



## Mass Communication Andragogy for Teaching Online Adult Learners

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### Abstract

Adult learners, or those over the age of 25, are a rising subset of the university population. Additionally, online higher education courses consist mostly of adult learners (Silva, 2018), who find freedom and flexibility with this medium (James, Swan, & Daston, 2016). While adult learners enter college with rich life and career experiences, they also have families and other responsibilities. This means that their educational needs, expectations, and interests are different from those of traditional college-age students. As a result, an understanding of how faculty could reach online adult learners becomes paramount. The Community of Inquiry Model and the theory of andragogy helped to guide 10 best practices for teaching online adult learners. These practices are contextualized within several communication courses such as journalism, mass media, and newswriting.

Adult learners, or those over the age of 25, account for 71 percent of all online higher education students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Additionally, online college courses consist mostly of adult learners (Silva, 2018), who find freedom and flexibility with this medium (James, Swan, & Daston, 2016). The landscape of online education achieving greater popularity in higher education among a growing percentage of online adult learners presents issues, topics, and challenges for faculty teaching online mass communication courses such as contemporary mass media or newswriting. Fusing educational pedagogy to the mass communication discipline, 10 practices set forth key concepts that communication instructors should consider when teaching adult learners in the online environment. Additionally, two theoretical approaches in educational pedagogy are provided to

help guide these practices.

### Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks help provide evidence for the subsequent recommendations for teaching adult online learners. First, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Model was chosen for its focus on one of the elements: teaching presence. Second, the theory of andragogy focuses on the learning process among adults rather than the teaching process, which makes it beneficial in observing how teaching presence is structured in online education.

### Community of Inquiry Model

Some theories of online education highly regard student independence. The early work of Moore and Garrison, among others, focused on interpersonal

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communication between teacher and student (Akyol & Garrison, 2008). The CoI theoretical framework is a process of creating a collaborative-constructivist learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence, all of which are created through interpersonal communication. To be effective, all three presences must be developed in balance (Akyol & Garrison, 2008). Each is explained briefly, with a greater focus on teaching presence for the purposes of best practices.

**Social presence.** This phase is designed to support critical inquiry. Therefore, social presence means being in an online environment that supports and encourages questions and skepticism, as well as the expression and contribution of ideas. When social presence is established, collaboration and critical discourse are enhanced and sustained (Garrison & Akyol, n.d.).

**Cognitive presence.** At the nexus of a community of inquiry, this presence requires engaging students in all phases of practical inquiry. A moderator who can assess the nature of the discourse consistently is needed to advance the critical thinking component.

**Teaching presence.** This third dimension is the key element in integrating social and cognitive presence during the inquiry process. It serves as the glue in the development of an online community. Simply put, teaching presence is what the instructor does to create a meaningful community of inquiry. More than the other types of presence, teaching presence can improve a variety of learning outcomes for adult learners. First, it correlates with cognitive presence (Lambert & Fisher, 2013), which is known as whether a person feels “real” in virtual communication.

A common challenge to teaching online is the feeling that the instructor or other classmates are not present. When an instructor displays teaching presence, learners will then feel more connected to the environment. Additionally, teaching presence influences engagement because when learners sense connection with a course, they may also engage and interact with the content and other learners. This could lead to greater learning because of the greater engagement and motivation the learners can feel. Another outcome of teaching presence is increases in learner satisfaction, persistence, and usage of the learning (Joo, Joungh, & Kim, 2012). These authors found that teach-

ing presence in corporate e-learning led to these outcomes, which may influence the effectiveness of the training. Clearly, this research suggests that there are positive outcomes to incorporating teaching presence into an online course for adult learners.

### **Theory of Andragogy**

Known as the science of adult education, the theory of andragogy was developed to create educational philosophies that concentrate on the needs of adult students and include their life and career experiences in the learning environment (McCall, Padron, & Andrews, 2018). This differs from pedagogy, which focuses on the instruction of children and young learners. The learning process and the learner’s needs, rather than the teaching process and the instructor’s outcomes, are the nexus of adult education.

Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2015) identified six central principles of andragogy: (1) the learner’s need to know, (2) self-concept of the learner, (3) the learner’s prior experience, (4) a learner’s readiness to learn, (5) a learner’s orientation to learning, and (6) an adult student’s motivation to learn. These tenets make up an adult student’s affinity for learning where they are taught skills and strategies that they can use throughout their careers and their lives.

### **Best Practices for Teaching Online Adult Learners in Mass Communication Courses**

With these theoretical frameworks in mind, the following 10 practices are recommended for mass communication faculty teaching adult online learners. We used media, journalism, and newswriting courses to contextualize some of these suggestions.

**1. *Instructors should design an online course that contributes to impressions of teaching presence.*** A clearly organized communication course can demonstrate that the instructor is thoughtful about the learning experience and involved in the development and direction of the course (Silva, 2018). Organization includes having a course overview page to identify navigation, clearly labeling and grouping module components and relevant assignments, and providing clear locations for help, support, and access. These reduce uncertainty and anxiety for adult learners, which may contribute to feelings of efficacy and satisfaction. In an undergraduate mass communications course that followed instructional design principles for online learning, adult students indicated they were able

to follow course material and expectations clearly when the content was organized and the assignments related to learning objectives.

**2. Instructors should use problem-solving approaches to make the course relevant.** In contrast to many traditional students, adult learners typically have a substantial amount of life, professional, and career experience that they bring to the classroom. As a result, they have a strong desire to understand how their education and training directly affect their lives, solve meaningful problems, and help reach their goals (Cercone, 2008).

With this in mind, it is important for communication instructors to reframe the syllabus, assignments, and activities to help facilitate a problem-solving approach in the course to appeal to the adult learner. For instance, in a journalism or public relations course, encouraging adult learners to apply material to a broadcast or print medium that they prefer based on their work experience can build meaning to the assignment. The key is allowing adults to identify a problem, goal, or need that they have and use course content to address it, making it relevant for them.

**3. Instructors should guide adults without overly directing their learning.** Adult learners are often skilled in identifying weaknesses or gaps in their own knowledge and are motivated to learn. O'Lawrence (2006) stated that adult learners can shine in online education because they enjoy having control over their own learning and are successful in creating their own learning. Further, Cercone (2008) suggested that adult learners need scaffolding that encourages self-reliance. This may be distinct from traditional undergraduate students, who may not desire or be capable of being fully self-reliant. Examples of this scaffolding may include training, coaching, or instructing on how to complete tasks while maintaining an adult's sense of freedom and choice, offering additional help where needed, and giving examples. Thus, communication instructors may consider how to guide, coach, and provide resources for adults without overly directing their learning.

Activities useful in mass communication courses include personal blogs, interactive activities where students give feedback, and videos (Silva, 2018). These activities avoid simply requiring students to submit their work online; rather, they allow for interaction, direct instruction, or facilitation of more discussion

about them. Blog assignments in an online newswriting course also helped to strengthen adult students' critical thinking and media literacy skills.

**4. Instructors should embrace adults' different learning styles and talents.** Exposure to different learning styles, viewpoints, talents, and perspectives increases student versatility and ability to adapt to real-world situations. The online environment, in this practice, allows adult students especially more time to process, reflect, and respond. Increased self-confidence when participating in online class activities is a desired outcome.

After having students in the online newswriting course complete discussion assignments in a format preferable to them — textual, video, or audio file submissions — most of the adult learners in the course chose to write their responses in the text field, while fewer opted for audio. However, the adult learners indicated that having a choice boosted their confidence to complete subsequent discussion assignments in a learning style that resonates with them.

**5. Instructors should establish an emotional presence, not just a teaching presence.** Teaching presence extends beyond the cognitive connection between learner and instructor. Inclusion of emotional presence as emotional intelligence could be a part of the teaching presence, influencing learner emotional presence, social presence, and cognitive presence in the CoI model (Majeski, Stover, & Valais, 2018). Emotional intelligence would include intrinsic factors such as motivation, which would be explained by the theory of andragogy (McCall, Padron, & Andrews, 2018). In addition, emotional presence is a factor that can influence learning satisfaction for adult e-learners.

Indeed, Joo, Joung, and Kim (2013) found in their study that learning satisfaction is affected by a sense of teaching presence in corporate e-learning. Therefore, to maximize learning satisfaction in the dimension of teaching presence, a variety of online instructional design and teaching elements are a crucial prerequisite for a successful online learner education experience for adult students (Ke, 2010). To enhance emotional presence in online communications courses, the instructor could be an active participant in discussions, offer examples, and arrange for periodic virtual meetings through Zoom or Skype web-conferencing tools.

**6. Design instructional approaches in online discussion**

**boards.** Discussion boards are among the major activities planned in an online course. However, adult students have mixed perceptions of online discussions, which are more grade-driven than collective inquiry-oriented (Ke, 2010). To connect students more effectively to the content taught on online discussion boards, communication instructors should provide more examples in the discussion board assignment and be present in the discussion through frequent responses (Pamuk, 2012). However, discussions should be authentic. McDougall (2015) used a thematic analysis in a study of 50 adult students, who were more engaged in online discussions when authentic discussions were practiced.

Furthermore, online discussion boards and other technology that are part of effective learning designs guided by sound educational principles can facilitate improvements to the quality of the student learning experience. However, adult learners are motivated when they can see the relevance of what they are learning. Informed use of educational technologies is critical in fostering quality outcomes (Bricknell & Muldoon, 2013). In online communications courses, adult learners benefit when the instructor is engaged in the discussion not only by responding to their posts, but by raising additional questions to advance the opportunities in critical thinking.

**7. Add richness to the online course.** Instead of providing all text-based instructions, content, and announcements, a communication instructor might choose to record a video of himself or herself giving this information. Where possible, synchronous communication and meetings can also add richness, but this is often difficult for adult learners who are busy. Online communication courses that are skills-intensive, such as newswriting and other journalism courses, benefit from the use of web-conferencing tools such as Zoom or Google Hangouts for faculty to connect with adult learners.

**8. Incorporate multimedia into online courses.** Visuals, videos, and other resources can contribute feelings of presence from the communication instructor. This can humanize the learning experience, build immediacy, and make the course feel people-oriented, rather than technology-focused (DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, 2005). For online adult learners, examples and tutorials are desired. In the newswriting course, the instructor provided video and written tutorials for

a news story assignment. While all students benefited from both sets of instructions, adult learners especially embraced the assistance because the written instructions complemented the video.

**9. Facilitate online discourse in a variety of ways.** Communication faculty should introduce themselves to the course and encourage students to introduce themselves to the course and to each other. By participating in discussions and introductions, instructors can demonstrate their expertise, as well as their involvement in the course.

Additionally, instructors may facilitate online group projects. If students are tasked with group projects, the instructor can suggest tools for collaboration, help set deadlines, and provide meetings to direct the project. For instance, in a graduate course on mass media industries, students chose a media company to analyze its financial performance. They were placed in groups of three or four members each and assigned a discussant, who was tasked with providing critical feedback to their peers and raising questions for discussion. In this online course, plenty of time, templates, and meeting suggestions were provided. Additionally, the instructor met with each group via videoconferencing to help guide the teams. Each of these strategies allows the instructor to play a role in the learning community of the students, resulting in more effective learning experiences.

DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant (2005) argued that community is built through a commitment from the instructor to offer opportunities, facilitate communication, and model this process for learners. Thus, instructors can demonstrate teaching presence by facilitating communication between students.

**10. Communicate with learners regularly.** Indeed, “strong communication is essential for successful learning and strong communication pathways are essential for successful web-based learning” (DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, 2005, p. 34). This can be done through weekly messages, timely responses and feedback, and consideration of synchronous course or individual student meetings.

In the first author’s communication course, she sends individual emails to check in with each student at least twice in the semester. Students respond positively and often disclose challenges, ask questions, or give feedback in the course. Thus, frequent commu-

nication may help students to approach the instructor, feel closer to the instructor, and perceive that the instructor is involved in their learning. Further, timely and quality feedback provides direction for the students to improve, which will then improve their learning. Hence, instructors should consider communicating directly and frequently with learners to help support their experience in the online course.

### Conclusion

These best practices offered a review of instructional approaches and a consideration of emotional presence that mass communication faculty could apply to help build a teaching presence for online adult learners, who are becoming a considerable subset of the college student population. Adult learners will be more receptive to online instructional delivery and educational technology when they are able to apply what they learned to their careers and build on their life experiences.

A strong sense of teaching presence also would reinforce the cognitive and social presence in an online learning environment, as the Community of Inquiry Model theorizes. Currently, there is not enough work to demonstrate evidence-based practices for improving adult students' learning experiences in communication contexts. By furthering work to understand their needs, roles, and outcomes in online courses, we can ensure that we are reaching these learners in a meaningful and effective way.

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