have implications for what adults need from an educational setting. Knowles (1980) provides a concise overview of the implications of these

characteristics for instructional practice, noting that, due to their self-motivation, adults respond better to an internal drive for learning than to external sanctions, such as grades. While this may be less true for college students, who are often very grade-focused, an internal motivation for learning should be encouraged among college students in order to promote an inclination toward lifelong learning. Knowles also notes that adults are goal-driven, focused on the immediate application of new knowledge. As a result, they will benefit more from instruction centered on an identified problem that they can learn to solve. Because adults define themselves based on their life experiences, Knowles proposes that educators employ experiential techniques such as discussion and skills practice. Finally, Knowles acknowledges that it is typical in adult education to have groups of students with widely varying backgrounds, experiences, and learning styles. Approaches to such multilevel classes, as well as those addressing the other characteristics of adult learners, will be discussed below.

The term *andragogy* was proposed in the 1960s as an adult-centered alternative to *pedagogy* (Knowles, 1980; Deshler & Hagan, 1989; Merriam, 2001), but the term has not enjoyed sustained and widespread use to refer to the theory of adult learning. In fact, Merriam (2001) suggests that there is no single theory of adult learning, and that extant andragogical principles are best thought of as models or “pillars” of adult learning. Together with best practices that are widespread in the literature but may not be based in traditionally defined “theory” (due largely to the dearth of research in the field), I prefer to think of these andragogical principals as *approaches* to adult education. Common approaches include viewing the teacher’s role as a facilitator of learning (Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 1990a; PCAE, 1991), fostering a respectful and reflective classroom environment (Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 1990a, 1990b; PCAE, 1991), and using an assets-based approach through which learner experience is

acknowledged and built upon (Brookfield, 1986; Deshler, 1990; Freire, 1993; Knowles, 1980; PCAE, 1991; Worthman, 2008). While some of these practices are increasingly embraced in K-12 and higher education, they are a clear departure from “traditional” educational settings in which the instructor was seen as the sole expert, delivering lectures and discipline based on perceived student deficiencies.

Another approach to adult education involves the related practices of intentionality and transparency. Freire (1993, p. 79) describes intentionality as being the “essence of consciousness” and a quality to be invoked in learners. I would add that intentionality is critical for educators as well, meaning that there should be a specific intention behind each element of instruction. Instead of employing practices based on precedence or habit, educators must be conscious of the choices that they make in the classroom and the educational justification of each choice. To take an example from adult education, a teacher asking her ELA students learn a song in English would need to ask herself what she expected students to get out of this activity. If the intention were merely to keep students occupied or entertained, the activity would not be educationally justified. Choosing this activity because it would aid students with pronunciation and fluidity of speech is sufficient justification, and the teacher’s reflection allows her to be conscious of that intention. One’s consciousness as an educator is only the first step, with the equally critical next step being transparency, or the communication of these intentions to students. Because adults are goal-driven, it is important for them to know the purpose of a project or activity at the outset, a desire that may also be seen in college students (Huba & Freed, 2000). Adult education instructors who are not transparent about their intentions may experience student dissatisfaction, discordant expectations, and confusion (Burns & de Sylva Joyce, 2008; Johnson, 2005; Mathews-Aydinli, 2008). Returning to the above example, if students are asked



to learn a song without an explanation of the educational benefits, they might view the activity as a waste of time and be less engaged. It is important that both educators and learners understand the educational justification for classroom projects and activities; educators can achieve this by being intentional and transparent.

Lastly, participatory and learner-centered approaches have been widely employed in both adult and higher education. The two terms are frequently used in conjunction or conflated. Together, I take them to mean an educational approach in which students take active responsibility for their learning, including involvement with determining their learning needs and evaluating their progress toward the same. As Brookfield (1986) points out, student self-diagnosis of learning needs does not release the instructor from the responsibility of contributing to the discussion of what gets taught, which should rather be decided in dialogue with students. As defined by Pima County Adult Education (1991), learner-directed practices encompass many of the approaches mentioned above, including transparency, teacher as facilitator, and assets-based learning.

### **Application to Information Literacy Instruction**

Many of the approaches described above are not unique to adult education; Merriam (2001) notes that Malcolm Knowles, one of the early proponents of andragogy, later acknowledged that the andragogy/pedagogy dichotomy was somewhat false, and re-conceptualized a continuum of teacher-directed to student-directed teaching, with the best approach depending on the situation. There are precedents, however, for applying approaches that originated in adult education to higher educational contexts, with varying degrees of success (Brock, 2010; Kaufmann, 2010; Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010), and at least one instance of

application to information literacy instruction of non-traditionally aged college students (Gold, 2005). I posit that many of the above educational approaches can be helpful in teaching information literacy to college students of all ages, and may potentially help them transition to the next developmental stage as learners. As noted above, adult learners tend to be self-motivated, goal-driven, and able to connect new knowledge to prior experience. These characteristics can be fostered in college students with the intention of creating lifelong learning habits. Thus, in addition to conveying the content of information literacy instruction, librarians and other educators are poised to develop student inclination toward lifelong learning. The adult education approaches described may be particularly useful for new instructional librarians who need a foundation for their intentional practice. Following are some general suggestions for using adult education approaches in information literacy instruction.

#### *Librarian as Facilitator*

The instructional librarian should play the role of facilitator in the classroom, whether it be for a one-shot library workshop or a semester-long, credit-bearing course. In a participatory, learner-centered model, the instructor facilitates while students take active responsibility for their learning. This means that the librarian should not assume sole expertise on the subject at hand, but rather facilitate the process of peer learning, possibly by encouraging discussion and group work. When evaluating the credibility of an information item or brainstorming a list of search terms, librarians can encourage peer learning by having students work in pairs or small groups, later sharing their results with the whole class. I have found students to be more apt to contribute to a full class discussion once they have had the chance to articulate their thoughts to one or two peers. The facilitation of peer learning is an assets-based approach that recognizes that many students have previously engaged with information literacy topics at some level and have

experience to build upon. It thus responds to both the adult characteristic of being defined by one's previous experiences and the nature of the multi-level classroom, in which student backgrounds and knowledge may vary widely. While this variation might be viewed as an obstacle for instruction, in a participatory, assets-based approach, it acts as an advantage, with the librarian facilitating knowledge transfer among students with different levels of experience.

### *Intentionality and Transparency*

Students will be more motivated to take responsibility for their learning if there is transparency around the intentions of classroom activities, and if these activities are tied to their needs and experiences. This speaks to the importance of timing when scheduling a one-shot library workshop; if students are not yet faced with a project that provokes a need for library resources, they are unlikely to fully engage with information presented on these resources. A new librarian may assume that because she has been invited to do a library session with a class, the instructor will have already framed the session, explaining how it relates to upcoming course assignments and, for first-year students in particular, how library research fits into the larger academic paradigm. Such assumptions are often unfounded, and it may be useful to start a class session by asking students to describe the assignment they are working on, what role library resources play in their assignment, and where they have found useful information resources in the past. This framing of the session allows students to consciously identify their need for library resources and build on past information-seeking experiences, all while actively participating in the first few minutes of class (I have found that the earlier in a class session students start participating, the more likely they are to continue doing so).

### **Case Description: The Pre-Assessment**

To further illustrate the classroom application of some of these approaches to adult education, I will describe in detail a practice of several instructional librarians at a small, public university that encompasses many of the learning characteristics and approaches described above: teacher as facilitator, intentionality, transparency, and participatory, learner-centered, multi-level instruction. At our institution, we have found that using online pre-assessment surveys to frame one-shot information literacy sessions allows us to be intentional and transparent with our instruction in a way that caters to adult learning styles. In advance of instruction, we assess students' information literacy needs and interests by using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool that offers basic survey capabilities for free (our institutional subscription grants us additional functionality). Classroom response systems (clickers) or low-tech solutions such as chart paper and markers could be employed in a similar fashion.

The primary motivation behind administering a pre-assessment to students in advance of library instruction is to determine their information literacy strengths and needs, allowing librarians to build on prior student experience. Given that students may overestimate their abilities in certain areas, the pre-assessment should be used to determine a session's content in conjunction with librarian expertise and, importantly, the observations and needs of the course instructor. A typical pre-assessment survey (see Appendix) may include some general information about students' class standing and the number of library sessions they have previously attended. The main portion of our survey focuses on gauging student confidence in a number of common areas of information literacy instruction, including creating a research topic, using the library catalog and databases, evaluating information credibility, and using the required

citation styles. Final, open-ended questions on what students hope to learn from the session or what their topics are for the assignment at hand may also be included.

With the instructor's cooperation, the librarian can administer the survey in advance of the class, via email or a learning management system. While this method tends to have a lower response rate, it allows the librarian to view student responses in advance and is recommended for new librarians who might be more comfortable entering the classroom with a concrete plan. Another option is to have students complete the survey at the beginning of class, though this requires more flexibility on the part of the librarian, and if the class is not held in a computer lab, a reliance on a low-tech and less anonymous survey technique, such as chart paper and markers.

However the survey is administered, the results will inform the session's focus, with the librarian using student responses to intentionally structure instruction based on student needs. It is important for the librarian to be transparent about the survey results and how they will inform the session. I prefer to display survey results (which are anonymous) at the beginning of the class session and use them to frame the day's agenda. In addition to serving as an overview of topics to be covered, this discussion gives students an idea of the composite experience of their class. Students can see, for example, that most of their peers are comfortable creating a research topic but do not feel confident using library databases. This helps them understand why a larger portion of the class will be spent on database use, and, for those students ahead of the curve, allows them to recognize their relative expertise and be more patient with what they might otherwise view as repetition. When presenting survey results, I often mention that those students who ranked themselves particularly high in certain areas are welcome to share their experience with their classmates, thus playing the role of facilitator and helping moderate the potential frustrations of those students on the upper end of the knowledge spectrum in a multi-level

classroom. Likewise, when there are only a few students reporting little to no experience with using citations, I acknowledge that we will not spend much time on this topic during class, but that students needing additional assistance should visit the reference desk.

In addition to promoting intentionality, transparency, and addressing the needs of multi-level classrooms, the use of pre-assessment surveys to frame information literacy instruction fits squarely into the paradigm of participatory, learner-centered instruction. In this approach, students take active responsibility for learning and are involved in decisions about what to learn. The pre-assessment survey allows students to self-diagnose their learning needs and have a voice in the planning of the class. Another component of participatory education is student evaluation of their learning progress. Along these lines, I often revisit the survey results at the end of class, both to recap what was covered and also to remind students what they indicated that they had hoped to learn. This gives students a chance to evaluate their progress toward their goals for the session, and to identify any outstanding questions they may have.

While students have responded well to the pre-assessment and participating librarians have embraced it as positively impacting their instruction, its effect on student learning is admittedly anecdotal and its generalizability to different contexts has yet to be demonstrated. It is presented here primarily to serve as an example of using known pedagogical approaches to inform instructional practice, and it additionally suggests potential avenues for future research. Such research could include an investigation of student satisfaction with instruction sessions, including or excluding a pre-assessment, with regard to meeting needs and expectations, building on prior experience, and facilitating peer learning. On a broader scale, further research is necessary to determine whether using pedagogical approaches from adult education promotes

student development of the characteristics associated with adult learners and encourages lifelong learning.

### **Conclusion**

In order to be confident and intentional educators, instructional librarians must have specific educational motivations behind their classroom practices. The justification of practice is often grounded in educational theory, or, in a field such as adult education where empirical research is notably absent, grounded in approaches based on observed characteristics and developmental theory. This article has attempted to provide new librarians with a basic understanding of the characteristics of adult learners and the instructional approaches that may best meet their needs. I acknowledge that many college students do not share the profile of a typical adult learner but argue that we do them a disservice by not treating them as adults. By fostering adult learning preferences such as being goal-driven, self-motivated, and defined by life experience, librarians are poised to assist students in their transition to the next developmental stage and to create lifelong learners.

This article has explored some general ideas for librarians to apply learner-centered approaches from adult education to information literacy instruction, such as taking the role of facilitator and encouraging students to take active responsibility for their learning. The example of using pre-assessment surveys to frame multi-level class sessions illustrates the principles of intentionality, transparency, and participatory, assets-based instruction. While there are many possible foundations for classroom practices, the principles and approaches of adult education can contribute to our understanding of teaching and learning, and create intentional practices of information literacy instruction.

## Appendix

### WLC 300 Fall 2011: Library Pre-Assessment

Exit this survey

CSUMB Librarian Sarah Dahlen will be joining the class on October 7th for a session on library research. In order to focus the session on those areas and skills that will be of most benefit to you, please complete this brief survey.

**1. You are a:**

- First-year student
  Sophomore
  Junior
  Senior

**2. How many library sessions have you had at CSUMB?**

- None
  1
  2
  3 or more

**3. Please rate your level of skill or experience with the following aspects of library research:**

	I don't have a clue	I've tried it before	I can make do	I'm pretty good at this	I'm a pro
Choosing and focusing a research topic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Searching the CSUMB Library catalog for books	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Using CSUMB Library databases to search for articles	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Evaluating the credibility of information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Distinguishing between scholarly and non-scholarly information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Using MLA or APA citation style	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4. What is one thing you hope to learn from the library research skills session?**

**5. What ideas do you have for your capstone topic?**

Done



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