

# Graduate Students as Adult Learners: Andragogy and Instructional Design

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## ABSTRACT

Higher education instructors generally teach adult learners and given that LIS programs in the United States are typically graduate degree programs, LIS faculty may work exclusively with learners who are even older than the traditional undergraduate. Adult learners have a different set of motivations for learning and a different set of expectations for their learning experiences than younger students. The challenge is that most higher education instructors are not taught how to teach at all, much less introduced to the nuances of teaching and learning with adults. In this session, panelists with a range of experience and background with pedagogy and instructional design will offer insights into theories of adult learning, including andragogy, humanism, constructivism, and critical pedagogy and discuss how to put these theories into practice using Backward Design as an instructional approach. The session will feature interactive portions where attendees will be invited to share their experiences and to apply their knowledge and learning to their own curricula.

Theories of teaching and learning as well as more practical approaches to designing instruction are often gathered together under the term pedagogy. However, most of the research and application of these ideas has focused on younger learners, typically from kindergarten, or even preschool, through high school. Knowles (1988) was among the first to acknowledge that adult learners have different needs and motivations than younger learners and proposed andragogy as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43). One of the major differences between children and adult learners is that children generally do not have much choice in participating in learning, as school attendance is generally mandatory. Also, much of what they learn as children will not be immediately useful or applicable, but is expected to be important knowledge for the future. When learning is compulsory and not necessarily immediately relevant, external motivation might be necessary to encourage learners to engage. Adult learners, on the other hand, typically do make their own choices to engage in learning and graduate

students, in particular, are more likely to be financially responsible for their education. As such, adults are typically more self-motivated and self-directed in their learning. Moreover, especially if their motivation is related to career goals, adults may be particularly interested in the relevance of what they are learning and connecting that learning to their lives and goals. At the same time, adults generally have more demands on their time than younger students do, and might be balancing work and family responsibilities along with their education. To be effective with adult learners, instructors need to understand their context and design their instruction to meet those needs and expectations. Instructors can help tap into adults' motivation to learn by being transparent about their instructional design choices; building flexibility and choice into the curriculum; and acknowledging adult learners' experiences and drawing on those experiences to contextualize learning. Backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), with its emphasis on learning outcomes and creating experiences to demonstrate learning, can be an effective approach for designing instruction for adults.

This panel session will begin with an overview of the theory of andragogy, or adult learning, including constructivist and humanist approaches to teaching adults, along with strategies for tapping into their intrinsic motivation and building on prior knowledge. This section will be followed by a primer on instructional design and lesson planning, including the Backward Design approach of identifying outcomes, designing assessments, and planning instruction with a focus on adult learners. These presentations will be followed by an activity in which attendees will be invited to select a course, module, or lesson from their own curriculum and revise or redesign it with one or more of the andragogy and Backward Design principles in mind. After a brief share out, the panelists will open the discussion up to attendees. Drawing on the community of practice model from LIS Pedagogy Chat, which two of the panelists co-host, the presenters will prepare a series of questions related to the topics of andragogy and instructional design and moderate a facilitated discussion. Questions may include:

- What motivated you to attend this session?
- Do any of the ideas shared here resonate with your own experiences as a learner or instructor? How so?
- What are some of the challenges you have encountered in teaching adult learners? What realities do you think underlies these challenges?
- What are some successful strategies you have used with adult learners? What made them successful?
- Knowing that adult learners are often motivated by relevance, what are some ways that you connect your course content to the “real world”? Are there any content areas you find particularly easy or difficult to make explicitly relevant?
- What is one technique or strategy that you would like to try and how might you use it?

The panelists bring a wide range of knowledge and experience. Two of the panelists, Laura Saunders and Melissa Wong, regularly teach a course on library instruction and have co-authored the open access textbook *Instruction in Libraries and Information Centers: An Introduction*, which presents learning theories and instructional design approaches with a focus on teaching and learning in library settings. They also founded and co-host LIS Pedagogy Chat, a community of practice in which librarians and LIS faculty share ideas and discuss issues related to teaching and learning related to library and information science. Sarah Appedu is a doctoral

student and adjunct professor. In addition to having expertise in instructional design and the philosophy of learning, she brings a unique perspective as a current LIS student.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Pedagogy; Students; Teaching faculty.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Pedagogy; Instructional design; Andragogy; Teaching; Learning.

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