

My main interest is teaching in higher education in an online environment, particularly non-traditional students. I believe that online, asynchronous courses appeal to non-traditional students, a segment that is increasingly becoming significant in college enrollments¹. I define non-traditional students as either older students who are returning to school after an interruption in their education or younger students who have real-life factors that limit their ability to attend classes full time. I believe that both types of non-traditional students have maturity levels that exceed those of most traditional students.

Andragogy, the art and science of teaching adult learners, as described by Malcolm Knowles informs my Philosophy of Teaching. Andragogy is contrasted with the pedagogical model which is aimed at teaching children. Knowles describes four basic assumptions about learners as they grow in maturity. All four relate to our understanding about a learner's ability, need and desire to take responsibility for their learning. I break the 4th into two assumptions because I believe they are especially important:

1. Learners' self-concepts change from dependency to independency or self-directedness.
2. Learners' life experiences can be used as a foundation for learning.
3. Learners' readiness to learn becomes intertwined with their developing social roles.
4. Learners' have an increasing sense of urgency to use their newly acquired knowledge to solve immediate problems in their lives, and
5. Learners prefer performance/self-centered instruction rather than teacher-centered instruction.²

"The pedagogical model does not account for such developmental changes on the part of adults, and thus produces tension, resentment, and resistance in individuals."³

I believe the andragogical model, however, must be used carefully in an on-line environment, particularly an asynchronous one in which the instructor is not always online. I believe that andragogy and pedagogy are not dichotomous but rather represent the endpoints of a spectrum and that it is useful to consider them both in designing instruction for an on-line, asynchronous course. For many courses, use of the pedagogical model is advantageous, where instruction is primarily teacher-centered, with the teacher deciding what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught and how student performance will be assessed. However, I believe in using the andragogical model where learners are internally motivated by self-esteem, recognition, self-confidence, and /or self-actualization. The key to course design for non-traditional students is merging these two approaches.

I also believe that graduate-level courses benefit more from use of the andragogical model. I believe that, under the andragogical model, learners learn best when: They feel the need to learn; the instructor lets the learners know why something is important to learn. They have input into what, why and how they learn; learners needs are considered in the design of learning objectives. The instruction has a meaningful relationship to their prior experience. The instruction has a meaningful relationship to their current life situation. They have as much autonomy as possible after being shown how to navigate the information. There is a cooperative learning environment, encouraging student-student interaction. Their learning styles are taken into account. The learning environment minimizes anxiety and encourages freedom to experiment.

¹ National Center for Education Statistics

² Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education* (revised and updated). Chicago: Association Press (originally published in 1970).

³ Knowles, M. (1984). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Houston: Gulf Publishing.

Instructor Presence and Interactivity. I believe online courses require careful design and implementation to ensure sufficient instructor presence is evident to the learners. Presence in online courses is similar to that in traditional classes – students must “see” the instructor’s involvement in the course. A visibly active instructor and a high quality course design are related to students’ sense of “connectedness” and “learning” in the online environment.⁴

There are three components to instructional presence in online courses: teaching presence, instructor immediacy and social presence⁵.

The key to teaching presence in an online course is instructor-student interactivity. This interactivity is the result of careful instructional design, facilitated discourse (setting the climate for learning, drawing in participants, and prompting discussion) and direct instruction⁶. I believe that student satisfaction with an online course is largely determined by their valuation of teaching presence.

Instructor immediacy is determined by verbal and non-verbal interaction between the instructor and student. In an online environment there is little opportunity for non-verbal interaction but the verbal immediacy actions can be enhanced. Verbal immediacy actions include humor, frequent use of student names, encouragement of discussion, encouraging future contact with students, and sharing personal examples.

Social presence is the feeling that learners communicate with people instead of impersonal objects.⁷ When social presence is low, students feel disconnected and isolated. My sense is that students learn more when they are satisfied with their relationships with their online instructor and other students. Encouraging students to communicate and interact with each other is important.

I believe that instructor presence is the key to the establishment of an online learning community in which the students can construct knowledge and thus is essential to their overall satisfaction with the course. Instructor presence in an online, asynchronous course can be improved through the use of podcasts of lectures and introductions to course assignments; significant instructor involvement in threaded discussions; establishment of “regular office hours” in which the instructor is available via phone, audio or video chat, and/or email; publishing of appropriate summaries of student-instructor conversations via audio or video podcasts; relatively rapid turnaround of graded submissions.

⁴ Shea, P, Swan, K., Li, C. S., & Pickett, A. (2005). Developing learning community in online asynchronous college courses: The role of teaching presence. *The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 9 (4), 5982.

⁵ B. Jean Mandernach. An Examination of Online Instructor Presence via Threaded Discussion Participation. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* Vol. 2, No. 4,

⁶ “Within this structure, *instructional design* emphasizes course organization and includes setting curriculum, establishing time parameters, and laying out netiquette criteria. *Facilitating discourse* centers on the identification of areas of agreement/disagreement, seeking to reach consensus and understanding, encouraging/acknowledging/reinforcing student contributions, setting the climate for learning, and drawing in participants and prompting discussion. Supplementing these components, *direct instruction* focuses on the presentation of content and questions, summarizing discussion, confirming understanding, diagnosing misperceptions, injecting knowledge, and responding to technical questions/concerns.”⁵

⁷ Short, J., Williams, E. & Christie, B. (1976). *The social psychology of telecommunications*. London: John Wiley and Sons.