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# Designing Information Literacy Instruction for Adult Learners



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## **ABSTRACT**

An issue currently facing many academic librarians involves the challenge of designing information literacy instruction for nontraditional students, particularly adult learners. Increasingly, adults are enrolling in college later in life to complete undergraduate degrees. Because information literacy instructional research and instructional methods commonly focus on traditional students, academic librarians struggle to design information literacy instruction that meets the needs of this more mature population. This article examines information literacy instructional design basics, characteristics of adult learners and adult learning theory, as well as presents examples for designing information literacy instruction for adult students.

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## **Introduction**

One issue facing many academic librarians today involves the challenge of designing information literacy instruction for nontraditional students, particularly adult learners. Increasingly, adults are enrolling in college later in life to complete undergraduate degrees. Because information literacy instructional research and instructional methods commonly focus on traditional students, many academic librarians struggle to design information literacy instruction that meets the needs of this more mature population. In order to help adult learners improve their information literacy skills, academic librarians can study basic information literacy instructional design, the characteristics of adult learners, and instructional design created specifically for adult learners, as well as learn from adult learning theory-based instructional methods already being used by other librarians.

## **Information Literacy Instructional Design**

### **Information Literacy**

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) describes information literacy as “a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (American Library Association, 2000, p. 2); its goal involves promoting lifelong learning. Built upon this characterization and goal, information literacy instructional design begins by developing a plan of the program itself, which

includes the following elements: a statement of purpose, identification of content instruction, identification of modes of instruction, program structures, and evaluation and assessment (American Library Association, 2011). In order for the information literacy plan to be effective, information literacy programs must also have sufficient instructional, facilities, financial, training, and human resources support (American Library Association, 2011). When developing the parts of an information literacy program plan, instructional methods, or pedagogy, must be considered.

## **Pedagogy**

American Library Association (2000) implies that pedagogy in effective information literacy programs involves varied approaches to instruction and learning. Its design corresponds to the type of instruction being used, and, where appropriate, information technology and other media resources are incorporated. Activities should advance learning through collaboration and experience, while at the same time encourage critical thinking, reflection, and recursive learning. Pedagogy seeks to build on the learners' existing knowledge, and takes into consideration course assignments as well as student career goals. When implementing pedagogy, care should be taken to contextualize it within academic courses. Ultimately, pedagogy for information literacy programs should clearly correlate with the main goal of information literacy: equipping students for independent lifelong learning (American Library Association, 2012).

## **Understanding Adult Learners**

### **Characteristics**

An increasing number of college students are considered "adult learners." Unlike traditional college students who typically go to school full-time and have few responsibilities outside of academia, most adult learners attend school part-time, have full-time jobs, families, and community responsibilities (Budd, 2012; Cooke, 2010; Moslander, 2000; Rapchak & Behary, 2013). They may have had some college prior to their current enrollment with a lapse of time between academic pursuits. Although adult learners are often older than traditional students, they are not necessarily defined by age; instead, they are defined by the fact that they, at some point, terminated their schooling and assumed adult responsibilities in life (Cooke, 2010). According to Darkenwald (1992) adult learners' student role is "subordinate to other life roles, which is nearly always the case when individuals are focused on their own lives and livelihoods" (p. 30).

The number of adult learners returning to school in the United States has continually increased within the last two decades; in 1990, 40% of adults were students, 45% in 1999, 46% in 2001-2002, and 47.6% in 2004-2005 (Cooke, 2010, p. 212). Adult learners represent diversity in gender, race or ethnicity, age, educational level and

occupation, and they pursue education in a variety of subject areas. They return to school for various reasons, which may include “job obsolescence, job competition, employment longevity, acceptability of career changes, higher personal aspirations, professional advancement, the need for socialization, cognitive interests, and an increase in leisure time and disposable income” (Cooke, 2010, p. 212).

**Strengths.** Adult learners are highly motivated to learn. Unlike traditional students, adult students’ motivations for learning originate inwardly rather than outwardly; they are motivated by their own desires for self-improvement, retooling, or equipping for job advancement instead of by parental pressure or social expectations (Badke, 2008; Budd, 2012; Cooke, 2010; Harrison, 2000; Moslander, 2000). Because of their maturity and experience, they have much to offer in the classroom. They are not afraid to work (Badke, 2008).

**Challenges.** Adult learners face barriers in achieving their educational ambitions. Since it has been a long time since they were in school, many feel unprepared for the new tasks set before them. Just figuring out how to function again in school is challenging. They often suffer from anxiety or fears which can be attributed to many factors, including a lack of self-confidence, excessive life responsibilities, technology fears, fear of poor study skills, fear of failure, or fear of not measuring up when compared with traditional students (Badke, 2008; Budd, 2012; Cooke, 2010; Moslander, 2000). These challenges, when combined with their hectic schedules, make it a constant battle for them to complete assignments (Badke, 2008). Adult learners return to college “with special needs and often under stressful circumstances; they have strengths and deficits as learners that set them apart from traditional-aged students” (Darkenwald, 1992, p. 31).

**Andragogy.** Andragogy involves “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Cooke, 2010, p. 214; Ingram, 2000, p. 144; Moslander, 2000, p. 106). Currie (2000) presents adult learning theory pioneer Malcolm Knowles’ andragogical model, which “is characterized by a mutually respectful, informal, collaborative style of teacher/student relationship which uses experiential techniques and is based on several key assumptions about adult learners” (p. 220). Knowles’ key assumptions of adult learners imply that not only do adult learners want to learn, but they want their learning to relate to life. They tend to learn best through experience and through self-directed learning (Cooke, 2010; Currie, 2000).

Adults learn throughout their lives; life changes and transitions are the cause and motivations for their learning. Adults’ learning styles are diverse; they learn in various ways. As a rule, however, adults prefer their learning activities to be problem-centered

and immediately applicable to their lives. Adults' past experiences sometimes enhance their learning, and sometimes inhibit it. How they view themselves as learners plays a major role in their level of learning success (Cooke, 2010; Currie, 2000).

The andragogical model of lifelong learning developed by Knowles is centered on adults' preference for self-directed learning. In brief, adults are self-directed in their learning and desire to learn what is relevant, useful, and applicable to their life situations.

Currie (2000) sums up adult learning as follows:

According to Burge (1998) adult learning is all about construction (how adults create their own framework of knowledge) and confusion (when learners attempt to organize a mass of incoming information); achievement, affiliation and acknowledgement (feeling competent and being connected to others); relevance, responsibility and relationships (relating life experiences and personal knowledge to learning, accepting learner responsibility for learning and establishing collaborative relationships which create a climate that allows for talking in order to think, making mistakes, letting go of old ideas and attitudes and being open to anything new) and expression through which the learner is able to see himself perform, hear himself think, compare thoughts and skills to those of his peers and open his mind to feedback. (p. 222)

## **Instructional Design for Adult Learners**

### **Basic Design**

Instructional design for adult learners should be “collaborative and personalized,” and the instructor should undertake the role of facilitator rather than expert lecturer (Cooke, 2010; Currie, 2000; Harrison, 2000). This helps to build an environment of openness and mutual respect, while concurrently involving the learner in the planning process. In order to offer the best instruction to the learner, the instructor should collaborate with the learner to diagnose learning needs and form objectives to assist in learning. The adult's readiness to learn must be assessed by the instructor; a sequenced design of instruction should be based on this knowledge. In accordance with Knowles' key assumptions regarding adult learning, “learning activities must be experiential and relate directly to the immediate, practical needs of the learner. They must be learner-centered, and specifically problem-centered; that is, focusing on the learner's problems” (Ingram, 2000, p. 145). Effectiveness of instruction should be measured by mutual evaluation and assessment.

## **The Instructor as Facilitator**

Due to their learning needs, styles, and life experiences, adult learners best learn when instructors act as facilitators rather than experts. Currie (2000) cites six principles in facilitating adult learning:

- Participation is voluntary
- Effective practice is characterized by respect among participants for each other's self-worth
- Facilitation is collaborative with facilitator and learners engaged in a cooperative enterprise
- Praxis is at the heart of effective facilitation – a continual process of activity, reflection, collaborative analysis, further reflection
- Critical reflection is fostered
- Self-directed empowered adults are nurtured. (p. 222)

Learning interactions between facilitator and learner are characterized as “active, challenging, collaborative, critically reflective and transforming” (Currie, 2000, p. 222). The facilitator's goal is assisting adult learners in becoming independent learners (Caravello, 2000; Currie, 2000). Facilitators' understanding of the educational, personality, cultural, sophistication levels and experiential differences between themselves and their adult learners is critical to effective facilitation. A facilitator's awareness of these contrasts should guide the approaches used within teaching and the learning process (Currie, 2000).

## **Applying Adult Learning Theory**

In order to meet the information needs of adult learners in their libraries, academic librarians are increasingly applying adult learning theory to information literacy instruction. Being able to visualize the application of adult learning theory to information literacy instruction through examples can provide instructional models for librarians to follow as they proceed to design information literacy programs and implement quality instruction for adult learners in their own libraries. Following are three examples describing how academic librarians are working to provide quality information literacy instruction to adult patrons through reference instruction and information literacy courses.

## **Reference Instruction: Step-By-Step**

Badke (2008) gives specific instructions – based on his experience in serving adult learners in his own library – on how to guide adult learners through the research

process in the reference interview setting. In highlighting adult learners' needs, he asserts that adults tend to think of research in analog (ordered, step-by-step) terms and, therefore, have difficulty crossing the divide from an analog to digital way of thinking. The practical process he presents for guiding adult learners in meeting their information needs through reference interviews is intended to help them make the transition to understanding digital information.

When confronted with an information need by an adult learner – particularly a need related to a class research assignment – Badke (2008) suggests academic librarians lead students through several steps. Librarians should start by helping students differentiate between data collection and true research. Badke (2008) explains, “Genuine research begins with a problem to be solved, a controversy to be analyzed, or a discovery to be made. Once adult students see data as a means to solve a problem rather than an end in itself, the excitement begins to grow” (p. 49). After students have an understanding of true research, librarians should encourage students to identify their research questions and formulate general outlines which will serve as guides for their research. Next, reference information may be gathered to gain a working knowledge of the topic. After this, students may proceed to search for data in “books, journals, and other sources (for example, ERIC)” (p. 50). Finally, the Internet (Google, Google Scholar, etc.) may be searched for further information.

He also gives a process to follow when helping adult learners learn how to use databases:

First “read” the database to see what it offers. Then try out a keyword search and see what you get. Identify an article directly relevant to your research question and open the record. Does it have controlled vocabulary (standard forms of authors' names, subject headings)? Click on a linked subject heading and see what comes up. Experiment with adding keywords to the subject search to narrow it. And so on. (Badke, 2008, p. 50)

Badke (2008) contends that adult learners, with their busy lives, do not have time to devote to mastering information literacy skills, nor are they likely to do much academic research beyond the extent of their programs. Of course, it is preferable to help adult learners become expert researchers, but in reality, they are simply focused on completing their degree requirements and graduating. The best way to help adult learners develop information literacy skills is “by providing them with a research model along with strategies that model and use the digital tools they need. They will do the work” (Badke, 2008, p. 50).

## **A Face-to-Face Course Model**

Caravello (2000) describes an optional information literacy course for adult patrons offered through UCLA University Extension. The course was created with the intention of teaching information literacy skills to adult learners who regularly utilized the university library, but were not students. The following constitutes the course's goals:

- To foster information literacy in the adult learner
- To provide practical as well as conceptual assistance for the information and research needs of the independent writer or researcher
- To introduce tools of the modern research library and virtual library
- To create a more substantive librarian-adult learner connection and shared vocabulary which can be valuable at any reference desk. (Caravello, 2000, p. 261)

Held on two Saturdays, the course aims to develop skills in the area of research, including citations, notes, search strategies, controlled vocabulary, online catalogs, reference tool evaluation, abstracts and periodical indexes, and critical thinking in research (Caravello, 2000).

Caravello (2000) uses diverse instructional methods to teach the course, including lecture, group activities, demonstrations of online resources and strategies, library tours, hands-on exercises, as well as independent activities; all instructional strategies employed reflect principles of adult learning theory (voluntary participation, mutual respect between facilitator and learner, critical self-reflection, cooperative learning, collaborative analysis, and self-empowerment).

At the course's conclusion, its effectiveness is assessed through a survey in which students are asked to provide feedback regarding the content of the course, the facilitator, and course materials. Upon the course's completion, analysis of the survey's results is conducted by the course's instructors; the results are used to tweak and improve the course from year to year. Caravello (2000) states the ultimate aim of the course as follows: "The goal is for the course to be a key step in the process of becoming information literate, not for it to bring the students all the way there or to certify that particular skills have been acquired" (p. 267). The course is not meant to be an end-all to acquiring information literacy skills; rather, it is designed to provide the necessary skills to further progress the adult learner toward being information literate. Progress in the course cannot be measured on a set scale, but instead varies according to each individual student.



According to Caravello (2000), the course has been a success. The author cites, “When veterans of the course approach me at the reference desk, they invariably convey that they feel less fear and intimidation than before in using the library” (pp. 268–269). Caravello (2000) has found that in assisting those former students, they now have a “shared vocabulary” that she can refer to and build upon, enabling her to more effectively meet their information needs (p. 269).

### **An Online Course Model**

An online information literacy course for adult learners at Duquesne University is described in a recent study by Rapchak and Behary (2013). Created to mirror an information literacy course offered to on-campus adult students, the online course, designed in Blackboard, includes weekly tutorials, webinars, readings, and assignments. Although most of the course is conducted asynchronously, a Wimba virtual classroom is utilized for synchronous discussions regarding more difficult concepts. The scope of the course contemplates information literacy from rhetorical analysis to critical thinking, teaches research skills and strategies, and also encourages students to ponder the future of information.

In accordance with adult learning theory principles, the course’s weekly assignments ask students to apply the course’s learning concepts to their real-life experiences. General guidelines for completing assignments are designed to allow “some flexibility so that the students would see the relevancy of the skills learned, could apply their previous knowledge, and could also take control of some of their learning” (Rapchak & Behary, 2013, p. 355).

Students are required to complete two major assignments for the course: an annotated bibliography and an information need analysis and search. The annotated bibliography, which allows students to practice newly-learned research skills, instructs the students to gather six resources on a topic and connect them to another course they are currently taking. The second assignment, the information need analysis and search, gives students the opportunity to use information literacy skills to help someone else meet an information need; the person with an information need could be a friend, child, parent, employee, etc. This assignment requires students to detail their research process and discuss how they could tweak their search methods to receive better search results in the future; ultimately, it assists adult learners in understanding how to apply the course’s learning concepts outside the classroom (Rapchak & Behary, 2013).

Other methods of evaluation include online discussion boards and quizzes. The course's discussion boards emphasize information related to both coursework and real-life experiences. While quizzes with both open-ended and closed-ended questions are given, more open-ended questions are included to provide opportunities for the students to show their understanding of the course's learning outcomes through application.

Upon describing the course, Rapchak and Behary (2013) conclude that successful information literacy instruction designed for adult learners includes "flexibility in instruction formats and expectations of students, a reliance on active learning to generate student involvement in their education, and content that applies to real-world situations" (p. 359).

## **Conclusion**

Considering the characteristics of adult learners, it remains challenging for academic librarians to ascertain the best way to teach them information literacy skills. Additionally, less research has been conducted on the topic of teaching adult students information literacy skills when compared with teaching information literacy skills to traditional students. Nonetheless, when librarians seek to understand adult learners' characteristics and needs, study adult learning theory, and analyze specific information literacy instructional initiatives designed for adult learners, they will be able to successfully design information literacy instruction for the adults they serve, effectively "meeting adult learners where they are" and advancing adult information literacy skills to competency. †

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