Adult Learning - The Continuum

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As a twenty year veteran of policing in Ontario, Canada and a part time Professor in Police Foundations at a Community College the term 'adult' is not only difficult to define it is situation dependent. In the legal realm alone there are various criteria that determine what adulthood is. A child is defined as a person who is or appears to be under the age of twelve, a young person is or appears to be over twelve but under eighteen and an adult is defined as 'neither a child nor a young person' (Youth Criminal Justice Act, Section 2(1) pp. 1097-1099). For admission to Fanshawe College a student must meet one of three criteria: the applicant should have an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, be nineteen years of age prior to the onset or adhere to guidelines specified by the selected programme. Policy makers set these pre-requisites out and it is entirely feasible that a person may be admitted into a programme prior to reaching the age of eighteen.

In order to apply to the Ontario Provincial Police Service an applicant must be at least eighteen years of age, with an Ontario Grade 12 diploma or equivalent, C.P.R., First Aid, valid Ontario driver's licence with less than six demerit points, no criminal record (unless a Pardon has been granted), be a Canadian Citizen, pass credit and background checks as well as possess the necessary Certificates of Results from police fitness and academic testing. These requirements are more stringent than they are for college admission and, in this particular case; the age of eighteen is a minimum requirement and is absolutely required.

As is evident from both of these examples 'adulthood' is not so simple that it can be defined by one boundary of age alone (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, p. 53). It is necessary to consider the person's mental age, maturational level, ability, level of understanding, social role

and prior experience. Each case needs to be looked at on its own merits and take into account individual differences as well as culture and context.

As an adult learner myself, I can tell you that although I could legally drive at sixteen, could enter a licenced establishment at eighteen, I may have been called an adult but I sure was not very mature! I was not in a position to appreciate academics until I was in my mid twenties. In 2008 when I decided to 'go back to school', my own learning was a priority. I personally was thinking of what I was going to do in retirement. Encouragement from Professor's as well as the interactive work environment and dialogue with fellow classmates were inspirational to me.   As I continued to learn from my courses I would pass this on, sometimes subconsciously, to my own students.

As a teacher trying to assist the adult in their learning process it is important to have as much information as possible about "who" the learner is (Vella, 2002, p. 38). The person's cultural background, race, age, experience, class, gender and societal issues need to be considered. A needs assessment is a helpful tool (Vella, 2002, pp. 5-8) to ascertain as much information as possible about the learner and their expectations.   This helps to coordinate the course to fit the students so the semester can be a productive one.

Our learning develops along a continuum, as it travels the teaching method changes from one that is teacher led or a didactic pedagogical approach to a student directed andragogical one (Knowles, 1980 p. 43). Adults may need a pedagogical approach to learn something out of their comfort zone. Once they become more familiar with the material the method can adapt and change to a more student directed approach.   There is no clear guideline for if or when one will

enter the andragogical realm, rather it is situation specific and this method of teaching is appropriate for children and adults alike (Knowles, 1984, p.13).

   I began my teaching experience using a traditional "formal" pedagogical teaching style. I stood at the front of the class and lectured the students who at first were receptive but then I started to lose them, they would fall asleep or turn me off part way through. I had no prior teaching experience or training but knew something was wrong. I began using scenario's, active participation (Felder and Brent, 2009), collaborative learning in groups, humour, my own experience and case studies. Attention increased, the material was relevant, and the learners became more confident and satisfied (Keller, 1984). Adult learners are motivated to learn when they feel included in a group, have a positive attitude and relationship with the teacher, get some meaning out of what is being learned and once they feel comfortable they start to become competent and confident (Wlodkowski, 1999). The students were intrinsically motivated, they were leading the discussions and I was learning from it!

   The adult learner undergoes changes that the younger learner does not. First of all, aging is something that the adult is faced with, disease, changes in vision, hearing and the central nervous system (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007, p. 300). This is of particular importance in Policing since reaction time, hearing and vision in a critical incident are imperative for officer safety. The Officer is required to make life and death decisions in a matter of seconds and they need all of their faculties in order to do so. It is also important in teaching the older student because they may need to sit closer to the front of the room to see or hear and may require more time to complete their work (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007, pp. 302-305).

The psychological aspect incorporates the developmental level the adult learner is at during different aspects of their lifetime. This coincides with the person's "readiness to learn" (Knowles, 1980, p. 51). Typically, the younger learner does not have to deal with dilemma's that are characteristic of adulthood; marriage, (divorce) having children, and occupational issues among other things. Since the adult has different things to deal with outside of their chosen profession or schooling this makes things more difficult for the teacher. This is not always a negative thing, often times the learner has outside experience to base this new learning on. Typically, the adult is going to school voluntarily but not always. There are situations where the adult is in the environment as a requirement for work or other reasons.

What appears to be most important is that the relationship between the teacher and learner is a sound one (Vella, 2002, p. 85). I can attest to this in my own teaching practice. It is most important to my students to feel that they are respected and it is reflected in their class performance. Each individual has different things to offer and it is important to include their input in the learning experience, the method is not necessarily different just because the student is an adult. It is different because the student is an individual. "Teaching different adults (or children) is (or should be) different (Kerka, 2002, p. 2).

In order to recruit adult's, educational institutions need to market their products in an attractive fashion. In the Police Foundations Program at Fanshawe College it would be helpful if the pre-requisites reflected the criteria for employment. It is absolutely necessary that people applying for this profession do not have criminal records, yet that is not a requirement for the course. This is concerning because some of the material is of a sensitive nature. Employers can discriminate if there is a standard necessary to participate in the activity or a bona fide

occupational requirement (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2011). In this case an applicant with a criminal record could jeopardize other people's safety if hired.

Most students that continue with post secondary education do so voluntarily so administration needs to make the programme attractive. It is important to have something in place to assist with situational, institutional and dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981, p. 99). In our college the biggest barriers are child care, financial concerns and transportation. It is necessary to have these things addressed at the start by the college administration so attrition does not become a problem. Having on campus child care, information for financial options, government assistance as well as counsellors that can assist the students with options is imperative (Baker, 1998). Transportation options such as reduced bus fares and car pooling are possibilities.

The teacher needs to be approachable as this is important for retention (Kerka, 1995). Our first impression is a long lasting one and we need to encourage participation and make the student experience an enjoyable one. In our programme we have traditionally started out with approximately 40 students in the class in September and lose about one third along the way. Some of the students are lost because of a language barrier. We as teachers need to be careful that we are not culturally insensitive to these students (D'Amico-Samuels, 1980). This is a college problem, students need to be fluent in English or they need to take English as a second language course prior to the onset of the programme. This is not happening and some students are dropping out. Others discontinue their studies for familial reasons; this is just not the "right time" for them.   It may not be what the students expected, it may be too difficult or they just may not like it. There could be a number of underlying reasons that a student may decide not to participate in the programme. Some students decide to enter into a programme yet they are not prepared to learn. They may be there because of parental pressure to "do something" or because

work has sent them to take a particular course. It would be a good idea to try to find out why the student is dropping or stopping out if they will tell us so that improvements can be made in the future and data collected.

Learning is a process of acquiring meaning about something. Adults tend to learn in a more self directed fashion based on their experience, development and maturity (Knowles, 1968, p. 351). These seem to be more assumptions based on the andragogical model (Knowles, 1989, p.12). I believe that learning stems from our experience and is the building block for further learning. Learning actually transforms as our beliefs (meaning schemes) or perspectives (habit of mind) change (Mezirow, 2000). In this learning theory one will have an experience, reflect on that critically, be involved in discourse and take some sort of action (Mezirow, 1981). This usually takes place after a 'disorienting dilemma' for example, being disciplined at work and the person decides to go back to school to get better qualifications for a better position.

Part of my teaching regiment is to tell of incidents I have been involved in (Daloz, 1999). The students are asked to discuss this which assists in their learning. Another method used is cognitive apprenticeship whereby I take the student on a 'ride along' with me. At first they watch and are asked to perform some basic tasks or tell me what they would do in a situation. When we go back to the classroom we participate in similar situations (Stein, 1998) with actors so it is safe. The support system is gradually removed so the student becomes self directed and ultimately can generalize this method to new situations (Brandt, Farmer and Buckmaster, 1993).

Finally, I started out with a Cognitive Piagetian approach of learning. I have evolved to incorporate some of the other approaches as well. As I progress through my own learning experience I am following more of a Constructivist approach incorporating the mental and social

perspectives as well as self directed transformational and experiential aspects. Adult learners do

need to learn by doing, this is praxis, action and reflection (Vella, p.4). As an instructor I have

incorporated small group work into my classroom and use more reflective activities. I have

grown myself and I am comfortable letting the learners teach me what they want to know.