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Synthesis of Literature on Effective Educator Practices in the Online Setting: Perspectives from a Caribbean Higher Education Context Through University Pedagogy

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Donna Walker has over seven years of experience in higher education holding roles such as learning strategist, teacher, and instructional designer. She has an academic background in leadership, instructional design, engineering, and technology. Her research interests are in using online learning and e-learning technologies to transform higher education with a specific emphasis on faculty empowerment, and learner equity and accessibility.

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Keywords

University pedagogy; online learning; nontraditional learner



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Abstract

Adult learners increasingly pursue higher education opportunities. As such, it is crucial for educators to ensure that they are competently equipped and are using the most effective strategies to facilitate the learning process. Through a review of extant literature, we develop a conceptual framework that is grounded in university pedagogy theory to emphasize a shared approach to the learning process. We conclude with implications for practice specific to international and nontraditional contexts.

Keywords: University pedagogy, online learning, nontraditional learner

Introduction

Effective teaching and learning processes have been very active areas of educational research. The value of effective teaching and learning, especially the development of critical thinking skills, is high in the age of tertiary information (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011; Davies, 2015; Graham, 2020; Lloyd & Bahr, 2010). Interestingly, technology continues to evolve and leave lasting impacts on the classroom, student resources and expectations, and the role of the teacher and distance learning, specifically in the higher education context with nontraditional students (Dolch & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Maftuna, 2022; Safford & Stinton, 2016; Schuetze & Slowey, 2013). The higher education industry is multifaceted in that it comprises traditional students, nontraditional students who now make up over 74% of higher education (Chawla, 2019), and online education, all factors that can be viewed as highly transformative (Adams & Corbett, 2010; Babb et al., 2022; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2015).

Pelletier (2010) defines nontraditional students as those who may have delayed enrollment into post-secondary education, are employed (part-time or full-time), have dependents, or do not have a high school diploma. Online education has allowed education to reach areas of the planet that would not otherwise have access to advanced degrees (Jaggi, 2021; Rose, 2014; Tiwari, 2019). In this review, a range of articles related to effective teaching in higher education are synthesized to inform evidence-based recommendations. While there is agreement among many prominent scholars as to what constitutes effective teaching and learning (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2022; Dumford & Miller, 2018; Hattie, 2015), each circumstance and classroom is different (Timmons et al., 2021; Youmans, 2020). This exploration of the literature accounts for international and nontraditional contexts through our analyses of implications for practice.

Literature Review

This review of the literature is presented to understand what prominent scholars have identified as comprising effective pedagogical and andragogical practices. The study demonstrated arguments using a combination of conceptual outline approaches, known as theory synthesis, and model, discussed by Jaakkola (2020). The author defined theory synthesis as “conceptual integration across multiple theoretical perspectives,” (p. 22) and model as “building a theoretical framework that predicts relationships between constructs” (p. 22). This review of the literature utilized these well accepted approaches (Axelsson, 2019; Carroll et al., 2013; Hörisch et al., 2020) to conceptualizing this paper to allow the research to be demand driven, draw upon the wealth of previous knowledge to remain grounded in evidence, relevant, easily justifiable, and implemented.

Student Perspectives

Many perspectives are offered regarding effective teaching, from students, administrators, educators, and even politicians (Ajani, 2022; Goodwin et al., 2016; Hill, 2014; Kisiel et al., 2010). With each group of stakeholders demonstrating unique perspectives, the views of students are particularly highly valued in the discussion (Huang & Lin, 2014; Latif & Miles, 2013; Loes, Salisbury, & Pascarella, 2015); moreover, students are capable of forming strong opinions of their preferred teachers and learning experiences at a young age (Isik, 2016; Notin & Ware, 2020).

Students report overwhelming appreciation of instructional clarity, clarity of delivery, instructional organization, and educators' class preparedness (Huang & Lin, 2014; Latif & Miles, 2013; Loes, Salisbury, & Pascarella, 2015). Feldman (1989) found that clarity and organization were the strongest correlators of student achievement. Feldman's study served as the conceptual framework for the work done by Loes, Salisbury, and Pascarella (2015), who found that perceived instructional organization was significantly and positively correlated with the development of critical thinking skills. Thus, this knowledge and preference have remained consistent over many decades. Student perspectives also reveal an appreciation for charisma (a function of knowledge, teaching techniques, humor, and positive personality traits) in a study by Huang and Lin (2014). Latif and Miles (2013) similarly discovered a student preference for educators to have a good grasp of the content they are delivering, further supported by Ball, Thames, and Phelps' (2008) framework of learning and more recent work by Vereijken and van der Rijst (2021). The empirical findings from these various sources provide insight into the cognitive and behavioral processes of adult learners.

Clarity of Context

Perspectives from other scholars further develop the concept of effective teaching (Dunn, 2011; Inda-Caro et al., 2019; Overby, 2018; Willard-Holt, 2013). Chawla (2019) proposed that when targeting nontraditional learners, it is important to draw upon their expertise, motivation, and discipline using active learning strategies. Examples of these include experiential learning, think-pair-share, and problem-based learning. It is also helpful to communicate clear grading schemes, policies, and objectives via syllabus (Chawla, 2019), which supports students' preference for clarity (Huang & Lin, 2014; Latif & Miles, 2013; Loes, Salisbury & Pascarella, 2015). These authors' findings support a move toward a model that emphasizes a shared approach to the learning process.

Furthermore, as distance education grows in popularity, even more so due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand how one may effectively teach using online mediums (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Nambiar, 2020). Mulig and Rhame (2012) highlight that previous studies indicate neither in-person nor online platforms to be more or less effective than the other. Some active strategies that are effective in the online environment include:

interaction with students, material, and instructor; instructor presence; and incorporating a course homepage with information about the instructor, course, and expectations (Davis et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2017; Mulig & Rhame, 2012). Competing priorities that result in very limited available time to dedicate to academic activities is a major challenge for nontraditional students (Grabowski et al., 2016; Munro, 2011; Rodríguez et al., 2021). Moreover, a subset of older adult learners, commonly referred to as digital immigrants (Janschitz & Penker, 2022), face obstacles related to using online technology education resources given the nature of their generation's norms. Clarity becomes especially crucial to the online learning process when accounting for these challenges (Chen & Almarode, 2022; Limperos et al., 2015; Nambiar, 2020). Nontraditional students and online platforms are increasing and may benefit from clarity, organization, and engagement as are found in traditional settings.

Educator Presence

A further point of agreement in the literature lies with consistent educator presence (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Cobb, 2009; Rapanta et al., 2020; Soper & Ukot, 2016). Mulig and Rhame (2012) place significant emphasis on presence in online education, which may be easily achieved through short video clips. Research done by Bradley (2011) informs one of the many theories underpinning the work done by Mulig and Rhame (2012) in which educator to student interaction (among other forms of interaction) is used as a criterion for evaluating the quality of online courses. In online courses, it is easy for students to feel disconnected from others and lose motivation (Bartlett, 2018), outside of the traditional classroom context. In some cases, an educator can alleviate this feeling.

In both traditional and nontraditional environments, students benefit from charismatic personality traits in educators, such as humor (Huang & Lin, 2014). Huang and Lin incorporate a wealth of existing research on the importance of student perspectives and existing studies regarding what strategies and personality traits contribute to being a good educator. From this, they investigate “teaching charisma” and develop an Inventory of Teaching Charisma in the College Classroom (ITCCC); this instrument can be replicated in other settings. The goal of the inventory is to help educators identify and develop areas that may be improved based on student feedback. Perceived educator presence becomes of extreme importance in mitigating deficits of

motivation, accountability, and known shortcomings of the online environment (Hosler & Arend, 2012; Khalid & Quick, 2016). Thus, it appears, in student perspectives, that the educator's presence along with pedagogical approaches are important parts of classroom dynamics, especially in the online education context (Brooks & Young, 2015; Cole et al., 2017; Gurley, 2018).

Variations of Roles

With the value of the educator in the classroom well established (Huang & Lin, 2014; Mulig & Rhame, 2012), it is imperative to consider that the role of the educator varies considerably for different audiences (Alvarez et al., 2009; Baran et al., 2008; Grammens et al., 2022; Shaikh & Khoja, 2014). Specifically, when comparing traditional and nontraditional students, nontraditional students seem to benefit more from effective facilitation strategies that emphasize more student-led learning (Abegglen & Morris, 2015; Holvig, 2014; Kavannah et al., 2014; Prideaux et al., 2022). Active learning activities that are supported by inquiry-based and service-based learning provide opportunities for students to engage more with content and make real-life applications, rendering the learning process student-driven and learner-centric (Tularam & Machisella, 2018; Xie et al., 2015).

To fully appreciate these differences, the characteristics of nontraditional students must be understood. Knowles (1970) proposed that nontraditional students learn by doing, enjoy social interaction, are problem solvers, are highly motivated and self-directed, and bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to the classroom. It therefore stands to reason that they appreciate problem-based, experiential learning that builds upon real-world experiences and expertise (Chawla, 2019; Gittings et al., 2020; Konidari, 2022; Radović et al., 2021). This study by Knowles (1970) serves as the conceptual framework upon which Chawla's research was developed. The strategies such as think-pair-share, tell-help-check, self-assessment, and creating learning communities that address problem-based assessments change the role of the instructor to more of a facilitator (Burgess et al., 2020; Martinez & McGrath, 2014; Regmi, 2012; Yan, 2012). Thus, a key element of effective teaching is understanding and adjusting to the learners' needs (Hoover, 2011; Kacetl & Klímová, 2021; McGinnis, 2013) and a shared approach to the learning process that values both educator perspectives and student perspectives.

Chawla's (2019) work is well-informed on the strategies that connect with nontraditional students. In programs that are composed predominantly of nontraditional students, educators, university administrators, and other academic support faculty should capitalize on opportunities to incorporate many of the ideal practices that are associated with typical characteristics of nontraditional students (Brinson, 2015; Remenick, 2019; Wyatt, 2011). According to Chawla, some of these key characteristics include independence, an eagerness to attend classes, interacting with materials before class, and sharing knowledge from work experiences. As nontraditional students present a range of diverse backgrounds and experiences, the wealth of knowledge exchanged in group brainstorms and sharing activities is more valuable than a single perspective from an educator (Al-Kurdi et al., 2018; Castro, 2019; Santos et al., 2019), following a less traditional, more innovative approach to the learning process. Nontraditional students have reported enjoying sharing with classmates as it allows the formation of sub-communities of practice, increasing students' sense of belonging, another important dynamic that is necessary to navigate in the online classroom context to support learning (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Davis et al., 2019; Pedler et al., 2021). These unique perspectives would remain undiscovered in traditional formats that do not promote interactive and andragogical principles of teaching and learning, serving to limit the learning experience of nontraditional adult learners. The proposed framework emphasizes educator and learner perspectives that demonstrates an ideal model for educating nontraditional adult learners.

Educator Knowledge

Educator knowledge on the subject is highlighted as an important factor to effective educator practice (Chawla, 2019; Huang & Lin, 2014; Latif & Miles, 2013; Loes, Salisbury & Pascarella, 2015). Ball, Thames, and Phelps (2008) argue for and propose a model that conceptualizes the educator's knowledge base from two main categories: subject matter knowledge (comprising common content knowledge, horizon content knowledge, and specialized content knowledge) and pedagogical content knowledge (comprising knowledge of content and students, knowledge of content and teaching, and knowledge of content and curriculum). Through this perspective, the authors underscore the importance of content competencies and process competencies (i.e., ideal principles of pedagogical practice). Elaborating the knowledge of students

within this model is of particular importance given the unique needs of nontraditional students (Hodge, 2022; MacDonald, 2018; Zeit, 2014), further exacerbated through online mediums of education. This supports the need for an approach that appraises both educator perspectives and student perspectives and highlights the ongoing academic conversation around the disconnect between theory and practice (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Kahlke et al., 2020; Skic, 2020).

Rose (2018) further emphasizes educator knowledge as crucial to effective teaching and learning practice but moves the conversation further to highlight the inefficiency of a didactic approach to learning in the online environment. As the author highlights, "...effective online teaching and learning is not just about conveying information, presenting large chunks of material to students, and/or simply transmitting knowledge from the teacher to the learner..." (p. 35), supporting a shared approach to the learning process. This perspective aligns with contemporary conceptions of technology as a powerful tool for learning in a current culture of digital age theories (Cloete, 2017; Lai & Bower, 2019; Spitzer, 2014); one such commonly discussed theory is connectivism. Connectivism, a learning theory of the digital age, proposes that learning is most effective when students are taught to navigate and create networks from knowledge through a combination of sources (Siemens, 2017). One of the core assumptions from connectivism resonates with the learner-centric approach (Corbett & Spinello, 2020; Ravenscroft, 2011); this differs from in-person traditional learning formats where students may ask questions and expect immediate responses from the teacher as opposed to a more active, problem-based approach to finding answers to questions independently. Through this model, the educator acts as a facilitator and not a bestower of information. As the current literature suggests, the role of the educator is likely to continue evolving and transforming to emphasize the shared approach to the learning process (Bredow et al., 2021; Gündüz & Akkoyunlu, 2019; López-Pastor & Sicilia-Camacho, 2017).

All perspectives may contribute to the development of a holistic view of effective teaching, but there are varying perspectives (Canrinus et al., 2017; Coman et al., 2020; Dilshad, 2010; Sjølie, 2014). Latif and Miles (2013) suggest that there are incongruencies in what students and educators highlight as important characteristics that contribute to effective teaching. Latif and Miles developed their theoretical framework on previous literature by Zietz, Cochran, and Hodgin (2001) in which students' preferences were analyzed using data from a large database. In this study, the

authors discovered that specific teacher characteristics, such as enthusiasm, preparation, clarity, fair grading, among other attributes, were linked to increased student satisfaction. Furthermore, both students and educators rated enthusiasm equally. However, students placed three times and twice as much emphasis on fair grading and class preparation, respectively, than educators did. The literature that highlights the disconnects between what students and educators believe to be responsible for effective teaching further justifies the need for a shared approach to the learning experience to clarify variances in perspectives, classroom conduct, and performance expectations (Borghi et al., 2016; Chory & Offstein, 2018; Kyvik, 2013).

Implications for Practice

Based on the principles of andragogical practice as outlined by Chawla (2019), adult learners:

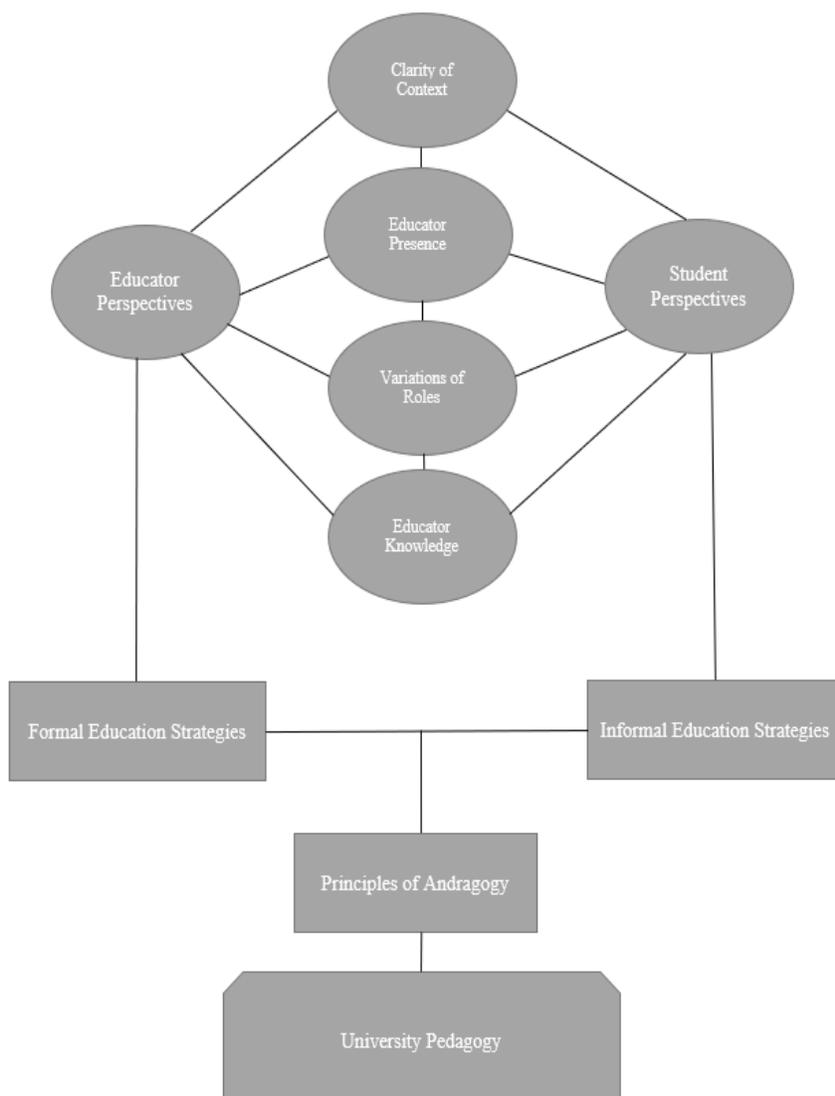
“need to know why they are learning something, learn through doing, are problem solvers, learn best when the subject is of immediate use, prefer social interaction, want to use their life experiences in the classroom, and want to integrate new ideas with existing knowledge.” (p. 78).

Using this perspective, this study proposes a conceptual framework grounded in university pedagogy theory to emphasize the fluid interplay of dynamics between educator perspectives and student perspectives to help conceptualize the importance of a teaching and learning model that demonstrates the value of adult learners’ contributions to the learning process. University pedagogy theory is a relatively new field in pedagogy and andragogy that has been explored in European and international contexts but to very limited extents (Aikaterini & Labrina, 2022).

Melo and Campos (2019) define university pedagogy as “a polysemic field of pedagogical knowledge production and application in higher education. It recognizes different scientific fields, which become epistemological and cultural references to define its basis and features” (p. 49). Aikaterini and Labrina (2022) operationalize this definition, highlighting that the field has drawn predominantly from theories of adult learning that categorize teaching and learning into formal and informal categories through which there exists much overlap. Intentionally building this framework into university education allows for strategies that utilize critical reflection, the

importance of the learning environment, each learner’s unique experiences, and the centrality of the learner in the teaching and learning process, which according to university pedagogy theory serve as the core of teaching and learning practice. The conceptual model portrays the learning process as a shared responsibility between educator and learner, accounting for the unique strengths that each entity contributes to the process.

Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework: University Pedagogy as the Foundation for Andragogy Construed Through a Shared Approach to Learning.*



Relevance of Framework to Nontraditional Contexts

As Daiva (2017) highlights, the nontraditional student is a difficult concept to uniformly define across the literature but can be captured through what these students represent (age, social roles, form of study, engagement status). Drawing on Pelletier's (2010) definition of the nontraditional student, this study defines nontraditional contexts as environments that support nontraditional students and deviate from North American higher education infrastructures, (paradoxically) utilizing more traditional approaches to andragogical practice (such as lecture format). Researchers have found compelling evidence to support the need for university pedagogy theory's integration into education systems (Aikaterini & Labrina, 2022; Lammers & Murphy, 2002; Onwuqhbuzie et al., 2007; Rotidi et al., 2020) across countries, such as Australia, Hong Kong, Greece, and the United Kingdom. These findings are relevant and can be applicable to Caribbean contexts given the history of European influence on Caribbean education that have modeled systems in higher education curricula across the region (Con Aguilar, 2017; Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018; Gallardo, 2007).

In Krasnodebski et al.'s (2012) report, the researchers discuss higher education institutions' practices across 11 Caribbean countries. The researchers express how these practices present opportunities for greater collaboration and alignment with European institutions through various regional and international organizations that represent scholarly educational interests to inform the teaching and learning process. Notwithstanding these efforts, Jennings (2017) articulates the challenges of moving Caribbean pedagogical practices to a student-centered approach due to systemic, sociocultural dynamics, and educator training models that emphasize traditional approaches. The need, then, lies with a model that proposes strategic changes at the structural levels for a reformative framework to enhance pedagogical practice, specific to given contexts. University pedagogy theory, constructed through our proposed conceptual framework, provides such infrastructure relevant to nontraditional contexts. Online education further increases accessibility to implement university pedagogy theory's practices.

Grounded in critical reflection, university pedagogy theory supports the principles of andragogy that demonstrate the learner as an active participant in the learning process (Bransen et al., 2022; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Cassidy, 2011; Roth et al., 2016). In higher education, adult

learners bring a wealth of conceptions and lived experiences that should be capitalized on to ensure learner-centricity (Antwi-Boampong, 2021; Castillo-Montoya, 2018; Jehangir, 2010). Sharifi et al. (2016) demonstrated the instrumentality of ePortfolios as a tool to move adult learners to be much more active in learning and long-term personal and professional development. Ahmad (2020) highlights that the Caribbean region is currently not aligned with most current global best practices for technology integration into higher education practices. ePortfolios is an ideal method to integrate more technology with principles of andragogy to support nontraditional adult learners (Bryant et al., 2017; Peet, 2011; Wuetherick & Dickinson, 2015). Aikaterini and Labrina (2022) further discuss how these adult learners influence use of informal strategies in a traditionally constructed formal context; the true value of informal education strategies is discovered when embraced for its utility, strengthened by merging informal strategies (student perspectives) with formal strategies (educator perspectives). Such strategies may model practices such as flexible syllabi and curricula construction, active engagement techniques, and participatory formative assessments (role play, brainstorm, and group discussions of case studies) (Cox, 2013; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012; Peters & Romero, 2019).

Using a shared approach to learning, the components of effective teaching (clarity of context; educator presence; variations of roles; educator knowledge) are actively supported by diverse perspectives of educator and learner through andragogical processes; which are further mediated through the processes of online education. This proposed conceptual framework lays the foundation for further empirical inquiry into university pedagogy theory in international and nontraditional settings, specifically the Caribbean context.

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