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## ***Incorporating Adult Learning Principles in High Risk Equipment Operations Training***

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### **Abstract**

This paper considers the application of adult learning principles in training learners to operate high risk equipment such that they develop a sense of responsibility and accountability for the choices they make for themselves both during and post training. A literature review was utilised to review currently applied adult learning principles and the discussion considers these with reference to high-risk work particularly from a safety development perspective. Vocational Education and Training sectors throughout the world are traditionally responsible for training delivery in these areas where generally andragogical principles, as defined by Knowles (1970), are applied and with, in some cases, application of a heutagogical approach, as outlined by Hase and Kenyon (2000). Aside from considering these approaches, a new approach is proposed, referred to as authology, with a basis of including notions of responsibility and duty of care in adult learning. Collins (2004) suggests that all theories of adult education are based on building on prior learning and using methods that treat learners with respect, whilst recognizing that people learn differently. This involves learners taking responsibility for their own learning however does not overtly address developing an ongoing sense of responsibility, as is critical to those working in high-risk occupations. There are numerous training programs in vocational education and training, such as those related to equipment and plant operation, for which development of learner responsibility is a critical component in the training, particularly given the potential to cause harm, injury or fatality.

Keywords: Adult Learning Principles, Vocational Education, High Risk Work, Training Practices, Learning Styles, Authology

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## 1. Introduction

Adult Learning Australia (2020) outline that Alexander Kapp and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy formed theories around adult education, which were later extended by Malcolm Knowles. Mowson (2018) further illuminates Malcolm Knowles defined the term 'andragogy' in the 1970's as referring to methods and principles used in adult education. Knowles (1970) used term 'andragogy' to explain the art and science of helping adults to learn. In 1984, Knowles identified six adult learning principles including: The need to know; Self-concept; Experience; Readiness to learn; Orientation to learning; and Motivation. These learning principles established a platform for training practices beyond the basic provision of instruction and are especially applicable to vocational education and training where a main goal is to develop job ready workers.

Knowles (1990) outlines that an andragogical approach is advocated as a way of facilitating more meaningful outcomes for learners. Within vocational education and training, there is evidence of use of an andragogical approach based on provision of flexible delivery, supporting the notion of learners as individuals in a specific or particular context, and on the basis that learners are required to take responsibility for their own learning (Choy & Delahaye, 2002).

The concept of andragogy can emphasise the value of the process of learning. Watson (2015) elaborates that andragogy uses approaches to learning that are problem-based and collaborative rather than instructive, and also underscores equality between the teacher and learner. Trainers, on this basis facilitate a learners' progression toward self-directed and responsible learning, whilst fostering the learner's internal motivation to learn. Adult Learning Australia (2020) outlines that motivation can be reduced by where learning experiences do not encompass adult learning principles. Inclusion of adult learning principles in training practices strengthens the outcome of the learning such that knowledge and skills are better retained which is fundamental to producing workers who will engage in their workplaces not only effectively, but also safely.

Applying andragogical principles to technical education elicits any number of best practices in training provision. These include giving learners the opportunity to use the knowledge and experience that they have acquired and to apply these to new learning events and scenarios (Watson, 2015). Watson also notes that adult learners are ready to learn when they experience a need to learn in order to better cope with real-life tasks or problems (Knowles, 1980 p 44, as cited in Fidishun, 2000). Trainers, then, are in a position to, through application of andragogical principles, enable a learner's readiness for problem-based learning and improve the learner's awareness of the need for the knowledge or skill being developed through the training activity.

Another adult learning principle in vocational education and training is that of the relevancy orientation of adults. Adult learners have a desire to appreciate the relevance of what they are learning to what they want to accomplish (Watson 2015).

Given that adults learn through direct experience, their training and learning activities should include active and practical participation and provide a range of usable and functional techniques and practices that can improve their everyday lives, whether in

or out of a workplace context.

Heutagogy is another learning principle worthy of consideration. Hase and Kenyon (2000) surmise that heutagogy is the study of self-determined learning and noting the approach is an attempt to challenge some ideas about teaching and learning. The approach is presented as an extension to andragogical approaches as described by Knowles. Heutagogy considers knowing how to learn as a fundamental skill, particularly necessary with innovation and change common in workplace environments and communities. This premise highlights the need for adaptability in the workplace, a skills that can be developed during training. Hase and Kenyon submit that a heutagogical approach recognises that learners need flexible in their learning. Flexibility in this case refers to a trainer providing resources and the learner designing the actual course he or she might take by negotiating the learning, essentially with the trainer acting as a facilitator and the learner providing a degree of control over the course of the learning. This principle advocates that trainers should concern themselves with developing the learner's capability, rather than just embedding discipline-based skills and knowledge (Hase & Kenyon, 2000).

Blaschke (2012) informs that competent learners demonstrate the acquisition of knowledge and skills and the acquired skills can be repeated and knowledge that can be retrieved. The knowledge and skills are not only replicable and repeatable, but can also be applied to a range of contexts, such as is required in any work environment. Capable learners are able to reproduce knowledge and skills in unfamiliar situations. Blaschke (2012) states that capability can be seen as an extension of one's own competence, noting that without competency there cannot be capability. A heutagogical approach condones development of capability beyond competence. Learners are able to increase their awareness of their preferred learning style and are able to recognise these in context and thus adapt new learning situations to their learning styles, and in turn, making them more capable learners.

With a focus on both competency and capability, heutagogy moves trainers a step closer toward better addressing the needs of adult learners in complex and changing work environments (Blaschke, 2012). The incorporation of heutagogical practice presents an opportunity for trainers to effectively prepare learners for the workplace and for becoming lifelong learners. Heutagogical practice foster learner motivation by cultivating learners who "are fully engaged in the topic they are studying because they are making choices that are most relevant or interesting to them" (Kenyon & Hase, 2010, p. 170, cited in Blaschke, 2012). As such, the heutological approach is associated with self-determined learning. The learner is central to the process and the trainer acts a mentor to facilitate the learning. Learning in this environment allows a learner to synthesise new knowledge through utilization of reflective and critical thinking skills.

Davis (2018) summarises that whereas pedagogy is teacher-led learning and andragogy is self-directed learning, heutagogy takes an approach that is different to both approaches. This notion is on the basis that a heutagogical approach is self-determined learning. The heutagogical approach encourages learners to uncover their own problems and questions to solve. In this case, rather than undertaking and completing tasks assigned by the trainer, the learners seek out areas of uncertainty and complexity in the subjects they examine. Trainers help by providing context to

learners' learning and create opportunities for them to explore subjects fully.

Davis notes that for heutagogical oriented training, the purpose is to create a learning environment in which learners can determine their own goals, learning paths, processes, and products. She outlines that when applying heutagogical approach, the learner transitions from passive recipient to analyst and synthesizer. These abilities may be considered as some of the most valuable skills for learners interacting with a world requiring knowledge management and curation (Davis, 2018). A consideration of these learning principles, and an understanding of adult learning principles by trainers, is essential in an adult learning environment focused on training related to high risk occupations or use of high risk equipment.

## **2. Method**

The discussion and conclusions drawn are based on a literature review together with consideration of the current adult learning principles in vocational education training and assessment. This paper outlines the application of these adult learning principles within a specific context, where training and assessment is related to high risk plant and equipment operations. The discussion firstly establishes where current approaches based on accepted adult learning principles fit into the training repertoire and then examines aspects of high risk work that may not be effectively addressed. An additional approach that should be integrated into training activities is then considered, particularly from the perspective of establishing a greater sense of responsibility and meeting duty of care obligations.

## **3. Discussion**

### *3.1 Significance of adult learning principles*

Collins (2004) identifies that the teaching approach should be based on the objective of the teaching-learning situation and believes that the learner-centered andragogic may not be appropriate in all adult education settings, as supported by Imel (2004), cited in Collins (2004). Collins notes that the training approach should be based on the objectives of the learners, the training content, and may include other factors. As such, Collins identifies that selection of one training approach may not be suitable for all training scenarios.

There are several related and relevant themes presented by Collins (2004) to be considered. The first of these is the notion that the learner should be actively involved in learning and should be encouraged to be active. This entails provision of the opportunity to practice new behaviour in a safe and supportive environment.

To outline the value of active participation Collins (2004) refers to Rogers (1969) who distinguished two types of learning, referred to as cognitive and experiential. Collins outlines that cognitive learning can be seen as academic knowledge, whereas experiential learning encapsulates learning by doing and notes that Rogers perceived the qualities of experiential learning as personal involvement, self initiated, learner evaluated, and having a pervasive effects on the learner. Rogers (1969) ties into the concepts of andragogical principles with suggestions that significant learning can occur when the subject matter is perceived as having relevance for their own purposes by the learner, stating that “A somewhat more formal way of stating this is that a

person learns significantly only those things which he perceives as being involved in the maintenance of or the enhancement of his own self” (p. 158).

Collins (2004) also introduces transference and suggests that transference occurs through association where a learner can associate newly acquired information with something they already know. Associative learning essentially take place through experience. The extent to which this occurs is related to the learner’s degree of original learning. Collins (2004) notes that transference is greatest when the level of original learning is high and when the information being learned contains elements that are of extreme benefit to the learners work environment. Again, these concepts tie in with the principles associated with andragogical approaches. There are then a number of key principles derived from andragogy and heutagogy that can be applied to training and, in turn, adult learning and their application should vary with the learning content, context and purpose.

Collins identifies that not all people learn in the same way and to engage all learners, methods by which information is communicated should be varied. In order to so, methods can include group discussion, role-playing, lecturing, case studies, games, questioning, and using varying technology. Collins (2004) concludes that all theories of adult education are based on appreciating and applying a learner’s prior learning and their experience and notes that “adult learning requires building on this prior learning, using methods that treat learners with respect, and recognizing that people have different learning styles and have a variety of responsibilities and time commitments” (p. 1489). Collins advises that the optimal role of the adult learner in the learning situation is one that is characterized by of a self-direction, self-motivation and collaboration in the learning process and is an individual who takes responsibility for learning.

### *3.2 Adult Learning Styles*

Aside from adult learning principles, adult learning styles also warrant consideration when delivering training. Adult learning styles refer to learning approaches that learners naturally prefer to maximise their personal learning experience (Adult Learning Australia, 2020). Peter Honey and Alan Mumford, cited in Adult Learning Australia (2020) and based upon the work of Kolb, have identified four adult learning styles. Knowing that there are different learning styles allows trainers to vary the learning activities and experiences they provide to their adult learners and this variation can, in turn, improve the learner’s ability to not only learn but also retain the learning.

Peterson (2019) identifies that a significant difference between teaching children and teaching adults is the self-concept of adult learners. She identifies that adult learners are usually mature and self-confident enough to know their strengths and weaknesses and how they are able to best learn, including the most suitable environments and practices. This notion leads into the application of self-directed learning. In an situation of self-directed leaning, Peterson (2019) advises that learners can design their studies around their preferred learning style whether this is visual, auditory, or kinesthetic, also referred to as tactile learners.

Smith and Dalton (2005) recognise that in a vocational education environment there are wide differences in learners, and developing training methodologies that are suited

to these learners is likely to lead to more effective learning, greater satisfaction among learners, and stronger motivations to persevere in the learning activity. In order to accommodate varying learning styles, trainers need to be able to recognise the styles within their learner cohorts and provide a range of training activities to allow each learner to excel.

### *3.3 High Risk Equipment*

Vocational education and training can involve learner development of competence in a range of plant and equipment operation depending on the course or qualification being undertaken. These can include any range of equipment from hand tools through to heavy vehicles to be operated on public roads. Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (2019) identify that machinery and equipment have moving parts and the action of moving can have enough force in motion to cause injury to people. The use of machinery and equipment is a requirement for many occupational roles and common in most workplaces. Given the potential to cause harm, injury or fatality, the effectiveness of training is critical to the ongoing safe use of the equipment by the learner.

Many countries around the world have recognised that there are specific plant and equipment that are more likely than others to cause workplace injury or fatality. As an example, Safe Work Australia compiles the Work-related Traumatic Injury Fatalities data set. The data set provides national statistics on all workers and bystanders fatally injured at work (Safe Work Australia, 2020). The Safe Work Australia (2020) data highlights the mechanisms most likely to cause injury and/or fatality in Australian workplaces, with vehicle collision to be the most likely, followed by being hit by moving objects. These fatalities are associated with plant such as heavy vehicles/trucks and agricultural plant and equipment in the majority.

Training, and consequently learning, needs to go beyond the mechanical and operational aspects of the plant, such as which levers do what, to application of gained knowledge being used and contextualised such that a duty of care can be maintained to prevent injury and fatality.

In order to effectively train a learner to operate high risk plant and equipment, a range of adult learning principles need to be applied to develop the skills and knowledge to mechanically operate the machine, make adjustments to allow for the context, environment and task at hand, and maintain situational awareness and apply an ability to extrapolate skills and knowledge in a way that they are tied to maintaining safe and responsible practices.

### *3.4 Application of Adult Learning Principles to High Risk Equipment Operations Training*

In applying Knowles principles of adult learning, trainers must recognise that adults must have a hand in the design and development of their learning experience. Watson (2105) outlines ways that this can be achieved and this includes developing rapport with the learner to encourage questioning and consideration of concepts. The trainer must also show interest in the learner's thoughts and opinions which includes actively and carefully listening to any questions asked. Provision of both negative and positive feedback regular constructive and specific feedback allows learners to review their role and approach to their learning and provides an opportunity for them to review

their goals and attained goal completion.

Training commences with leading the adult Learner toward inquiry before oversupplying them with facts. Trainers must also acknowledge the preferred learning style of the learner (Watson, 2015). Assessment tasks should set projects or tasks for the learner that reflect their interests and which they must complete.

Adult learners need to be able to relate the learning to real world uses, gains and applications. If they can not recognise how particular learning is going to apply to real world situations, then they are not likely to be excited about the learning process. Trainers are required to provide meaningful learning experiences that are clearly linked to personal, workplace and life goals. This requires the trainer to ask questions that motivate reflection, inquiry and further research (Watson, 2015). Adult learners must also be given the opportunity to absorb information, rather than merely committing it to memory. Allowing opportunity for absorption requires the trainer to create activities that allow adult learners to interact with specific tasks, such as simulations. In turn, learners will then store the information in their long term memory, particularly through replication, repetition and experience, thus building familiarity.

Training and assessment should promote active participation by allowing learner to try things rather than observing. Learners must be given the opportunity to practice and consolidate their skills. Cordiner (2020) concurs with highlighting that practicing skills in a controlled environment allows a learner to grow self-efficacy in new tasks that prepares them to act autonomously beyond the learning environment, such as their workplace. Cordiner notes that the more an adult learner can practice new skills, competencies or the application of knowledge, the more transformational impact the learning intervention will have.

Self-efficacy is the belief we have in our abilities and competencies (Chowdury, 2020). Chowdury refers to Albert Bandura (1977), a pioneer humanist and contriver of the concept of self-efficacy, who defined self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise their influence over events that affect their lives”, and goes on to outline that self-efficacy determines how we think and feel about ourselves. Self-efficacy should be considered a primary goal in training and assessment as it contributes to the value and retention of the training.

Trainers should develop and utilise training activities that focus on problem solving, involving identifying the problem, considering alternatives, decision making, and implementing a solution. Thompson (2019) suggests posing realistic questions and problems to encourage problem-solving is more effective than rote learning. To highlight this point, Thompson (2019) considers that we really do not expect a manager, in a workplace context, to ask an employee to recite a processes from employee handbook by memory.

Narayan, Herrington & Cochrane (2019) discuss the integration of a heutagogical approach in training design and note that effective training requires design of learning activities, tasks and a learning environment that encourage elements of learner participation, personalisation and productivity. Likewise, the trainer should aim to

conduct learning activities in authentic contexts chosen by the learner to enable exploration and experimentation.

### *3.5 Current Adult Learning Principles are not Necessarily Inclusive of a Sense of Responsibility*

In any workplace environment where someone is relying on an individual to be careful, and that reliance is, in the circumstances, reasonable, then it will generally be the case that the individual owes them a duty of care. Adult learners understand that they have a duty of care to themselves and others and strive to ensure they are able to meet this obligation.

Adults undertake training not only for their needs but also so that they can provide higher level care for others. As such, here we can introduce an extension adult learning principle, which can be referred to authology, derived from the Latin 'Author' meaning responsible. The basis of the principle is that of an adult learner's need to be aware of and take responsibility for their actions in a workplace and ensure that their learning meets their social obligations to protect themselves and others. Authology then, is based on a tenet that adults have a sense of responsibility and duty of care which are rooted in the individuals' belief system. Duty of care in this context may be defined as a moral or legal obligation to ensure the safety or well-being of self and others. By extension, a duty of care exists when an individual's actions could reasonably be expected to affect other people.

The authological approach can be seen as an extension of andragogical and heutagogical approaches in that it facilitates an adult learner's ability to increase their sense of responsibility. The focus of the learning principle being on building the learner's needs to take responsibility for the welfare of others. The approach is therefore socially centric whilst maintaining andragogical principles. The learner is required to take responsibility for their own learning together with responsibility for the social implications of their own learning. The need to build one's capacity to provide effective duty of care may be seen as an additional pillar to those presented in Knowles initially identified key pillars of understanding adult learners.

Beaumont (2020) discusses the characteristics related to responsible adults and postulates taking responsibility for our choices provides the symmetry of reciprocal exchange and the basis for trust. Beaumont further presents that responsibility is a congruence between the actions we choose and our values. A number of specific characteristics are outlined and these include an ability to inquire, investigate, seek, and embrace facts and truth. Adults have a need to ground their knowledge in fact and reality rather than simply believing what they are told. Through the training process, a sense of responsibility can be developed through the training practice. Authology requires a trainer to provide a contexts and environments where a learner can develop their sense of responsibility and duty of care. Training authologically requires the trainer to provide opportunity to develop responsible thinking and development in, using Beaumont's identified characteristics:

- Honesty
- Focusing thoughts and attention
- Thinking through alternatives and consequences
- Clear and consistent thinking and expression
- Seeking out expertise

- Self-discipline
- Impulse control
- Openness to new ideas and information
- Willingness to accept blame for errors
- Rationality
- Able to make judgements on collected evidence
- Considering a variety of points-of-view
- Adaptation and flexibility
- Adjusting beliefs and actions to accommodate newly understood facts
- Autonomy
- Integrity
- Understanding that ideas, choices, and actions have consequences.
- Belief that effects and outcomes have causes.
- Internal Locus of Control

All of these characteristics are extremely important in the use of high risk plant, which requires a high level of responsibility to ensure safe performance. Typically, any workplace health and safety system is built around the notion of duty of care and workers are indoctrinated into these principles as soon as they enter the workplace. Duty of care includes invoking responsibility. In high risk plant operations, the duty of care aspect of the work being undertaken is inflated on the basis that the worker has the increased potential to cause harm due to the nature of the equipment and work tasks performed. Particularly since failure to exercise care in operation of the specific plant may lead to foreseeable injury.

Beaumont (2020) outlines that responsibility requires autonomy and that adults can only feel accountable and be held accountable for the choices they make for themselves. Free choice, Beaumont suggests, is only possible when we are autonomous and notes the relationship between the two in that as autonomy increases, responsibility increases with it. In a training environment then, learners should be given the opportunity to work autonomously which ties in to heutagogical approaches. Autonomy grows with competence as does the perceived level of responsibility.

Where one person or agency imposes arbitrary rules in an attempt to control another, as can often happen in a training environment, those imposed rules reduce autonomy, and therefore reduce responsibility. Trainers in adult settings need to minimise imposing arbitrary rules and allow learners to recognise that their ideas, choices, and actions do matter and do have consequences. Beaumont (2020) recognises that treating adults like children by imposing arbitrary rules that destroy autonomy often encourages them to act like irresponsible children.

The core of acting responsibly requires considering the needs of others and the community, not only themselves (Beaumont, 2020) and this notion is the foundation of the concept of authentic thinking. Further, a responsible adult learner will integrate experiences and information to act rationally, consistently, and reliably rather than unpredictably, inconsistently, irrationally, and erratically (Beaumont, 2020). Franzoso (2018) considers that responsibility is the ability to respond to situations and events and is a value we adopt in adulthood. Responsibility is adapted in adulthood as children are unable to as they have not yet developed discernment or their 'intellectual dimension'/logic. Acting responsibly and meeting duty of care

obligations are central to adult learning and subsequent application of that learning in a workplace.

Training and assessment activities inclusive of developing responsibility require working autonomously, adapting to the task requirements and environment. McCombs (2020) identifies that the most effective strategies involve improving learners' abilities to identify and manage their emotions, appreciate and understand the perspectives of others, establish pro-social objectives, solve problems and use a variety of interpersonal skills to handle developmentally relevant tasks.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Effective training is critical in training scenarios where inadequate training can lead to injury or fatality, such as in high risk plant or equipment operations. Regardless of a Trainer's favored instructional approach, the goal is to prepare learners to undertake workplace activities safely and successfully. The skills and experience learners gain from self-determined learning are central in applying and maintaining the learning in an ongoing manner to a range of workplace contexts. Allowing learners to develop a sense of responsibility through training activities to subsequently meet obligations to a duty of care effectively should be considered a fundamental applicable adult learning principle. In a high risk plant and equipment operations training environment, an authological approach should be integrated by trainers.

To train adults authologically, trainers need to discover how to help learners develop the ability to make appropriate choices and take responsible control the activities they perform. This can be achieved through guiding adult learners to understand their learning interests, dispositions to be active and autonomous learners and capacities or strengths in the required competency areas.

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