Theory vs. Practice: Knowles’ Andragogy and Adult Learner Perceptions of Postsecondary Writing Instruction

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“I believe that the single most important goal for educators at all levels and in all agencies of the learning society is the development of lifelong learners who possess the basic skills for learning plus the motivation to pursue a variety of learning interests throughout their lives. There is some danger that the present educational system is geared to creating dependent rather than independent learners. Students in the formal educational system are rarely asked to think about what they should learn or how they should learn it. Most classroom teachers define the subject matter, assign readings, and test for subject matter mastery, despite the fact that such an antiquated model is increasingly incompatible with the demands of the learning society. Few adults, on the job or in their role as citizens and family members, are ever told what they need to know or where the answers will be found. Much more commonly, the learner is required to define the problem, locate appropriate learning materials, and demonstrate not just subject matter comprehension but the ability to apply the knowledge on the job, in the home, or for personal development. These needs call for thoughtful, autonomous learners rather than dependent learners.” – K.P. Cross, The Adult Learner

Adult learners are everywhere. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that students 25 years-old and over comprised just over 40 percent of the total enrollment at postsecondary institutions in 2009 and projects enrollment among these students to increase by 18.5 percent by the year 2020, double the projected increase of just 9 percent among traditional 18-to-24 year-old students. Moreover, these numbers are likely even greater when considering those students who are younger than twenty-five that have nonetheless returned to school. Indeed, while terms such as “traditional student” or “adult learner” provide a ready-set inventory of traits and age markers from which educators can conceptualize their students, in reality, learners do not fall into finite categories so easily. Adult learners are not only those students whose advanced age immediately distinguishes them from their 18-to-22 year-old peers; they are the young mothers who dropped out of high school and obtained their GEDs, who are now reentering academia for the first time in several years at only twenty years-old. They are the veterans who entered military service at eighteen and have since enrolled as college freshman at
the age of just twenty-two. Adult learners are not distinguished by age; rather, they are distinguished by a break in their formal education. With these considerations in mind, in all probability, adult learners likely comprise an even greater share of college campuses than even these statistics measure.

Far from having a marginal presence among college campuses, adult learners are returning to school in increasing numbers, and indeed have been for decades. Nevertheless, they are still often marginalized among postsecondary institutions because they are still regarded as a nontraditional student demographic. Adult educators and scholars alike have followed this trend with great interest, all of them stressing the urgency that these institutions acknowledge their adult students and correspondingly implement policies and instruction that account for their unique learning needs. Among them is Malcolm Knowles, who “pioneered the field of adult learning in the United States during the second half of the 20th century” and who’s most renowned for his theory of andragogy, which consists of instructional strategies designed specifically for adults (Bash 27). Indeed, despite the decades since Knowles first introduced andragogy to American education, andragogy has continued to be cited among many scholars (Bash; Cross; Hashimoto; Sommer; Uehling), and its principles can be traced throughout later researchers’ recommendations for teaching adult students. That being said, the bulk of these recommendations involve either the adaptation of infrastructure or the application of all-purpose instructional strategies. As a result, the intricacies of teaching adult students specific subjects has received noticeably less attention – among them, the subject of writing.

Most postsecondary institutions require that students complete at least one writing course to graduate; nevertheless, many “researchers have failed to focus on the marriage of the two areas – adult writers in the college composition classroom” (Stutzman Pate 3). Those that
do tend to do so with an especially limited focus, exploring at most only a handful of instructional methods and how adult students respond and benefit from them. Likewise, learners’ classroom experiences are often contextualized more as a consequence of their individual circumstances rather than as a result of their instructor’s teaching, so that the distinctive features of adult learners become foregrounded more so than the distinctive approaches by which they are taught. Regardless of their limitations, however, given Knowles’ groundbreaking theory of andragogy and all of researchers’ subsequent recommendations for writing instruction, one would think that, at some point, scholars would also investigate the extent to which these recommendations were actually implemented within college writing classes. As it currently stands, however, there doesn’t appear to be any research that measures how closely college composition courses correspond with scholars’ suggestions. For this reason, this thesis explores the extent to which the actual practice of postsecondary writing instruction matches Knowles’ theory of andragogy as it applies to teaching writing to adults.

The main focus of my thesis is a case study of four adult learners’ experiences within writing courses and how these experiences reflect both class instruction and their classes’ writing assignments, which I offer as an addition to the ongoing conversation regarding composition studies and adult learners. These insights I obtained via two-part interviews with four adult learners currently enrolled in postsecondary writing courses, and I interpret them via their consistencies with Knowles’ theory of andragogy as it applies to writing instruction specifically. However, because some educators might not be familiar with the concept of andragogy, I first outline its key aspects and how scholars’ subsequent recommendations for writing instruction reflect andragogy’s various principles.
CHAPTER II: BACKGROUND

Before delving into the intricacies of andragogy, I must preface my review of the research with the disclaimer that I define both andragogy and pedagogy based on Knowles’ original conceptions of them – that is, pedagogy is teacher-centered and content-focused and andragogy is student-centered and process-focused. This is not to say that pedagogical instruction is only teacher-centered and andragogical instruction exclusively student-centered; rather, these assumptions reflect the original premises of either theory at the time of andragogy’s introduction. Naturally, these theories have evolved over time, and indeed, many pedagogues stress the importance of student-centered instructional strategies; however, these approaches would be considered andragogical rather than pedagogical given Knowles’ characterization of either. For the sake of this thesis, therefore, I use the term pedagogy to refer to instruction that is teacher-centered and content-focused and andragogy to refer to instruction that is student-centered and process-focused.

Andragogy

That Knowles’ concept of andragogy is a comparatively new addition to the field of education necessitates understanding the established educational ideology into which it was introduced – that is, pedagogy. Unlike andragogy, which has attracted educators’ attention only in the past several decades, pedagogy boasts a centuries-long history that has firmly entrenched it in educational practice. Derived from the teaching methods used on young boys of monastic and cathedral schools during seventh to twelfth century Europe, pedagogy was the “only one theoretical framework for all of education” (Knowles, Neglected Species 27), and thus
functioned as the dominant model from which future educators drew. Unsurprisingly, therefore, “the entire educational enterprise of U.S. schools, including higher education, was frozen into this model” in spite of the fact that pedagogy literally means the art and science of teaching children and regardless of adults’ increasing numbers as students (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 60). Thus, the educational environment into which andragogy was introduced and remains does not adequately address the specific learning needs of adult students.

“The pedagogical model assigns to the teacher full responsibility for making all decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and if it is has been learned” because it caters to the assumed qualities and corresponding learning needs of a specific type of learner – children (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 60). The andragogical model, on the other hand, regards the teacher as a co-agent, or facilitator, of students’ knowledge acquisition rather than an authority over it given that its assumptions relate to adults rather than children; instruction, therefore, is student-centered rather than teacher-centered (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 114-115; Uehling).

Both sets of assumptions are grounded in the learner’s psychological development and corresponding social roles and time perspective. This development refers to the fact that “as a person grows and matures his self-concept moves from one of total dependency (as is the reality of the infant) to one of increasing self-directedness” (Knowles, Neglected Species 55). Whereas children are predominantly dependent upon others to direct their lives and learning, adults’ independence and self-directedness enable them to assume responsibility in a variety of capacities and social roles, including their education. Moreover, these additional roles provide a greater abundance of experience from which adults continuously contextualize new experience and learning, and the demands of performing them are often what prompt adults to pursue
education in the first place (Knowles, *Neglected Species* 55-57; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 63-64; Bash 28). Consequently, their motivation for learning and readiness to learn are informed by a distinction in time perspective. While a “child’s time perspective toward learning is one of postponed application,” an adult “comes into an educational activity largely because he is experiencing some inadequacy in coping with current life problems” and therefore “wants to apply tomorrow what he learns today” (Knowles, *Neglected Species* 58). For many adult learners, therefore, learning must be perceived as relevant and applicable to their own lives. Nevertheless, because adult learners often experience a break in their education, their “reduced academic fluency” often generates significant anxiety that, compounded with their prior, pedagogical learning experiences, may result in the adult learner regressing into state of teacher dependency (Bash 153-155; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 63-64). For a full comparison of these assumptions as they pertain to learning, see Bash’s overview of learner attributes in Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1**

**COMPARISON BETWEEN TRADITIONAL LEARNERS AND ADULT LEARNERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Learner</th>
<th>Adult Learner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE NEED TO KNOW</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners only need to know that they must learn what teacher teaches if they want to pass and get promoted</td>
<td>Learners need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE LEARNER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent personality</td>
<td>Self-directed learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher is fully responsible for (what, how, when, whether)</td>
<td>Often anxious to learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrate that they are taking responsibility for themselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE LEARNER'S EXPERIENCE

Little valuable experience; 
relies on transmission 
techniques - lectures, readings, 
and audiovisuals 
Experience assumes greater volume 
and different quality (since adults 
perform different roles than 
younger people)

READINESS TO LEARN

Students become ready to learn what they are told they have to learn 
Students become ready when they experience a need to know something

ORIENTATION TO LEARNING

Subject-centered; learning as a process of acquiring prescribed subject matter content 
Life-centered, task-centered, or problem-centered orientation (curriculum should focus on life situations rather than subject matter units)

MOTIVATION TO LEARN

External: pressures come from parents or teachers 
Internal: self-esteem, recognition, better quality of life, greater self-confidence

[Source: Adult Learners in the Academy, Appendix 2.1: Comparison Between Traditional Learners and Adult Learners]

In addition to their assumptions about learners, both the pedagogical and andragogical models prescribe specific approaches to instruction. Knowles conceptualized the andragogical model as a process model of instruction in contrast to pedagogy’s content model, the distinction being that the andragogical model provides instructors with “a set of procedures for involving” students in their own knowledge acquisition while the pedagogical model involves the transmission of knowledge, or content, predetermined by the teacher (Knowles, Neglected Species 108). Andragogy, therefore, presupposes that instruction adapt to the learner in order for learning to take place, whereas pedagogy requires that the learner adapt to instruction. With regards to the sequence of procedures andragogy prescribes, Knowles likewise formulated these
as well. They are: “(1) preparing the learner; (2) establishing a climate conducive to learning; (3) creating a mechanism for mutual planning; (4) diagnosing the needs for learning; (5) formulating program objectives (which is content) that will satisfy these needs; (6) designing a pattern of learning experiences; (7) conducting these learning experiences with suitable techniques and materials; and (8) evaluating the learning outcomes and rediagnosing learning needs” (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson114). For a full comparison between pedagogical and andragogical approaches to instruction as differentiated by these procedures, see Knowles’ overview of instructional approaches in Table 2 below.

**TABLE 2**

**PROCESS ELEMENTS OF ANDRAGOGY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELEMENT</th>
<th>PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH</th>
<th>ANDRAGOGICAL APPROACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Preparing Learners</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Provide information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prepare for participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Help develop realistic expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Begin thinking about content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Climate</td>
<td>Authority-oriented</td>
<td>Shared authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Collaborative, supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Planning</td>
<td>By teacher</td>
<td>Mechanism for mutual planning by learners and facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Diagnosis of Needs</td>
<td>By teacher</td>
<td>By mutual assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Setting of Objectives</td>
<td>By teacher</td>
<td>By mutual negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Designing</td>
<td>Logic of subject</td>
<td>Sequenced by readiness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regardless of the apparent straightforwardness and common sense the andragogical model suggests, it is not without its flaws. Critics of andragogy, and indeed the discipline of adult education, condemn the lack of empirical evidence that supports adult educators’ claims about the ways instruction can best accommodate adult learners (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 231-232; Mancuso 166). This criticism, while valid, does not account for andragogy’s limited history and negligible presence in the overall context of U.S. education, however. Knowles himself labeled andragogy an “emergent theory,” and his conceptualization of it has evolved over time (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 231). For example, while it may seem that Knowles believed pedagogy and andragogy to be adversarial, as was originally suggested in the first edition of his book The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy, he eventually concluded that both approaches to instruction were beneficial, and that the appropriate application of either depended upon the specific learning situation and learner needs (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 67-69). Moreover, most of Knowles’ student-centered principles are reflected in the progressive pedagogical theory that many teachers and scholars have been pursuing for traditional students as well. As a result, the original disparity between pedagogy and andragogy has narrowed over time, with instruction reflecting a spectrum of both
pedagogical and andragogical strategies rather than the dichotomous application of either. That being said, a growing body of research identifies andragogical instruction as the model best suited to adult learners (Bash 159-160; Mancuso 171-175), not even accounting for the research that demonstrates its effectiveness in writing classes specifically.

In view of andragogy’s considerable popularity among adult educators and the evidence confirming its success in adult learning, one would assume that andragogical teaching is commonplace; nevertheless, barriers to andragogy’s integration into the overall educational landscape persist. Originally intended as an explanation for adult learners’ lack of participation in learning activities, Cross’ compilation of adult learning barriers possesses tremendous insight into the current obstacles inhibiting andragogy’s universal implementation (Cross 97-108; Colvin 21). The most relevant of these barriers are the educational institutions themselves: in spite of the large population of adult students enrolled in higher education, little has been done to address their needs (Bash 55; Hashimoto 55; Mancuso 167; Houp 699-700) or even to educate instructors as to what those needs are (Gillespie 31). Likewise, even with “the need for greater levels of participation by . . . adults already in the workforce in postsecondary educational activities,” the current challenges of budget deficits mean that educators “are looking for ways to trim education related costs, not enhance them” (Tate, Klein-Collins, and Steinberg 2). Regardless of the need for increased understanding of and training in instruction that best accommodates adult students’ learning needs, the lack of institutional support has relegated andragogy – and indeed adult students themselves – to the periphery of many educators’ minds. Until these institutional barriers are removed, therefore, andragogy’s marginalized presence in educational practice will persist.
Andragogy in Writing Instruction

Knowles’ andragogical process model is informed by the learning needs of adults; it does not account for the fundamental differences between specific subjects and how these differences may both determine and constrain instruction. Consequently, while andragogy serves as an excellent baseline from which educators may reference when teaching adult students, it is limited in that it does not and was never intended to address the needs of both the student and the subject – in this case, writing. As a result, the intersection of student and subject, of adult learners and writing, and how both inform instruction must be taken into consideration. Fortunately, scholars have since contributed research and recommendations for instruction that comprise both the learning needs of adult students and the fundamentals of writing as a subject. Likewise, these contributions supplement Knowles’ theory in that they all involve instructional strategies that are conspicuously andragogical in nature. Scholars’ research, therefore, can be contextualized through the lens of Knowles’ andragogical precepts and thus understood as andragogy applied to writing instruction specifically.

Andragogy emerged as a new approach to instruction based on the nature of the student in the latter half of twentieth-century America; likewise, at the same time, a new approach towards writing, and therefore writing instruction, emerged. Maxine Hairston’s 1982 article “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing” represents a landmark moment in composition studies wherein the "traditional" paradigm of viewing and teaching writing as a product lost out to the growing contemporary ideas of writing as a cognitive process that is rhetorically based. Much like the pedagogical model emphasizes the teacher’s transmission of content to a passive student audience, the traditional writing paradigm emphasized the effective transmission of content through writing to an ill-defined, imagined
audience. Indeed, it may in fact be because of pedagogy’s focus on content over process that writing was likewise viewed in this way. At the very least, these views share striking similarities.

Andragogy and writing’s new paradigm, on the other hand, are similar in that they both stress the role of the individual in a continuous process of knowledge acquisition and transmission. Moreover, they both acknowledge the tremendous influence experience possesses on the learning – and therefore writing – process. Marilyn Cooper in her 1986 article “The Ecology of Writing” expands on Hairston’s ideas of writing as a rhetorically-based cognitive process by proposing a “model of writing whose fundamental tenet is that writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (367). These systems, she explains, serve as reference points from which the writer continually draws:

One does not even begin to have ideas about a topic, even a relatively simple one, until a considerable body of already structured observations and experiences has been mastered. Even in writing where the focus is not on the development of knowledge, a writer must connect with the relevant idea system. (369)

Cooper regards writing as a process that is continuously in conversation with larger “idea systems,” or social contexts, wherein both the writer and the writing he or she produces is both “constituted by and constitutive of these ever-changing systems” (373). Experience with these systems, in other words, forms the basis for how learners learn and what writings they consequently produce. Teachers, in turn, must therefore recognize and learn to tap into their students’ experiences with these systems as a resource for learning and writing, echoing the basic
precepts of andragogy and andragogical instruction, which stresses that instructors make use of their adult students’ experiences.

That andragogy and the new, contemporary paradigm of viewing writing are harmonious concepts is reflected in the research that has since followed either’s introduction into America’s educational landscape. Indeed, Robert Sommer premises his book, *Teaching Writing to Adults: Strategies and Concepts for Improving Learner Performance*, on the idea that “only andragogy can lead to writing that is worth writing and worth reading” (xii). He synthesizes the andragogical process model with writing instruction specifically, developing concrete, comprehensive, and readily applicable teaching strategies that account for the demands of both the student and the subject (writing). Most research, however, focuses on isolated aspects of writing instruction that are andragogical in nature. For example, several scholars emphasize fostering a collaborative and supportive writing environment based on active classroom participation (Cleary, “Anxiety” 9; Miretello 7; Stutzman Pate 82; Baitinger 3), as well as the role of the teacher in facilitating that environment (Branch), so as to both alleviate adult learners’ writing anxiety and encourage them to assume authority over their own writing. Specific recommendations include providing students time in class to discuss their writing anxieties (Miretello 7), establishing that the instructor is available as a resource throughout students’ writing processes rather than an authority over their writing (Stutzman Pate 82), and valuing the development of creativity and personal expression in writing as much as mechanics and style (Baitinger 3). Consistent with not only andragogy’s conception of a cooperative and responsive classroom climate, as well as its notion of the instructor as a facilitator of learning, these suggestions also fit Hairston’s and Cooper’s writing paradigm because they underscore ways to enhance adult writers’ development rather than the writing they’re expected to produce.
Beyond establishing a classroom climate that best positions adult learners to cultivate their writing skills, other scholars highlight the importance of acknowledging adults’ prior experiences – particularly their past writing experiences – as the starting point from which learning needs are identified and subsequent learning will build (Cleary, “Anxiety” 6; Michaud 256; Gillam 11-15). For example, Gillam asserts that “returning students’ writing background can and should be the matrix out of which their abilities develop” (15), recommending that instructors begin their writing courses with “experience portfolios,” in which students are asked to provide samples of their writing and describe significant life experiences, their writing history, and how they view themselves as writers (11). Indeed, adult learners may be familiar with a variety of different genres through their personal and professional experiences that may, in turn, influence their reception of unfamiliar genres introduced in their writing courses. Adult learners’ genre repertoires thus represent an idea system from which they then contextualize and respond to new writing, “often adapting the familiar to the unfamiliar” (Popken 85). Having adult learners complete an experience, i.e., writing, portfolio thereby enables instructors to better understand their adult students and how they may be navigating completing their writing assignments. Moreover, the insights gained from students’ writing portfolios can then inform both the content of the course as well as instructors’ teaching strategies. Viewed from an andragogical standpoint, writing portfolios likewise follow the andragogical process model’s call for a mutual diagnosis of learning needs. Adult learners are equally involved in assessing their learning needs because preliminary writing portfolios require students to evaluate their own writing and how they view themselves as writers before the bulk of instruction even begins; thus, they are not the passive recipients of their instructor’s appraisal.
Whereas Gillam stresses that adult learners be permitted input and shared authority in evaluating their own learning needs for writing, other scholars emphasize the benefits in offering adult students control over the writing assignments themselves (Gillespie 27) or, at the very least, influence over what instructors ultimately teach and assign (Uehling; Baitinger 7; Rose; Cleary; “Anxiety” 6). Furthermore, scholars’ commendation of this practice foregrounds the central tenet of andragogy: that instruction be student-centered, catering to the unique interests and learning needs of adult students. Baitinger, for instance, recommends “incorporating topics and tasks that adult learners have identified as meaningful to them” as a way to potentially “contribute in transferring the power for growth and development into the learner’s hands” (7).

In so doing, instructors accommodate adult learners’ need to be self-directing and derive relevance from their learning. Likewise, because adult learners often experience heightened anxiety navigating institutional expectations for students, several scholars advise using low-stakes writing to provide “low-stress writing practice” and “prompt learners to develop the confidence they need to take a proactive role when it comes to their studies” (Stutzman Pate 79; Baitinger 4; Cleary “Anxiety” 9).

Still others explore how certain kinds of writing actively incorporate and build upon adult learners’ experiences to great effect (Hashimoto 63; Houp 701-703; Smith 92; Boud; Jarvis; Clark and Rossiter). Indeed, Sommer maintains that “possibly no subject an adult may study will make as much use of experience as writing” (36). For example, in a study investigating the effectiveness of autobiographical writing in adult learner contexts, Smith finds that autobiography can legitimize adult learner “experiences while exploring their histories as bridges to ‘new’ learning,” as well as “provide access to an authorial self that many adult learners feel inadequate about taking on” (92). Houp, on the other hand, examines how narrative writing gave
an adult learner, Lana, the opportunity to derive meaning from her life experiences while simultaneously cultivating writing skills (701-703). Clark and Rossiter even go so far as to postulate that the learning process itself involves constructing an internal narrative, and that narrative writing therefore offers a “means to connect lived experience to learning at a more complex and profoundly human level” (68-69). They also suggest utilizing learning journals wherein adult students reflect and write about their learning experiences as they occur within the course. Thus, journal writing becomes “the place where the events and experiences are recorded and the forum by which they are processed,” the benefits of which include enabling adults to “make sense of the experiences that result, recognize the learning that results, and build a foundation for new experiences that will provoke new learning” (Boud 10-11). The unifying, andragogical concept around which all of these writing forms revolve is adult learners’ experience and how it should be leveraged as a principal resource for contextualizing new learning.

While the preceding teaching strategies involve assigning various kinds of writing based on andragogical concepts, it is worth noting that much of the research frames instructors’ adoption of such writing assignments primarily as a consequence of the instructor’s preexisting awareness of their adult learners’ interests and learning needs. Adult learners, therefore, are not directly involved in the planning process Knowles’ andragogical model advises; their assumed learning needs and interests simply inform what kinds of writing assignments the instructor provides. However, two scholars do note the ways in which adult learners can directly shape their writing assignments: Gillespie and Cleary. Touting the benefits of project-based learning, Gillespie explains that allowing adults to form project groups and corresponding writing assignments based on a topics they themselves find personally meaningful “encourages
collaborative learning and writing for authentic purposes” (27). Also, because project-based learning arranges writing assignments around these central topics, or problems, that the learners themselves define and subsequently work through, students’ learning follows the problem-unit structure for andragogical learning activities and is sequenced by adults’ readiness rather than the logic of a content-unit governed by the instructor alone. Furthering Gillespie’s conceptual notion of this, Cleary investigates the effectiveness of project-based instruction within an individualized writing course known as Writing Workshop, which, incidentally, also incorporates nearly all of the elements the andragogical process model dictates. She explains:

In Writing Workshop, each student, in collaboration with the teacher, develops and implements a plan to improve his or her writing. Students start the course by assessing their own writing and receiving an assessment from their instructor. . . . Students use these assessments to develop and implement a plan to build upon their strengths, address their most pressing challenges, and find resources for their ongoing writing development. As a result, rather than having set assignments, students work on writing tasks that are important to them. (“How Antonio Graduated” 43)

Already, Writing Workshop typifies the fulfillment of the andragogical process model within a writing course specifically; however, Cleary also found students who took Writing Workshop were “retained to the next quarter and to the following year at higher rates than . . . national averages,” 81 percent of which passed their courses “earning an average letter grade of a B” (“How Antonio Graduated” 47). The adaptation of the andragogical process model to writing classes in particular, therefore, is not represented simply and only as scholar’s abstract conceptualization of it; andragogy has also proven highly beneficial in practice as well.
In sum, while the body of research that has followed Knowles’ introduction of andragogy represents in no way an exhaustive compilation of research on adult learners and writing theory, nor does it definitively prove andragogy’s superiority over other instructional forms, scholars’ emphasis on andragogical principles as applied to writing instruction for adults cannot be ignored. Consequently, andragogy as it is adapted to writing instruction specifically serves as the point of reference from which my study both investigates adult learner perceptions of writing instruction and then compares to actual practice.
In this study, I explore the extent to which the practice of teaching writing to adults matches the theory of teaching writing to adults within postsecondary writing courses. To accomplish this end, I interviewed four adult learners who were, at the time of their interviews, currently enrolled in postsecondary writing classes, relying upon information from the available research in current writing and education theories – i.e., andragogy – to inform my interview questions.

The purpose of this research is exploratory; it was not and is not intended as a measure of instructors’ performance or success, neither does it involve my going through a running checklist of instructional strategies. Rather, I wanted to explore each learner’s classroom experiences organically, contextualizing their experiences as a consequence of both who these students were and how they were taught. Because Knowles based his theory of andragogy on the recognition that adult students’ myriad differences can be used as a way to understand their classroom experiences, I likewise felt it necessary to talk with study participants in-depth about who they themselves were and how their experiences have shaped who they are as learners. Moreover, given that andragogy is by definition student-centered, I wanted to align my research method in such a way that was correspondingly student-centered. For these reasons, I chose to use personal one-on-one interviews as my research method, and it is likewise for these reasons that my interview process was twofold and two-part. I met with each study participant twice, the first interview being primarily biographical, with questions pertaining to learners’ reasons for returning to school, their feelings towards writing, and the experiences that shaped them as individuals and learners. The second dealt with their classroom experiences specifically.
However, as I proceeded to interview these adult learners, I realized that many of their responses to instruction and course content resulted from experiences that were incredibly personal. In order to protect their identities while remaining faithful to their stories, therefore, I’ve applied pseudonyms to all of my study participants.

I purposefully chose not to interview participants’ instructors given that, regardless of how instructors perceive their own instructional methods, how these methods are received by their students may differ significantly. Students’ learning is not a seamless process of knowledge transfer from teacher to student; rather, it is a continuous process of students’ interpretation of their instructors’ teaching. It is this process of student interpretation and corresponding reception that I am interested in exploring.

Before proceeding with my interviews, however, I had to submit a research proposal to my university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), which it summarily approved. I then reached out to former professors in the hopes of finding adult learners currently enrolled in college writing classes who were also willing to meet with me. Fortunately, my professors did not disappoint. They referred me to four adult learners: two from a 4-year university and two from a 2-year community college. Even more interesting was that one of them was enrolled in an advanced writing course, which I felt was the perfect opportunity to explore whether or not writing instruction differs by level of the writing course. With all these considerations in mind, therefore, my research questions are thus:

1. To what extent does the actual practice of postsecondary writing instruction match scholars’ theories (andragogy) and recommendations for teaching writing to adults?

2. Does postsecondary writing instruction differ by institution?
3. Does postsecondary writing instruction differ by the level of the writing class?

4. Regardless of whether or not instruction matches scholars’ theories and recommendations for teaching writing to adults, how do adult students respond to the writing instruction within their own writing classes?
CHAPTER IV: THE LEARNERS

Ron

Ron’s decision to pursue higher education was the happy outcome of a bad situation. Several years prior to his enrollment, Ron was charged with a DWI, the punishment for which required that he attend a support group for alcoholics. And while Ron is not an alcoholic himself, his exposure to others who were had a profound effect: after roughly two decades as a successful business owner of both a barber shop and a trucking company, Ron aspires to become a substance abuse counselor as well. He’s enrolled at a local community college, therefore, with the intention of obtaining an associate’s degree before transferring to a four-year university, most likely majoring in health and human services. Regardless of what he ultimately majors in, however, Ron’s committed to helping others. “I want to be able to reach out and touch people,” he explains in a personal interview, “I want to do something where I feel I’m making a difference.”

As a business owner, Ron’s completely at ease in authoritative positions. He’s used to being in charge, and he’s very comfortable with overseeing multiple tasks simultaneously. Likewise, as both a learner and a writer, Ron expresses similar confidence in his ability:

When I was in school, I was always told that I was a good writer. . . . I always knew I could do a lot of stuff because I would joke and laugh and play, but I still got my work done, and I would make the best grade or just as good as anybody who was quiet in the class. So, the teachers would always say I had a gift.

Self-assured as both a student and a writer, already financially secure, and at ease juggling multiple commitments at once, Ron’s transition into academia did not pose as many challenges.
for him as might be expected of most adult learners. Several scholars note that adult learners often struggle with anxiety, reduced academic fluency, and accommodating the demands of school alongside other obligations (Bash 153-155; Cleary “Anxiety”; Colvin). For Ron, however, attending classes and completing coursework are simply added responsibilities for him to balance alongside the myriad other things he already skillfully manages.

From an andragogical standpoint, Ron possesses many characteristics Knowles identified as typical of an adult learner, and his writing course was likewise oriented in such a way as to cater to them. Perhaps the most influential of these qualities as it pertains to Ron’s learning is his self-concept. Ron is naturally self-directing, and he instinctively positions himself as the authority over his own learning. As a result, he approaches every course with well-established expectations: “I don’t want to be in any class that doesn’t make me think. I don’t want to feel like I’m smarter than the person that’s talking. Why am I in there, [then]?” Measuring the quality of instruction – and by extension, the quality of the instructor – by how he personally responds to it, Ron, therefore, insists that his instructors adhere to his concept of good teaching in order for him to regard them as good teachers. Moreover, Ron believes that an instructor’s responsibility is to “make sure everybody understands,” thereby placing the responsibility for learning not on students’ ability to decipher instruction but on how well instruction yields students’ understanding. Thus, a competent teacher, to Ron, is one that adapts to him and his corresponding expectations; he needn’t adapt to the teacher. Student-centered, andragogical instruction, therefore, is most compatible with Ron’s expectations because he regards his own judgment, rather than his instructor’s, as the foremost gauge of both his learning and a successful course.
Fortunately, the structure of Ron’s writing class revolved around classroom discussion that, by its very nature in welcoming student input, established a climate wherein students’ own views were regarded as valid and, more importantly, valuable. Rather than monopolize control over students’ learning, Ron’s instructor fostered a cooperative, inclusive classroom environment through collective inquiry much like that which the andragogical model recommends. Indeed, the andragogical process model deemphasizes transmittal techniques such as lecture in favor of active participation; likewise, it emphasizes a collaborative classroom environment wherein authority is shared among the instructor and students. Sommer even goes so far as to advise that “[a]bove all, the teacher [not] hoard authority” because he maintains that “for students to write, *they* must have authority over the material” (xii). “The writing teacher’s best chance for success [in helping students develop their writing skills],” therefore, “lies in finding ways to promote the writer’s authority for what she has to say” (Sommer 14). Because discussion necessitates students assume a definitive opinion about a topic in order to participate, it encourages the development of an authorial self that is grounded in the learner’s own authority over the material, just as Sommer advises. On the whole, therefore, Ron’s writing course permitted him to retain primary authority over his own knowledge acquisition because it actively scaffolded new learning through Ron’s personal interpretation – rather than passive reception – of course content.

Not only did discussion allow Ron to remain self-directing, it also primed him to analyze writing critically. Ron explains that most classes began with his instructor writing a word or sentence pertaining to the classes’ assigned readings on the board, after which, she’d encourage students to raise their hands and explain their interpretations of it. Emphasis was placed not on establishing a collective, unanimous understanding of a text but rather on the exploration of ideas
resulting from students’ diverse interpretations. Not only were students encouraged to examine their own views of a reading, therefore; discussion also required that they consider each others’ analyses:

She always tried to explain that everybody has their own opinion and that you have to understand where the other person is coming from . . . because you may have never thought of something that way before. . . . That’s what she taught me. There are thirty people [in the class] – they’re not going to think the same thing about a sentence.

In structuring the class so that learners’ ideas and understandings of writing were always in conversation with one another, Ron’s writing course actively utilized individual learner’s experiences and idea systems as resources for the entire class to benefit from. Ron’s learning and development as a writer, therefore, derived from both his peers’ collective participation and corresponding insights as well as his teacher’s own expertise.

Another consequence of Ron’s instructor choosing class discussion as the primary vehicle for learning was that it mirrored the way Ron himself naturally learns. His learning process is twofold: he reads something and “then [tries] to educate other people about it,” a practice that is nearly identical to that of his writing course – the class reads something, and then students talk with, or “educate,” one another about what they thought. That being said, the likelihood that Ron’s instructor knew his personal learning style was so well-suited for discussion is slim; unlike the andragogical model, which calls for a mutual diagnosis of learning needs, and unlike Gillam’s counsel that instructors begin their writing courses with student experience portfolios, Ron’s instructor did not administer any kind of initial assessment, which could have provided insight into Ron’s and his classmates’ ways of learning. Consequently, his instructor having opted for classroom discussion may have little to do with capitalizing on Ron’s
or any student’s – individual learning styles. That being said, it may have everything to do
with her understanding that discussion facilitates engaged, active learning. Regardless of the
reason, that Ron’s learning style matched his instructor’s teaching style has only proven
beneficial. When asked how he felt about the structure and instructional methods of his writing
course, Ron maintains that he “wouldn’t have changed anything because it opened [his] mind
up” to new perspectives. Not only that, he feels he’s gained a tangible skill as a result –
thoughtful, targeted writing: “Now, I can take a sentence, and I can write it three different ways
depending on what I’m trying to get you to understand.” Because discussion involved the many
ways a topic, word, or sentence could be interpreted, Ron likewise understood that his own
writing could be crafted in such a way as to evoke multiple readings as well. Discussion,
therefore, primed Ron for the analytical thinking required for the course’s subsequent writing
assignments.

Aside from the collaborative classroom climate established via frequent class discussion,
however, the majority of the class abided by the characteristics of pedagogical instruction. Ron
maintains that all class readings were predetermined and assigned by the instructor; students did
not directly negotiate or contribute to the selection of course content. Likewise, the writing
assignments followed the content unit structure of the pedagogical model. According to Ron, the
course called for three major graded essays, all of which were predetermined by the teacher and
all of which pertained to specific genres of academic writing: a literary analysis with claim
paper, a comparison with claim essay, and an argumentative research paper. Students were
allowed to choose topics that fit within the genre itself; nonetheless, learners remained
considerably limited in that writing assignments required they incorporate their interests within
the bounds of a writing prompt. Learners’ interests as it pertained to writing, in other words, fell
secondary to their demonstrating mastery of that genre. Moreover, none of these writing assignments involved any of the writings scholars suggest for adult learners, such as narrative or journal writing, which actively make use of adult learners’ experiences and interests as a bridge to new learning. For these reasons, Ron’s writing assignments necessitated that he adapt to assignments in order to derive meaning from them; although the prompts may have been sufficiently open-ended for Ron to incorporate his interests and experiences, they did not necessarily cultivate connections between them and new learning (his development as a writer) on their own. Rather, Ron made these connections himself, integrating his own experiences and corresponding interests within the writing assignments organically.

While Ron’s writing course included three major essays, the paper wherein Ron most ostensibly incorporated his interests and experiences, and, significantly, the paper Ron also enjoyed writing most, involved developing an argument about a research topic Ron’s instructor had yet to hear before. For his part, Ron wanted to write about the repercussions of drinking and driving as an argument against doing so. Having gotten a DWI in the past and because the resulting experiences prompted his return to school in order to become a substance abuse counselor, he saw this writing assignment as an opportunity to write a paper “that meant something to [him].” Viewed from an andragogical standpoint, Ron’s desire to derive meaning from his writing demonstrates another of Knowles’ adult learner characteristics – namely, that adults want new learning to be relevant and applicable to them personally. Moreover, he regarded his paper, not as an isolated assignment only his teacher would see, but as something that others would read and gain from; much like Cooper conceptualized writing in conversation with larger idea and social systems, Ron viewed his writing as a way of placing his own ideas in conversation with alcoholics and the broader discipline of substance abuse prevention and
treatment. Likewise, because he’d attended meetings alongside actual alcoholics, he wrote for a
tangible rather than imagined audience. In so doing, Ron thus developed his own rhetorical
context, which drew upon his personal experiences as both the motivation and resource for new
learning.

In spite of Ron’s deep investment in the consequences of drinking and driving, however,
his instructor advised him against pursuing it as an essay topic. Because the writing prompt
called for an argument about a topic Ron’s instructor had yet to hear, the degree to which the
topic of drinking and driving fit the assignment depended on whether his instructor had read
other students’ papers that dealt with drinking and driving as well. Unsurprisingly, Ron’s
instructor had. As a result, Ron explains, she dissuaded him from the topic, explaining that she
didn’t “think [he] could write anything [she] hadn’t heard before.” That the approval of Ron’s
topic seemed to rest on his instructor’s previous experiences with students who had likely re-
hashed worn topics without new investment suggests that she either didn’t know of Ron’s
aspirations to become a substance abuse counselor or else didn’t make the connection between
his career goals and his choice in essay topic. Likewise, Ron’s instructor may have regarded
these considerations as secondary to the assignment’s purpose, which was, presumably, that
students foster critical thinking skills in their writing. Choosing a topic rarely written about
necessitated that students investigate issues lacking immediate answers, thereby requiring them
to formulate their own; likewise, students would also be less likely to find comparable writings
from which to reference and use in place of their own analysis when developing their arguments.
With this in mind, Ron’s instructor may have felt that Ron’s topic of drinking and driving would
not prove intellectually rigorous enough because it was an issue with both an immediate answer
based on obvious reasons – drinking and driving is bad because it can result in car accidents,
injury, and death – and because much has already been written on the topic. Whatever the reason, that Ron’s instructor advised him against pursuing a topic that held such importance to him deviates from andragogical principles. The potential benefits of utilizing Ron’s firsthand experiences as a bridge to new learning, as well as his passion for the topic, were either unknown or simply ignored.

Contrary to his instructor’s counsel that he select another essay topic, however, Ron ultimately chose to write about the implications of drinking and driving. That being said, in response to his instructor’s disapproval of his original topic, Ron did initially consider writing about something else – why people shouldn’t eat pork. “She loved that,” Ron explains, and worked with him to outline the points that he would use for his argument. In the end, however, despite having an alternative topic his instructor approved of, Ron returned to his original focus: drinking and driving. Fortunately for him, Ron’s instructor permitted him to proceed, in spite of her continued protests. Rather than assume authority over Ron’s writing by constraining his paper topic to only one she approved of, his instructor ultimately relinquished control over Ron’s writing – and by extension, Ron’s development as a writer – to Ron. Thus, while she may have initially diverged from andragogical instruction in that she did not approve and capitalize upon a topic that actively incorporated Ron’s experiences and interests, Ron’s instructor certainly upheld the andragogical precept that instructors serve as guides of students’ learning rather than authorities over them. In this sense, Ron’s experiences writing his essay reflect instruction that contained both pedagogical and andragogical principles. On the one hand, while she might not have known the extent of Ron’s investment in the subject of drinking and driving, she nonetheless chose to dissuade him from a topic he had demonstrated a keen interest in, even after he’d knowingly chosen to write about a topic she disapproved of. That Ron was willing to forgo
a topic she’d approved of for the sake of one she didn’t clearly demonstrated his deep investment in it and its corresponding potential for engagement; nevertheless, she continued to dissuade him, which unmistakably conflicts with the andragogical tenet that instructor’s utilize their learner’s interests and experiences. However, she did allow him to write his paper on the topic of his choosing, and her misgivings that he would likely fail to produce anything she hadn’t read before may have even prompted Ron to become further engaged and innovative with his writing. Indeed, Ron not only proved these misgivings wrong, he succeeded outstandingly, earning a 96 on his completed essay. This essay thus represents the primary space, which I refer to as an entry point, wherein he most connected and correspondingly incorporated his interests and experiences to new learning. Ron, in spite of his instructor’s initial direction, produced a successful piece of writing that was meaningful to him and successfully integrated his experiences and learning interests.

No matter the interchange of pedagogical and andragogical instruction, Ron maintains that he wouldn’t change one thing about the course or his instructor’s teaching: “I think she’s one of the best teachers I’ve had in my life.” That he responded so positively to those aspects of instruction that were andragogical and student-centered reinforces the general agreement of its suitability for adult learners. However, more interesting was that Ron actively applied and incorporated his experiences and interests within the class’ writing assignments. Such a phenomena signals a trend shared among all the learners examined in this study – namely, that they all naturally sought to situate themselves, their experiences, and their learning interests within course content and writing assignments.
**Eileen**

Whereas Ron’s essay served as the entry point at which he most markedly integrated himself within his writing course, Eileen’s “entrance” of self and experience was initiated by course readings she especially connected with. Recently divorced, Eileen explains in a personal interview that she’s currently rediscovering herself: “[Being married], you rely on the other person for identity, and so my divorce made me question [it]. . . . Now, I’m finding that I have my own identity, and I’m no longer so-and-so’s ex-wife.” Likewise, her divorce is also the catalyst for her returning to school because Eileen’s current occupation as a hairdresser is no longer sufficient to provide for herself and her son. As a result, Eileen’s decided she’d like to become a registered nurse, an occupation she feels she’ll “be guaranteed work [in] because [it’s] in the medical field,” and has since enrolled part-time at a local community college in the hopes of obtaining an associate’s degree in nursing. Eileen’s return to school, therefore, coincides with a total life change: not only is she switching careers, she’s adjusting to her newfound independence and status as a single parent.

That Eileen is changing careers constitutes a tremendous transition in and of itself; however, her having begun to actively reconstruct an identity in the wake of a divorce also situates her learning at a time that is especially reflective. Indeed, by her own admission, Eileen identifies her recent divorce as the single most influential event in shaping who she is as both a person and a student. Having never pursued higher education prior to her divorce, Eileen explains that when her marriage turned sour, her ex-husband “gave [her] every reason as to why [she] couldn’t go back to school,” and that she “spent a lot of time being told that [she] was not intelligent.” Having endured her ex-husband’s demoralizing claims and because they revolved around her capacity to succeed in college, Eileen, unsurprisingly, views her education as a way
of both re-empowering herself and proving her ex-husband wrong. Eileen’s classes thus exist as spaces wherein exposure to new learning not only furthers her career goals but, first and foremost, prompt her to reflect on her recent experiences and thereby negotiate a new identity independent of her ex-husband. Indeed, this negotiation of identity has manifested quite conspicuously in the revelations Eileen’s made about herself while in her writing class. However, had it not been for her teacher’s choice in assigned readings, Eileen might have missed out on these realizations entirely.

Eileen notes that much of the course readings were “female-oriented,” and that the commonalities shared between them and her own life sparked “exorbitant epiphanies” about herself. For example, Eileen was required to read Kate Chopin’s short story “The Story of an Hour,” in which a woman, upon hearing of her husband’s death, becomes extraordinarily happy at the incredible sense of freedom she feels. That her husband is dead and therefore warrants her grief is secondary to the exultant realization that her life is now entirely her own. Having likewise felt set free from her marriage, albeit under different circumstances, Eileen connected very powerfully with this story, recollecting the point at which she experienced her own sense of freedom and concurrent heartache:

[All of the possibilities that are there, that lie in front of her in that realization [of freedom], to me, when I read it, I could remember . . . the moment that I realized that although I was heartbroken over getting divorced, I had these freedoms that I was allowed now, and I don’t have to answer to anybody, and any decision that I make is my own. And it both gave me a sense of pleasure and joy but also limitation because of the fact that I am alone.
“The Story of an Hour” is not an isolated text whose relevance to Eileen’s learning involved only its capacity to cultivate critical thinking; for Eileen, it is a testament to her own experiences. Likewise, Eileen responded to other course readings in much the same way: in an essay titled “Does Fatherhood Really Make You Happy?”, Eileen paralleled her own experiences as a parent with those discussed in the reading, and another titled “I Want a Wife” prompted her to consider the limitless expectations traditionally imposed on wives that she had similarly felt forced to abide by within her marriage. Moreover, Eileen loved reading them: “It’s opened me up to so many new writers and so many new ideas and new ways of looking at things. . . . [I]n a lot of ways, these writings that she has assigned have all spoken to me on an emotional level.” Placing her life experiences in conversation with course readings, Eileen, like Ron, actively connected new learning (the readings) with her preexisting knowledge (her experiences). However, whereas Ron’s reaction to the readings – as evidenced in class discussion – involved exploring possible interpretations of said readings, Eileen’s response had more to do with relating her past and ongoing experiences, especially her divorce, to her class’ assigned texts and thereby learning about herself through them.

That Eileen got to “know [herself] . . . through literature” suggests her writing course enabled Eileen to “story” her recent experiences. Consistent with Clark’s and Rossiter’s premise that individuals process new information by first constructing internal narratives, and that this new learning, in turn, informs one’s preexisting interpretation, or “storying,” of prior experiences, Eileen internalized course readings in relation to her established understanding of both her marriage and subsequent divorce. Her analysis of the readings was contingent upon her preceding experiences; thus, the texts were in effect “storied” through them. More important, however, is that Eileen gained further insight into her marriage and divorce from these readings
which, as a result, revised her antecedent “storying” of them. As was the case with Ron, however, the likelihood that Eileen’s instructor knew of these unique circumstances and therefore incorporated readings that corresponded to them is slim. Given that Eileen and Ron shared the same instructor and likewise the same writing course, it comes as no surprise that she was not given any kind of prior learning assessment, neither was she asked what kinds of texts or topics she’d enjoy reading. Moreover, it’s unlikely that she would have volunteered the particulars of her divorce, let alone mention it in class. Rather, it’s far more probable that Eileen integrated her experiences within the preexisting frameworks of these readings herself. Nevertheless, that Eileen was able to connect her experiences to course readings confirms their utility as entry points, so that while Eileen’s instructor may not have anticipated the extent to which these readings would correspond with Eileen’s experiences specifically, she did likely anticipate their capacity to engage her adult students.

Each of the readings mentioned involve, at least to some extent, a common theme shared among many college students (working through identity), and several of them involve experiences that are typically the exclusive domain of individuals older than today’s traditional 18-to-22 year-old, i.e., marriage and parenthood. As a result, Eileen’s instructor likely chose these readings with her students’ experiences in mind, knowing that learner engagement would likely follow. Thus, her instructor and the course readings she assigned fall within andragogical dictates, which stress facilitating learners’ active engagement. That being said, her instructor didn’t directly involve her students in determining these readings; whether or not students connected with them, therefore, depended on the extent to which students’ experiences fit each reading. In this sense, Eileen’s course readings possess both andragogical and pedagogical features: because they are entry points whose content facilitated student engagement, they are
andragogical, but because students were not involved in the negotiation or design of this engagement, they are pedagogical.

While Eileen’s course readings at least appear to coincide with both pedagogical and andragogical instruction, most classes were conducted, like Ron’s, via classroom discussion. It goes without saying that this particular aspect of Eileen’s course is andragogical; however, beyond the benefits already mentioned in my review of Ron’s classroom experiences, another gain of classroom discussion that was unique to Eileen specifically is the camaraderie developed among Eileen and her classmates. In fact, Eileen maintains that the relationships she forged with her peers as a result of class discussion was the single most enjoyable aspect of her writing class, the reasons for which she explains in greater depth:

I feel that we can have open discussions and that there is no shock value. It seems like it’s a pretty open class. There’s this really nice respectfulness that’s going on whether or not you agree with what [someone else is] saying. You can see how one thought or one comment spurns on the next, and you can see the ideas popping in people’s heads.

Eileen consciously recognizes that discussion snowballs students’ idea generation because it places their individual interpretations of course content in conversation with one another’s. Whereas in Ron’s case these benefits remained largely implicit given that most went unacknowledged by Ron himself, Eileen’s personal response to classroom discussion stands as a testament to their actual realization. Moreover, Eileen also acknowledges how discussion facilitated students’ collective sharing of personal “experiences . . . that pertain[ed] to a particular reading or a particular point that [her instructor] was trying to drive home.” That Eileen’s instructor made such heavy use of classroom discussion thereby enabled Eileen to
supplement the connections she’d already made with her course readings by allowing her a space wherein her integration of experience was shared, validated, and valued alongside her peers.

The culmination of Eileen’s incorporation of personal experience within her writing course manifested, finally, in her writing assignments. Like Ron, she was also assigned three major essays, and likewise, Eileen’s favorite was also the paper wherein her chosen topic paralleled her life experiences. That being said, because Eileen’s and Ron’s instructor are one and the same and given that they both enrolled in the same writing course, Eileen’s essay prompts were exactly the same as Ron’s, and therefore most closely followed the content unit structure of the pedagogical model. Consequently, Eileen’s essays, like Ron’s, necessitated that she proactively fit and incorporate her experiences within her writing assignments given the conditions her writing prompts imposed.

The aforementioned essay Eileen considers “close to [her] heart” was a literary analysis with claim paper, which asked that she develop and argue a central claim based on earlier course readings. Given that Eileen connected so poignantly with “The Story of an Hour,” unsurprisingly, she chose it and two other readings with similar themes as the basis for her essay. Interestingly, however, Eileen does not mention her own comparable experiences and how they may have influenced her partiality towards this particular paper. Rather, her choice in readings and corresponding thesis confirm their potency. Eileen loved her course readings precisely because they paralleled her own life, and her thesis likewise explored how each text demonstrates a woman’s loss of identity, which she herself experienced. Consequently, the significance of Eileen’s choice in texts, which she readily admits “spoke” to her life experiences, and her corresponding interpretation of them in relation to her current circumstances cannot be underestimated. Eileen’s fondness for her literary analysis with claim paper most likely derives
from its capacity to facilitate deeper connections between her and her readings. Eileen’s partiality for this particular essay, in other words, cannot be divorced from the readings by which she wrote it. That being said, while Eileen’s paper provided her a space wherein she could relate and integrate her experiences, that she did incorporate them was not necessarily the exclusive consequence of the essay’s design. Rather, the prompt was simply sufficiently open-ended, and the readings from which she completed this prompt just happened to correspond to her own experiences in such a way that she naturally sought to relate and incorporate them.

The extent to which Eileen “filled” the essay’s – and by extension, her readings’ – afforded entry point, the space wherein she could incorporate her interests and experiences, seemed to rest more on her personal engagement with course readings. However, her response to these texts could have proven quite different had her experiences been different, and with no apparent mechanism for negotiating course content had that been the case, Eileen may not have “filled” these entry points at all. Thus, her integration of experience was prospective and optional rather than fundamentally necessary to her essay’s completion. For this reason, and because the requirements of her writing prompts necessitated that she fit her experiences to these conditions in order to incorporate them at all, on the whole, Eileen’s writing assignments thus appear more consistent with pedagogical principles than andragogical ones.

**Collin**

At only 24 years-old, Collin deviates in many ways from the traditional portrait of an adult learner. He has yet to establish a career for himself, and unlike Ron and Eileen, who both work full-time on top of attending school, Collin is fortunate in that his financial aid covers enough of his living expenses that he need not juggle a 40-hour work week on top of being a
full-time student. Moreover, while the more “conventional” adult learner may have 10+ years more experience than their younger, fresh-out-of-high-school counterparts, Collin leads his 18-to-22 year-old classmates in age – and therefore experience – at most by just six years. That being said, Collin did experience a three-year break from formal education, which he discusses in great depth in a personal interview: “I actually left my last school to avoid disciplinary action because I came out [as gay] after my third year of college, and it was actually written [as a violation] into their honor code.” That Collin was in effect kicked out of his previous college because of his sexuality underscores a myriad of ethical implications in and of itself; however, as it pertains to his views towards education, Collin’s three years outside of school gave him “a greater appreciation” for the opportunities having a degree confers, and he’s since enrolled at a four-year university to pursue a degree in philosophy. Nevertheless, Collin’s unique combination of characteristics straddle him between either designation of traditional or adult learner. He cannot be counted as a traditional student given his age and time away from formal education; however, he’s also much younger and possesses far less experience than many adult learners. Likewise, he has yet to establish and therefore juggle other significant social roles – such as husband, father, business professional, etc. – that are characteristic of most adults given their advanced age and experience. However, these distinctions are precisely why Collin’s learning experiences should be examined; again, while labels such as “traditional student” or “adult learner” provide a ready-set inventory of traits from which educators can conceptualize their students, in reality, learners do not fall into finite categories so easily. Perhaps most importantly, however, Collin’s nonconformity to either grouping corroborates the relevance of student-centered andragogical instruction; because Collin cannot be compartmentalized and correspondingly generalized as a student, instruction that best suits him cannot be based on such
discrete categories either. And while andragogy does include broad-based claims about adult learner attributes, andragogical instruction is highly adaptive, revolving around the needs of individual learners. Whether Collin experienced andragogical instruction within his writing class and how he subsequently responded if he did, therefore, merits further inquiry.

Collin’s writing class stressed the importance of structure, cohesiveness, and clarity in writing. Whereas Ron’s and Eileen’s writing classes included diverse readings that encouraged students’ varied interpretations and active participation in discussing them, Collin’s course made use of “a lot of [readings] about improving [one’s] writing.” Strategies discussed were generally indisputable, all-purpose, and well-recognized tenets of good writing, such as “making sure your argument is flowing successfully, . . . making transitions through paragraphs,” and “[making] the good idea you might already have as clear as possible on paper.” Readings thus emphasized the production of an end product – a finished piece of writing – rather than students’ development as writers because their focus involved the realization of specific aspects of writing rather than the process by which these elements are achieved. In other words, process fell secondary to product. For this reason, readings may not have been as especially engaging as Ron’s and Eileen’s were, because of which they appear more consistent with pedagogical instruction, which involves learners’ passive reception of course content rather than their active participation with it. Contrary to Hairston’s and Cooper’s contemporary paradigm for viewing writing and unlike the andragogical precept that learning involve learners’ active participation and inquiry, therefore, Collin’s course readings seem far more congruent with the pedagogical model for instruction, wherein instructors transmit information to a passive student audience.

Regardless of whether Collin’s readings were pedagogical or andragogical in nature, however, Collin nevertheless enjoyed them: “I think [what we’re learning] is very useful . . .
because the skills you learn in English are multidisciplinary. Perhaps something that I learn in philosophy might not be useful to another class, but certainly being able to write can be useful.” Likewise, Collin approves of the class’ focus on clear, easily understandable writing; however, that he’s responded so positively to course content has much to do with the fact that Collin naturally focuses on these aspects of writing himself. When asked what elements of his own writing he typically scrutinizes most, Collin explains that “a successful piece of writing has to be something that almost anybody can understand. So, for me, . . . [I] focus on crafting the sentences – making sure they’re as concise but clear as possible.” Problem areas he wishes to avoid most are likewise ambiguity and poor organization, both of which inhibit Collin’s principal objective when writing: ensuring that his ideas “[flow] in the most logical,” and therefore comprehensible, way. Thus, Collin’s positive reception of his writing course can be attributed in large part to the happy coincidence that the class stressed the cultivation of writing skills that Collin himself identified as most important. One point of entry into the course, or, the aspect of Collin’s writing class from which he connected new learning with preexisting knowledge and learning interests, therefore, was the focal point of the course itself: clear writing. Collin, like Ron and Eileen, forged connections between himself and his writing course, albeit without actively incorporating his experiences and his learning interests to course content. Rather, because the focus of the course already matched Collin’s notion of good writing, he had no need to.

That being said, the remaining facets of Collin’s writing course were markedly more andragogical than either of Ron’s and Eileen’s classes. Consistent with andragogy’s call for a mutual diagnosis of learning needs, as well as Gillam’s counsel for writing portfolios, Collin’s instructor did administer an initial self-assessment. Questions included “what kind of writer
[students] feel [they] are, what areas [they feel] the least confident in, and what [they] need help with.” For his part, Collin identified citations as his greatest concern, because of which, Collin recalls, his instructor then incorporated additional resources to remedy his anxiety: “I remember in the middle of the semester, she even told me . . . ‘I threw in a lot of that citation stuff just for you because you said you were really worried about it in the survey.’” Thus, while Collin’s instructor may have had a predetermined agenda for his writing class, that she supplemented course content with materials meant to address Collin’s learning needs specifically is especially student-centered and therefore highly andragogical.

Beyond dispensing students an initial self-assessment that subsequently informed the inclusion of additional resources, Collin’s instructor also organized the bulk of the class around student-chosen research topics. His writing class was divided into three discrete units, two of which involved students’ exploration of topics they elected to investigate. The first of the two units asked students to research the history of a topic of interest, from which, students then produced a paper examining three especially compelling sources. Moreover, students had to choose and develop an argument for the one source they felt was most persuasive and insightful. The essay thus necessitated that they analyze each of their sources carefully, the learning objectives presumably being that students understand how to evaluate and work with various source materials. The following unit then built upon these skills: students were offered the choice to continue with their chosen research topic or else select a new one in order to develop a research proposal. Having already worked extensively with sources in the preceding unit, students could therefore extend their application of them one step further – by using sources strategically to craft a research proposal. Whereas the first unit familiarized students with source materials and how to find them, therefore, the second required them to both find and apply said
sources purposefully. Unlike Ron’s relatively comparable research paper, however, Collin’s writing assignments possessed very little stipulations. Either unit required only that students’ topics be something whose histories could be researched and whose relevance justified further inquiry. The first condition could be met with arguably any topic; the second, as soon as students formed a research question pertaining to it. In so doing, the majority of Collin’s class actively permitted and indeed encouraged that he navigate his writing assignments by connecting his own learning interests and experiences to new learning (the assignments). Thus, Collin’s coursework can be understood as upholding all those andragogical aspects of both Ron’s and Eileen’s writing assignments while taking them one step further: whereas Ron and Eileen were constrained by both the form of their writing assignments and the conditions of their writing prompts, Collin’s writing prompt was essentially left open for him to determine. He had only to abide by the form of his writing assignments – that is, a research paper – thus affording him a larger “entry point” by which he could incorporate his interests and experience.

For his part, Collin chose to research astrology and its unusual prominence in American culture. “I guess I’ve just always been kind of fascinated with superstitions,” he explains. “[T]o me, it just always seemed kind of striking why astrology should even be popular at all because very few people in the United States believe in [it].” Consequently, that Collin’s writing assignments actively incorporated his learning interests as bridges to new learning, and thus involved him in his own knowledge acquisition, fits several andragogical principles. For one thing, Collin’s writing assignments are experiential and relevant to him personally because they require that he utilize learning activities towards an end that’s of his complete choosing – learning about astrology. Likewise, because Collin shares some level of control over his writing assignments in choosing his own research topic, he’s an active participant with shared authority
in his development as a writer. In other words, Collin’s writing isn’t simply performative, fulfilled only for the sake of demonstrating mastery of course objectives; rather, Collin chose his own learning outcomes – to learn more about astrology – that were fulfilled through and concurrently with his instructor’s. Collin’s liberty to choose his own research topic also echoes several elements of Gillespie’s notion of project-based instruction, the most prominent of which includes arranging writing assignments around students’ chosen research topics and because of which students “develop language, literacy, and problem-solving skills” (Gillespie 27). Indeed, Collin confirms the legitimacy of these purported benefits in his assertion that his freedom to choose a research topic of his own enabled him to “actually make the most out of [his] research.” Collin’s research topic thus served as another entry point wherein Collin was able to connect – and therefore integrate – his learning interests within the course; however, this time, the assignments actively facilitated this connection.

Not only were Collin’s writing assignments especially andragogical, but also the steps by which Collin’s instructor staggered students’ completion of them were particularly andragogical as well. Throughout each course unit, Collin’s instructor assigned low-stakes writing that fragmented students’ essays into phases known as Feeders. For example, “the very first Feeder of a paper might just be a brainstorming activity,” Collin explains, whereas subsequent Feeders might “be an outline” or “a draft of a paper.” Moreover, Feeders were worth far less than the unit essays they built up to in terms of grading, and several even allowed for multiple drafts before students submitted them for a final grade. Effectively dividing students’ essays into manageable chunks with very little risk, Collin’s instructor thus sequenced students’ writing processes by readiness, just as the andragogical process model advises and consistent with several scholars’ recommendations for low-stakes writing. Only when students had finished
brainstorming ideas would they be ready to move into outlining, then drafting, etc., a progression for which Collin was very grateful:

[I]t’s just a better way of going about [writing] because if you just try to write the final assignment all at once, it might be very disorganized. But if you start[ed] with a structure and then fill[ed] things in slowly . . . by the time you had to turn something in for a grade, you felt it was basically the best you could do.

Likewise, as a philosophy major, wherein meticulously “constructing [an] argument is very important,” Collin felt that the “piece-by-piece construction of the papers . . . was very useful.”

For these reasons, Collin’s positive reception of progressive – and therefore andragogical – low-stakes writing is twofold: he approves of Feeders not only because he feels they facilitate exemplary essays but also because they correspond with the inherent aspects of his major.

Finally, throughout the duration of Collin’s writing course and in addition to his low-stakes writing assignments, Collin’s instructor organized students into peer review groups, in effect distributing authority over students’ writing among the students themselves. Indeed, when asked how he felt about the way his course was structured, Collin notes how his peers’ input offset any potential mismatch between his and his professor’s writing styles:

I’ve been in a class before where I felt that maybe my writing and my teacher’s writing isn’t really on the same page. And so, what I like with how this course is structured, is that I don’t get feedback from just one source – the professor. I’m also getting feedback from my peers.

That Collin views his peers as resources to utilize whenever he experiences any confusion or misunderstandings with his instructor demonstrates that he sees his instructor, not as the authority over his own writing, but as one of many readers who may or may not be compatible
with his writing style. Much like Ron and Eileen’s writing classes, therefore, Collin’s instructor actively capitalized on students’ preexisting knowledge and experiences as resources for each other’s learning and chose not to monopolize control over her students’ knowledge acquisition. Rather, in providing students a tangible audience – their peers – for input and advice throughout their writing processes, Collin’s instructor encouraged active, cooperative participation and a supportive classroom climate, both of which andragogical instruction requires.

Jean

Of all the learner’s discussed, Jean’s life circumstances, as well as her learning experiences, are the most unique. At 50 years-old and after thirty years as a successful HR outsourcing consultant, the last seventeen of which she headed her own firm, Jean suffered a traumatic brain injury when she fell off a cliff during a hike in Maui. While discussing the event in a personal interview, Jean maintains that it’s “a miracle [she] survived;” nevertheless, she says at first she tried living as she always had. Jean’s used to “always being the smartest girl in the room,” having taught herself everything about the HR outsourcing industry and likewise achieving enormous success as a consultant. It wasn’t long before Jean realized, however, that she simply couldn’t fulfill the demands of her job; she had to let her brain heal. As a result, she sold her company and returned to school, opting for an English major with a composition, rhetoric, and digital literacy minor in the hopes that new learning will help facilitate her brain’s healing and make her “marketable as a writer.” Much like Eileen, therefore, Jean’s return to school coincides with a total life change, only in Jean’s case, she’s contending with tremendous physiological changes on top of situational ones.
Unfortunately, working around her brain injury has posed a significant challenge for Jean. She no longer has a photographic memory, a talent she’s relied upon her entire life, and in order for her to learn anything, she has to commit it to long-term memory. Jean also has difficulty concentrating, and there are only certain hours of the day she can work, both of which necessitate that she painstakingly plan out all of her semester’s assignments well in advance. And while Jean is by no means performing poorly in her classes, Jean’s brain injury most certainly compounds her transition back into the academic sphere. Moreover, Jean’s reduced academic fluency and her instructors’ seeming unawareness of it doesn’t help. Thus far, she’s struggled to understand the terminology her professors use in class, and she’s felt that many of her instructor’s writing assignments involve “vague prompts” with correspondingly vague directions, which she explains in great detail:

I feel like [my instructors] have said go to the mall and buy a birthday present, but [they] haven’t told me how much I can spend [or] . . . who I’m buying for. I feel like I’m just doing this assignment blind. Give me some more information. Give me a model. What does an A paper look like? They’re assuming I should know.

That Jean feels many of her instructors presuppose she already understand discursive language and know how to write for the academy suggests a significant lack of productive writing instruction, and that Jean’s therefore had to proactively “learn” her instructors’ expectations for writing signals their clear disconnect from Jean’s learning needs. This disconnect, in turn, suggests a lack of student-centered andragogical instruction, or, at the very least, the absence of an initial self-assessment that would otherwise present Jean’s instructors with greater insight into her unique learning needs. Whatever the reason, however, the effects of this disconnect are significant: when asked about some of the foremost feelings she’s experienced upon returning to
school, Jean divulges that she’s “never . . . felt so stupid and so behind,” nor does she feel she’s learned how to write. Despite her English major and composition minor, both of which require heavy writing and because of which she hopes to graduate marketable as a writer, from Jean’s perspective, her instructors’ lack of explicit writing instruction has severely inhibited her understanding of writing altogether.

Fortunately, explicit instruction is exactly what Jean received in her digital writing course. In fact, andragogical instruction underlies all of Jean’s classroom experiences, making her writing course the most andragogical of all the learners discussed. That said, Jean’s course is also unlike any of the prior writing classes discussed; whereas Ron, Eileen, and Collin were all enrolled in obligatory introductory writing courses, Jean chose to enroll in her digital writing course, which, despite its name, dealt very little in writing as it is typically conceived in formal education – that is, writing standard essays. Rather, Jean’s course emphasized the cultivation of digital literacy by exposing students to various digital platforms, such as Photoshop, Twitter, and interactive portfolios. Also unlike prior learners’ courses, Jean’s class placed writing within contexts that students are generally more likely to encounter outside of formal education. While a research project or literary analysis with claim paper do foster writing skills, the burden is often placed on learners to translate these skills into various discourse communities because the only context wherein these writings exist is largely academic. Their focus, therefore, seems to be the advancement of students’ academic literacy. Jean’s course, however, treated writing in a more holistic way, exploring various frameworks beyond the academic realm and how their distinctions inform the writings contained within them. Jean also believes her course presupposed that students had already been sufficiently exposed to the fundamentals of writing and academic literacy – grammar, syntax, structure, etc. – via prior courses, whereas their
familiarity working within certain digital environments was likely far less extensive. The course aimed to develop students’ proficiency with digital mediums, therefore, more so than producing actual writings for them. Nevertheless, Jean initially enrolled in the class hoping she’d be taught how to blog, and was disappointed to find that the course focused on developing students’ digital skills as opposed to writing within digital contexts. As a result, Jean’s instructor partnered with her to develop a completely individualized digital literacy course specific to both her learning interests and needs, championing Knowles’ andragogical model and actively involving Jean in every aspect of her learning.

Jean’s instructor was the most adaptive – and therefore most andragogical – out of all the instructors discussed; rather than fit her within his preexisting plan for the course, he recommended that Jean propose an independent study wherein she develop a blog and he serve as her advisor. Already, therefore, Jean’s instructor adheres to andragogical practice: not only did he create a mechanism for mutual planning (her independent study proposal), he extended to Jean a space wherein her learning interests and needs actively inform her learning activities. Whereas Ron’s and Eileen’s writing assignments necessitated that they fit their experiences and learning interests within the bounds of a given prompt in order to incorporate them at all, Eileen, like Collin, did not need to. Likewise, while both Ron, Eileen, and even Collin could have successfully completed any of their assignments without so much as mentioning their experiences and learning interests, Jean’s assignments could not be completed without them. Jean’s assignments fit her experiences and learning interests; she need not fit herself to her assignments. Thus, every aspect of Jean’s independent study represents a deliberate and necessary, rather than prospective, entry point, wherein Jean actively incorporated her
preexisting knowledge and learning interests because they were the matrix out of which her learning activities were designed.

For her part, Jean had wanted to create a blog for several months, one that explored the “mind-body-spirit connection” and how the cultivation of this connection can facilitate healthy aging. She’s especially passionate about personal wellness, having made it a hobby for much of her life, and in fact attributes her survival of her traumatic brain injury to her longstanding meditation practice, healthy eating habits, and exercise regimen. Moreover, she considers her success within her various social roles to be integrally linked to her understanding and development of the mind-body-spirit connection, enabling her “to be a more effective parent, a more effective businessperson, and a much more effective student.” That Jean’s blog is devoted entirely to its advocacy, therefore, not only demonstrates its significance as a learning interest, but also serves as a tribute to her life experiences. For these reasons, Jean’s blog functions as a kind of intermediary between her preexisting knowledge and new learning – her development as a writer. Her experiences and learning interests inform the topics of blog posts while the blog itself acts as the mechanism by which she simultaneously advances her writing proficiency.

Because Jean’s blog effectively scaffolds new learning via prior experience and learning interests, her independent study as a learning activity aligns most closely with andragogical instruction. For one thing, the andragogical model and the research that has since followed it stress the importance of utilizing adults’ preceding knowledge and experience as resources for learning, which in turn helps determine the kinds of writing assigned to them in the first place. And while a personal blog is not mentioned among the scholars discussed as a particularly effective genre for teaching writing to adults, in Jean’s case, her blog builds upon personal experience much like the writings they suggest. Likewise, her independent study also represents
a project in and of itself, not unlike Collin’s astrology research project and consistent with the basic premise of Gillespie’s project-based learning, albeit without collaborative project groups. Unlike Collin, however, Jean determined both the form and content of her learning activities (the blog), whereas Collin was expected to produce specific writings dictated by his instructor that pertained to his topic. She was allowed much more freedom than any of the learners previously discussed, and her learning activities were thus determined as much, if not more so, by Jean herself as opposed to her instructor. Indeed, andragogy advises that instructor’s negotiate learning objectives with their students, which naturally influence the learning activities that follow. In allowing Jean a stake in all of these areas, therefore, Jean’s instructor upheld the andragogical process by which adult learners are made active participants and joint authorities in their own knowledge acquisition.

Jean’s independent study is only one half of her especially andragogical learning experience, however. Beyond serving as her adviser for her independent study, he also suggested that Jean remain in his digital writing course, allowing her to modify every assignment to fit her vision for her blog. For example, one project involved coding Twitter posts, or tweets, that used certain hashtags. Each tweet was next assigned a descriptor, or code, depending on its content, from which students then created visuals to represent their data. However, rather than code for just any topic that piqued her interest, Jean asked her instructor if she could code tweets for healthy aging, the topic of her blog. She wanted to pinpoint trends among people’s discussions of it in order to gain deeper insight into what specific subtopics she might include within her posts. Unsurprisingly, her instructor happily obliged, allowing her to develop deliverables for her blog via subsequent projects in much the same way. Her instructor thus upheld the andragogical tenet that instructors negotiate learning objectives because he facilitated
win-win learning activities wherein both his and Jean’s learning objectives were concurrently met: she learned the skill he was trying to impart while she created content relevant to her blog. Furthermore, the project’s simultaneous fulfillment of instructor/student learning outcomes parallels Collin’s own learning experiences; however, that Jean’s instructor actively negotiated the design of Jean’s projects with her takes her instructor’s inclusion of andragogical instruction one step further. The very act of negotiating Jean’s projects proffers her shared authority over her learning in a way that is much more substantial than any of the learners discussed, and that her instructor accommodated her self-identified learning objectives affirms that her learning interests are valued.

For her part, Jean loved this. She entered the course already critical of her other instructors’ overuse of conventional papers within her English classes, and she feels their continued emphasis limits her major’s capacity for real-world applicability:

Yeah, it’s okay to learn [about them], but [why is] your whole English degree [based] on writing these same papers over and over again? It’s great if you want to be an English teacher, but how [is writing those kinds of papers] going to apply to life outside of academia?

Consistent with andragogy’s adult learner attribute that adults desire coursework that is relevant and applicable to them, Jean wants her writing assignments to further her long-term goals and takes great issue with writing she feels is only related to academic contexts. Consequently, for her instructor to adapt projects so that they align with her learning interests and desired learning outcomes represents a dramatic shift from Jean’s prior writing experiences, one that not only fostered relevance for Jean personally but situated Jean’s writing (her blog) in conversation with various digital modalities she’s more likely to experience outside of school. Indeed, Jean reflects
on the contrast in applicability between more conventional English classes and her digital writing class: “I don’t know what I’m going to do with my fantastic knowledge of Milton in the real world, but these skills that we’re learning . . . can make my blog more interesting. I find it very valuable.” Jean, like every learner before her, enjoyed those aspects of the course that most closely corresponded with her learning interests. Unlike previous learners, however, this connection was unmistakably intentional because Jean’s instructor knew of her learning interests and adapted each project’s design because of them. Moreover, while all learners considered their writing courses relevant, their relevancy was limited predominantly to the course’s capacity to develop skills; learners were not necessarily developing end-products that were especially useful to them outside of academic contexts or beyond the bounds of the course itself. Jean’s digital writing course, on the other hand, facilitated both the cultivation of relevant skills and the production of relevant products because her instructor allowed Jean shared authority over each assignment’s design. Beyond the benefits already identified by Knowles and echoed in Jean’s classroom experiences, therefore, a supplementary gain from an especially individualized, and therefore andragogical, course seems to be the realization of both applicable skills and relevant products.

If each learner’s classroom experience reflects a spectrum of instruction from traditional, product-focused, teacher-centered pedagogy to progressive, process-focused, student-centered andragogy, Jean’s experience suggests instruction that is undoubtedly the most andragogical of all the learners discussed. While Ron’s, Eileen’s, and Collin’s courses all afforded them spaces within readings and assignments wherein they could – and did – connect and incorporate their interests and experiences, these spaces were not negotiated between their instructors and themselves as Jean’s were. Rather, they chose to fill these preexisting spaces on their own.
Jean’s instructor, on the other hand, consciously adapted assignments so that each project became a deliberate “space” for Jean to “fill,” knowingly connecting her learning interests and life experiences to course content. Indeed, only Jean could fill these spaces because they were designed specifically for her. The extent of her instructor’s adaptability and the corresponding individualization of Jean’s course exceeds that of all the learners examined in this study, and it is precisely because of these distinctions that Jean’s digital writing course and independent study are most reflective of Knowles’ andragogical model of instruction. However, that Jean’s course appears most consistent with andragogy means little if not for the fact that Jean actively pursued such an individualized classroom experience herself. Jean wanted to connect her learning interests to course content, she wanted writing prompts and projects that were relevant to her personally, and she wanted a say in each assignment’s design if she found they weren’t. Consequently, Jean’s reception of her instructor’s fulfillment of these desires was nothing but positive, the realization of which may help educators reflect on the ways their own adaptability in the classroom operates and how their own adult learners may respond to greater individualization.
CHAPTER V: STUDY CONCLUSIONS

The singular recurrent trend exhibited among every adult learner this study discusses is the tendency for them to either occupy or negotiate spaces, which I refer to as “entry points,” for incorporating learner interests and experiences to course content:

- Ron chose a research topic that was both relevant to his career aspirations and directly related to his past experiences;
- Eileen achieved greater understanding of herself and her recent experiences by relating course readings to her divorce;
- Collin used his research project as an opportunity to learn more about a subject that had always piqued his interest;
- And Jean negotiated the design of both an entire course – her independent study – and specific course assignments to best serve her desire to create and develop a blog.

That learners were able to integrate these aspects of themselves in the first place signals the existence of entry points; however, these entry points were not equal in scope, frequency, or design. Nevertheless, because these entry points reflect those moments wherein instruction most engaged each learner and because the entire purpose of andragogical instruction is to actively engage adults in their own learning, the characteristics of these entry points determine the extent to which instruction most corresponded with either pedagogical or andragogical principles. This is not to say that any one moment in these learners’ experiences reflects instruction that was purely pedagogical or exclusively andragogical; rather, the characteristics of these moments reflect instruction that may possess more andragogical or pedagogical features than others.
All study participants were proffered spaces wherein they could connect their learning interests and experiences with course content; however, for all but one of them, the possibility that they might not “fill” these spaces remained. Ron, Eileen, and Collin could have reasonably completed any of their writing assignments without incorporating their interests and experiences at all, so that while these spaces may have been created for them, whether or not Ron, Eileen, and Collin “filled” them depended on the extent these spaces appealed to them in the first place. These entry points, therefore, were prospective. Moreover, these entry points also varied in scope. All study participants’ course assignments were sufficiently open-ended to afford them spaces for integrating their interests and experiences; nevertheless, Ron, Eileen, and Collin all had to fit these aspects of themselves within the bounds of writing prompts whose requirements they themselves had not chosen. As a result, the extent to which they could fit their learning interests and experiences within their writing varied by writing prompt. Ron’s and Eileen’s writing prompts possessed more stipulations than Collin’s; their capacity to serve as entry points was thus more limited.

Jean’s entry points, on the other hand, were not only created for her, they were developed and negotiated by her. She helped design virtually every aspect of her independent study, and her instructor likewise accommodated her requests to adapt her digital writing assignments to suit the needs of her blog. As a result, any compulsory conditions her assignments might have otherwise imposed were effectively defused. Those spaces wherein Jean could incorporate her interests and experiences were not only embedded in nearly every aspect of her class but also necessary to her learning and successful completion of either course. In other words, because Jean had negotiated her courses’ entry points herself for herself, she would – and did – most certainly inhabit them.
Given the situational differences between each learner’s incorporation of interests and experience, the distinction between Ron’s, Eileen’s, and Collin’s classroom experiences and those of Jean’s is course flexibility. Whereas Ron, Eileen, and Collin followed their instructors’ intended trajectory for their courses without ever becoming especially involved in the design of their assignments, Jean was involved in nearly every aspect of hers. However, Ron, Eileen, and Collin didn’t ask to adapt assignments to their own learning interests and experiences as Jean did either. For this reason, their lack of involvement in this respect is not a consequence of their teacher’s failing or inflexibility, neither would it necessarily be appropriate or realistic to accommodate their learning interests and experiences to the extent that Jean’s instructor did.

This distinction in course flexibility and instructor adaptability reflects only the principal disparity among these adults’ classroom experiences; however, the extent of this disparity marks the degree to which their instruction most aligns with andragogical principles. All study participants received instruction and assignments that actively engaged them with their learning, and for this reason, all participants’ courses demonstrated tremendous consistencies with andragogy; nevertheless, only one of them was actively involved in the design of this engagement – Jean. In this sense, each learner’s experiences can be understood as reflecting a spectrum of instruction that moved from being less andragogical to more: Ron’s and Eileen’s courses were the least andragogical, Collin’s was more andragogical than Ron’s and Eileen’s, and Jean’s was the most andragogical of all.

With these key findings in mind, I finally return to the initial research questions that prompted this study:
1. To what extent does the actual practice of postsecondary writing instruction match scholars’ theories (andragogy) and recommendations for teaching writing to adults?

2. Does postsecondary writing instruction differ by institution?

3. Does postsecondary writing instruction differ by the level of the writing class?

4. Regardless of whether or not instruction matches scholars’ theories and recommendations for teaching writing to adults, how do adult students respond to the writing instruction within their own writing classes?

In answer to the first, I found that, by and large, postsecondary writing instruction did match the andragogical principles and practices scholars recommend given that every learner was both actively involved in their own knowledge acquisition and able to connect their interests and experiences to course content. Writing, therefore, was active and engaged rather than passive and performative. Likewise, I also found that instruction differed by institution, albeit, these differences were slight among Ron’s, Eileen’s, and Collin’s introductory writing courses. The largest difference between these learners’ classes seems to coincide with the level of the writing course: whereas Ron’s, Eileen’s, and Collin’s introductory writing classes were all relatively similar to one another, Jean’s advanced digital writing course was drastically different because of how highly individualized it was for Jean specifically. Whatever the differences between study participants’ courses, however, all of them expressed enormous appreciation for both their classes and their instructors. In fact, they held their classes in such high esteem that was when asked if there was anything about them they would change, the only aspects of their courses they believed could possibly be improved upon was their course’s scheduling and the removal of certain distracting classmates. With no complaints to speak of regarding actual writing
instruction, these writing classes, for these adult learners, were beyond doubt an incredible success.

This study sought to capture the essence of adult learners’ experiences within postsecondary writing classes, and while several phenomena can be traced throughout each learner’s experiences, the diversity among them foregrounds the importance that instructors regard their students as individuals whose responses to instruction can and will vary. Instruction will forever be in conversation with learners’ responses to it, and indeed, it is from this interchange of student and instruction that educators’ ways of teaching may realize or even defy their ideals.
APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1st Interview

Basic/Background:

1. How long has it been since you’ve been in school?

2. Why have you decided to return to academia?
   a. Are you seeking a degree? If so, in what and for what purpose?
   b. Are you a full-time or part-time student?

3. Why are you currently enrolled in a college writing course?

4. What are your feelings towards higher education?
   a. What purpose(s) do you feel it serves, if any?

5. What are some of the most prominent feelings you’ve experienced upon both returning and transitioning to academia?
   a. Why do you think you’ve felt this/these way(s)?

6. What are some of the most prominent feelings you’ve experienced in your writing class?
   a. Why do you think you’ve felt this/these way(s)?

7. What do you hope to gain from (1) this class and (2) attending college?

8. How has returning to academia impacted your life?

9. How would you describe yourself as a person?
   a. What job(s)/occupation(s) have you had in the past? What occupation(s)/job(s) do you currently have?

10. How would you describe yourself as a student?
    a. Strengths? Weaknesses?
b. Do you feel that you as a student are any different than the traditional, fresh-out-of-high-school student?
   i. Why/why not?
   ii. If yes, in what ways?

11. Could you describe what an average day for you is like, as both a student and whatever other roles you may have?
   a. How do you balance your life as a student with everything else you may have to do?

*Learning Experiences/Behaviors/Needs:*

1. To what degree do you feel your past educational experiences contributed to your development as a person? As a learner? Explain.
   a. In what ways do you feel your past educational experiences contributed to this development?
      i. Specific teachers/experiences that stand out as significant?

2. To what degree do you feel your professional/job-related experiences contributed to your development as a person? As a learner? Explain.
   a. In what ways do you feel your professional/job-related experiences contributed to this development?

3. To what degree do you feel your personal life experiences contributed to your development as a person? As a learner? Explain.
   a. In what ways do you feel your personal life experiences contributed to this development?
4. Of the above questions on educational, professional, and personal experiences, which do you feel has contributed most to your development as a person? As a learner? Explain.

5. How do you feel you learn best?
   a. What sorts of resources do you make use of/refer to in your academic work?
      i. Which ones do you find most helpful? Least helpful?
         1. Why?

6. Describe your development as a writer, both within and outside of formalized, institutional education.
   a. How have you learned how to write?
   b. What kinds of writing have you been exposed to, both in and outside of formal education?
      i. Exposed to most? Least?
   c. What kinds of writing have you been asked to undertake, both in and outside of formal education?
      i. Most? Least?
   d. What have you/do you enjoy(ed) writing most? Least?
      i. Why?

7. Explain your writing process. How you go about completing a writing assignment.
   a. What does a successful piece of your writing look like to you?
      i. Why?
   b. What do you focus on when you write?
      i. Why?
c. What sorts of issues or errors in your writing do you look to avoid most? Do you pay attention to most? Do you worry about most?
   i. Why?

d. What would you consider your writing strengths to be? Weaknesses?
   i. Why?

8. What do you feel is the teacher’s role or responsibility in the classroom?
   a. What do you think a successful teacher looks like? An unsuccessful one?
      i. Ex: Teaching strategies, attitude, assignments, etc.

**Second Interview**

**Classroom Experiences/Perceived Pedagogy:**

1. What do you enjoy most about your writing course? Least?

2. How important is it to you to have a relationship with your teachers?
   a. Could you describe what that sort of relationship is like, or looks like, for you?
      i. What about in your writing class? How does that play out?

3. Describe what an average class is like for your writing course.
      i. Are most classes structured the same way – for example, as a lecture – or does he/she vary the way classes are conducted?
         1. If so, in what ways?
      ii. What kinds of instructional materials does he/she use?
   b. What sorts of things are you being taught?
i. What do you think about what you’re being taught?

ii. In what ways, if any, does your instructor explain the rationales behind what’s being taught?

iii. How relevant and applicable do you find what’s being taught in your writing course?

1. In what ways do you feel what’s being taught applies to “real life?” To you and your educational and long-term life goals?

iv. What knowledge and sorts of skills do you feel you’re learning from this course?

1. Of these, what do you think will transfer into other courses? Into your life in general?

c. Considering how you are as a person and a learner, how do you feel about the way your writing class is structured and conducted? Explain.

i. How do you feel you respond to the instruction?

1. Why?

4. What sorts of writing and genres have you been exposed to or read in this course?

   a. How do you feel about them?

5. What sorts of assignments or writing have you been asked to complete in your writing class?

   a. How many are graded vs. ungraded? How much do these various assignments factor into your grade?

   i. What about writing assignments specifically? Graded vs. ungraded?

   How much do these writing assignments factor into your grade?
b. How are the assignments presented to you? How are they worded?
   i. What additional information, if any, is given to you along with the
      assignment instructions? (ex: a list of learning goals, rationale for the
      assignment, resources to reference)
   ii. In what ways, if any, does your instructor explain the rationales behind
       what’s been assigned?

c. In what ways, if any, do you feel your writing assignments incorporate and build
   upon your life and experiences? Explain.

d. In what ways, if any, do you feel these writing assignments are relevant and
   applicable to both your educational and long-term life goals? Explain.

e. Could you describe an assignment, if any, you found particularly interesting and
   fun for you?
   i. Why was that the case?

f. Could you describe an assignment, if any, you found particularly difficult and
   didn’t enjoy?
   i. Why was that the case?

g. Considering how you are as a person and a learner, how do you feel about the
   assignments you’ve been given? Explain.
   i. How do you feel your respond to, or handle, the assignments you’re
      given?
      1. Why?

6. What kind of feedback have you received from your instructor on assignments?
   a. How do you feel about it?
7. Were you required to complete any kind of self-assessment wherein you were asked to determine your own learning needs and desired competencies/outcomes from taking the course?
   a. If so, describe what they were like.
      i. When were these self-assessments assigned? At the beginning of the semester? At the end? Both?
         1. What did you think of them?
   b. If not, what are your thoughts on that idea?

8. Is your class allowed any input on what information is to be taught or what assignments are to be administered?
   a. If so, in what way/to what extent? Is it at the classroom level? Individual level?
      i. How do you feel about it?
   b. If not, what are your thoughts on that idea?

9. In what ways, if any, do you feel your past writing experiences influenced your current feelings towards and performance in this writing class?

10. In what ways, if any, has your instructor helped relieve any anxiety or apprehension you may have towards the class or assignments?

11. In what ways, if any, has your instructor adapted instruction to accommodate your specific learning needs and interests?

12. In what ways, if any, has your instructor adapted assignments to accommodate your specific learning needs and interest?
13. In what ways, if any, has your instructor accommodated outside obligations or responsibilities you may have that could potentially conflict with instruction, assignments, and/or assignment deadlines?

14. Given everything we’ve discussed in the preceding questions, overall, what are your general thoughts and feelings about your writing class?
   a. Why?

15. Is there anything you wished was different about your writing course?
   a. If so, what?
      i. Why?


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