

Synergistic Andragogy: Reflections from the Professors

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Introduction

Synergistic Andragogy (SA) is a type of learning which occurs through the interaction of two or more groups of adult learners such that the combined effect is greater than the sum of individual group learning. SA combines two concepts, synergy and andragogy, to create a powerful learning process.

The word “synergy” comes from the Greek *sunergiā*, meaning cooperation, and from the Greek *sunergos*, meaning working together (Synergy, 2008a; Synergy, 2008b). Synergism brings two or more forces together based on the belief that joint efforts and combined energies are greater than individual efforts. Research suggests that the value, performance, and power of teams, groups, and collectives are always going to be stronger than individuals acting alone (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003).

Malcolm Knowles, the “father of adult learning,” brought to popular use the term “Andragogy,” which had previously been defined in Europe as the parallel to pedagogy (Saunders, 1991). Knowles argued that the adult learning process is significantly different than a child’s learning process (Birzer, 2004). Knowles eventually summarized six key assumptions about adult learners, which he said are the foundation of adult learning: (1) Self-concept: as a person matures, his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality towards one of being a self-directed human being; (2) Experience: As a person matures, he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes a resource for learning; (3) Readiness to learn: As a person matures, his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented to the development task of his/her social roles; (4) Orientation to learn: As a person matures, his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his/her orientation towards learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness; (5) Motivation to learn: As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal; (6) The need to know: Adults need to know the reason for learning something. (Forrest III & Peterson, 2006; Kidd, 1973; Knowles, 1984a, 1984b; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Lindeman, 1926; Ozuah, 2005; Thompson & Deis, 2004; Tough, 1979; Yoshimoto, Inenaga, & Yamada, 2007, p. 81).

Synergistic Andragogy Process

Synergistic andragogy brings two or more adult learning groups together with the purpose of producing more learning than either group might experience individually. To create SA a series of six steps are taken. The six steps that have been identified are:

1. Identify two or more adult learning groups.
2. Identify a common theme central to both groups.
3. Identify a learning objective or end result for students to achieve.
4. Provide different means of andragogical instruction.
5. Bring groups together for a common learning experience.
6. Evaluate.

Experiences using Synergistic Andragogy in an academic setting

SA was used during the course of one semester to enhance the learning experience of students enrolled in two separate university-level courses. One course was Organizational Development and the other was

Human Resource Development. Both were part of a graduate program in adult and organizational learning. Most of these students were at the master's level though a number were doctoral students. The ensuing follows the six step process which was undertaken to create a synergistic adult learning environment.

Step 1: Identify two or more adult learning groups

Two adult learning groups were identified. The members of one group were nine students enrolled in a graduate level Human Resource Development (HRD) class. The purpose of this course was identified in the class syllabus: "(a) explore various models and principles that inform best HRD practices, (b) understand theories and philosophies that shape and form HRD efforts, and (c) gain greater insight into individual and organizational learning, performance, and change."

The members of the second group were fifteen students enrolled in a graduate level Organization Development (OD) class. The purpose of this class, as identified in the class syllabus, was to examine the theories and practices of "planned strategies for organization development." The class explored issues such employee motivation, training, analyzing and sculpting the corporate culture, and determining the skill and knowledge gaps of the human resources. The subject matter of the two courses was related but not the same.

The classes were designed as hybrid courses. Each met face-to-face every other week, and online on the alternative weeks using the Blackboard online platform. Two students were in both classes.

Step 2: Identify a common theme central to both groups

"Organizational sustainability" was chosen as a theme to focus on throughout the semester. Sustainability is a hot topic these days as environmental issues have moved to the forefront of governmental, corporate, and non-profit agendas. Organizational sustainability includes, but is more than, adopting practices which will make our world more environmentally viable. Organizations have to compete for resources, such as talent or market share, and to survive over time will have to successfully produce goods or services in return for funding or sales. For purposes of this exercise, "organizational sustainability" was defined as that which causes organizations to survive and thrive over the long term.

Step 3: Identify a learning objective or end result for students to achieve

The terminal learning objective defined at the beginning of the academic semester was to create a model of organizational sustainability.

Step 4: Provide different means of andragogical instruction

Different andragogical techniques for instruction were then employed throughout the semester. In addition to regular course materials, assignments, reports, and discussions, the instructors started by providing both groups with literature on sustainability. The students were asked to read common articles. The purpose was to develop a baseline of information about organizational sustainability and to develop student interest for discovering more about the topic. Internal motivation is one of the key assumptions of andragogical instruction.

Weekly assignments were also included. The focal point of each assignment was to ask students to relate the learning concepts for that week to their own situation or experiences. Each student then shared their assignments with the rest of the class for further discussion. According to Knowles, adults tend to learn better by relating their past reservoir of experiences to current course content. By applying course material to real situations students were also more ready to learn – another of Knowles' andragogical assumptions. This was highly effective due to the eclectic backgrounds of the students. Allowing for students to hear about others' experiences in completely different backgrounds helped them to more usefully apply the readings and discussions to their own situations. These weekly assignments, which were posted online, fostered not only discussions in the classroom but also online throughout the week.

Students were placed in groups of 5-7 people for the semester. The premise was that smaller groups would facilitate more depth of discussion and encourage participation both online and in the classroom. These groups worked together on a major assignment, but also discussed the weekly topics and assignments, posed questions, and shared ideas that interested them. This encouraged self-directed learning and lively online discussion, which often ranged into topics not directly assigned but of related interest to students. Often they were dealing with real issues in their own work situations and inquired

about approaches to take to solve their own problems and opportunities. Each of these approaches also reinforced Knowles andragogical assumptions as described above.

Step 5: Bring the groups together for a common learning experience

Throughout the semester the instructors provided opportunities for the groups to meet together. The primary mechanism for this was through class guest speakers. Guest speakers would come to discuss topics that were common to both courses and tied to the common theme of sustainability. The two courses met on the same day of the week on alternating weeks to make it as easy as possible for students to attend these sessions if desired.

The class produced two products through their mutual learning efforts. One was a combined annotated bibliography of articles about sustainability gathered by members of the two classes throughout the semester and compiled by the instructors. The other was a group of four organizational concept maps.

At the end of the semester a joint class meeting was scheduled with the purpose of sharing knowledge gathered throughout the course of the semester. The specific objective of this session was to create organizational sustainability models based upon the information, discussion, and reflection accumulated throughout the semester. It was important to incorporate the central theme that was identified in Step 2 and to achieve the desired end result established by the instructors in Step 3. The process used for the evening is outlined in Table One.

Groups for the session included students from both courses. They brought their knowledge and experience from their respective courses and life experiences. This meeting was the culmination of SA. Not only did students indicate that the session was among the most effective and interesting learning experiences of the semester, but the experience brought together the best thinking and knowledge from their respective courses and life experiences. They were able to look at the issue of organizational sustainability not just from one course perspective but from multiple perspectives. The SA learning objective was met in a tangible way. Four concept maps were developed during that session (Figures 1-4). The four perspectives led to further discussion about the complexity of organizational sustainability and the differing paradigms that individuals bring to organizational and societal issues.

Step 6: Evaluate

Two forms of evaluation were used. The first was a reflective process between the three instructors. The second was an electronic student survey. Both were qualitative processes that yielded useful insights for future SA learning design. Student and instructor responses related to the SA learning experience over the semester included:

Went well

Both students and instructors thought the joint model building session at the end of the semester was a powerful, intriguing, and enjoyable learning experience.

Group discussions were enjoyable and valuable to students. The amount of coursework involved made it overwhelming for some to do both individual and group work online.

Students highly valued the hybrid class structure. Having both classes on the same day of the week, alternating courses weekly, was however confusing to some students and might have been especially challenging to the students taking both classes simultaneously.

The topic of organizational sustainability was a good one to practice SA. Not only is sustainability perceived to be an important societal topic it also was directly related to the material covered in the two courses. Students were intrigued with how sustainability, which is often defined more narrowly as related solely to environmental issues, relates in a broader way to organizational success over time.

The guest speakers were very effective and brought outside concepts that students found interesting and informative. Providing the opportunity for both classes to attend these sessions added to the mutual knowledge development.

In general, students valued the variety of learning experiences throughout the semester.

Could Be More Effective Next Time

Scheduling mutual meeting times should be planned well ahead of time so students can take advantage of the learning opportunity.

More mutual work, like the annotated bibliography and the concept mapping exercise would have increased SA learning through the semester. The guest speakers were informative and caused discussion but more joint work, preferably earlier in the semester, should be considered for future SA learning experiences.

The assignments and readings for the sustainability theme created additional work which made already demanding courses even more so. Future designed SA learning experiences should be careful not to overload students.

Additional Thoughts

All three instructors met weekly to evaluate and assess progress throughout the semester. It was a learning experience for the instructors as well. Two of the instructors were students that were co-teaching with the third, a faculty member. This was the first time the teaching group taught the courses. It was an experiment to explore SA through these joint learning experiences and so the instructors no doubt learned just as much as the students. For example, time management and the coordination of the two groups played a very instrumental role that had not been fully anticipated. When it was well laid out the learning experiences were very powerful, when changes were made along the way they were less so.

When dealing with one group it is easier to adjust. When working with multiple groups, and there is an expectation of creating synergy between them, timing issues are more difficult to coordinate. Adults tend to have multiple commitments – especially graduate students who are working full time. As long as a schedule can be placed before them for what is going to happen in the course of four months, they are more able to plan. The instructors adjusted as they learned throughout the semester and the mid-course changes were difficult for some of our students.

It was extremely valuable for the instructors to have an excellent working relationship with one another. The ability to bounce off ideas of one another and be able to rely on each other was vital. The ability for the instructors to meet on a regular basis - at least once a week physically and every day electronically – was essential.

SA has a number of advantages. It allows for the power of bringing the knowledge and experience of multiple groups together to produce a better end result. By incorporating andragogical principles students develop more powerful learning experiences and become more motivated to learn. SA has the ability to create cohesive learning environments that could go beyond the classroom setting.

One of the biggest drawbacks to a SA approach is that it is much more time intensive than instructing a normal class. SA requires the coordination between two or more groups, perhaps with multiple instructors. Adults have complex lives and responsibilities which makes course management additionally challenging. Each of the two groups also develops its own identity so mixing them together successfully also takes thought and deft facilitation.

Conclusion

Synergistic Andragogy is a new way of considering adult learning experience. Although it lacks empirical support, it shows signs of potential. Bringing multiple groups together to create and/or solve a common objective could prove to be extremely beneficial. The six stages proposed are process steps for SA to occur. Although this work and approach is exploratory the opportunity to create synergy learning experiences is an important and potentially useful avenue for both practice and research. In the words of Helen Keller, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much” (Keller, 2001).

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Tables and Figures

Table One: Model Building Session

Organizational Sustainability
Inter-Course Model Building Session Outline
<p>Welcome</p> <p>Logistics for the session.</p> <p>Purpose of the day: to try to build an organizational sustainability model based upon our readings and exercises. The goal is to build a visual model of what we believe will lead to organizational sustainability.</p>
<p>Resources</p> <p>Playing cards</p> <p>Markers/tape</p> <p>Flip Charts</p>
<p>Room</p> <p>Four chevrons w/5 seats.</p>
<p>Activities</p> <p>How are you “sustained” in difficult times? (music, prayer, e.g., and etc). (Flip Chart responses).</p> <p>Theory and Model Building Presentation (Overheads).</p> <p>Each person take a card (use Aces through 10’s) – for group assignments and reassignments.</p>
<p>Mind Mapping</p> <p>Mind Mapping exercise.</p> <p>Pick the most important variables which affect organizational sustainability (in groups).</p> <p>Groups Share – 30 minutes.</p> <p>Pick the five most important variables for entire group (Flip Chart responses).</p>
<p>Concept Mapping</p> <p>Concept Mapping Exercise - show the relationships between the variables previously identified.</p> <p>Show and tell.</p> <p>Now – go to your model and circle the places where OD/HRD have the most leverage.</p> <p>Group Discussion.</p>
<p>Summary and Debrief</p>

Figure 1: Organizational Sustainability Concept Map One

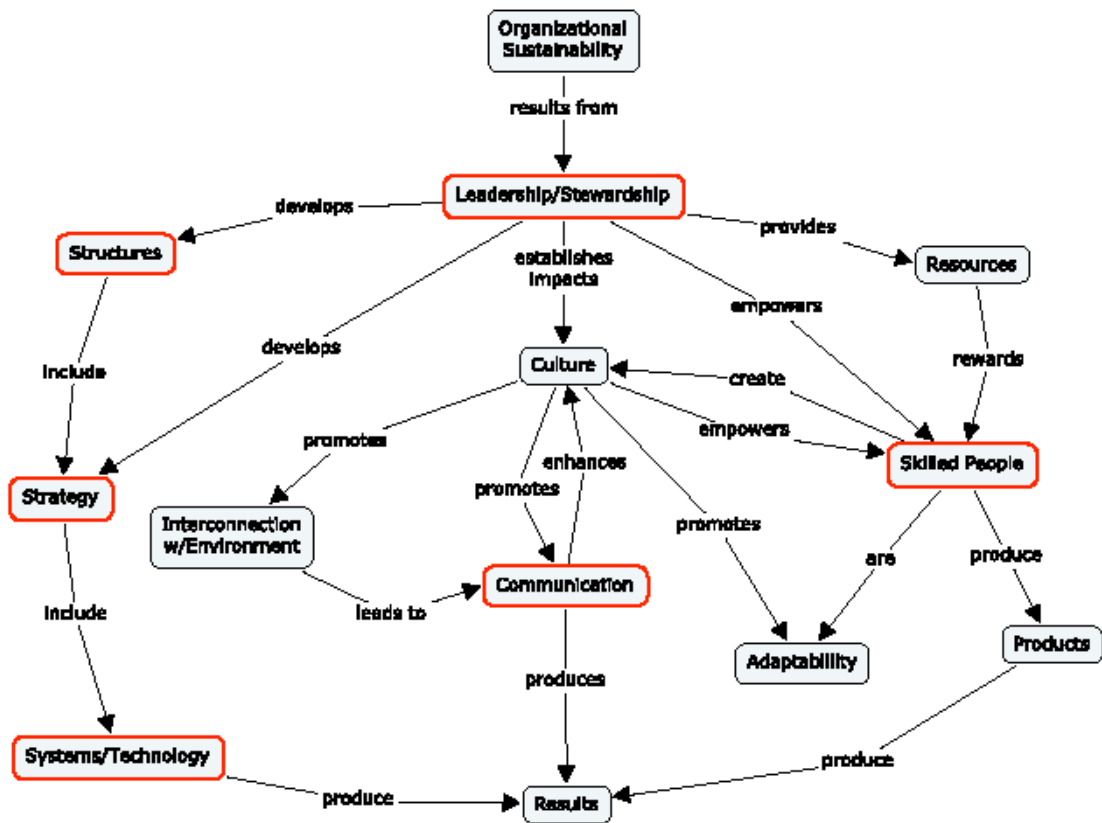


Figure 2: Organizational Sustainability Concept Map Two

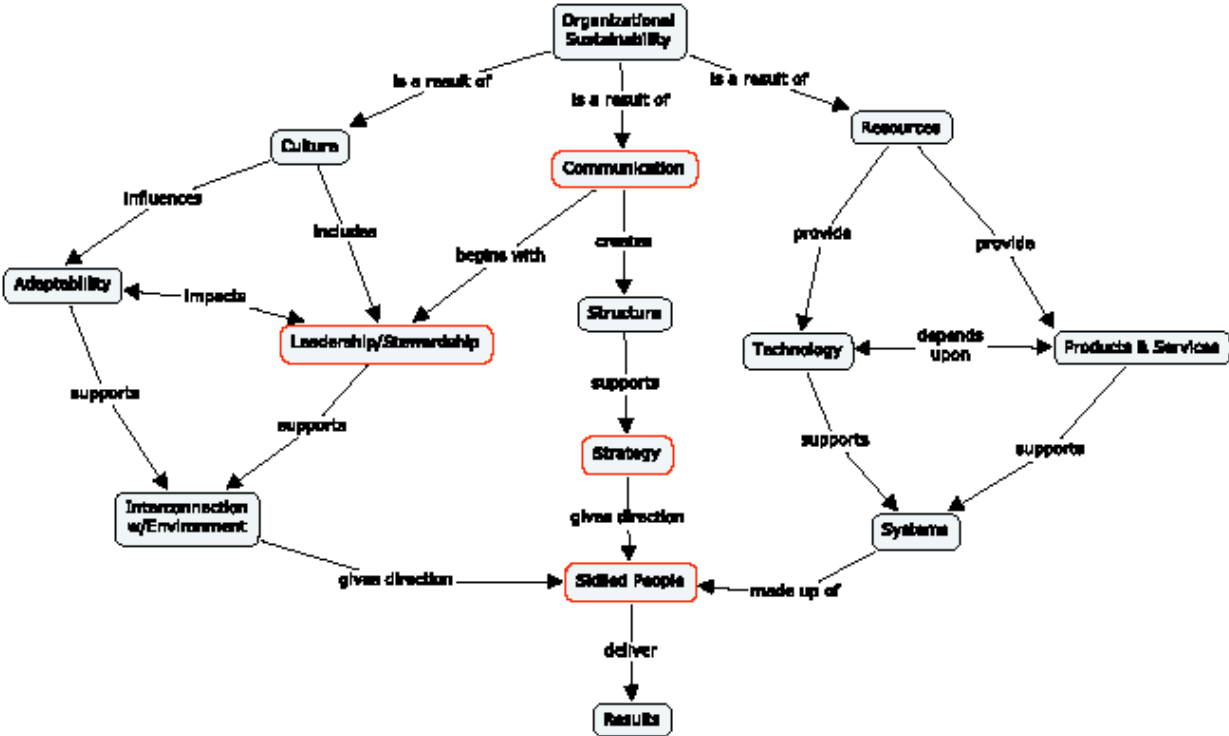


Figure 3: Organizational Sustainability Concept Map Three

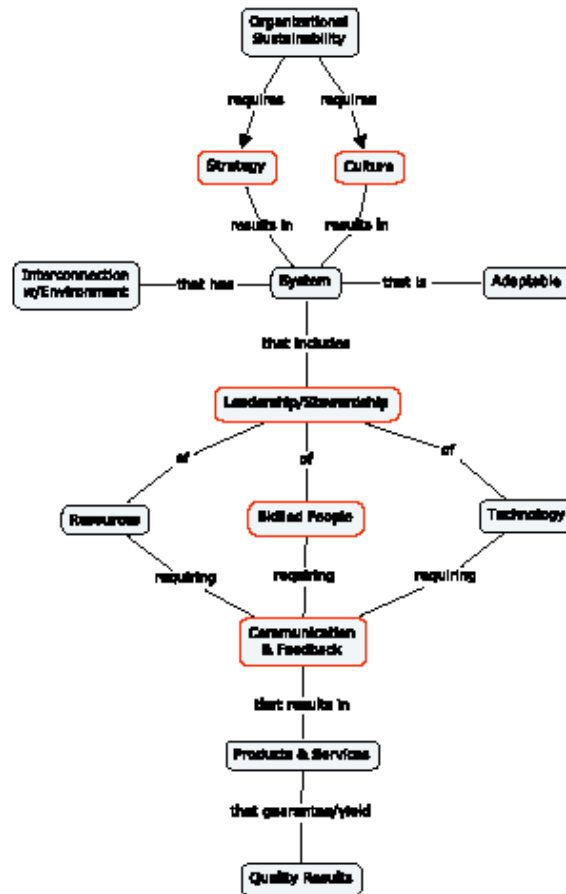


Figure 4: Organizational Sustainability Concept Map Four

