

## andragogy

*The notion of andragogy has been around for nearly two centuries. It became particularly popular in North America and Britain as a way of describing adult learning through the work of Malcolm Knowles. But what actually does it mean, and how useful a term is it when thinking about adult learning?*



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The term andragogy was originally formulated by a German teacher, Alexander Kapp, in 1833 (Nottingham Andragogy Group 1983: v). He used it to describe elements of Plato's education theory. Andragogy (*andr-* meaning 'man') could be contrasted with pedagogy (*paid-* meaning 'child' and *agogos* meaning 'leading') (see Davenport 1993: 114). Kapp's use of andragogy had some currency but it was disputed, and fell into disuse. It reappeared in 1921 in a report by Rosenstock in which he argued that 'adult education required special teachers, methods and philosophy, and he used the term andragogy to refer collectively to these special requirements' (Nottingham Andragogy Group 1983: v). **Eduard Lindeman** was the first writer in English to pick up on Rosenstock's use of the term. The he only used it

on two occasions. As Stewart, his biographer, comments, 'the new term seems to have impressed itself upon no one, not even its originators'. That may have been the case in North America, but in France, Yugoslavia and Holland the term was being used extensively 'to refer to the discipline which studies the adult education process or the science of adult education' (Nottingham Andragogy Group 1983: v).

In the minds of many around the adult education field, andragogy and the name of **Malcolm Knowles** have become inextricably linked. For Knowles, andragogy is premised on at least four crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners on which traditional pedagogy is premised. A fifth was added later.

1. Self-concept: *As a person matures his self concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being*
2. Experience: *As a person matures he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.*
3. Readiness to learn. *As a person matures his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles.*
4. Orientation to learning. *As a person matures his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centredness.*
5. Motivation to learn: *As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal* (Knowles 1984:12).

Each of these assertions and the claims of difference between andragogy and pedagogy are the subject of considerable debate. Useful critiques of the notion can be found in Davenport (1993) Jarvis (1977a) Tennant (1996) (see below). Here I want to make some general comments about Knowles' approach.

### **Some general issues with Knowles' approach**

First, as Merriam and Caffarella (1991: 249) have pointed out, Knowles' conception of andragogy is an attempt to build a comprehensive theory (or model) of adult learning that is anchored in the **characteristics of adult learners**. Cross (1981: 248) also uses such perceived characteristics in a more limited attempt to offer a 'framework for thinking about *what* and *how* adults learn'. Such approaches may be contrasted with those that focus on:

- an adult's life situation (e.g. Knox 1986; Jarvis 1987a);
- changes in consciousness (e.g. Mezirow 1983; 1990 or Freire 1972) (Merriam and Caffarella 1991).

Second, Knowles makes extensive use of a model of **relationships derived from humanistic clinical psychology** - and, in particular, the qualities of good facilitation argued for by Carl Rogers. However, Knowles adds in other elements which owe a great deal to scientific curriculum making and behaviour modification (and are thus somewhat at odds

with Rogers). These encourage the learner to identify needs, set objectives, enter learning contracts and so on. In other words, he uses ideas from psychologists working in two quite different and opposing therapeutic traditions (the humanist and behavioural traditions). This means that there is a rather dodgy deficit model lurking around this model.

Third, it is not clear whether this is a **theory or set of assumptions about learning, or a theory or model of teaching** (Hartree 1984). We can see something of this in relation to the way he has defined andragogy as the art and science of helping adults learn as against pedagogy as the art and science of teaching children. There is an inconsistency here.

Hartree (1984) raises a further problem. Has Knowles provided us with a theory or a set of guidelines for practice? The assumptions 'can be read as descriptions of the adult learner... or as prescriptive statements about what the adult learner *should* be like' (Hartree 1984 quoted in Merriam and Caffarella 1991: 250). This links with the point made by Tennant - there seems to be a failure to set and interrogate these ideas within a coherent and consistent conceptual framework. As Jarvis (1987b) comments, throughout his writings there is a propensity to list characteristics of a phenomenon without interrogating the literature of the arena (e.g. as in the case of andragogy) or looking through the lens of a coherent conceptual system. Undoubtedly he had a number of important insights, but because they are not tempered by thorough analysis, they were a hostage to fortune - they could be taken up in an ahistorical or atheoretical way.

## The assumptions explored

With these things in mind we can look at the assumptions that Knowles makes about adult learners:

**1. Self-concept: *As a person matures his self concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.*** The point at which a person becomes an adult, according to Knowles, psychologically, 'is that point at which he perceives himself to be wholly self-directing. And at that point he also experiences a deep need to be perceived by others as being self-directing' (Knowles 1983: 56). As Brookfield (1986) points out, there is some confusion as to whether self-direction is meant here by Knowles to be an empirically verifiable indicator of adulthood. He does say explicitly that it is an assumption. However, there are some other immediate problems:

- both Erikson and Piaget have argued that there are some elements of self-directedness in children's learning (Brookfield 1986: 93). Children are not dependent learners for much of the time, 'quite the contrary, learning for them is an activity which is natural and spontaneous' (Tennant 1988: 21). It may be that Knowles was using 'self-direction' in a particular way here or needed to ask a further question - 'dependent or independent with respect to what?'
- the concept is culturally bound - it arises out of a particular (humanist) discourse about the self which is largely North American in its expression. This was looked at last week - and will be returned to in future weeks.

**2. Experience: *As a person matures he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.*** The next step is the belief that adults learn more effectively through experiential techniques of education such as

discussion or problem solving (Knowles 1980: 43). The immediate problem we have is the unqualified way in which the statement is made. There may be times when experiential learning is not appropriate - such as when substantial amounts of new information is required. We have to ask the question, what is being learnt, before we can make judgements.

A second aspect here is whether children's and young people's experiences are any less real or less rich than those of adults. They may not have the accumulation of so many years, but the experiences they have are no less consuming, and still have to be returned to, entertained, and made sense of. Does the fact that they have 'less' supposed experience make any significant difference to the process? A reading of Dewey (1933) and the literature on reflection (e.g. Boud et al 1985) would support the argument that age and amount of experience makes no educational difference. If this is correct, then the case for the distinctiveness of adult learning is seriously damaged. This is of fundamental significance if, as Brookfield (1986: 98) suggests, this second assumption of andragogy 'can arguably lay claim to be viewed as a "given" in the literature of adult learning'.

**3. Readiness to learn. As a person matures his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles.** As Tennant (1988: 21-22) puts it, 'it is difficult to see how this assumption has any implication at all for the process of learning, let alone how this process should be differentially applied to adults and children'. Children also have to perform social roles.

Knowles does, however, make some important points at this point about 'teachable' moments. The relevance of study or education becomes clear as it is needed to carry out a particular task. At this point more ground can be made as the subject seems relevant.

However, there are other problems. These appear when he goes on to discuss the implications of the assumption. 'Adult education programs, therefore, should be organised around 'life application' categories and sequenced according to learners readiness to learn' (1980: 44)

First, as Brookfield comments, these two assumptions can easily lead to a technological interpretation of learning that is highly reductionist. By this he means that things can become rather instrumental and move in the direction of competencies. Language like 'life application' categories reeks of skill-based models - where learning is reduced to a series of objectives and steps (a product orientation). We learn things that are useful rather than interesting or intriguing or because something fills us with awe. It also thoroughly underestimates just how much we learn for the pleasure it brings (see below).

Second, as Humphries (1988) has suggested, the way he treats social roles - as worker, as mother, as friend, and so on, takes as given the legitimacy of existing social relationships. In other words, there is a deep danger of reproducing oppressive forms.

**4. Orientation to learning. As a person matures his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centredness.** This is not something that Knowles sees as 'natural' but rather it is conditioned (1984: 11). It follows from this that if young children were not conditioned to be subject-centred then they would be problem-centred in their approach to learning. This has been very much the concern of progressives such as Dewey.

The question here does not relate to age or maturity but to what may make for effective teaching. We also need to note here the assumption that adults have a greater wish for immediacy of application. Tennant (1988: 22) suggests that a reverse argument can be made for adults being better able to tolerate the postponed application of knowledge.

Last, Brookfield argues that the focus on competence and on 'problem-centredness' in Assumptions 3 and 4 undervalues the large amount of learning undertaken by adults for its innate fascination. '[M]uch of adults' most joyful and personally meaningful learning is undertaken with no specific goal in mind. It is unrelated to life tasks and instead represents a means by which adults can define themselves' (Brookfield 1986: 99).

**5. Motivation to learn: As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal (Knowles 1984:12).** Again, Knowles does not see this as something 'natural' but as conditioned - in particular, through schooling. This assumption sits awkwardly with the view that adults' readiness to learn is 'the result of the need to perform (externally imposed) social roles and that adults have a problem-centred (utilitarian) approach to learning' (Tennant 1988: 23).

In sum it could be said that these assumptions tend to focus on age and stage of development. As Ann Hanson (1996: 102) has argued, this has been at the expense of questions of purpose, or of the relationship between individual and society

### **Andragogy and pedagogy**

As we compare Knowles' versions of pedagogy and andragogy what we can see is a mirroring of the difference between what is known as the romantic and the classical curriculum (although this is confused by the introduction of behaviourist elements such as the learning contract). As Jarvis (1985) puts it, perhaps even more significantly is that for Knowles 'education from above' is pedagogy, while 'education of equals' is andragogy. As a result, the contrasts drawn are rather crude and do not reflect debates within the literature of curriculum and pedagogy.

*A comparison of the assumptions of pedagogy and andragogy following Knowles (Jarvis 1985: 51)*

	<b>Pedagogy</b>	<b>Andragogy</b>
The learner	<i>Dependent.</i> Teacher directs what, when, how a subject is learned and tests that it has been learned	<i>Moves towards independence.</i> <i>Self-directing.</i> Teacher encourages and nurtures this movement
The learner's experience	<i>Of little worth.</i> Hence teaching methods are didactic	<i>A rich resource for learning.</i> Hence teaching methods include discussion, problem-solving etc.

Readiness to learn	<i>People learn what society expects them to. So that the curriculum is standardized.</i>	<i>People learn what they need to know, so that learning programmes organised around life application.</i>
Orientation to learning	<i>Acquisition of subject matter. Curriculum organized by subjects.</i>	<i>Learning experiences should be based around experiences, since people are performance centred in their learning</i>

We need to be extremely cautious about claiming that there is anything distinctive about andragogy. In his reference to romantic and classic notions of curriculum Jarvis (1985) brings out that what lies behind these formulations are competing conceptualizations of education itself. Crucially, these are not directly related to the age or social status of learners. There are various ways of categorizing strands of educational thinking and practice - and they are somewhat more complex than Knowles' setting of pedagogy against andragogy. In North American education debates, for example, four main forces can be identified in the twentieth century: the liberal educators; the scientific curriculum makers; the developmental/person-centred; and the social meliorists (those that sought more radical social change) (after Kliebart 1987). Another way of looking at these categories (although not totally accurate) is as those who see curriculum as:

- the transmission of knowledge,
- product
- process, and
- praxis.

Viewed in this way - Knowles' version of pedagogy looks more like transmission; and andragogy, as represented in the chart, like process. But as we have seen, he mixes in other elements - especially some rather mechanistic assumptions and ideas which can be identified with scientific curriculum making.

### **Andragogy - the continuing debate**

By 1984 Knowles had altered his position on the distinction between pedagogy and andragogy. The child-adult dichotomy became less marked. He claimed, as above, that pedagogy was a content model and andragogy a process model but the same criticisms apply concerning his introduction of behaviourist elements. He even added the fifth assumption: As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal (1984: 12). Yet while there have been these shifts, the tenor of his work, as Jarvis (1987b) argues, still seems to suggest that andragogy is related to adult learning and pedagogy to child learning.

There are those, like Davenport (1993) or the Nottingham Andragogy Group (1983) who believe it is possible to breathe life into the notion of andragogy - but they tend to founder on the same point. Kidd, in his study of how adults learn said the following:

[W]hat we describe as adult learning is not a different kind or order from child

learning. Indeed our main point is that man must be seen as a whole, in his lifelong development. Principles of learning will apply, in ways that we shall suggest to all stages in life. The reason why we specify adults throughout is obvious. This is the field that has been neglected, not that of childhood. (Kidd 1978: 17)

If Kidd is correct then the search for andragogy is pointless. There is no basis in the characteristics of adult learners upon which to construct a comprehensive theory. Andragogy can be seen as an idea that gained popularity in at a particular moment - and its popularity probably says more about the ideological times (Jarvis 1995: 93) than it does about learning processes.

### Further reading and references

Here I have listed the main texts proposing 'andragogy' - and inevitably it is the work of Malcolm Knowles that features.

Knowles, M. (1980) *The Modern Practice of Adult Education. From pedagogy to andragogy* (2nd edn). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Cambridge. 400 pages. Famous as a revised edition of Knowles' statement of andragogy - however, there is relatively little sustained exploration of the notion. In many respects a 'principles and practice text'. Part one deals with the emerging role and technology of adult education (the nature of modern practice, the role and mission of the adult educator, the nature of andragogy). Part 2 deals organizing and administering comprehensive programmes (climate and structure in the organization, assessing needs and interests, defining purpose and objectives, program design, operating programs, evaluation). Part three is entitled 'helping adults learn and consists of a chapter concerning designing and managing learning activities. There are around 150 pages of appendices containing various exhibits - statements of purpose, evaluation materials, definitions of andragogy.

Knowles, M. et al (1984) *Andragogy in Action. Applying modern principles of adult education*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass. A collection of chapters examining different aspects of Knowles' formulation.

Knowles, M. S. (1990) *The Adult Learner. A neglected species* (4e), Houston: Gulf Publishing. First appeared in 1973. 292 + viii pages. Surveys learning theory, andragogy and human resource development (HRD). The section on andragogy has some reflection on the debates concerning andragogy. Extensive appendices which includes planning checklists, policy statements and some articles by Knowles - creating lifelong learning communities, from teacher to facilitator etc.

Nottingham Andragogy Group (1983) *Towards a Developmental Theory of Andragogy*, Nottingham: University of Nottingham Department of Adult Education. 48 pages. Brief review of the andragogy debate to that date. Section 1 deals with adult development; section 2 with the empirical and theoretical foundations for a theory of andragogy; and section 3 proposes a model and theory.

Some critiques of the notion of andragogy - and more particularly the work of Knowles can be found in:



Davenport (1993) 'Is there any way out of the andragogy mess?' in M. Thorpe, R. Edwards and A. Hanson (eds.) *Culture and Processes of Adult Learning*, London; Routledge. (First published 1987).

Jarvis, P. (1987a) 'Malcolm Knowles' in P. Jarvis (ed.) *Twentieth Century Thinkers in Adult Education*, London: Croom Helm.

Tennant, M. (1988, 1996) *Psychology and Adult Learning*, London: Routledge.

### Other references

Boud, D. et al (1985) *Reflection. Turning experience into learning*, London: Kogan Page.

Brookfield, S. D. (1986) *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning. A comprehensive analysis of principles and effective practice*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Cross, K. P. (1981) *Adults as Learners. Increasing participation and facilitating learning (1992 edn.)*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think*, New York: D. C. Heath.

Hanson, A. (1996) 'The search for separate theories of adult learning: does anyone really need andragogy?' in Edwards, R., Hanson, A., and Raggatt, P. (eds.) *Boundaries of Adult Learning. Adult Learners, Education and Training Vol. 1*, London: Routledge.

Humphries, B. (1988) 'Adult learning in social work education: towards liberation or domestication'. *Critical Social Policy* No. 23 pp.4-21.

Jarvis, P. (1985) *The Sociology of Adult and Continuing Education*, Beckenham: Croom Helm.

Kidd, J. R. (1978) *How Adults Learn* (3rd. edn.), Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.

Kliebart, H. M. (1987) *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958*, New York : Routledge.

Merriam, S. B. and Caffarella, R. S. (1991) *Learning in Adulthood. A comprehensive guide*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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