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## At Issue: Improving Your Teaching Using Synergistic Andragogy

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**Improving Your Teaching  
Using Synergistic Andragogy**

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**Introduction**

Synergistic Andragogy (SA) is related to the concept of Synergogy as presented by Mouton and Blake (1984). Synergogy, much like SA, is an alternative mode of education. Mouton and Blake define synergogy as a “systematic approach to learning in which the members of small teams learn from one another through structured interactions” (Mouton 1984, p. xii). Synergogy focuses on learner motivation and involvement, whereas Synergistic Andragogy (SA) focuses on the learning experience and its potentially powerful outcomes. 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 process that adult educators can use in a variety of environments to create a powerful learning process. 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 often stronger than individuals acting alone (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). Andragogy was popularized by Malcolm Knowles, who argued

that the adult learning process is significantly different than a child's learning process (Knowles, 1984). Knowles eventually summarized six key assumptions about adult learners, which he said are the foundation of adult learning.

The purpose of this article is to describe an exercise in how SA was executed over one semester through a six step model. The foundations of SA and how we integrated organizational sustainability as the theme is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Kroth, Taylor, & Lindner, *in press*).

### **Experiences using Synergistic Andragogy in an academic setting**

SA was used during one semester to enhance the learning experience of adults enrolled in two separate university-level courses. The following six step process (Figure 1) was undertaken to create a synergistic adult learning environment.

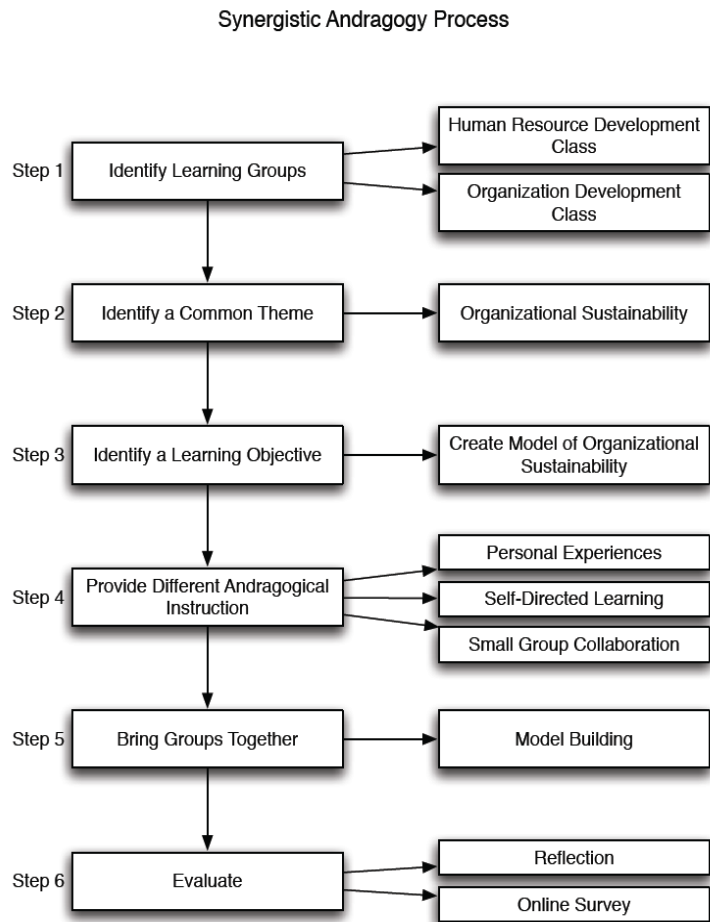


Figure 1: The Six Step Process of SA

*Step 1: Identify two or more adult learning groups*

Two adult learning groups were identified. The members of one group were students enrolled in a graduate level Human Resource Development (HRD) class. The members of the second group were students enrolled in a

graduate level Organization Development (OD) class. The classes were designed as hybrid courses. Each met face-to-face every other week, and online on the alternate weeks using the Blackboard online platform.

*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 an important topic these days as environmental issues have moved to the forefront of governmental, corporate, and non-profit agendas and we wanted to make the experience meaningful for students (Lindeman, 1926). 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. 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. By applying course material to real situations students were also more ready to learn. 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.

Students were placed in groups of 5-7 people for the semester. This facilitated more depth of discussion and participation both online and in the classroom, and 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 individual problems and opportunities.

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

Throughout the semester the instructors provided opportunities for the groups to meet together. Guest speakers would come to discuss topics that were common to both courses and tied to the theme of sustainability.

The classes produced two products through their mutual learning efforts. One was a combined annotated bibliography of articles about organizational 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.

This meeting was the culmination of SA. Four concept maps were developed during that session. 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.

All three instructors met weekly to evaluate and assess progress throughout the semester. Two of the instructors were students that were co-teaching with the third, a faculty member. This process was an experiment to explore SA, and the instructors learned as much as the students.

### **Conclusion**

Synergistic Andragogy brings multiple groups together to create and/or solve a common objective. The six stages proposed are process steps for SA to occur. Although this work and approach is exploratory, the opportunity to create synergistic learning experiences is an important and potentially useful avenue for both practice and research.

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