



Adapting DAU to Change for the Warfighter

Diane Bublak

LEARNING IS A LIFELONG ADVENTURE, AND IT takes personal commitment. Adult learners increasingly return to the education arena for a plethora of personal, financial, and social reasons. Adult learners are defined as those over the age of 25. Andragogy is the methodology applied to adult learning.

Andragogy is the study of adult learning. Andragogy is important because the theory supports the needs of a student population that is no longer the traditional audience of fresh high-school graduates. Classrooms at the Defense Acquisition University (DAU) are populated by a mixture of prior or active-duty military, recently graduated adult and young learners, and adult learners returning to the workforce or reinventing themselves by entering a new career field.

Bublak is the Learning Director for Contracting in the Foundational Learning Directorate of the Defense Acquisition University at Fort Belvoir, Virginia.



**Develop a passion
for learning. If you do,
you will never
cease to grow.**

**—Anthony J. D’Angelo,
author of *Inspiration for
Resident Assistants***

Adult learners are self-directed with three generally accepted perspectives: humanistic, transformational, and emancipatory. However, workforce changes resulting from economical, societal, and global alterations allow the adult learners to gain additional education credentials. Adult learners want skill-oriented education. In 1995, less than 40 percent of employer training was remedial. Therefore, corporations have been spending money for adult education that provides for the highest financial returns from their financial investment. Institutions responded with various learning opportunities such as credential tracks, certification, and incentive badging. These learning tracks focus on one segment of a larger topic, such as Adult Learning Theories and Education, in the larger career track of Higher Education.

Adult learners bring to the classroom a wealth of knowledge based on lived experiences, lessons learned, best practices, and cultural behaviors. They add value to the

class by expanding the knowledge through stories and experiences shared with other participants. Education institutions realize the impact of these experiences and consider these lessons through Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs). PLAs can take the form of an exam, a written exercise, or a hands-on demonstration that the knowledge meets the acceptable level of existing standards. Accredited universities provide college credit for this nonformula, informal, and workplace learning.

How does andragogy help us understand adult learners? Studies proved that the art of teaching children differed greatly from the art of teaching adults. Adult learners may return to the educational environment with apprehension and anxiety. Some adults return after many years away from the classroom. Some adults experience online learning for the first time when returning to the workforce. As facilitators of adult learners, we need to understand what they need in order to cultivate the learning event. For instance, facilitators need to set a cooperative climate for

... the consultant must be flexible and accept that the audience may not be the usual new hires or young learners who need to be lectured. They may be seasoned employees who want a refresh or quick on-demand learning experience to bring them up to date on regulations, policies, or procedures.

learning—a safe learning environment. This includes identifying the needs and interests of the learners. One way to ensure that these criteria are met is through the student introductions. During the introductions, the facilitator may ask the students to specify their expectations for the learning event. Keeping the expectations visible throughout the week(s), enables the participants to see that their expectations are met.

Meeting the expectations of a variety of learners can take any form and aids in changing a class from a lecture to an active learning experience. Active learning enables the students to enhance their current skills, improve their critical thinking skills, and gain new knowledge efficiently. This type of active learning demands a different type of presentation and does not involve lecture and rote memory exercises and exams. Therefore, traditional lectures are not always suitable and knowledge checks take unique forms such as capstones and knowledge assessment games. As we move from instructors to professors to consultants and facilitators, we need to expand our portfolio of experiences to didactic and problem-based learning techniques and practices.

In the past, the DAU focused on providing the career-oriented Defense Acquisition Workforce Initiative Act (DAWIA) certification curriculum for the Department of Defense workforce. However, as technology, demand for flexible courses, and the target audience's needs changed, the DAU responded by adjusting curriculum design and development. The university has focused on changing how the professors deliver training. For these and other reasons, the DAU has continued to revisit certification curriculum in an effort to reduce the time spent in the classroom and concentrate on immediate results for better performance in the workplace.

The reduced material allows the professors to engage more with the customers through Mission Assistance. During these events, the professors act as consultants rather than as traditional professors. Mission Assistance, unlike resident courses, should be client-centric and address the needs expressed by the client. In these situations, the consultant must be flexible and accept that the audience may not be the usual new hires or young learners who

need to be lectured. They may be seasoned employees who want a refresh or quick on-demand learning experience to bring them up to date on regulations, policies, or procedures. Participants should not be considered as "students," per se, but instead as knowledgeable partners with valuable stories and experiences that can be shared for the benefit of others. Mission Assistance events help foster lasting relationships at a high level while closing the learners' knowledge gaps. Mission Assistance opportunities are compatible for adult learners, because they provide for self-directed, knowledge sharing, and skill-based training. Employers, for their part, realize an immediate return on their expectations.

In response to technological changes, the DAU encourages professors, course managers, and learning directors to seek instances in which technology can supplement or replace instructor-led courses. Resident courses converted to virtual instructor-led courses allow the learners to attend training at a time and place that is most convenient for them and their employers. Another instance where the DAU strives to keep pace with adult learning trends while appealing to the younger learner is in learning tracks similar to the certification programs of public institutions. The DAU has kept pace with technology by developing an iPhone and Android DAU smart application. Faculty, staff, and students can access their DAU assets from any smart device.

The DAU, like any university or training institution, must maintain a competitive edge, and this requires buy-in from the top to the bottom and vice versa. The institution must remain flexible and solicit creative ways to entice learners back into the education arena. Changes in delivery methods and varying opportunities help to ensure that the DAU can provide an equitable learning environment. Preparing the workforce to support the warfighter is our goal. In order to accomplish this goal, we must intimately know and understand our audience so we can offer accessible and sustainable training events. We also must reduce barriers to learning opportunities by stretching our use of technology.

The author can be contacted at Diane.Bublak@dau.edu.