speaking from experience...

A Case Study in Applying Adult Learning Theory in Developing Managers

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The entry of large numbers of adults into educational programs has challenged ideas about traditional learning styles. Malcolm Knowles, particularly, has reviewed and revised the purposes, processes and assumptions behind adult learning in *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, as well as in *Self-Directed Learning: A Guide for Learners and Teachers*. Knowles believes that his approach, known as “andragogy”—defined as “the art and science of helping adults to learn”—is an effective method by which maturing men and women may develop. Knowles defined learning occurring in this way:

In its broadest meaning, “self-directed learning” describes a process in which individuals take initiative. They diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify human and material resources for learning, choose and implement approximate learning strategies and evaluate learning outcomes. Self-directed learning usually occurs in association with various helpers, such as teachers, tutors, masters and peers.

Knowles points out that this type of self-directed learning has been found to result in learning more, faster, remembering it longer and applying it better than learning in a traditional format.

Assumptions underlying the andragogical model

Learner’s self-concept. The andragogical model assumes that the learner becomes increasingly self-directing because as a person matures, the desire increases to move from dependency and reactivity to independence and assertiveness. Some educational techniques that assume that the learner is dependent and should be told information may affect adult learning negatively.

Learner’s experience. Teacher-centered learning often assumes that the learner’s experience has less value than that of the expert, whose role becomes to impart knowledge to the student through lectures, textbooks and assigned reading.

The andragogical model focuses on the learner’s experiences and on analysis of the experiences. Laboratories, role plays, discussions and field experiences are preferred techniques, and peers are valuable resources.

Readiness to learn. Traditional learning assumes that when individuals in a group reach a certain level, they are ready to learn the same material. Andragogy assumes that adult learners will seek out what they need to know when they need to know it; until that time, learning might not be relevant.

Adults need to apply their learning now! Their needs require know-how in completing tasks and solving problems. The andragogical model, therefore, focuses not on accumulating knowledge, but on developing immediate skills necessary for resolving problems and conquering tasks.

Motivation to learn. Self-directed learning assumes that incentives—such as the need for self-esteem, need for achievement, satisfaction of accomplishment, need to know how to solve a problem or complete a task and need to develop—come from within the individual. The andragogical model, therefore, imposes few rewards and/or punishments. Although some external rewards may exist, the major thrust is self-directed.

The Competency Program offered by the American Management Associations (AMA) is a case study in the application of these ideas. The Competency Program is a non-traditional approach to graduate management education, with the goal of helping managers become more effective. As a base, a behavioral research firm identified what makes a manager effective. Their...
study of 2,000 managers in a variety of jobs and organizations delineated 18 generic management competencies. An applicant to the program is assessed through audio- and video-taped operant exercises and special tests. The assessment determines the extent to which the applicant possesses and uses the program's skill and knowledge competencies. Six weeks after the initial assessment, the applicant returns for feedback on the test results. Students learn about the competencies by attending didactics, participating in group discussions, meeting individually with faculty advisors and sharing examples of the competencies with group members. Based on the understanding of their performance in the assessment process, the students, with the aid of their faculty advisor, design a competency development plan (CDP)—or syllabus for an independent course of study. Students then work one-to-one with the guidance of a faculty advisor to carry out their plans on the job. This article illustrates and evaluates how the Competency Program represents a case study in the application of adult learning principles.

The Competency Program

In the Competency Program, the student develops a learning contract (a competency development plan), in which he or she designs an individual process of learning. The participant designs a competency development plan with the aid of the faculty to answer the following questions:

- What do I need to know about the competency?
- How can I practice the competency on the job?
- How can I get feedback about using the competency?

First, participants identify the competencies they want to practice. After determining the extent to which they already use these competencies, participants make a decision about continuing on in the program. If the individual decides to continue, he or she designs a six-month learning plan, including only those competencies to be developed during that time. A student constructs a plan consistent with his or her learning preferences. For example, some people prefer reading as a method for learning, while others prefer an active and experiential mode of learning.

Role of learner's experience

The goal of the Competency Program is skill development; the participant can learn the skills in any way that might be helpful. With this in mind, the Competency Program encourages use of experiential learning, a mode of learning particularly effective in developing practical skills.

When the participants come to "Feedback Week" they work in five-person study groups and view themselves and their use of the competencies on video recording. They discuss with one another why they did or did not demonstrate the competency, and they have the opportunity to observe others who have demonstrated the use of the competencies.

The group also helps develop the various learning plans for each participant. Group participants share ideas and techniques and "reality-test" the plans. The faculty offers its own resources as facilitators, not as communicators of information.

Participants leave "Feedback Week" with plans to apply the selected competencies to their jobs. They have identified opportunities to use the competencies in their offices, planned for the use of the competencies and rehearsed and role-played the use of the competencies before using them on the job. They also have been advised either to video- or audio-tape themselves or to ask people to supply feedback on their performance. These activities represent examples of using field experiences, which the andragogical model has identified as helpful to the adult learner.

Readiness to learn

Most of the program participants have reached the managerial level by virtue of their technical expertise in their areas of specialization. Many are outstanding sales people, computer technicians or marketing people. Few have been trained to be "managers." As their roles have evolved, some have developed necessary competencies; others have not. They attend the program because of a perceived need and an internal desire to develop. Analyzing performance and receiving feedback from group members and faculty enhances their readiness to learn.

The community effect of group sharing and support is an especially powerful part of the program. Often for the first time, students admit their perceived weaknesses or ask others to tell them directly what they perceive as a weakness. During the feedback process, participants begin to integrate a more realistic assessment of themselves with their present and future goals. Some alter or expand their original objectives, but most complete the process with a strong commitment to self-development.

Orientation to learning

Competency is defined as "an underlying characteristic of a person that leads to effective and/or superior performance on the job." A competency is the potential for performing in a specific manner in a variety of different situations. For example, if an individual has the competency "Efficiency Orientation," that individual will be efficient not only on the job, but also in social and personal situations. The objective is to use a com-
petency in an individual’s personal repertoire.

The 18 competencies in the model include the following (for complete definitions and descriptions, see The Competent Manager):

**Goal and Action Management Cluster:**
- Efficiency orientation;
- Proactivity;
- Concern with impact;
- Diagnostic use of concepts.

**Directing Subordinates Cluster:**
- Use of unilateral power;
- Developing others;
- Spontaneity.

**Human Resource Management Cluster:**
- Use of socialized power;
- Managing group process;
- Positive regard;
- Accurate self-assessment;
- Self-control;
- Stamina and adaptability;

**Leadership Cluster:**
- Self-confidence;
- Conceptualization;
- Logical thought;
- Use of oral presentation.

Using these competencies, managers focus on skill development rather than on theory. The measure of success in acquiring the competencies is whether the student consistently uses them in day-to-day job demands.

Participants in the Competency Program are motivated usually by a need to develop managerial skills. There are no grades or time limits for completion of projects. The important motivators in the process include:
- An increased awareness of the discrepancy between the model of the superior manager and the reality of the skills that the participant presently demonstrates;
- The development of a personal support network which facilitates movement toward delineated goals;
- Increased self-esteem resulting from competency development.

**The learning climate**

Adults learn best in a relaxed, informal and comfortable physical climate. Group members should feel they can trust each other. They need to feel that the group will be supportive if they make a personal disclosure. Adults require a social environment characterized by cooperation and mutual respect, rather than competition. Group members should use the personal strengths and technical expertise of others to facilitate their learning.

**Planning learning activities**

Learners and the program leader should plan learning objectives and activities. The leader communicates broad-based goals to the participants prior to their arrival. Once assembled, however, the group receives the specific objectives. From a set of leader-generated alternatives, the group selects the preferred means of reaching those objectives. The leader thus recognizes the value of each person’s needs and communicates his or her desire to involve the participants in their learning. This process helps foster commitment to the activities and objectives.

**Discussion of conceptual material**

During this phase, the program leader presents a series of didactics that engage the learner in a preliminary review of the concepts and theories that comprise the discussion topic. The learner has an opportunity to learn more about the subject matter from the course leader and other group participants.

**Diagnosing learner needs**

Participants must ask themselves: “Based on my specific objectives for learning, and comparing this with the ideal, what are my specific needs?” It is important that each need be focused and directed toward specific behavioral objectives. Before establishing objectives, some assessment should occur, including input from the participant, group members and program leader. The assessment should consider the participant’s previous, present and anticipated future job experiences.
Establishing learner objectives

The learner uses the diagnosed learning needs from the previous stage as a basis for developing objectives; based on perceived personal needs, he or she decides the specific learning objectives.

Learning activities

The learning activities represent the means to an end: “How am I going to develop myself in the stated direction?”

Adults generally prefer to learn actively. They often choose activities such as independent study projects and experiential activities. These activities often include actions in three distinct areas: activities that will facilitate learning about the targeted subject (i.e., conceptual material); practice; and evaluation of what has been learned.

Evaluation of learning activities

One concept that has not been mentioned yet is the cyclical nature of an adult’s learning process. The evaluation of learning activities as related to the stated objectives is the critical step in that cyclical process.

What is the evaluation stage? It is a time to take stock of what has happened in the learning cycle. How realistic were the objectives? How feasible were the learning activities? Did any learning take place? How can one measure it? What happens next? Often, for example, the new objectives and activities emerge from initial objectives, or new long-term needs arise out of a career change. Time, phase and parcel objectives into reasonable pieces of work that are realistic and attainable.

Designing development plans

After establishing a specific set of objectives, the adult learner may design a personal development plan. This learning contract is based on readiness for learning and individual needs of the learner. Writing plans and verbally sharing them with group members fosters more commitment to work toward the objective.

The plan is composed of several distinct but interrelated parts: the statement of specific learning objective; a measurable outcome which addresses the question, “How do I know that I have accomplished my objective?”; target dates for completion of the various phases; and the means or activities that will be used to accomplish the objective.

The plan need not be elaborate; a concise contract is often more useful. Adults have distinct stylistic preferences in learning—it is important that they design a plan to maximize their potential. This is more likely to occur when the plan incorporates efficient and enjoyable activities. For example, if the individual knows that practice on the job is an effective learning activity, it makes sense for this person to incorporate this concept into the development plan.

To begin evaluation, the participant collects evidence which is validated by peers, faculty and experts in the field. If the participants believe they have achieved their objectives, then the cycle is complete and new objectives can be established. If the participants have not achieved their objectives, they must alter the objectives or the time limit.

The learning climate

The learning climate is established during the first two hours of the participant/managers’ involvement in the Competency Program. Participants identify individual experiences and training, and these introductions play an important part in the program. Leaders recognize that each individual brings a rich set of resources to the group.

Next, the group divides into small groups to develop questions and expectations for the learning experience; each small group shares these lists with the large group. Each group’s learning objectives, coupled with the course objectives outlined by the course leader, comprise a mutually negotiated group learning contract.

In order to maximize the potential for cooperative learning, two key points are discussed:

- Confidentiality. Participants review the program’s policy regarding confidentiality of information relating to shared experience from their work settings and the results of their assessment experience;
- Guidelines for feedback. The group discusses guidelines for giving and receiving feedback. A statement regarding the behavior of another group member must be specific and able to be substantiated by examples. When receiving feedback, the recipient should clarify what he or she “hears.”

Planning learning activities

Program leaders handle initial planning, and participants join in interim planning sessions. This allows participants to become highly committed to the process and the cooperative learning effort.

Didactics

This phase exposes participants to the “ideal” with respect to the targeted subject matter. The targeted subject matter in the case of the Competency Program is “the generic competencies that are causally related to managerial excellence.” Two key points are worthy of discussion:

- The content (competencies) is presented in detail. Each competency is described using behaviorally specific language, indicating how an effective manager possessing this competency behaves and how having this skill will help one to be a better manager.
- Presenting the material (the didactic presentation) is an interactive process. The leader asks participants key process questions and relates the material to their experience. The activities engage participants actively in learning, while the objective remains to help participants learn more about the use of the competencies on the job.

These two points satisfy two basic rules of adult learning:
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Adults prefer not to discuss general theories or have an overview of the material; and the learned material must help adults solve a current problem facing them.

Diagnosing learner needs

At this point in the learning process, participants “take inventory”: they compare themselves to the model of effective behavior for managers. Participants receive a detailed account of their managerial competencies, including other variables:
- Self-evaluation;
- A structured review of the skills as they are used on the job (competency review exercises);
- Feedback from group members;
- Feedback and counseling with a faculty advisor;
- Feedback from a special battery of tests that assess the competencies at the level of motives.

Participants then work individually to think through priorities for self-development and to establish specific behavioral objectives. They consider short-term job-related needs as well as long-term career objectives. They present these objectives to the faculty advisor during an individual counseling session and then to their study group for reality testing. The study group provides an additional resource for the learner to set realistic development objectives.

Designing development plans

The CDP phase begins with a didactic presentation, and participants learn about the basic components of skill development and planning for learning. Each participant then develops a CDP for one competency of his or her choice. This becomes a reference when a “model” sample of a CDP is developed through discussion with all group members.

The key components of a CDP are: a statement of a specific, measurable learning objective; targeted dates for completion; and the specific resources that will be used to accomplish the goal.

Field-based learning

With a CDP established, participants return to the job setting and carry out the learning activities they have designed. In the Competency Program, there are no restrictions on the length of time or the type of activity that managers choose to develop the competency.

Participants communicate with a faculty advisor at regular intervals to receive guidance and support. The learning plan becomes a cyclical process as participants regularly (at six-month intervals) assess their learning and...
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redesign new learning activities to develop competencies.

Conclusion
Adult education and training has come of age. The interest in adult education has necessitated reviewing the assumptions underlying adult learning, as well as the processes used in helping adults develop. The following comments from the program highlight conclusions about the effectiveness of applied theories of adult learning:

- From the underlying assumptions of the andragogical model, some of the concepts seem to work in the program while others do not. Two problematic areas relate to the self-concept and motivation of the learner. Many participants remain accustomed to externally directed techniques. Motivation is at its highest point at the conclusion of "Feedback Week." Participants leave enthusiastic about the learning process; however, their motivation for involvement decreases with time.
- With respect to process elements of the andragogical model, specific areas are problematic. For example, the learning plans are not carried out in a systematic manner. Time limitations and work activities often take precedence over these learning plans. As the distance from feedback increases, participants become less committed to the process.

Those assumptions and process elements of the andragogical model that work effectively support the continuation of the Competency Program. Program designers are currently rethinking techniques to resolve the problematic areas.

—TDJ