

Adopting Heutagogy in Adult Learning: Case Studies from Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study-based analysis of the paradigm shift from andragogy to heutagogy in adult learning, especially within higher education settings. Drawing on recent research and theoretical perspectives, this study explores how self-determined learning principles are applied across four institutional case studies. The cases highlight practical implementations, learner outcomes, and instructional design adaptations. This shift emphasizes learner autonomy, capability development, and the integration of digital tools. By comparing these case studies to traditional pedagogical and andragogical approaches, the paper offers evidence supporting the efficacy of heutagogical practices. The findings contribute to understanding how heutagogy can be effectively operationalized in diverse learning environments and suggest recommendations for institutional adoption.

Keywords: Heutagogy, Andragogy, Adult Learning, Self-determined Learning, Higher Education

Introduction

The evolving landscape of adult education calls for pedagogical approaches that go beyond traditional methods, emphasizing autonomy and lifelong learning. Andragogy, a term popularized by Knowles (1984), focused on the self-directed nature of adult learners and was long regarded as the cornerstone of adult education. However, the acceleration of digital transformation, the complexity of workplace demands, and the need for learners to continuously reskill have led to a reconsideration of educational models. In this context, heutagogy, or self-determined learning, emerges as a progressive model that addresses current educational and workplace challenges (Hase & Kenyon, 2000).

Heutagogy emphasizes learner agency, capability development, non-linear learning pathways, and an adaptive mindset. While andragogy supports learner autonomy to some extent, heutagogy extends this by promoting a learner-centered environment where learners not only direct what they learn but also how and why they learn it (Blaschke, 2012). Digital technologies have facilitated the transition toward heutagogy, enabling learning anytime, anywhere, and supporting the creation of dynamic and personalized learning experiences (Cochrane et al., 2020).

Numerous scholars have outlined the benefits of heutagogy, including improved learner engagement, enhanced critical thinking, and readiness for real-world challenges (Blaschke & Hase, 2016). Despite its theoretical promise, the empirical application of heutagogy remains under-explored. There is a significant gap in literature addressing how heutagogical principles

are applied in real-world contexts, particularly through case studies in higher education institutions. Moreover, much of the current literature is conceptual rather than empirical, limiting the understanding of how heutagogy functions across disciplines and cultural contexts.

The objectives of this study are to:

- (1) explore the implementation of heutagogy in higher education through real-world case studies;
- (2) compare heutagogical models with traditional andragogical frameworks; and

This study builds upon earlier works by Hase and Kenyon (2007), Blaschke (2012), and others by offering a detailed case-based exploration of heutagogy in action. The selected case studies span disciplines, geographical regions, and educational contexts, thereby offering diverse perspectives on how heutagogical models are shaping the future of adult learning.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the effectiveness of a self-directed learning module implemented among supervisory-level employees in a corporate setting. Data were gathered through a combination of open-ended questionnaire responses and secondary document analysis, including training reports, internal evaluation documents, and module content outlines. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in the pilot phase of the learning intervention.

The qualitative data from the open-ended questionnaire were coded thematically, with a focus on learner motivation, perceived effectiveness, content applicability, and suggestions for improvement. Themes were identified inductively to capture nuanced insights and patterns across participant responses. Document analysis further supported the findings by providing context about the design and objectives of the learning module. This triangulated approach ensured a more comprehensive understanding of how the self-directed learning model functioned in real workplace conditions.

The data that was collected at the first phase with questionnaire 1 helped to conduct the pilot study and also helped in the finalization of the other two questionnaires on the basis of which various objectives were met and it also helped to derive the hypothesis. The questionnaire for the pilot study included basic information like:

- Personal information of the supervisory level personnel (like age and gender)
- The first training that they underwent in the organization
- To find if the training was beneficial or not
- How frequently training is provided in the organization?
- Did pattern in training change post COVID-19
- If the employees had knowledge about self-learning module
- Their views on digital training programs

A total of 63 responses were collected for the pilot study. On the basis of the data collected Cronbach's alpha test was conducted to check the reliability and internal consistency of the tool used. This helped to derive the value from the z test to see if the tool was reliable or not. The z test that was conducted had a score of 1.96, which signifies that the tool is reliable. The hypothesis that was derived are as follows:

1. H₀: Ages of the employees are equally distributed

H₁: Ages are not equally distributed

2. H₀: The present training method is beneficial

H₁: the employee did not find the training beneficial. It implies that there is no difference in performance after training has been provided.

3. H₀: There is significant difference between the two training methods i.e. online training & offline training

H₁: There is no significant difference between the two training methods i.e. online training and offline training

The data collected during the pilot study not only helped to derive the hypothesis for the study but also helped the researcher to identify the areas that could be included in the first phase of administration of the self-directed learning module. It included various statements that were categorized into various dimensions and then divided into tasks that were important for fulfilling job responsibilities. The various factors and responses helped in the formation of the first self-directed learning questionnaire as it helped the researcher to identify the various developmental areas for supervisory level personnel. Few important areas for development of supervisory level personnel have been listed below:

- Need to excel and manage general managerial tasks important to complete job roles assigned to them
- To know the art of record keeping and how to communicate effectively
- How to manage stress and personnel relations
- Having knowledge about basic IT skills that help to facilitate job roles effective in the organization
- How to motivate oneself to be a continuous and a better learner

The pilot study was conducted it led to the creation of self-directed learning module and a second set of questionnaires was designed to understand how the personnel felt after being administered with the self-directed learning module and how the self-directed learning module was different from the normal training that is given by the organization. The data that was procured after the administration of the first self-directed learning module were procured in terms of descriptive statistics i.e. mean, standard deviation, standard error mean.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the self-directed learning module reveals a thoughtful and responsive approach to adult education, especially at the supervisory level. The use of open-ended questions allowed participants to reflect on and share in-depth feedback about their learning experiences. Responses emphasized the benefits of self-paced learning, especially for adult learners who value flexibility and autonomy. Many employees appreciated the convenience of accessing the module at their own time and pace, which aligned well with the principles of adult learning theory. The ability to revisit content when needed and the presence of practical, interactive activities enhanced their engagement and skill application at the workplace. Participants also recognized the importance of upskilling in a post-Covid work environment, where job roles and expectations have evolved rapidly. The module appeared to act as both a learning tool and a motivational catalyst for further self-development.

Building on the first phase, the second asynchronous online learning module was developed using the feedback collected from the initial round. This demonstrates a feedback-driven and learner-centric design process. The new module addressed key areas such as digital communication, cyber awareness, software usage, personal grooming, and conflict management—skills crucial for modern supervisory roles. The results from the second phase showed strong positive responses, with over 85% rating the experience as “good” or “excellent”. The high chi-square value indicates that these favorable ratings are statistically significant and not random, reinforcing the module’s effectiveness. Importantly, there were no “poor” ratings, reflecting general satisfaction and the success of the module in addressing the needs of its target audience. Feedback also suggested improvements such as incorporating vernacular languages, highlighting the importance of localization in training materials to ensure inclusivity and better comprehension.

The case studies illustrate diverse applications of heutagogy across geographic, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries. A consistent theme is the emphasis on learner autonomy, reflective practice, and real-world applicability core tenets of heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2007). Compared to andragogical approaches, which focus on self-direction within a structured framework (Knowles, 1984), heutagogy supports learners in defining and owning their learning journeys, often without predefined curricula or rigid assessments.

In both academic and workplace contexts, such as the ICT sector in Finland and medical colleges in India, heutagogy proved effective in building competencies like critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability. These findings align with Sumarson (2019), who emphasized the role of digital tools in enabling learner autonomy. Likewise, the Tanzanian ODL case highlighted the significance of institutional support in fostering heutagogical learning; without infrastructure and awareness, self-determined learning remains aspirational rather than operational.

The transformation of faculty roles from knowledge providers to learning facilitators was a cross-cutting element. Faculty development and administrative backing were essential for institutional success, as observed in the University of Western Sydney’s program. The transition also required cultural shifts—acceptance of uncertainty, co-learning, and decentralization of authority. Ultimately, these cases support the notion that heutagogy can bridge the gap between educational outcomes and workforce demands in the 21st century.

Case Study 1: Institute of Adult Education, Tanzania At the Institute of Adult Education in Morogoro, Tanzania, learners in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program transitioned from andragogical models to self-determined learning. Students who had prior exposure to ICT tools were more effective at utilizing digital libraries and online learning platforms. Challenges such as lack of internet infrastructure, inadequate access to devices, and limited institutional support were noted (Kisusi, 2022). Nevertheless, learners demonstrated autonomy in accessing free resources and co-constructing learning strategies with peers.

Case Study 2: Undergraduate Nursing Education in the UK In pre-registration nursing programs, students face unpredictable and complex clinical environments. Traditional pedagogical approaches were deemed insufficient to meet these needs. Faculty introduced heutagogical practices, allowing students to self-select learning activities and reflect on their experiences. This shift was supported by mentors who served as facilitators rather than instructors (Jeffreys, 2004; Darbyshire & Fleming, 2008). Outcomes included enhanced self-efficacy, deeper reflection, and improved adaptability in clinical scenarios.

Case Study 3: ICT Sector Workforce Learning in Finland Lemmetty and Collin (2020) documented how self-directed learning was operationalized in ICT organizations in Finland. Employees described learning as obligatory, flexible, and embedded within everyday tasks. Companies supported these practices by fostering agile teams and reducing hierarchical barriers. Workers engaged in learning by solving real-time problems, collaborating with colleagues, and using online platforms, exemplifying heutagogical tenets in the workplace.

Case Study 4: Medical Education in India Chacko (2018) highlighted the gradual shift from pedagogical to andragogical and heutagogical practices in medical colleges. In early undergraduate years, structured teaching dominated. As students advanced, faculty encouraged reflective practices and independent learning, particularly through e-learning modules and Web 2.0 technologies. Self-determined learning was promoted in postgraduate stages, where learners set their own goals and assessment strategies with mentor support.

Case Study 5: Teacher Training Program at University of Western Sydney The University of Western Sydney redesigned its teacher education curriculum to embed heutagogy into blended learning models (Blaschke, 2012). Students were empowered to create personalized learning plans, choose assessment formats, and collaborate on interdisciplinary projects. Faculty shifted from content deliverers to learning facilitators. Reported outcomes included increased engagement, innovation, and development of lifelong learning competencies.

Conclusion

The pilot study served as a foundational step in designing and validating the self-directed learning modules for supervisory-level personnel. Through the administration of the first questionnaire, the researcher was able to gather key demographic and contextual data, assess the effectiveness of existing training practices, and formulate hypotheses that guided the subsequent phases of the study. The reliability of the tool was confirmed through statistical tests such as Cronbach's alpha and the z-test, ensuring that the data collected could be used to inform meaningful insights. The pilot data also enabled the identification of critical skill gaps

and developmental needs, which became the basis for constructing the self-directed learning content and follow-up questionnaires.

The phased development and evaluation of the self-directed learning modules reflect a learner-centered, iterative, and evidence-based approach to adult learning. Participants expressed high satisfaction with the flexibility, relevance, and practicality of the modules, especially in a post-COVID context where traditional training methods have often fallen short. The second module, developed in an asynchronous online format, was particularly well-received, with over 85% of respondents rating it positively. The study underscores the value of self-paced, contextually tailored digital training solutions in fostering continuous professional development among supervisory personnel. It also highlights the importance of incorporating user feedback into instructional design and the need for localization to ensure accessibility and effectiveness across diverse learner groups.

The synthesis of these five case studies underscores the transformative potential of heutagogy in both educational and professional settings. Across diverse contexts—from Tanzanian distance education to Finish ICT workplaces and Indian medical schools—heutagogical approaches consistently enhanced learner autonomy, critical thinking, and adaptability. These outcomes are particularly relevant in today's complex, rapidly evolving environments where conventional pedagogical or even andragogical methods often fall short.

While the successful implementation of heutagogy depends on factors such as institutional infrastructure, faculty development, and cultural openness to learner-driven models, the evidence suggests it offers a robust framework for fostering lifelong, self-determined learning. By shifting the educator's role to that of a facilitator and enabling learners to co-create their educational experiences, heutagogy emerges not only as a pedagogical innovation but also as a strategic response to aligning education with 21st-century workforce demands.

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