

Examining the Appreciative Instruction Methods Used by Instructors within an Adult Degree Completion Associate's Program

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Abstract

This study examines the appreciative instruction methods used by instructors within an online Adult Degree Completion Associates degree program. The researchers conducted a qualitative study that assesses the appreciative instruction methods used by instructors of the Associate of Science in Professional Studies (ASPS) program. The ASPS program is designed to apply students' past achievements and peak performance learning moments toward degree attainment. The results of the study revealed key themes of the instructional methods used by instructors within the ASPS program which contributed to the development of a Model for Appreciative Instruction within Adult Degree Completion Programs. The study has implications on the faculty and program development frameworks that are used within Adult Degree Completion Programs.

Keywords

appreciative education, degree-completion, adult learners

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center ([NSC], 2019), 36 million U.S. residents hold some postsecondary education or training, but no degree. The NSC data further illustrated that at least 10 percent of these individuals completed at least two years of academic credit. These students are more likely to complete a degree upon reenrollment than other former students with college credit (NSC, 2019). With this in mind, the need for degree completion programs has become increasingly significant and relevant.

The Associate of Science in Professional Studies (ASPS) program is an adult degree completion program designed to leverage students' strengths and past peak performances. These practical experiences are evaluated and converted into academic credit that can be applied towards the degree program. Degree completion programs are particularly relevant for adult learners because they use their experiences and training to minimize student debt and expedite time and toward degree completion (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2018). Furthermore, these programs can play an important role in enrollment growth strategies as they attract and incentivize students to further their education with advanced degrees (Shapiro et al., 2019). There is a need for instructors within these programs to have a sound understanding of instructional methods in order to leverage students' strengths so that they may thrive.

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The purpose of the current study is to examine the appreciative instruction methods used by instructors within the ASPS program. The following questions guided the researchers' inquiry into the impact of the ASPS program:

1. To what extent do online instructors employ appreciative instruction techniques into their teaching practices?
2. How do online instructors perceive the importance of appreciative instruction?
3. To what extent do online instructors see appreciative instruction help students meet the intended program outcomes?

Literature Review

Adult Learners and Non-Traditional Students

More than 40% of the undergraduate population at American colleges and universities are classified as non-traditional students (Center for Law and Social Policy [CLASP], 2015). The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) defines nontraditional students as having one of seven characteristics: (1) delayed college enrollment; (2) part-time college student; (3) full-time employment; (4) financially independent; (5) has children or other dependents; (6) single parent; or (7) a student that has not earned a high school diploma. As such, many non-traditional students are adult learners as well.

Many non-traditional students choose online degree programs that have been crafted specifically to meet the needs of non-traditional and adult learners. These students tend to prefer online learning for reasons such as accessibility, flexibility, convenience, and connectedness (Simunich, Robbins & Kelly, 2015). Associate degree programs are in high demand and enrollments continue to grow among non-traditional students (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2018). Non-traditional students are particularly interested in learning new skills and gaining certifications that can be applied toward a future degree (Marcus, 2020). This concept is known as 'stackable credentials'. Marcus (2020) states that the economic toll of the COVID-19 pandemic is giving stackable credentials a burst of momentum. Students will need more education to get back into the workforce, and they will need to earn it quickly, at the lowest possible cost, and in subjects directly relevant to available jobs. Therefore, these programs require instructors who understand the strengths and needs of this non-traditional student population (Addae, 2016; Adebisi & Oyeleke, 2018). The current study examines the instructional practices of instructors within such a program.

Appreciative Advising and Appreciative Instruction

Appreciative Advising is the intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help student optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). These appreciative questions often focus on past peak performances and successes.

The appreciative approach parallels the past experiences principal of andragogy and also aligns with adult learning best practices. Knowles (1980) defined andragogy as the art and science of teaching adults. One of the key principles of andragogy involves the role of past experiences that adult learners possess. Adults tend to come into the educational arena with a richer array of experiences than traditional age students. Adult learning professionals believe that prior experiences are the richest resources available to the non-traditional student (Ozuah, 2005).

At the University of Montana, adult educators apply appreciative instruction (AI), which is closely related to appreciative advising. They skip general student introductions and have students describe past learning experiences. For example, "Can you think of a learning

situation in which you excelled? What was that like? Can you give us a specific example of learning something? How did you learn it” (Simunich, Robbins, & Kelly, 2015)? The method is growing in popularity and in educational practice (Auguste, 2018; Kenrick, 2019). There is a need to further investigate the impact of the appreciative instruction as it pertains to adult learners, non-traditional learners, military learners, and online learners.

Methods

Program Context

All students admitted into the ASPS have previously completed a technical certificate or a significant amount of practical training, typically while serving in the United States military. In the ASPS program, in addition to a General Education core, students are required to complete two required professional studies program courses: an FYE course and a capstone course. Both courses utilize appreciative instructional techniques and build upon students’ past peak performances.

All ASPS students take an FYE course during their first semester. While the course curriculum introduces students to strength-based approaches, the discussions focus on student motivation and past peak performances. The course is thematic in design and divided into four modules. Module 1 addresses the student’s academic motivation, preferred learning style, and how general education adds value to their past work experience (theory - practice). Module 2 introduces critical thinking skills and technical literacy. In Module 3, students build an academic plan that focuses on their strengths and support network. Module 4 focuses on long-term career goals, including a discussion of one’s strengths and how they relate to future career goals.

The capstone course is taken during the students’ final session. It is a culminating and reflective experience in which the students’ past, present, and future culminate with a final scholarly project. The project builds upon the students’ work life experience (professional and technical/vocational certification) and degree coursework (Liberal Arts coursework) and addresses today’s challenges and opportunities as they relate to students’ educational and professional goals.

Instructors play a critical role in sustaining student motivation and confidence building. Introductory and FYE courses strategically place engaging instructors who understand the importance of centering lessons on the students’ experience. Additionally, these instructors integrate student success skills into curriculum and connect students with university resources that aid in their degree progress. Furthermore, class discussions and feedback make certain to take an appreciative approach to teaching by highlighting strengths of students’ in-class performances and guide students toward strategies to strengthen their writing over the duration of the session.

Advisors of professional-studies degree completion programs work intimately with program instructors to support at-risk students and motivate students. These advisor-student conversations take an appreciative advising approach, while focusing on the student’s previous successes. Using this approach, advisors identify the successes of students and then refocus conversations into actionable steps used to make progress on assignments within the courses.

Participants

The researchers addressed the research questions through the administration of qualitative surveys at a 100% online university. The survey was sent through email to four instructors who teach a FYE course within the ASPS program. All four participants returned

the survey, leading to a 100% response rate for the study. The participants included three part-time adjunct instructors and one full-time instructor within the program.

All four study participants have prior experience with appreciative advising or strengths-based teaching approaches. The participants included two males and two females, all of whom are White. All four participants were familiar with strength-based teaching approaches: two were extremely familiar, one was very familiar, and one was somewhat familiar with the teaching approach. Collectively, participants have over 36 years of experience with appreciative instruction and have extensive experience with strengths-based teaching approaches at large public university systems.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was developed by the researchers. The researchers are experts in teaching and learning at both online and face-to-face institutions. Additionally, the researchers have extensive experience developing and managing FYE courses, adult degree completion programs, and managing instructors for improved teaching performance. The survey questions were designed to match the exploratory nature of the study surrounding the perspectives and practices of employing appreciative instructional techniques in the FYI course.

Data Analysis

The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. The thematic analysis approach uses six phases to identify themes within the data, including: (1) familiarizing one's self with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing the themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report.

The researchers began the analysis phase with transcribing all data and reviewing the data for accuracy (Riesman, 1993). The researchers reviewed the data three times, while highlighting and adding notes around excerpts that directly addressed the research questions. In addition, they conducted two more overviews of the data to further to familiarize themselves with the data (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Through this process, the researchers gained a firm understanding of the data.

After familiarizing themselves with the data, the researchers began the second phase of analysis. They reviewed the notes and highlights made on the open-ended survey responses, created initial codes for patterns of responses from the participants (Boyatzis, 1998). These patterns of responses included ideas surrounding varying degrees of curriculum development, instructor-student in-class interaction, instructor-student in-class interaction, discussion involvement, encouragement, and motivation.

The third phase of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is searching for themes. The researchers grouped the codes into larger families of ideas. This process helped produce the beginning of a thematic map of related ideas (Kelle, 2004; Seale, 2000). Additionally, the process helped the researchers differentiate between codes and themes to produce an accurate representation of the data.

The themes were reviewed in phase four of the analysis. The researchers discussed the patterns within the responses and made adjustments to the names of the themes and subthemes within the data. This process helped the researchers ensure validity of the results as it pertains to the research questions and how the development of the thematic map (Patton, 1990).

The researchers then began to name the themes within phase five of the process. This phase involved defining and refining the themes with the goal of capturing the essence of each theme. The researchers drafted narratives for each theme with a definition and evidence that significant about the theme and why. The researchers discussed and refined the themes numerous times to confirm if any sub-themes exist and how all themes relate to each other (Braun & Wilkinson, 2003).

Finally, the researchers produced the report in the sixth phase of the analysis. This phase was reflected in the results and the discussion sections of this article. The report included definitions and explanations of each theme as well as evidence/excerpts that supported the rationale for each theme in relation to the research questions. The themes were stitched together to form a narrative discusses the meaning and significance of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

The study sought to answer three research questions. The survey solicited a mix of categorical responses and open-ended probing questions from respondents. The results provided insights regarding the extent online instructors employed appreciative instruction techniques; how online instructors perceived the importance of AI; and the extent online instructors viewed AI as helpful in supporting students to meet the intended outcomes of the program.

Role of AI in ADC FYI Course

In general, the responses from the participants were very similar. Two of the four participants incorporated AI in their FYE courses very frequently, one incorporated AI frequently, and one incorporated AI a moderate amount. The study participants were also asked about how valuable they believe AI is in the FYE course they teach. Three instructors replied extremely valuable and one responded very valuable (Table 1).

Table 1. Factors Surrounding the Role of AI within ADC FYE Course

n=4	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
Extent of incorporating AI in course	5	3	4	5
Perceived value of AI in ADC FYE course	5	4	5	5
Perceived role of AI in helping students meet learning outcomes of ADC FYE course	5	4	4	5

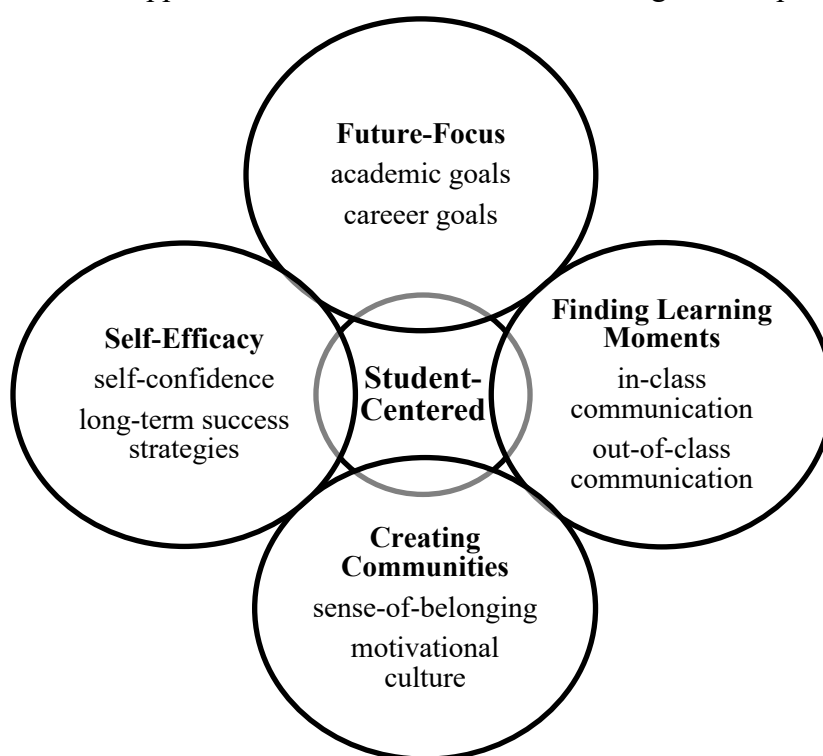
Note. Scores are in relation to a five-point Likert scale, where a score of 5 indicates a high level of use, perceived value, and helpfulness experienced by FYE instructors

The participants were also asked about the extent to which they view the role of AI in helping students meet the intended learning outcomes of the FYE courses they teach within the adult degree completion program. Two instructors replied that AI was extremely helpful in helping students meet the intended learning outcomes of the program. The other two replied that AI was very helpful in helping students meet the intended learning outcomes of the program. All instructors viewed AI instruction as an important part of teaching the FYE

course within the ADC program (Table 1). The results indicate that AI is an important and valuable approach to teaching a FYE course within the adult degree completion program.

The researchers also asked open-ended questions to follow up on the reasons and support for instructors' responses to the above questions. The results of the study found four main themes and eight sub-themes. The main themes consist of: (1) future- focus; (2) creating community; (3) self-efficacy; and (4) finding learning moments. The first main theme, future-focus consists of two sub-themes: (a) academic goals; and (b) career goals. Creating community also consists of two sub-themes: (a) sense of belonging; and (b) motivational culture. Self-efficacy consists of the following two sub- themes: (a) self-confidence; and (b) long-term success strategies. Finally, finding learning moments consists of two sub-themes: (a) in-classroom communication; and (b) out-of-classroom communication. The thematic results find these four themes of appreciative instruction to be situated around the student needs in the center of the model (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Model for Appreciative Instruction within Adult Degree Completion Programs



Future Focus

Future-focus is the first theme that emerged from the thematic analysis. Future- focus is placed at the top of the framework since instructors consistently referred to looking ahead when teaching, coaching, and advising students. This aligns with the appreciative college instruction approach as instructors encourage to frame assignments, discussion and feedback in ways that look beyond the FYE course they are enrolled in (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Snyder et al., 2002; Wells et al., 2014). For example, participant four stated, "...[instructors] use student strengths for academic advising and major and career exploration...it is a huge part of our approach". This response summarized how instructors who used AI as their strengths-based teaching approaches are future focused on two levels: academic and career. All instructors in the study expressed the importance of helping students achieve short and long-term academic goals. Instructors help students achieve these goals in a variety of ways. For example, participant two stated that instructor feedback and

involvement in discussions were spaces where instructors can specifically “connect student strengths to their learning styles, educational planning and career planning”.

Participant one reinforced this future-focus teaching strategy by stating the “approach ultimately helps students explore all aspects of academic planning... and deliver on the student’s desired outcome of degree completion”. The survey respondents clearly emphasized a focus on FYE in the course and long-term academic planning through graduation.

The survey participants also emphasized a future-focus approach in career development. This approach is seen in self-discovery assignments and discussion forums. For example, participant one expressed that “it [appreciative instruction] is an extremely healthy and helpful approach...for helping students navigate toward specific careers”. The survey participants also emphasized the value of encouraging students to dream and think about how their strengths lead them to careers.

Creating Community

Creating community is appropriately placed at the base of the model because it serves as the foundation the student experience (e.g. student-to-student; student-to- instructor; student-to-advisor, etc.). The qualitative responses from the participants emphasized rapport and trust building in a safe environment are critical parts of the student experience within the adult degree completion program. Responses from the participants reveal two sub-themes in student *sense-of-belonging* and *motivational culture*.

Student sense-of-belonging relates to how students feel like they fit within the class, program, and institution. Much of a student’s sense-of-belonging is grounded in the relationships they develop and maintain with each other, faculty, and staff (Bloom et al., 2008). For example, participant three incorporated AI by “connecting with students in introductions” and approaching student support in a “non-threatening manner”.

Participant four reinforced participant three’s response in connecting individually with students, but also building a student’s network by connecting them with resources at the university, like advising. Participant one and two both emphasized the importance of creating a solid supportive environment and a welcoming space for students, while “making them feel like I want to listen and hear from them” (Participant 2). Past literature finds fostering students’ sense-of-belonging is critical in first-year experience FYE courses, and the instructors of the study validate this claim in their survey responses (Bloom et al., 2015).

Motivational culture pertains to the positive, encouraging, and motivational messages students receive from instructors who practice AI. This is visible in the results through numerous words and phrases found within the survey responses that relate to encouraging, offering positive feedback, focusing on strengths, building confidence and helping students “cultivate their best selves” (Participant 1). This is achieved in an online environment primarily through the intentional use of a supportive and caring “word usage, tone, and emotionally-infused text” (Participant 1). These strategies are believed to be important in fostering a motivational culture within the adult degree completion program.

Student Self-Efficacy

While future-focus and creating community focus more on outcomes or “the what” of the goals to be achieved through the adult degree completion program, *self- efficacy* and *finding learning moments* represent more of “the how”. For this reason, holistic development and finding learning moments are placed on each side of the AI model to represent the “hands” used to accomplish the outcomes and goals of the program.

Developing student self-efficacy is a cornerstone of FYE courses (Bandura, 1997). According to Bandura (1994), “self-efficacy is defined as people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated of performance” (p.71). The instructors within the current adult degree completion program emphasize that their communications and feedback scaffold the development of student self-efficacy in two-ways: self-confidence building and long-term success strategies.

Self-confidence relates to a student’s assurance in their capabilities. For example, this theme was developed from a repeated pattern of instructors who discussed their intentional approach to helping students identify and discover their own personal strengths. Instructors within the study prescribed to setting manageable goals and actionable steps that guide students to earning quick wins and build momentum. Instructors also shared how they connected the lessons within the course to real-life scenarios in an appreciative way. In this manner, students see the bigger picture as it relates to personal development in and beyond the classroom.

Introducing success strategies that students can use in their re-integration process within an adult degree completion program was reported by participants as an important approach to facilitating a success course. *Long-term success strategies* appeal to what Bandura (1994) would describe as the self-regulated behaviors of students to influence their own motivation, thought processes, and emotional states to overcome obstacles and accomplish goals. This language was often used within the responses of the instructors within the study. For example, instructors state they have an emphasis on developing problem-solving skills, overcoming obstacles, and providing simple and direct action steps to complete in route to accomplish their tasks and goals.

Finding Learning Moments

Finding learning moments is also prominent theme that is found in this study among instructors who practice appreciative instruction. This theme relates to how instructors communicate with students both within the course and in supplemental communication outside of the course. The instructors within the study had a strong degree of focus on instructor engagement. All the instructors within the study agreed that they approach all communication with students as potential learning moments for them. Instructors noted that these learning moments were reinforced through all communications and continually persist through the duration of the session.

In-classroom communication relates to all communication within the actual class. This includes instructor feedback on assignments, instructor engagement within the discussions, and messages within the online learning management system. Across all instructors within the study, everyone noted these areas within the class to help students develop academic and career goals and building a supportive and encouraging community at the university. Instructors found the discussions, assignment feedback, and “News You Can Use” sections of the course as areas instructors can help students “grow”, “develop”, and form habits from strategies that enable them to “overcome obstacles”.

According to the thematic analysis, instructors found out-of-classroom communication equally as important. *Out-of-classroom communication* relates to all other communication outside of the university learning management system. This includes email, phone calls, and texting, etc. Instructors see out-of-classroom communication as vital means to ensure a motivational culture through wrap-around support that supplements instruction within the class. Instructors take a “light-hearted tone” (Participant 2) and nudge students who may be falling behind and/or connecting with non-participating students. The results

reveal out-of-classroom communication is an important to maintain consistent student engagement.

Discussion

Appreciative College Instruction is grounded in the appreciative mindset, rooted in positive psychology (Bloom et al., 2013). The current study is aligned closely with the AI framework and investigates the perspectives and practices of AI among online instructors within an adult degree completion program. AI follows six phases of appreciative education: Disarm; Discover; Dream; Design; Deliver; and Don't Settle.

This section describes how the current study integrates each of these steps within an adult degree completion program and the implications for further study and practices.

Disarm

The *disarm* phase of AI focuses on building rapport between students and faculty. Much of this process involves engaging and coaching students. Additionally, the disarm phase can be characterized as an instructor's actions in creating a safe environment (Bloom et al., 2013). For example, students within the ASPS program of this study participate in a live webinar orientation session. Within the webinar, students are free to ask questions of advisors and instructors in a non-threatening environment. One of the main themes of the study is *building community*. Building community is demonstrated in the study through their responses to the qualitative questions of the study. For example, instructors specifically mention the importance of creating a safe environment and engaging with students so that "they feel heard and that I want to listen to them" (Participant 2). Strategies from the instructors follow traditional AI practices in using positive and encouraging tones. Instructors within the study report this being a critically important first step in the educational process. Past research has found this approach to be a best practice in teaching, and it holds significant importance to instructing students and it seems to hold true with students within an Adult Degree Completion Program (Lin, 2016).

Discover

The *discover* phase of AI focuses on using open-ended questions to discover what their strengths are (Bloom et al., 2008). The instructors find this stage to be extremely important and is primarily integrated into the assignments within the curriculum of the adult degree completion program. According to the instructors within the study, the assignments allow for a significant amount of self-reflection on their strengths in designing assignments and discussion topics centered around their experiences. This stage of the AI framework is demonstrated in the *self-efficacy* phase of the current study. The results of the current study help to build upon a student's self-discovery, identify personal strengths in pursuit of cultivating the student's best self, which fundamentally reinforces the discover phase of the AI framework. This practice is significant as it reinforces previous research on learning models that promote student success (Kamphoff et al., 2007).

Dream

This *dream* phase "highlights the importance of uncovering personal and organizational visions" (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 9). This phase is demonstrated in the *future-focus* theme of the study. Future-focus is represented in the study participants through a continual pattern of reinforcement from instructors in focusing discussions, feedback, and reflections within the class on short and long-term goals, relating to their "learning styles, educational planning and career planning" (Participant 2). Integrating short- and long-term goal related assignments and feedback can be especially meaningful for students within an

adult degree completion program. These assignments are introduced in the FYE course and are much further developed by the time the students reach the capstone course.

Design

The *design* phase is described as the process to create a plan to achieve the goals defined in the dream phase. The instructors within the study demonstrate this step of the AI framework in the language they use in their feedback, discussion questions, and supplemental communication. Instructors within the study explained the close relationship in helping students achieve their academic goals to their career goals.

Instructors break down the class into manageable parts to complete (e.g. assignments), and then reinforce the importance of how each assignment builds upon each other to meet the student's long-term goal(s). The future-focus theme is also present in this phase of the AI framework within the Adult Degree Completion Program at the institution. Instructors within adult degree completion programs can effectively coach student through their classes and programs if this type of feedback and guidance is implemented within in-class and out-of-class communications.

Deliver

The *deliver* phase of the AI framework is also present in the current study's participants. For example, students within the FYE course of this study are connected with their academic advisor to create an academic plan through the discussion of academic and career goals, potential pitfalls/challenges students may experience, and begin the enrollment process into classes and/or change majors if necessary to meet the goals students have set. In this way, students take the first steps in meeting their long-term goals through by accomplishing their shorter-term academic goals. The collaboration and synchronous partnership between the instructors within the adult degree completion program and the academic advising staff at the university develop into measurable actions from students in moving closer toward accomplishing their academic and career goals.

Don't Settle

The *don't settle* phase of the AI framework is the final step of the process. The don't settle phase pertains is described by Kuh, et al (2005) as positive restlessness. This phase continues to ask students, what else, as it pertains to their thoughts and actions in attaining their academic and career-oriented goals. This is present in the current study through the *finding learning moments* theme. In this stage, instructors seek to continually challenge students in connecting the assignments to the fruition of their short and long-term goals (Pulcini, 2016). These students bring an amazing array of talents from their previous work experience and training. By the time they complete this ASPS program, graduates understand their academic and professional strengths and have demonstrated significant personal growth.

Implications

Faculty play a critical role in retention, student engagement, and institutional vitality within higher education institutions (Betts, 2009). This is particularly important to higher education as institutions are transitioning to partially and fully online programs. Many instructors struggle with this transition and lack knowledge with best practices in online student engagement and instruction (Chatham-Carpenter & Spadaro, 2019). The current study has implications for not only instructional methods within adult degree completion programs, but also in curriculum design within these programs, and best practices within online instructional approaches.

The current study has implications for the instructional methods for faculty within adult degree completion programs. Adult learners are characterized as having non-traditional pathways to education and possess additional work and personal responsibilities that their traditional student counterparts do not have (CLASP, 2015). These experiences affect the adult learner's ability to complete their assignments through in-class self-regulated learning behaviors and persist through their programs (Dignath et al., 2008; Schmitz, B., & Wiese, 2006). Additionally, adult learners bring within them unique learning preferences that traditional-aged students do not, which require a different pedagogical approach (Kellenberg et al., 2017). These above-mentioned factors call for studies such as the current one to enhance the student learning experience and improve student success rates.

Instructional Methods for Faculty within Adult Degree Completion Programs

The current study surveyed faculty who employ appreciative instruction methods within adult degree completion programs. The results indicate that these methods help build community among students and faculty, frame educational experiences within a larger future focused context, and provide learning moments through in and out-of-classroom communication. Instructors within the study achieve these objectives through positive appreciative language and manageable action steps for students to make continual progress in their learning and course performance. The appreciative faculty mindset seems to be a valuable approach in facilitating courses within an adult degree completion program, as the practices and strategies aid in improving self-regulating learning and degree progression from adult non-traditional students (Johnson, 2014).

Curriculum Development within Adult Degree Completion Programs

This study also highlights the importance of implementing adult-centered pedagogy within adult degree completion programs. The program within the current study uses a case-based learning approach that situates the learner's experience at the center of the course. This approach follows *andragogical* learning models where course lessons are repeatedly connected to the learner's practical experience (Galustyan et al., 2019). The results from the study indicated instructors place a high degree of importance in this model to enhance the learning experience of their students. These results reinforce previous literature surrounding the positive impact of the andragogical learning approach for adults within their academic pursuits (Youde, 2018). Therefore, academic administrators of adult degree completion programs may find comparable success within their programs if a similar approach to the curriculum design and teaching methodology is taken.

Instructional Methods for Faculty within Online Programs

A third implication of the study can be found in the instructional methods for faculty within online programs in general. This is particularly relevant in times of local, national and global crises, when students' lives are quickly and significantly changed. These changes have potentially strong negative implications on students' abilities to persist and complete their programs. The current study shines light on the importance of the appreciative approaches of faculty. The current study finds that positive, supportive, and encouraging language in both in and out-of-classroom communications can help students find motivation in completing their courses and programs using manageable action steps.

Limitations and Future Studies

The current study has some inherent limitations. Four faculty within the adult degree completion program within a fully online university were surveyed. Although these four faculty teach the large majority of the students enrolled in the FYE course of the adult degree

completion program, it still presents challenges to generalize the results across other faculty members within the program. The participants lack racial diversity and generally have homogenous professional experiences. For example, all four study participants practiced appreciative and strengths-based at the same large state institution prior to working at the online university within the study. Although this fact reveals the power of transferring appreciative instruction across different institutional types, bias is present within the results of the study. Further, the survey used in this study was created by the researchers. Although researchers are experts in appreciative education, the study would be stronger if a more valid and reliable instrument was created using past empirical research on the topic.

Future studies on appreciative instruction can improve upon the current study in several ways. Future studies might gain more reliable and valid results if they surveyed faculty of different courses within the adult degree completion program. This approach would build upon the diversity of responses within the study and potentially yield new insights and perspectives into appreciative instruction practices within adult degree completion programs.

Future studies can also potentially improve upon the current study by implementing a new design method. For example, more robust data and themes may be potentially be gained if focus groups and/or interviews were conducted with study participants (Jamshed, 2014; Morgan, 1996). This approach is especially relevant given the small number of participants within the study.

Future studies would add to the current body of knowledge on appreciative instruction in numerous ways. For example, future studies would gain new insights on the impact of appreciative instruction if they included student perspectives in addition to faculty perspectives. This design improvement would help researchers measure the extent to which the faculty intended outcomes are actually being experienced by students. Additionally, future studies can take a more quantitative design method and measure the impact of appreciative instructional methods on student outcomes like grades, course completion rates, graduation rates, etc. Furthermore, future studies can be conducted at different institutional types (e.g. large-public; small-private, etc.) to potentially apply best practices in teaching and curriculum development of adult degree completion programs across institutions with different student populations and geographic locations.

Conclusion

The current study surveyed instructors within an online adult degree completion program. The result of the study lead to the development of a new model for appreciative instruction within adult degree programs. The model places students at the center of the model and surrounds with four main themes: future-focus, finding learning moments, creating community, and self-efficacy. The study has implications for faculty teaching practices and curriculum development within adult degree completion programs.

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