Adult Learner navigating research in a 'Fake News' era

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Abstract

Today's students must learn to navigate their research through a new era of 'fake news'. The focus of this article was a focus on the practicalities of administering self-reports on systematic research projects from sixty-one adult learners enrolled in graduate-level research courses during February 2017 to October 2017. This article reviewed feedback from adult learners in both community-based and educational settings in higher education. Seventy-five percent of the self-reports came from adult learners working on graduate research projects to obtain either a master's degree in business or public administration. The other six percent of the self-reports came from community members involved in public research projects. This article addressed suggestions for helping adult learners in the areas of orientation to learning and motivation to learn based on self-reports.

Keywords: Adult Learners, Misinformation, Navigating research

Introduction

Students reported feeling overwhelmed by the abundance of information and 'fake news' that must search through to complete timely and meaningful scholarship. Others reported feeling unprepared to embark upon the task conducting research and sharing their findings. The era of 'fake news' must be identified and addressed.

There are many commonly held definitions of 'fake news'. "*Fake news, or hoax news, refers to false information or propaganda published under the guise of being authentic news. Fake news websites and channels push their fake news content in an attempt to mislead consumers of the content and spread misinformation via social networks and word-of-mouth. One of the more colorful definitions of fake news comes from PolitiFact: "Fake news is made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word" (*Stroud).

By the end of this case, students should be able to understand a framework for research and adult learning; students should be able to apply orientation and motivation to research projects; and students have a deeper appreciation of engagement and sharing of research concerns during an era of fake news since the USA presidential election of 2016*." Fake news reports soar on social media, where links are given the same weighting regardless of source, and particularly on Facebook, where there is a potential audience of 1.89b"* (Guardian).

Materials and Methods

I have observed many political elections since the 1960's. I have taught adult learners for some decades now and have covered numerous topics and subjects. I have taught some phenomenal college students over the years; however, I am still somewhat amazed at the attitudes that many adult learners have towards the initial thought of having to produce scholarly work and their concerns about the truth in their findings. *'Fake news' has rapidly become a catch-all term to discredit all kinds of stories. We need to be smarter at recognizing and combating outright fabrication'* (Guardian).

Graduate level students during February 2017 to October 2017 at National University in Los Angeles, California. Students reported feeling overwhelmed by the abundance of information and 'fake news' that must search through to complete timely and meaningful scholarship. Others reported feeling unprepared to embark upon the task conducting research and sharing their findings. The era of 'fake news' must be identified and addressed.

The focus of this article was on the practicalities of administering self-reports on systematic research projects from adult learners who are overwhelmed with 'fake news*." Fake news reports soar on social media, where links are given the same weighting regardless of source, and particularly on Facebook, where there is a potential audience of 1.89b"* (Guardian). First this case drew its systematic implementation approach for the body of work by Alan Lakein, "an early leader in time management, suggested in his book *How to Get Control of Your Time and Life*, The Swiss-Cheese Concept. Secondly, this article drew its theoretical framework context from the meaningful work of Dr. Malcolm Knowles. *In 1980, Knowles made 4 assumptions about the characteristics of <u>adult learners</u> (andragogy) that are different from the assumptions about child learners (pedagogy). In 1984, Knowles added the 5th assumption. (1) Self-Concept*-As a person matures his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.* As a professor of public administration, I often may have a group of students at the beginning of their graduate program and then again in their research project course at the end of their academic degree. *(2) Adult Learner Experience*-As a person matures he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.* Most of my students are working full time and in professional position prior to beginning their research project. They have a wealth of knowledge and experiences to draw from as they engage the research process. *(3) Readiness to Learn*-As a person matures his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.* Most of my students are enrolled in hybrid learning programs where they meet face-to face and on line. The other group of adult learners meet on line only. Both groups demonstrate readiness to learn. *(4) Orientation to Learning-As a person matures his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. As a result, his/her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject- centeredness to one of problem centeredness.* This article addressed suggestions for helping adult learners in the areas of orientation to learning and motivation to learn based on self- reports. *(5) Motivation to Learn* -*As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal (Knowles 1984:12).* Motivation comes from within; thus, the educator of adult learners must create an environment which encourages and fosters learning.

Results and Discussion

The focus of this article was on the practicalities of administering self-reports on systematic research projects from adult learners. This article reviewed feedback from adult learners in both community-based and educational settings in higher education. Seventy-five percent of the self-reports came from adult learners working on graduate research projects to obtain either a master's degree in business or public administration. The other six percent of the self-reports came from community members involved in public research projects. This article reflected on self-reports shared by adult learners about lessons learned from the research experiences. Findings from this article support the research of Knowles and Kearsley, which suggested four principles that are applicable to adult learning.

I concur with the following four principles applicable to adult learning: (1) *Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction* Adult learners need the freedom to discuss and select their own research topics within scope of learning objectives and goals. (2) *Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.* Adult learning is a process. Thus, research should involve fun and meaningful learning activities as part of the research project phase of academics. (3) *Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life.* Research projects must have professional development and personal enrichment significance for adult learners. (4) *Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented. (Kearsley, 2010).* Adult learning is proactive, not reactive.

Article was conducted with focus on revisiting the importance of understanding adult learning in research from a practical standpoint. Self-reports from sixty-one adult learners were shared and the findings were summarized and developed in the Method in Action portion of this article. The methodology included identification of common research concerns self-reported by adult learners using descriptive research model format.

All sixty-one learners were presented the 'Swiss-Cheese Concept' and shown systematic approaches to utilizing the technique in their scholarly work. The point was 'that when you face a large, complex task that cannot be accomplished in an uninterrupted time span, divide it into smaller, less overwhelming parts' (Lakein).

Self-reports from adult learners of major research concerns were grouped are found time management, orientation and motivation to be essential to student success.

Based on the body of work by Knowles and Kearsley, this article expanded on two of the five assumptions of adult learning: '*Orientation*' and *'Motivation*' as it related to research and placed in two groups. This article addressed practical applications for helping adult reports. List of self-reported research concerns shared by students.

(1) Fear of research project -Orientation. (2) Problems with writing skills-Motivation. (3) Unclear how to organize written project – Orientation. (4) Not understanding primary vs secondary research – Motivation and (5) Misuse of correct research design for project; Incorrect references and citations inability to narrow the focus of the research topic – Orientation. The aforementioned concerns reported by adult learners were grouped to areas of focus: Orientation to learning '*about research'* in specifics and Motivation to learn.

The focus of this article was a focus on the practicalities of administering self-reports on systematic research projects from eighty-five adult learners enrolled in graduate-level research courses during February 2017 to October 2017. "*Fake news reports soar on social media, where links are given the same weighting regardless of source, and particularly on Facebook, where there is a potential audience of 1.89b" (*Guardian). All students had eight weeks to complete a comprehensive research proposal or project while separating 'real news' and 'fake news'. Ninety-nine percent finished project within the eight weeks period; however, majority of students completed their project in six weeks. What went well as the lesson on the 'Swiss-Cheese Concept' because students could really relate to the notion of being overwhelmed; but, yet making a difference, one bite at a time. Students were asked to break their research into manageable parts. They did the following research activities: (1) Visited a research library to narrow down their topic using 'real news'. Most students had not been inside a physical library in years. They self-reported on the calm and comfortable environment of the library that they had forgotten about over the hectic routine of their adult working lives. (2) Made an appointment with the writing center and worked with a tutor on some aspect of their research project. Students did not know of the services of the writing center; and yet learned so much from their tutors in such a brief visit. Students received some guidance from tutor in identifying and selecting 'real news' over 'fake news'. (3) Students were asked to share their research status and updates weekly with classmates which created responsibility and accountability among the classmates. And (4) each student was required to make an oral presentation either on line or face to face, depending on class location. This process created student 'ownership of their research'.

There were several lessons learned from the findings. This article addressed suggestions for helping adult learners in the areas of orientation to learning and motivation to learn based on self- reports. Lesson #1: The number one concern shared by students was their 'fear' of research project. 'Fear of research' is one of seven deadly fears explored. Using 'Orientation to learning' can help adult learners to develop research project flows smoothly towards full completion. The other research concerned shared were: 'unclear how to organize written project,' and 'misuse of correct research design for project, incorrect references and citations, inability to narrow the focus of research topic.' Students could gain greater proficiency and clarity through more effort towards understanding the orientation of learning within the framework of research. Most students felt that research was only given a cursory overview until they research their thesis and project courses. Greater research involvement and activities are needed for adult learners. The second lesson learned #2 – Students expressed personal problems, in general, with writing skills. The other concern was not understanding the difference between primary vs secondary research. These concerns could be addressed with more attention to 'Motivation' of learners and better preparation. Lastly, using organizational and time management skills is critical to productive and proactive student research.

Conclusions

Today's students must develop skills in navigating the mines of 'fake news' and elaborate campaigns of misinformation (Lyle). The emphasis of this article was a focus on the practicalities of administering self-reports on systematic research projects from sixty-one adult learners enrolled in graduate-level research courses during February 2017 to October 2017. This article reviewed feedback from adult learners employed in public service, community-based and educational settings in higher education; and enrolled full time in graduate programs. Self-reports from these adult learners revealed fear and some major research concerns that they believed could impact their ability to produced scholarly work. \

Based on the body of work by Knowles and Kearsley, this article expanded on two of the five assumptions of adult learning: '*Orientation*' and *'Motivation*' as it related to research was self-report as paramount two along need for 'Time Management' as essential strategies to succeeding proactively in a step by step manner towards helping the adult learner complete proposals and research projects using 'real news'.

Lastly students reported great satisfaction with their completed research projects and the learning process. When asked, just how did you do this project in less than two months; they replied, " I used real-news and I *Swiss-Cheesed* it". This article reviewed feedback from adult learners in both community-based and educational settings in higher education. The grouping of 'orientation' and 'motivation' was useful; however, it took more effort than applying the Swiss-Cheese Concept.

Students can use social media tools to develop their own 'real news' and new creating new approaches to learning such as "GoReact is the #1 tool for teaching performance-based skills online. It's an interactive cloud-based video software for grading and critiquing lessons, presentations, and performances—like game film for educators," as we shift through the murky lines of 'real and fake' news for today's scholars.

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