

Online Learning and the Adult Learner

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The current nursing shortage and demands for increased pay have attracted many second-career learners. Given that more and more nursing education is occurring online, many in this population of second career returning adults are going to encounter online education for the first time. This discussion will analyze the critical issues facing the returning adult in the online learning environment.

Introduction

Business schools across America are learning the new philosophy of 'student as customer.' This is evidenced by many students demanding an efficient and effective way to improve their career options, while maintaining their current vocational standing and position (Huff, 2003; Langan, 1997; Zell, 2001). Upon further investigation, it is clear that the true customer is not the student, but the true customer is the labor market (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). A deeper analysis of the drive for adult learners to pursue higher education quickly reveals that a great deal of the education that involves adults is driven by vocational issues.

Wieck (2003) notes that in the past "Education has been considered a providerdriven service, not a consumerdriven commodity" (p. 152). Just as in business, market forces in health care are pressuring nursing academia. In nursing education commodification must be addressed. Commodification is a term that describes the nature of a process or observation where a concept or entity has become a commodity (C. Strickland, personal communication, July 8, 2004). Given the severe shortage of nurses in the foreseeable future (Buerhaus, Staiger, & Auerbach, 2003; Wieck, 2003), the profession is demanding that academia become more sensitive to current and future workforce participants. One of the most important ways of becoming more sensitive is by

understanding potential student needs and eliminating barriers to accessing quality education (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2003; Diekelmann, 2001).

One group that brings a special set of needs to nursing academia is the growing group of adult learners. In the current nursing labor market, the number of registered nurses (RNs) over the age of 35 accounts for the largest growth (Buerhaus et al., 2003). The number of those under the age of 35 is declining. Another statistic indicates that 94 percent of the growth in the nursing workforce is from married individuals. While recent increases in wages have attracted some younger graduates into the profession, the vast majority of growth is coming from those who would be classified as adult learners. The increase in adult learners shows that like nursing academia, commodification is happening with the adult learner as well. They are becoming a crucial component of the future of nursing.

The numbers presented above represent recent observations of the nursing workforce (Buerhaus et al., 2003). Those numbers do not tell us where these 'older' nurses are coming from. Some suggest that market and subsequent labor declines in other professions are forcing the nurse in the family to go back to work, or work more hours to obtain family health benefits and increase family income. This would explain why 94 percent of the growth in the nursing workforce is coming from nurses with families (Buerhaus et al., 2003).

Even if inactive nurses returning to the workforce accounts for some of the growth, there still has to be a great deal of growth from the population of adult learners graduating from nursing school (Heller, Oros, & Durney-Crowley, 2004). In 2002, approximately 50% of all nursing students in Minnesota were over the age of 25 (Minnesota Department of Health, 2002).

Married students account for 38% of all nursing students and up to one-third of nursing students had dependent children living with them.

Across the U.S., the statistics look quite similar. During the 1990s, the average age of a nursing graduate increased by seven years to 30.9 years (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2003). In 2003, it was estimated that almost 73% of nursing students were considered adult learners because "... of their older age, more independent financial status, delayed entry into higher education, and competing responsibilities such as jobs and families" (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2003, p. 10). These demographics indicate that the halls of nursing academia are being populated by a larger body of adult learners.

Commodification of nursing academia is forcing educators to take notice of the growing population of adult learners. Increased numbers of adult learners in nursing schools encourages academia to rethink traditional nursing education. These adult learners are in need of a flexible education so that they may balance studies with their non-academic responsibilities (Langan, 1997). They are also in need of a learning environment that caters to their population, such as andragogy.

Andragogy

Andragogy is a term dating back to 1833 that has come to be known as the practice of facilitating adult learning. This differs from pedagogy which refers to child learning (Cross, 1981). Knowles, credited with the modern conceptualization of andragogy, teaches that andragogy is a model of assumptions that assist academia in managing adults as learners (Brookfield, 1986). The four assumptions offered by Knowles (as cited in Brookfield, 1986) are:

1. Adults both desire and enact a tendency toward self-directedness as they mature, though they may be dependent in certain situations.

2. Adults' experiences are a rich resource for learning. Adults learn more effectively through experiential techniques of education such as discussion or problem-solving.
3. Adults are aware of specific learning needs generated by real life tasks or problems. Adult education programs therefore should be organized around 'life application' categories and sequenced according to learners' readiness to learn.
4. Adults are competency based learners in that they wish to apply newly acquired skills or knowledge to their immediate circumstances. Adults are, therefore, "performance centered" in their orientation to learning. (p. 92)

When discussing adult learners, there needs to be clarity in the fact that chronological age is not exclusively considered for inclusion or exclusion in this group. Much of the thought on adult learning dates back to the 1920s when it was first being described. "It is interesting to note that Lindeman did not dichotomize adult versus youth education, but rather adult versus 'conventional' education. The implication here is that youths might learn better, too, when their needs and interests, life situations, experience, self-concepts, and individual differences are taken into account" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, p. 40).

The adults, spoken of in Knowles four assumptions, are described as those who are self-directed (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981). There are adult learners who may not be considered self-directed. The self-directedness comes from an observation that as one becomes an adult, one tends to become self-directed in their activities such as vocation, citizenship and parenting. The importance of identifying self-directed learners is that nurturing them in an environment that is similar to their other social activities is theoretically supported to enhance their learning (Brookfield, 1986; Cuellar, 2002).

For the purpose of discussion, the adult learner will be considered one who has a more self-supporting financial status, delayed or reentry into higher education, or has competing responsibilities such as jobs and families (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2003). This definition allows for inclusion of those who would most likely have a tendency towards

self-directedness. The following four areas will be evaluated around the framework of Knowles (as cited in Brookfield, 1986) four andragogical assumptions: self-directed learning; learning based on prior experience; learner-centered learning environments; and immediate application of learning.

Self-directed Learning

Self-directed individuals are taking on the decision-making roles for particular areas of their lives (Brookfield, 1986). When adults decide to change jobs they may be considered self-directed in their employment choices. When adults choose a school for their child, they are being self-directed in their parenting. They are taking responsibility for their parenting. These same principles apply to learning. A self-directed learner is taking responsibility for their learning. Students identify their own personal learning needs and seek the resources to meet those needs. Further description notes that “Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teachers is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it” (Knowles et al., 1998, p. 40). Throughout the learning process, learners will evaluate whether or not their learning needs are being met.

Self-directedness is a characteristic needed by professionals functioning in the Information Age. Over the last half of the last century, modern society experienced a supersystem shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age (Reigeluth, 1999). The Industrial Age valued compliance as compared to initiative in the Information Age. Bureaucracy and centralized control have been replaced with team-based organization, accountability and autonomy. Successful existence in a labor force that holds these characteristics in high esteem

will require an individual that is self-directed. If adults are not self-directed in this environment, they will either not perform or learn to be self-directed. Commodification of academia makes awareness of ideal characteristics necessary for success in the Information Age an essential task for nurse educators. An analysis of characteristics for successful participants in the Information Age reminds educators to consider the implementation of self-directed learning methodology for all learners, not just adult learners (Knowles et al., 1998).

Given the self-directed nature of andragogy (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981), there can be bidirectional benefit for students learning in this environment. If learners are self-directed in their learning preference, then the learning will be more nurturing to their character. Palloff and Pratt (2003) note that allowing students to learn from a preferred style is good practice to facilitate learning. However, if students are not self-directed by nature, andragogy may encourage growth in an area that is held in high esteem by the labor market (Reigeluth, 1999; Stanley & Waterman, 2000). Arguably, commodification of nursing academia reveals the true consumer of most andragogical learning environments as the labor market (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). Therefore, the development of self-directedness in students may prove beneficial to academia and students.

Concern for the utilization of mismatched learning methodologies may be an issue for students who are not self-directed, yet participate in an andragogical environment. However, just as learning to develop in different learning styles allows for growth (Davis, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 2003), so can learning to become a self-directed learner allow for growth. If an adult learner struggles with being self-directed, the andragogical learning environment may have more to offer than just course content. By encouraging the development of self-directedness in the

learner, the educator will be supplying that learner with a much needed skill for successful participation in the Information Age (Reigeluth, 1999).

Prior Experience

An adult's prior experience is considered an important resource for the andragogical learning environment (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981; Knowles et al., 1998). The term prior experience refers to the cumulative lived experience of the individual. Prior experience includes everything from prior schooling, to significant life events, employment, and experience encountered during social phenomenon such as war or elections.

Acknowledging that the adult learner has acquired understanding and developed meaning from prior experience has benefits to all involved in andragogy (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rose, 1989). For the adult learners, they feel empowered when their worth in the classroom is acknowledged. Their prior experience is considered a contribution to the learning of all and adds deeper meaning to the learning because of relevance. Rose (1989) notes that by acknowledging the value of prior experience, academia recognizes that people can learn in different ways. She states that "...the most important result [of nontraditional education] has been the reorientation placing greater emphasis on learning than on the process or delivery of that learning" (Rose, 1989, p. 212).

The author has had the pleasure of teaching nursing in undergraduate programs. Classes taught include many discussions about caring for those suffering from different diseases. In almost every class, one of the students will mention a personal experience with a particular disease process. One mother shared about her son's suffering with a congenital birth defect of the bones. She described to the class how this shook the very core of their family as they helped

her son through numerous surgeries. Her prior experience made the classroom discussion take on a whole new level of meaning.

In another class, where all the students are Associate degree registered nurses (RNs), the issue of case management was being discussed. The students proceeded to complain about the inadequacy of case managers and how they felt over-worked as a result of these deficient case managers. This discussion took on a whole new meaning when one of the quieter students spoke up to share her extensive experience as a case manager. Not only did the students who were complaining learn a whole new perspective, but the student who shared developed a sense of belonging and worth in the group because her contribution truly mattered. Palloff and Pratt (1999) state that “The process of connecting the learning gained from everyday life to the learning of the course not only creates a deeper sense of meaning for the participants but it validates them as people who possess knowledge and who can apply what they know in other contexts” (p. 116). That type of learning can not be offered through lecture or textbook, but only through the sharing of students’ prior experience.

Learner-centered Environment

Acknowledging the prior experience of adult learners conveys a sense of worth to students (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Another way to convey students’ worth is through “formulating a shared goal for learning” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 110). Creating this sense of collaboration with the learner allows the instructor to develop a better understanding of the students’ needs and readiness to learn (Brookfield, 1986). This is the basis for the learner-centered nature of andragogy.

One way to begin forming a shared goal for learning is through negotiating guidelines (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Early in the course, getting the students involved can really force them to take ownership while at the same time conveying a sense of mutual respect and worth between learners and the instructor. The instructor can take part of the course and leave its structure open to discussion among the learners. One example offered by Palloff and Pratt (1999) had to do with assessment of the learning process in an organizational management class. The instructors let the students decide how to assess the learning experience. The result of this example was a deep discussion about the assignment that led to a better understanding of the need for this type of assignment.

The example of negotiating guidelines in the organizational management class demonstrates how the learner-centered environment can require an inverse power structure in the educational process. The balance of power is more towards the learner than the instructor when a true learner-centered environment is utilized (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). The learner and instructor "...both need to become comfortable with making changes in the typical classroom power and control structures, creating a more open, collaborative learning environment" (Nelson, 1999, p. 248). The ability to operate within cooperative relationships and take part in shared decision making are both necessary skills for professionals in the Information Age (Reigeluth, 1999).

Collaboration and an inverse power structure may prove difficult for both the learner and the instructor. Instructors may struggle with relinquishing control. They may also struggle with the role change from "expert imparting knowledge to willing learners" (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 74) to that of the 'guide on the side.' Knowles (as cited in Knowles et al., 1998) reflects "I had replaced getting my rewards from controlling students with getting my rewards from releasing

students” (p. 200). The author has personally struggled with this concept in his practice as a nurse educator. He has worried that if too much power is relinquished, will the students learn what they need to be successful in the clinical environment? This can be distressing for the educator attempting to implement a learner-centered environment.

Likewise, the learner may struggle with this role change. The learner-centered environment is more active in nature and may lead to the decreased satisfaction of learners if benefits and goals are not explained clearly in advance (Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 2000; Lake, 2001). As the author learned of more active learning methodologies, he began experimenting with these practices in his nursing courses. Instead of delivering the course content via broadcast lecture, the content would be delivered through the use of games and discussions. When students who were not familiar with an active learning environment encountered the games and discussions in place of the broadcast lecture that they were used to, they complained that it was not their job to teach themselves. They protested that it was the instructor’s job to tell them what they had to know instead of allowing them to learn through experiential methodologies. The instructor soon learned to share with students the rationale and benefits of active learning at the commencement of a class. This process has curbed the complaints somewhat, but not totally. The author must continue to study best practices in implementing andragogy in order to effectively create a learner-centered environment that is more appealing to his learners.

Immediate Application of Learning

Adult learners thrive in environments that are learner-centered and acknowledge prior experience. Another key component of andragogy is that adult learners want learning that is

applicable to their current environment (Brookfield, 1986). In order for adult learners to truly find learning meaningful, the content needs to be relevant (Jonassen, 1999). Relevant learning encourages the learner to take ownership of the learning and possibly apply the learning immediately.

Immediate application can occur in different ways. The learner may apply learning while still in the academic realm through working on problem-based class projects (Nelson, 1999). The adult learner will usually work in a group as collaboration is utilized to construct meaning through the identification and resolution of a fictitious yet realistic project. Learners may also identify their own problems based on their current vocational or personal situations. Working on these types of problem allows for immediate application and subsequent relevance. Given the commodification of nursing academia, when the labor market sees learners bringing recently developed learning into practice, the labor market may respond more favorably to future academic activities.

In a nursing theory class for RNs, the author encourages the learners to discuss the relationship between nursing theory and their admission tools. Some learners have noted that they have never thought of their admissions tools as anything more than a long troublesome form. By looking at the tool through the lens of nursing theory, they have developed an appreciation for the potential power of the tool in affecting the care that the clients receive. Other learners have noted that by having them look at their current nursing practice they have learned that nursing theory is relevant. Before they were encouraged to immediately apply the nursing theory, this class was considered a necessary evil that was just part of the program. Immediate application has helped the learners to understand that everything they are taught and use in

practice has some type of theoretical underpinning. This provides relevance and motivation for the learners while at the same time providing rationale for the need for learning to the employer.

Meeting the need of the learner for immediate application allows adult learners, with many competing responsibilities, to better justify their learning. In an era of commodification, the labor market is another stakeholder who may require justification for the learning (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). In the author's own learning at Capella University, he created a syllabus and course plan for delivering a pharmacology course online. This course became the first undergraduate nursing course offered at Concordia University Wisconsin. By teaching the author through the use of andragogy with immediate application, the employer realized the potential value of the author's learning in their institution. Andragogy may improve the worth of the learning to the labor market if immediate application can be observed by employers.

Andragogy offers a framework for understanding issues that adult learners will face in the learning environment. Adult learners' needs and expectations are highlighted through the exploration of this learning theory. By providing a learner-centered, self-directed learning environment that acknowledges prior experience and pursues immediate application, the instructor can provide a high quality education to the adult learner.

Online Learning

Online learning is on the rise in much the same way the number of adult learners is increasing. Over the past few years the growth of online learning has been significant. Recent years have seen projected annual growth in online learning by as much as 19.8% (Allen & Seaman, 2003). In 2003, 81% of colleges and universities offered some type of online learning

with 67% of institutions reporting that online learning is a critical part of their long-term goals. The growth in online learning alongside the growth in adult learners supports the conclusion that these two phenomena will and have intersected in nursing academia. This interaction will provide potential benefits and challenges to the adult learner.

Benefits to Adult Learners

The online learning environment offers several benefits to the adult learner. To adequately describe these benefits a definition of online learning must first be discussed. For the purpose of this discussion, a definition of online learning will be adopted based on the assertion that "the asynchronous discussion is the most effective means of promoting online learning" (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 10). Online learning refers to a learning environment that utilizes an asynchronous discussion format as an important part of the course. Other technologies may be utilized to include instant messaging, video of lectures and email.

At Texas A&M University a \$7 million grant was secured to create a complete online nursing program (C. Johnston, personal communication, April 30, 2004). In this program the students never have any interaction with other learners in the classroom. The learners may take as long to complete a course as necessary and may do it from any location in the state of Texas. At Concordia University Wisconsin, the students in the Master's nursing program may take the courses through the use of email which is supplemented by VHS videotapes of lectures (G. Peterson, personal communication, September 12, 2003). Students communicate only with the instructor and turn in assignments via the use of email. They watch the lectures that occurred a few days prior on VHS videotapes. These are two examples that have been described by some as online learning.

The asynchronous nature of online learning can be hailed as one of the more pronounced benefits of online learning. Asynchronous implies that the discussion in the classroom can be joined by learners without the need for all learners to be in the same place at the same time. This arrangement allows for flexibility in the personal scheduling of the learner. For the adult learner, flexibility is paramount (Kozlowski, 2002; Langan, 1997). As is noted in the definition of adult learners, they are individuals who have a more independent financial status, have delayed entry or reentry into higher education and have competing responsibilities (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2003). Commodification requires nursing educators to take heed of these needs for flexibility in the adult learners.

Adult learners are more likely to provide their own income and resources for their families. In Minnesota, a survey of nursing students revealed that 87% of all nursing students were working and approximately 27% of all nursing students were working more than 30 hours per week (Minnesota Department of Health, 2002). Of the students participating in the survey, 87% were taking more than eight credits. Considering their busy lives, this data reveals that adult learners will need flexibility to foster success in the learning environment. At Community Memorial Hospital in Wisconsin, one nurse manager shared with the author that the online program at the University of Phoenix has made pursuing her Master's in nursing a reality. Otherwise, the incredible demands that her work has placed on her would not have allowed this pursuit to improve herself and her value to the hospital. By acknowledging that the employer is just as much a customer as the learner, and allowing the learner to remain useful to hospital, University of Phoenix displays an understanding of the concept of commodification.

Location was also reported as a major concern for nursing students. Over 50% of students reported that location of a nursing school was a 'very important' reason for choosing a nursing program (Minnesota Department of Health, 2002). For nursing students, going to school and working can certainly lead to scheduling conflicts. Learners in asynchronous online learning will be able to avoid work conflicts by being allowed to complete their coursework from home and during a time that best meets their schedules.

Another scheduling dilemma can come from having family responsibilities. In the *Minnesota Nursing Student Profile* (Minnesota Department of Health, 2002), one-third of all nursing students had dependent children living with them and 38% were married. Over 50% of the students reported that childcare and family issues were obstacles to entering nursing school. Over 30% identified childcare and family issues as being obstacles to graduation. These observations point to the potential benefit that can be realized by adult learners in the asynchronous online learning environment.

The implementation of andragogy is another benefit for the adult learner in the asynchronous online learning environment (AOLE). The first part of andragogy that is supported in the AOLE is self-directedness. In this environment, learners have the majority of the responsibility for their learning. This requires a learner to be self-directed (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Flexibility takes away much of the external motivation exerted by the instructor in a traditional learning environment.

The AOLE facilitates andragogy in other ways. In a case study, King (2001) analyzed online interactions from an adult learning perspective. She reports:

The Web board dialogues were examined for common patterns of communication. These discussions were characterized by critical thinking, supportiveness, and student-

centeredness. One of the most dominant themes evident in the Web boards was the depth to which discussions were carried out. ... As adult learners, they referenced and valued their prior experiences and revealed their philosophies of education as they supported their positions. (p. 346)

The case study highlights the usefulness of the AOLE to andragogy. The environment was described as student-centered. The instructors in the case study affirmed researchers' observations by stating that the Web board was much more student-centered than the face-to-face classrooms. Other observations included the value of prior experience and that learners were sharing personal views and philosophies. Success of AOLEs is dependent upon a variety of factors. Nonetheless, this case study is one example of how the AOLE can be an ideal learning environment for adult learners.

Learning-style variety can be another benefit for the adult learner in the AOLE. The AOLE should include a variety of activities to allow learners to learn within their own preferred learning style at some point in the course (Palooff & Pratt, 2001, 2003). For example, the auditory learner may enjoy interacting with auditory content in the course room or on the Internet. The visual learner may prefer interaction with text and video. The kinesthetic learner enjoys activities such as visiting different Web sites and doing research online. This variety not only caters to the different learning styles but also encourages growth of learners' ability to function outside their preferred learning style. Variety also helps the AOLE to be a little more interesting. However, the instructor should be cautious about implementing too much technology. If technology problems become too overwhelming the benefit of the incorporated tool may not be realized (Palooff & Pratt, 2001).

Challenges to Adult Learners

One of the first challenges to adult learners is the issue of technology competency. When a learner registers for an AOLE, it should not be assumed that the learner is technologically competent (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). The self-directedness of the AOLE may create an environment that does not allow for a quick identification of technology deficits in the learner by the instructor. Therefore, the instructor should be careful to provide an adequate assessment of technology competency (King, 2001) and subsequent orientation prior to commencement of the class. Every time the author has taught a class completely online, he has had to address technology competency issues with his learners. In some of the schools that have not been too involved with online education, the author has provided all the technology competency training and support himself.

Technologically, the orientation should include introduction to the personal computer, word processing, and Internet usage. If the orientation does not include this, the student should prove that they have competency with these tools prior to the commencement of the class. Most importantly, the learner should understand how to get help if needed. Access to technical support services needs to be a priority of the institution. When the learner becomes competent enough to be successful in the course, they also may gain favor with their employer. Again, commodification encourages academia to display the many benefits that adult learners receive and an andragogy-based learning environment.

Another issue that can be a challenge for adult learner success in the AOLE is increased flexibility (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). In the AOLE, the learner may complete assignments at a time or place that is convenient to them. Many of the author's students in the AOLE have noted that

the online class gets put off until the last minute. The students report paying more attention to their face-to-face class studies because they actually see the instructor two or three times a week. When taking the class that is solely online, they note that there is a tendency for them to procrastinate with that class. If the learners are not very self-directed, they may struggle with this lack of external structure and guidance. Noting that not all AOLES are the same, some offer more structure. Students who prefer a more structured classroom are still able to participate in the AOLE (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

The next challenges that the learner may encounter have to do with the andragogical nature of the AOLE. The successful adult learner will need to have the ability to reflect on personal and group learning in the AOLE (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). In the traditional learning environment, the learner may not have time to reflect before responding so this may not be a normal part of the learner's academic practice. The AOLE also calls the learner to be a critical thinker. This encompasses the abilities to develop shared goals and use inquisitive dialogue as a way of learning. This too could be different for the adult learner who may have come to the learning environment expecting to only acquire facts.

Learning-style preferences may pose a challenge to the adult learner online. If the learner relies on auditory or visual cues and cannot learn without them, that person may not be well suited for the AOLE (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Learners may also struggle if they have poor writing skills. Even though some characteristics can be overcome, these issues can still cause the adult learner difficulty. Encouraging adult learners to develop all learning styles and writing skills that will allow them to be successful in the AOLE. However, their current skill set and

preferences need to be taken into consideration when advising students about participation in the AOLE.

Finally, attitude and beliefs can be challenges to the adult learners' success in the AOLE. One issue that adult learners may encounter is that of being transparent online. "Successful virtual students are open-minded about sharing personal details about their lives, work, and other educational experiences" (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p. 6). As King (2001) reports, interpersonal sharing is central to much of the learning that occurs in the AOLE. While precautions must be taken to prevent mental or emotional trauma to any learner, the development of community is vital to the success of the AOLE. Transparency then becomes a vital component if community is to truly develop and flourish. An inability to share experiences, feeling, philosophies and thoughts may prove to hinder the adult learner from reaping the full benefit of the AOLE.

The learner needs to also possess the belief that learning can occur anywhere and anytime. This type of learning is quite new and may be relatively suspect to some learners. If they are unable to accept that the AOLE is a valid way to learn, their beliefs may affect their attitudes and subsequent performance in the class. Time is the final issue that can affect attitudes about the AOLE. When the learners take responsibility for their learning, they may find that they are spending more time on the content than they expected. When unfamiliar with this part of the AOLE, some students may become angry or fall behind in the course. Both of these situations can cause problems for the adult learner.

Conclusion

The research is clear that adult learners have become a significant part of nursing academia (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2003; Langan, 1997; Minnesota

Department of Health, 2002). They represent a large portion of the student and professional nursing population. Given the current commodification of nursing academia combined with the nursing shortage (Buerhaus et al., 2003), nursing academia would do well to take note of this important group. With the inversion of the age pyramid, nursing will compete with many other professions for the few young workers available. Nursing academia will need to attract the adult learner in order to meet profession demands to assist in curbing the current shortage.

Online learning is growing in popularity across many areas of academia (Allen & Seaman, 2003). The increase in adult learners is forcing nursing academia to realize the congruency between andragogy and the AOLE. Another part of the growth in online learning is academia's response to the pressures from the labor market (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000; Wieck, 2003; Zell, 2001). Commodification persuades nursing academia to better understand the use of the AOLE as a vehicle for meeting the needs of adult learners and subsequently the labor market.

Observing the growth in online learning and the growth of the adult-learner population, nursing academia needs to understand the critical issues facing the adult learner in the AOLE. Andargogy is an important part of educating the adult learner (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981). Andragogical practice includes an understanding of self-directedness, valuing learners' prior experience, creating a learner-centered environment, and providing for immediate application of learning.

Online learning offers benefits and challenges to the adult learner. One of the main benefits is that implementation of the successful AOLE is consistent with sound andragogical practice (King, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Another benefit is the flexibility of the AOLE.

Given the many competing responsibilities of the adult learner (Minnesota Department of Health, 2002), flexibility makes an education much more possible. The adult learner may also experience benefits related to learning in their preferred learning style and developing the ability to function and grow in less preferred learning styles (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, 2003).

There can also be challenges for the adult learner in the online learning environment. To address these challenges, the characteristics of potential learners should be compared to that of a successful online student. Palloff and Pratt (2003) suggest that a successful online student:

- Is open-minded about sharing personal details about his or her life, work and other educational experiences.
- Is not hindered by the absence of visual cues in the communication process.
- Is willing to commit a significant amount of time to his or her studies weekly and does not see the course as the "softer, easier way."
- Is or can be developed into a critical thinker.
- Has the critical ability to reflect.
- Holds a belief that high quality learning can happen anywhere and anytime. (pp. 10-12)

In order for nursing academia to successfully serve the adult learner in the AOLE, benefits must be developed and challenges managed through the use of andragogical practice.

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