Adult Education: Its Implications for Baccalaureate Nursing Education

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Introduction

Psychological and social criteria are used to define what is an adult. The social criteria defines an adult as “a person who is performing social roles typically assigned by our culture.” The psychological criteria defines an adult as “a person who perceives himself or herself to be essentially responsible for her or his own life” (Knowles, 1980, p. 24). Tarcinale (1983, p. 19) defines an adult educator as “anyone who is responsible for helping individuals responsible for their own lives to perform their social roles.”

Current enrollment demographics have demonstrated an increase in the number of adult, nontraditional nursing students. Peterson (1985) described the adult nursing student as either: 1. “first career seekers, or 2. persons already established in one field, seeking a new or complementary career through nursing.” It is documented in the literature (Kidd, 1959; Knowles, 1980; Miller, 1964) that there are basic differences between andragogy (the art and science of helping adults learn) and pedagogy (the art and science of teaching children). However, many educators continue to utilize the theories and principles of pedagogy in their teaching methodologies regardless of the type of learners.

In order to insure the quality of nursing education and the availability of knowledgeable and competent new graduates, nurse educators must be responsive to the learning needs of their adult learners. The basic premise of this paper is that nursing students are adult learners. The following points are discussed: 1. an overview of adult education; 2. “andragogy” — an integrative conceptual framework for adult education; 3. research in the field of adult education; and 4. the application of adult learning principles to baccalaureate nursing education.

Overview of Adult Education

Evaluating adults is a multifaceted, complex process encompassing many subjects and interest areas. It is as broad and diverse as the people it serves. “It encompasses Adult Basic Education (teaching basic learning and survival skills to the undereducated), continuing education efforts for personal and professional growth, and enrichment activities for the highly educated” (Verdium, Miller & Geer, 1977, p. 3-4). Adult education programs are designed for personal skill development, for enhancing career opportunities, or just for enjoyment. Programs vary in duration from very short time commitments to several years of effort. Finally, the student population is very diverse.

In 1977, Verdium, Miller and Geer (p. 3-4) wrote that the scope and role of adult education had increased significantly in the last generation. These authors projected that adult education would “one day provide a system of lifelong education to every citizen.” Several trends have been inceptus for the growth of the adult education movement: 1. the continuous growth of sophisticated technology that requires a highly skilled labor force; 2. adults finding it difficult to function in society without basic academic skills and a high school diploma. Therefore, Adult Basic Education constitutes a large portion of adult education programs today; 3. modern society’s characteristic of rapid change. Adult education provides retraining in order to cope with “vocational obsolescence.” In addition, adults bewildered by a rapidly changing environment can become informed and productive citizens through adult education; and 4. increased leisure time and affluence have enabled people to spend their time in constructive learning experiences.

Adult education and its various program efforts occur in various forms and institutions. Although most colleges, universities, elementary and secondary schools are concerned with adult education, it is not the exclusive domain of public education (Verdium, Miller & Geer, 1977). Programs take place in “non-educational” institutions such as libraries, museums, voluntary associations, churches, and professional societies, to name only a few.

Informal learning continues throughout adulthood and, as described above, in almost any conceivable location. Adults learn as they adjust to role changes, achieve adaptation, and growth (Knox, 1977). Most adults engage in at least one systematic self-directed learning experience per year.

The following section will discuss the theory of andragogy — the art and science of helping adults learn.

Andragogy — An Integrative Conceptual Framework for Adult Education

Andragogy was derived from the stem of the Greek word “aner” which means “man” and has been traced to Alexander Kapp, a German grammar school teacher. In 1833, he used andragogy to refer to the normal, natural process of continuing education for adults. The assumptions made by the teachers of adults are different from those of the teachers of children. The four main assumptions of andragogy are:

1. Changes in Self-Concept: A person’s self-concept matures from total dependency (as in infancy) to increasing self-directedness. The point at which a person reaches a self-concept of essential self-direction is the point at which he or she psychologically becomes an adult (Knowles, 1978). From this point of adulthood, the person expects and has a need to be perceived by others as a self-directed individual.

2. Role of Experience: As an individual matures, his or her range of depth of experience and develops as a resource with which to relate new learnings. The individual also becomes a rich resource for learning. Maturing individuals consider themselves who they are by their experiences. “To a child, experience is something that happens to him; to an adult, his experience is who he is” (Knowles, 1978, p. 56). Adult educators demonstrate their respect for people by utilizing their experiences as learning resources.

3. Readiness to Learn: As an individual matures, his or her readiness is more the product of the developmental tasks required for the performance of his or her evolving social roles than of his biological development (Knowles, 1978). This assumption implicates the critical role of timing learning experiences to coincide with a learner’s developmental tasks. Readiness to learn can be stimulated by motivation strategies.

4. Orientation to Learning: Children are oriented to subject-centered learning whereas adults are oriented to problem-solving learning. The time perspective is different between children and adults; chil-
dren learn, but experience postponed application of that learning; adults however, learn with a perspective of immediate application. This occurs because adults enter into learning frequently in order to meet a need or inadequacy in their present life situation.

The above has been a discussion of the point of differentiation between andragogy and pedagogy according to the perspective of Knowles (1978). In summary, the points of differentiation were: self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, and orientation to learning. The following discussion will address the points of differentiation between pedagogy and andragogy according to Kidd and, finally, Miller.

Kidd (1959) describes four ways in which adult learning situations differ from those of children: 1. for an adult there is usually no answer that is totally “correct.” Real life situations require an assessment and analysis of many contributing factors. 2. Current or new situations are viewed in terms of previous situations and traditional, cultural, religious and/or institutional correctness. 3. An adult’s solution to a problem may have many implications and ramifications. 4. No assumptions can be made about the expectations of adult learners. The adult learner may have different expectations of a learning activity than those of the adult educator.

Kidd’s five factors differentiating andragogy are: 1. Life-span: Consideration of the whole life and the changes that occur which may affect how adults learn. 2. Maturation: Recognizes the adults desire to have self-direction and self-discipline. 3. Adult experience: Adults have more experience, different kinds of experience and organize these experiences differently. 4. Self-learner: Adults are “inner directed,” they want to learn — or are motivated by their individual needs. 5. Time: Adults perceive their time as very valuable.

Miller (1964) uses three factors in his differentiation between pedagogy and andragogy: 1. Heterogeneity: Adults have a variety of needs and interest, therefore, a group of adults may offer a challenge to group instruction. 2. Structure: The unique meaning an individual gives a particular experience due to previous experiences of the individual. 3. Maturity: Adults are independent, they seek assistance in problem solving, not forced decisions.

In summary, these three authors have developed many of the same concepts to differentiate pedagogy from andragogy, their labels only differ. Adults are different from children in their: independence, perceptions, motivations, immediacy, focus of effort, and variety of learning needs (Tobin, Hull, Yoder & Scott, 1974).

Research in Adult Education

Relevant research has been cited throughout this paper regarding adult education. In this section, an overview of the state of research in adult education is presented. In 1961, Ronald Lippitt identified three aspects of the research problems in adult education: 1. Need for more and better research; 2. Preparing better researchers and involving them in adult education; and 3. Motivating practitioners to interpret and utilize research findings currently available (Axford, 1969).

Kreitlow (1965) wrote that there was a lack of structure and theory upon which to base new research and integrate the present research. He also listed a number of areas that are in need of research: the adult educational enterprise including purposes and goals; understanding of adult education; the educational process; the educational program; preparation of adult educators; and the evaluation of programs to name a few.

The field of adult education is so diversified that it has borrowed research from other disciplines. Kreitlow (1965) states that in order to strengthen the professional area of study of adult education, its various parts must be organized and examined. Otherwise, the educator of adults may become absorbed by other related professions.

Application of Adult Learning Principles to Baccalaureate Nursing Education

The previously described teaching/learning theories and research investigations have led to the formulation of certain principles. Tarcinale (1983, p. 19) described these principles as “statements that attempt to insure precise results from the relationship between teaching and learning, since we are only too well aware that teaching does not always result in learning.”

Knowles (1950) developed 13 principles of adult teaching and learning. The list of principles is as follows:

1. The students should understand and subscribe to the purposes of the course.
2. The students should want to learn.
3. There should be a friendly and informal climate in the learning situation.
4. Physical conditions should be favorable.
5. The students should participate and should accept some responsibility for the learning process.
6. Learning should be related to and should make use of the student’s experience.
7. The teacher should know his subject matter.
8. The teacher should be enthusiastic about his or her subject and about teaching it.
9. Students should be able to learn at their own pace.
10. The student should be aware of his or her own progress and should have a sense of accomplishment.
11. The methods of instruction should be varied.
12. The teacher should have a sense of humor.
13. The teacher should have a flexible plan for the course.

This section of the article presents learning principles that have had positive influences on adult learning. Examples of the application of these principles to nursing education are included.

PRINCIPLE: Learning should be related to and should make use of the student’s experience.

Each individual adult learner has a variety of unique experiences and learns by associating a new experience to a past experience. These varied experiences form a rich resource of knowledge that can be shared with the group of learners. As nurses grow professionally, their clinical experience accumulates providing a variety of learning experiences and situations. In order to teach successfully, an instructor “must identify the learner’s experiences in the content area to be taught and draw upon these when implementing the lesson” (Tarcinale, 1983, p. 20).

Austin (1984) described the development of an alternative management experience for RN-BSN students at Eastern Michigan University. The first step was the assessment of previous experiences via questionnaires. Faculty than developed clinical groups and placement in the available clinical and community sites based on the assessment data. The questionnaire also requested specific learning objectives. Evaluation criteria were developed from the course objectives.

Experiential techniques are primarily used in adult education. Case studies, problem solving, and hands-on clinical experience are teaching methods that are successfully utilized in nursing curricula. Teaching the assessment of a burn wound can utilize experiential techniques. For example, slides illustrating the varying stages of burn wounds from occurrence through infection to healing can serve as
the "problem." As the learners describe what they see — their questions provide an opportunity for the instructor to introduce new information. Then, as the slides progress through the various stages, the students build on their new knowledge. Tar- cinal (1983, p. 20) states that such a technique "provides the teacher with the opportunity to interject new information at the critical moment — when the learners ask for it — to assist them in solving a problem."

**PRINCIPLE:** Students should be able to learn at their own pace. The teacher is responsible for organizing and pacing the delivery of the content to coincide with indications of learner comprehension.

In adult classes there is a wide range of experiences, previous levels of education, interests and abilities. Teachers must provide for the individual variances within the boundaries of the course purpose and objectives. Teachers translate the purpose of a course into behavioral objectives. The objectives specifically state the outcomes to be acquired by the learner when the course objectives are fulfilled. This provides an organization and sharing of both the teacher's expectations and the learner's responsibilities. A course syllabus provides most of this type of information to the student in a written format that can be used for future reference in the course.

Implementation of a teaching plan assists the instructor in utilizing the class time for its maximum benefit. A teaching plan also assures that all the class objectives are met and that students also have an opportunity to discuss the class content. When nursing skills are introduced, enough time must be allotted to allow for hands-on application. This principle applies for all psychomotor skills as: IM injections, insertions of various tubes such as nasogastric feeding tubes, suctioning, etc. Practice sessions are usually required in order for the student to achieve a safe and efficient level of confidence and competence.

Teachers need to set and select the pace of the class. It must be appropriate for the class. The methodology should be imaginative and maintain the student's interest and involvement. Observation of student reactions to the presentation will cue the instructor on the class's comprehension. Facial expressions are very useful in making this assessment. Built-in pauses are opportunities for summation, clarification, and questions. A logical progression is essential for the building of a firm foundation for subsequent learning.

**PRINCIPLE:** The students should want to learn. The teacher is responsible for motivating the learners by creating conditions to help them recognize their need to know.

Anxiety can be an impediment to learning. Teachers enhance learning by motivating students and establishing an environment conducive to learning. Jean Watson's Theory of Caring applies to the teaching-learning situation and the teacher-learner relationship. Genuine caring motivates, encourages, and assists the learner in achieving the specified objectives. Subsequently, the learner grows in self-esteem and strengthens her or his self-concept.

Nurse educators have utilized learning contracts as a teaching strategy to motivate students and make classroom learning more meaningful. Sasmor (1984) described the utilization of learning contracts in the clinical components of the nursing courses at the College of Nursing, University of South Florida. Learning contracts emphasize the abilities of adult learners and the responsibility adults assume for their own learning. The contract writing allows the students the opportunity to write down their strengths and weaknesses and identify areas for more concentrated effort. The contract is treated as any other legal, binding agreement. It consists of three components: objectives, approaches, and evaluation. The objectives are usually delineated by the course. However, the course objectives are broad and each student individualized them to her or his needs. The approaches describe what specific activities the student will follow to achieve the objectives of the contract. Students indicate in the contract what method of evaluation will be implemented; example: the evaluation will be conducted by the preceptor, the advisor or both. The responsibilities of all participants is also outlined in guidelines given to the students prior to the development of the learning contracts. The faculty role is non-traditional because the primary focus is the learner. Faculty are facilitators and mentors. Learning contracts provide an opportunity for:

"...individualizing learning without compromising educational goals and objectives. It requires an educator instead of a teacher — a person who can perceive the achievement of educational objectives through a variety of activities and who is willing to give up the role of primary knowledge source" (Sasmor, 1984, p. 172).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article illustrates the importance of applying adult learning principles to nursing education. Nursing students are adult learners, they are motivated to learn, and they are eager to become competent, knowledgeable members of the professions. The challenge to nurse educators and nursing education is to provide the knowledge, experience and training to assist the students in achieving their goals.

**References**


