

DE Oracle @ UMUC

An Online Learning Magazine for UMUC Faculty
Center for Support of Instruction

An Overview of Malcolm Knowles' Concept of Andragogy

Jack Boeve

Instructional Technologist
Center for Support of Instruction

Published: September-October 2012

Category: » [Online-pedagogy](#) » [Teaching-strategies](#)

Introduction

This article provides a brief overview of the concept of andragogy as put forth by Malcolm Knowles and suggests that his work in this area may contain some helpful ideas for educators to consider.

The concept of andragogy has been around for less than 200 years, and more formal theorizing and study of the idea that adults learn differently than children and, therefore, require another approach for education, has been around for less than 100 years. During that time, theorists, educators, and practitioners have discussed and debated whether a distinction between pedagogy and andragogy actually exists, and if so, what the implications may be. Part of the conversation, too, has included the question of what sort of model lies behind andragogy, whether it is a process or a body of content.

Background on the Concept and the Educator

Andragogy reportedly first appeared as a term in 1833, when German teacher Alexander Kapp used it in reference to elements of Plato's educational theory (Smith, 1996; 1999), but the term did not achieve mainstream use and was not used for decades thereafter. In the 1920s, educators Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Eduard Lindeman revived the term somewhat in the United States and used it to refer to a concept of adult education, a set of requirements that included a particular philosophy and special teachers and methods (Smith, 1996, 1999).

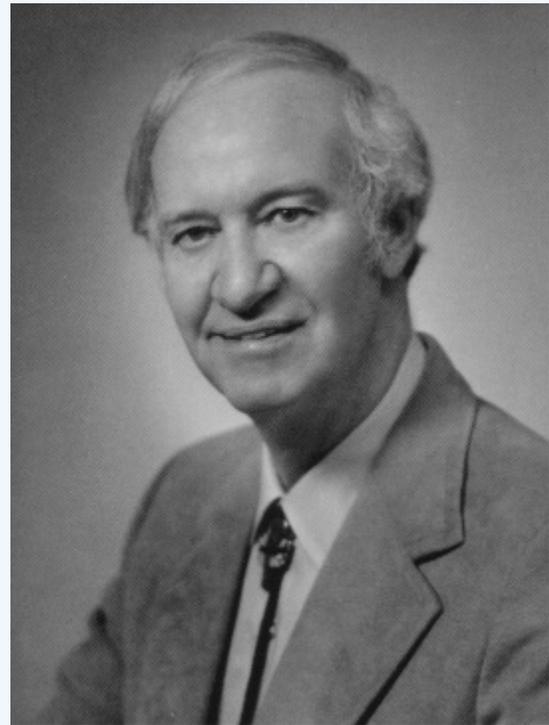
Malcolm Knowles (1913-1997) is considered to be a central 20th-century figure in U.S. adult education. A lifelong educator in both informal and formal settings, Knowles is credited as the one who popularized for English language readers the concept of andragogy-the discipline that focuses on the process and science of adult education (Smith, 1996; 1999).

Knowles' role in adult education began in 1935 under the influence of Lindeman. He latched onto the idea of adult education and delved into it over the course of the next several decades as he led adult education programs for the YMCA, served as executive director of the Adult Education Association of the United States in the 1950s, and then was a university faculty member for 20 years (Smith, 2002). Along the way, he became more focused on adult informal education as he sought for "a coherent and comprehensive theory of adult learning" (Knowles, 1989, p. 76). For Knowles, formal educational programs were most likely to be sponsored by established educational institutions, while informal programs were more likely to occur within the contexts of community associations and centers, organizations, unions and industries, and religious institutions (Smith, 2002). He thought that formal programs were usually better for "new learning of an intensive nature" while informal settings provided the best opportunities for practicing and refining what had been learned already or for arousing interests (Knowles, 1950, p. 125).

Knowles' Assumptions About Adult Learners...and Some Possible Questions for Application

Knowles initially based his concept of andragogy on four assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that are distinct from those traditionally held for pedagogy (Smith, 2002) and subsequently added two more in later publications (Keesee, 2010). He assumed that as people mature, they move along a continuum in areas that reflect each of these six assumptions, and that this movement is from a level of dependence and passivity toward greater levels of independence, initiative, and action.

As you teach your courses, what do you think about these assumptions about adult learners? Do they appear true? Do you consider these ideas when you are teaching courses and interacting with students? Drawing on these assumptions about adult characteristics, how might you incorporate any of these ideas into your courses or faculty-student interactions?



Malcolm Knowles

Source: <http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/resources/malcolmknowles.cfm> (<http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/resources/malcolmknowles.cfm>)

Learning Characteristic	Assumption: Pedagogy	Assumption: Andragogy	Application
Self-Concept	The learner is a dependent personality and is directed by a teacher whose societal responsibility is to determine the conditions and outcomes of learning.	As a person matures, he/she moves from being a dependent personality toward being a self-directed human being whose movement a teacher encourages and nurtures.	What do you observe of students' self-concepts and where they are on the spectrum of dependence/ independence or being other- versus self-directed?
Experience	A learner's own experience is limited, of little worth, and may be only a starting point. Valuable experience is that of the teacher, content author/producer, and expert. Teaching methods are didactic and focus on transmission.	As a person matures, he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning. Teaching methods are more experiential and encourage incorporating experience into education.	How are students drawing upon the various reservoirs of experience available to them, either their own or those of others within their spheres? Are they applying experience as an educational resource? How might you encourage them to do so?
Readiness to Learn	Readiness to learn is determined by a learner's age and developmental stage; learning and curriculum are organized around a standardized, uniform progression for all learners (learning what	As a person matures, his/her readiness to learn becomes orientated increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles (learning what one needs to know to fulfill particular roles).	Are students ready to learn and apply knowledge to their wide range of roles and tasks? How might you assist students in the process, being open to new information and integrating and applying new

	society and school expects one to know).		knowledge?
Orientation to Learning	Learners see education as a process of acquiring subject matter content, the greatest application of which is sometime in the future. Accordingly, curriculum is organized into subject matter units following the logic of the subject. Learners are subject-centered in their orientation to learning.	As a person matures, his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his/her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of task- or problem-centeredness.	How might you assist students with their application of knowledge, whether intended for later application or directed to present, more immediate life situations? Do your course materials focus on either subject knowledge or problem solving-or do you maintain a focus on both concerns?
Motivation to Learn	Learners are motivated by external rewards and punishment.	As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal.	Do you know what motivates students to learn? How might you discover, tap into, and support their motivations?
Relevance	Learners may be less inclined to question why they need to learn something.	As a person matures, he/she increasingly needs to know why he/she needs to learn something.	Do students know why they need particular courses or content? Are they able to answer this for themselves, or do you inform and guide their understanding of content relevance?

Desired Outcomes of Adult Learning

Over the course of his career, Knowles also identified desired outcomes of adult learning that he believed were crucial to the formation of "citizen-rulers" in a democratic society. He believed that these aptitudes and abilities were developed best within diverse educational settings. Knowles' (1950, pp. 9-10) seven baseline outcomes (*followed by shortened or paraphrased descriptions*) include:

- **Adults should acquire a mature understanding of themselves.** *This includes their "needs, motivations, interests, capacities, and goals," as well as possessing self-acceptance, self-respect, and a desire to become better.*
- **Adults should develop an attitude of acceptance, love, and respect toward others.** *They need to "learn to distinguish between people and ideas, and to challenge ideas without threatening people." Ideally, this leads to empathy and the desire to help others.*
- **Adults should develop a dynamic attitude toward life.** *They should accept change, including personal, and develop the skill and "habit of looking at every experience as an opportunity to learn."*
- **Adults should learn to react to the causes, not the symptoms, of behavior.** *This entails seeking solutions at the level of root causes, not in the symptoms.*
- **Adults should acquire the skills necessary to achieve the potentials of their personalities.** *A goal of education should be providing skills and nurturing capacities necessary for human flourishing in individuals and societies.*
- **Adults should understand the essential values in the capital of human experience.** *This refers to "the heritage of knowledge," ideas, and traditions of their world and a respect for common, binding values.*
- **Adults should understand their society and should be skillful in directing social change.** *Every adult should know enough about the diverse aspects of social order in order to be intelligent, effective, and productive participants.*

Do you agree with these stated outcomes? If so, how does education at UMUC-and your course

instruction specifically-support these broad goals?

Critique

If you find yourself questioning elements of Knowles' theory, you are not alone. Each of his assertions and the claims of difference between andragogy and pedagogy have been the subject of considerable debate and critique over the years. Smith (1996, 1999; 2002) highlights and summarizes some points of critique, including that of Hartree (1984), who asserts that it is not clear whether Knowles' work is a theory or set of assumptions about learning, or a theory, or model of teaching, or a set of guidelines for practice. She believes "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, 1999, p. 250).

Knowles (1980) later reconsidered his ideas and admitted that the line between pedagogy and andragogy was not always so clear and that the two are more properly understood as different models of assumptions--not as dichotomous but as two ends of a spectrum. According to Clark (2011), he conceded that a number of his key assumptions could apply equally to adults and children and that possibly the main distinction between them within this arena was that of experience. Thus, andragogy is perhaps more concerned with being learner-focused while pedagogy traditionally has been more concerned with being teacher-directed; both concepts exist on a spectrum shared by both adults and children.

Conclusion

In spite of these critiques, as educators you may still find ideas of merit within either Knowles' particular set of learning outcomes or his six educational assumptions. You may wish to consider some of the questions posed above in response to Knowles' ideas, or perhaps reflecting on these assumptions and learning outcomes generates questions and potential applications of your own. In either case, the six assumptions related to adult learners may influence or help guide you in your instruction and interactions with your students.

References

Clark, D. R. (2011). *Malcolm Knowles*. Retrieved from <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/history/knowles.html> (<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/history/knowles.html>)

Hartree, A. (1984). Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy: A critique. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 3, 203-210.

Holmes, G. & Abington-Cooper, M. (2000 Summer/Fall). Pedagogy vs. andragogy: A false dichotomy? *The Journal of Technology Studies*, 26(2). Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JOTS/Summer-Fall-2000/holmes.html> (<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JOTS/Summer-Fall-2000/holmes.html>)

Keesee, G. (2010). *Andragogy-Adult learning theory*. Retrieved from <http://teachinglearningresources.pbworks.com/w/page/30310516/Andragogy--Adult%20Learning%20Theory> (<http://teachinglearningresources.pbworks.com/w/page/30310516/Andragogy--Adult%20Learning%20Theory>)

Knowles, M. S. (1950). *Informal adult education*. New York: Association Press.

Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Cambridge Adult Education.

Knowles, M. S. (1989). *The making of an adult educator. An autobiographical journey*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Knowles, M. S. & Associates. (1984). *Andragogy in action. Applying modern principles of adult education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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

Smith, M. K. (1996; 1999). Andragogy. In *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/b-andra.htm> (<http://www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/b-andra.htm>)

Smith, M. K. (2002). Malcolm Knowles, informal adult education, self-direction and andragogy. In *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm> (<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm>)

About the Author(s)

Jack Boeve joined the CSI staff as an instructional support specialist in November 2011. Prior to joining CSI, he was a project specialist for with UMUC's Center for Intellectual Property, where his roles included Web and resource development, instructional support for courses and conferences, and creative communications and publications. He has also worked in the publishing industry and the nonprofit sector. Jack has a BA in English literature and an MDiv.

Rating: **Not yet rated**

Comments

No comments posted.

You must be logged in **and be a member of the UMUC community in order to comment.**

If you are a member of the UMUC community and do not have an account, please [register](#) for a FREE one.

If you have a guest account but are Faculty/Staff of UMUC please send an email to the [DE Oracle Site Manager](#) (<mailto:degrad@umuc.edu?subject=Please Update my DE Oracle Guest Account>) so that your guest account can be updated.

[Contact Site Manager](#)

Created and Maintained by the Center for Support of Instruction

© [University of Maryland University College](#)

Powered by [ArticleMS](#) from [ArticleTrader.com](#)