Why the "Why" Matters to Adult Learners

The word pedagogy continues to be bandied about in higher education despite increasing numbers of adults returning to the classroom. Additionally, online asynchronous courses continue to expand, making it harder for faculty members to gauge student comprehension of material and for adult learners to feel connected to the material. Thus, faculty, particularly those teaching in online graduate programs, need to emphasize the six andragogical principles developed by Knowles (1995). Knowles' assumptions are that adults:

- are independent and have a strong concept of self,

- rely on their background and previous experiences,

- seek to learn based on external influences,

- attempt to connect learning to everyday applications,

- are inherently motivated to learn,

- require rationale or the "why" of assignments.

Explaining the "why"

As a public and academic library director, I routinely explain policies and why preparing for unforeseen events is essential. This type of exploration and long-range planning has allowed libraries across the country to quickly adapt to COVID-19 closures. It is also something I embedded into my Library and Information Studies (LIS) curriculum as a new faculty member in the fall of 2020. After all, my entire professional career has been helping people answer questions: "Where do I find…," "How do I search for….," "Why do I need to know…," "When will I ever use…."

Understanding that students are unfamiliar with the intricacies of their future professions and that adult learners need to know the "why," I initially sought to provide contextuality to the course learning objectives. Nonetheless, an unanticipated pattern emerged in student surveys—praise for my concise instructions, including the who, what, where, when, how, and most importantly, the why of assignments (W5H).

My video lectures covering the core content provided fundamental knowledge; however, students garnered increased comprehension of theories by describing the W5H in pre-assignment videos. In addition, students produced more robust work products that they used in their current work environments. For example, a student's technology proposal received 100% funding from an outside foundation to implement new technology at his local library. Another student's tutorial on navigating a local library's catalog was placed on its website—even though the student had no previous association with the organization. A further student researched and justified an LGBTQIA+ collection for inclusion in a community's Young Adult area.

As more adults enter higher education, faculty will benefit by incorporating andragogical principles into the curriculum to fulfill adult learners' needs to understand the "why" of assignments. Curating practical assignments while providing appropriate context may allow learners to engage more fully in the course. Subsequently, students may develop a deeper appreciation of how course assignments apply to their future professions. Below is an example of a library management assignment that articulates the "why."

Developing a theory of leadership paper

Assignment information: This assignment expands your current working knowledge. The purpose of this paper is to help you determine the best leadership style for effectively managing library stakeholders. Use APA 7th edition citation style. The paper length is 10 to 12 pages.

This assignment is essential: As a leader, you will encounter different personalities and develop relationships with numerous stakeholders. To that end, it is vital that you understand leadership style strengths and weaknesses, and how you can best interact with followers. For example, while working in a public library, one of my staff members came into my office and asked me if I thought she was doing a good job. I explained she was doing an excellent job, and I valued her as an employee. However, during our conversation, I learned that she needed more consistent praise to reassure her of her place in the organization. When giving another employee praise several days later, the employee questioned my authenticity. The contradictory reactions were an eye-opening experience and helped me define who I am as a leader and how I can express my gratitude in meaningful ways to meet the needs of individual employees.

There are three objectives of this assignment.

1. The paper will help you further explore several leadership styles you have encountered during the course.

2. The paper will allow you to think about your personality traits and what leadership style appeals to you. Then, consider how you will lead from the beginning?

3. The paper will provide insight into how you might respond to different leadership styles in the workplace used by your manager.

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