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Abstract

Online university teaching affords instructors opportunities for adult students to become critical thinking intellectuals through collaboration and communication. From the author’s reflection on his first six years of online teaching and using CLC (Collaborative Learning Communities) Group Projects, he outlines practices that support adult learning and critical thinking in the online classroom with real-life learning applications. The author offers reflections from his own online teaching experiences with CLC Group Projects to guide online pedagogy/andragogy to structure discussions between adult students, to provide opportunities for adult students to become self-directed learners, and to encourage adult students to work together to become problems solvers on current learning issues. In conclusion, teaching in an online classroom gives instructors the opportunity to facilitate an education for adult students that reaches beyond the walls of the internet classroom into a K-12 classroom, or other workplace organizations.
Online Education: Collaborative Learning Communities

With the ease of attending an online university, many K-12 educators are returning to school to continue their professional development in the field of teaching. The goal of many of these educators is to earn a Master’s of Education degree. As an adjunct instructor in the field of education, my role is to provide these aspiring educators with the opportunity to achieve their goals of professional development, degree advancement, and simply the love for learning new researcher-based instructional strategies. Within the university online classrooms, the responsibility of the adjunct instructor is to provide a stimulating learning environment that focuses on adult learners and that provides real-life application-based learning opportunities that one can apply to a K-12 classroom setting. The problem is discovering how online instructors can develop instructional lessons around adult learners that provide opportunities to build upon real-life applications in a K-12 classroom setting. Participation in a Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) is one such opportunity found at a university with an online platform that provides students with opportunities to apply educational theories, concepts, and themes to a real-life classroom setting. A CLC (Grand Canyon University, 2014) is an online forum for students to work in collaboration with a small group of other students to examine course educational theories, concepts, and themes, as well as to apply their findings to a real-life applications, such as creating a lesson plan unit or developing a school wide safety plan.

The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, there is a need to understand how adult learners learn through professional development. Second, there is a need to understand how a CLC works in an online classroom setting and how this concept offers educators the opportunity to apply the basics from educational theories, concepts, and themes to a real-life K-12 classroom setting.
Adult Learning and Teacher Learning

When educators return to the university to take additional courses to continue the professional development and refinement of their teaching skills, they depend on a quality instructor to create a learning environment that builds upon their current teaching needs. From using the students’ current teaching repertoire, the instructor extends current knowledge levels with critical thinking and real-life application opportunities. The adjunct instructor must begin his or her planning by clearly understanding how adult students learn and why they are returning to school. An examination of adult learning theory provides the online instructor with the foundation to understanding his or her students and why they are taking online education courses.

Adult learning theory contributes to the knowledge surrounding how adult learning influences teacher development within the university environment, specifically collaborative learning (Tovey, 2013). Lindeman (1926) first proposed the process of how adults learn. Lindeman’s qualitative studies examined how adults learn in reality and in contrast to conventional learning found in adult education classrooms. Conventional learning focused on a planned curriculum from a textbook without any input on learning needs from the students. Lindeman found that adult education needed to move beyond textbook learning. Lindeman’s research indicated five assumptions associated with adult learning. The five assumptions of adult learning included: (a) adults are motivated to learn, (b) adult learning is life-centered, (c) adults have prior life and learning experiences, (d) adults are self-directed learners, and (e) adult learning changes as one ages.

Other researchers examined Lindeman’s (1926) research on adult education and conducted their own studies for verification of his results. Many research studies revealed that
Lindeman’s conclusion had merit. First, Houle’s (1961) qualitative studies of 22 participants in an adult education classroom suggested how adults learn. Houle collected his data with in-depth interviews of each participant and by conducting field observations. His case study found that (a) adults are goal-oriented to clarify goals and objectives, (b) adults are activity oriented based on personal circumstances, and (c) adults are learning oriented for learning’s sake.

Second, Tough (1979) conducted interviews to find out how adults learn. Furthermore, Tough’s interest was to discover what adults gain from the learning. Tough indicated that adults participate in over 700 hours of learning projects each year. Of those projects, about “70% of all learning projects are planned by the learner himself” (p. 1). If the adult is unsure how to complete the project, the adult seeks advice from multiple resources, such as friends, professionals, and written (trade books) resources. After discovering how adults plan and execute projects in regular day settings, Tough applied these findings to his research and found that adults use three phases to learn new information.

In the first phase, adults set a goal, or objective, for the project. In this phase, it is common for the leaner to estimate how much the project will cost and what the benefits shall be. In the second phase, the adults seek information necessary to complete the project, such as a textbook, an instructor, or a group of friends. Tough found, in most cases, adults tended to collaborate with friends, or other associates, for advice and guidance for completing a project. Guidance through collaboration was found useful because others with previous experience knew the best methods for completing the project from their successes and failures. The final stage of the process is the application piece where the adult learner conducts the project and arrives at a final result. Tough also concluded that projects relate to past experiences, projects relate to known skills and knowledge, and projects should produce a desired change or outcome.
The research of previous theorists of adult education caused the emergence of the andragogical theory for adult learning (Knowles, 1950). The theory is more commonly known as the adult learning theory. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2005) have conducted many quantitative and qualitative studies on adult learning and yield what constitutes adult learning. The six characteristics of adult learning include: (a) adults have the need to know why they are learning something, (b) adults are self-conceptual learners and are responsible for their own lives, (c) adults have a wide range of prior learning experiences, (d) adults are ready to learn and know ways to cope with learning obstacles, (e) adults are focused on learning to solve a real-life problem, and (f) adults are motivated to learn new skills for internal and external reasons, such as work improvement or raising self-esteem (pp. 64-68).

Although many researchers have contributed to explaining adult learning, other researchers question the stability of the andragogical perspective. Merriam and Caffarella (1999, as cited in Merriam) described a few aspects of adult learning theory that need additional inquiries for further understanding. A few of the questions Merriam and Caffarella pose include:

1. How do some adults remain self-directed in their learning over long periods?
2. How does the process change as learners move from novice to expert in subject matter and learning strategies?
3. How do the issues of power and control interact with the use of self-directed learning in a formal environment?
4. Does being self-directed as a learner have an impact on one’s instructional and planning activities?
5. What is the role of public policy in self-directed learning?
6. What does the critical practice of self-directed learning look like in practice?
7. How do contextual factors interact with the personal characteristics of self-directed learners (pp. 10-11)?

**Collaborative Learning Community**

According to the literature review on adult learning (Knowles et al., 2005; Tovey, 2013), there is evidence that indicates that adult learners (a) need time to work and share their ideas with other adults, (b) are full of life experiences and resources, (c) are self-directed learners, (d) are motivated to learn, and (e) use learning opportunities to solve real-life issues and concerns. From these facts on adult learning, a closer examination of CLCs and how CLCs fulfill the requirements and demands of adult learning in an online university classroom is justified.

A CLC (Grand Canyon University, 2014) is a discussion board forum in an online classroom that allows students to work as a team with other students to complete a given assignment assigned by the instructor. The process of the CLC Group Project in an online classroom is simple. At the conclusion of the first week of class, the course instructor assigns each enrolled student to a CLC Group. CLC Groups are small groups of three to five students. The course instructor makes an announcement posting on the Announcements Board in the online classroom welcoming students to their CLC Group, asking the students to visit the CLC Group Discussion Board to meet their peers, and to begin collaborating on the group project. Once the students visit the CLC Group Discussion Board, they discover a posting with the instructions for the group assignment and an attachment titled “CLC Group Project Agreement.” Once the students review the assignment requirements, the students use the CLC Group Project Agreement form to assign tasks for completing the assignment and to establish roles for each member of the CLC Group. The CLC Group Project Agreement form may also be used to
establish group norms, such as meeting times, due dates, and communication preferences (e.g. emails, telephone, teleconference, Facebook).

Once the students outline individual group member tasks for the assignment, students begin individual research, reading, and writing activities to complete their assigned task. Following completion of the assigned tasks, students post their part of the assignment using a Microsoft WORD document onto the CLC Group Discussion Board to share with their peers. Next, peers review their colleague’s part of the project and provide constructive feedback. After, each member of the CLC Group revises their part of the assignment. The revision process may be repeated multiple times until there is a consensus among the group that the individual parts of the project are ready to combine into one composite assignment and set for submission and instructor evaluation. Once all parts of the assignment are combined into one document, the group members review the document for possible revisions. After more revisions and constructive feedback, the CLC Group may submit their group assignment for submission to the course instructor for evaluation.

There are many outcomes that establish a CLC Group Project as a quality instructional practice in an online university classroom that meets the learning needs of adult learners. First, a CLC Group Project encourages members of the team to become critical thinkers. Students are assigned a group project based on the educational theories, concepts, and themes from the course up to that point. For example, in a course on English language learner instructional strategies, the students may work independently for the first four weeks of the course on different components of a SIOP lesson plan (Mann, 2009). As a culminating activity for the CLC Group Project, the students may be asked to apply their knowledge of the SIOP lesson plan components to an entire unit of lessons. Specifically, students are moving from the basic levels of understanding on the
Depth of Knowledge (Webb, 2002), CATs (Classroom Assessment Techniques) (Angelo & Cross, 1993), and Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) during the first part of a course to becoming problem solvers at the higher levels of the Depth of Knowledge, CATs, and Bloom’s Taxonomy later in the course through application of their knowledge and skills to a real-life usage.

Second, the CLC Group Project establishes self-directed learning opportunities. After the instructor posts the initial instructions for the group assignment, the students in the CLC Group initiate all group discussions and activities for the remaining part of the project. With the CLC Group Discussion Board, the students establish leadership roles, assign individual tasks to complete the assignment, provide constructive feedback on each other’s assigned tasks, and deliver a final product for evaluation from the instructor. The students establish their learning goals and objectives for the assigned task and assist each other in completing the assigned task with little to no assistance from the course instructor. Although most CLC Groups have the ability and the knowledge to complete the CLC Group Project with little to no assistance from the course instructor, there are instances when the course instructor must provide guidance to the group or to individual members of the group. A few of the common issues that require instructor mediation include personality conflicts between group members, members who do not contribute to the project, group members who become ill during the group project, and group members who disappear from the group altogether.

A third outcome from CLC Group Projects is the ability of adults to be able to work with other adults. In many adult-based classrooms, individuals complete course instruction and assignments with no collaboration from other students in the classroom. However, the CLC Group Project provides students with the opportunity to work as a team to complete the course
assignment. Students collaborate with other students that share common interests, common goals, past experiences, and a wealth of resources to fulfill the requirements of the assignment. Another benefit of working with adults in a CLC Group Project is ability to work with adults from different cultural backgrounds and geographic locations around the world. In a brick and mortar classroom, local geographic location restricts the students’ perspectives on a given topic. In the online learning platform, students’ exposure is to student perspectives on a given topic from locations all around the world. Students are able to examine similarities in a given topic of study, but also note the differences on the given topic. The diversity of experiences from individuals from various geographic locales enriches the learning experiences in the online classroom in contrast to the learning experiences in a traditional brick and mortar classroom.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Although online learning platforms are still in its infancy, the research of adult learning theory since the early 1900s to the present establishes an adult’s need for interactions with other adults to solve complex problems (Lindeman, 1926; Houle, 1961; Knowles, 1950; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Merriam, 2001; Knowles et al., 2005). Additional quantitative and qualitative research studies need to be conducted to understand the full extent of adult learning with CLC Group Projects in online classrooms. Likewise, online instructors need to continuously review the current research on adult learning in higher education and consider how to incorporate adult appropriate pedagogy/andragogy opportunities into their classroom experiences. From the research in this article and the discoveries of personal reflections from the author, the CLC Group Project forums in online classrooms provide adult students with the opportunity to work with other adults to solve various real-life problems. Our adult learners depend on instructors to
facilitate a quality education that offers opportunities to apply problem solving skills learned in
the classroom to the K-12 classroom, the workplace, and other facets of daily life.
References


