



An Academic Critique – Adult Learning and Adult Learners

SCOTT JAMES

UNIVERSITY OF WALES TRINITY SAINT DAVID

An academic critique of current thinking in relation to the concept of adult learning and the adult learner in the context of today's PCET

Within this written piece, the author will aim to demonstrate the current thinking of adult learning and the adult learner, considering the concept of today's PCET. Incorporated within the written piece will be the significance of Malcolm Knowles with the prominence of andragogy, and what he applied to develop the term within adult learning. To conclude, the author will determine the criticism it has gained overtime, as well as express the unquestionable influence that it has had on adult learning and adults learners today.

Andragogy is a term which originates from the expressions *andro* (meaning man) and *agourgous* (meaning to lead), and the word is intended to focus on the specific needs of adults and it is grounded on the idea that there is a substantial difference in learning traits between children and adults (Sato, Haegele and Foot, 2017). The individual who influenced the growth of andragogy was Malcolm Knowles. The American author developed the term and grew its awareness within the United States in his book called, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy* (Loeng, 2018). However, exploring into his research, Knowles found that the term was initially originated by Dutch adult educator, Alexander Kapp in 1833, who defined it from the theory of Greek philosopher Plato, as the normal process in which adults continue in their educational development (Chacko, 2018).

Knowles argued that the principle of adult education should be self-actualization, and while appropriate learning should always be considered within learning, he influenced the way in that teachers should pay precise consideration to the emotional, psychological and intellectual developments of the learners, as it was an area that was not completely comprehended within education at that time (Sharifi, Soleimai and Jafarigohar, 2017). Nonetheless, as the prominence of andragogy rose, so was the importance of pedagogy. Pedagogy represented more of a teacher – centred environment, paying a particular attention on traditional learner populations, whereas andragogy had more of a focus on the non – traditional learner populations (Blankson, Blankson and Ntuli, 2019).

As pedagogy signifies more of a teacher – centred environment, attending to the consideration of the subject material, Malcolm Knowles and many other educationalists differ the andragogical term to more of a learner-focused education, applying critical thinking with regards to the content and its application to the learner (Blackley and Sheffield, 2015). Peltz and Clemons (2018) argue that from a pedagogical theory, the growth of the learner depends on a co-ordinated plan, issuing the significance of finding the best way of transferring the content to the learner. Conversely, andragogy applies its

attention more on the developments of the learner, rather than commanding the learning and the learner (Peltz and Clemons, 2018).

As stated, Malcolm Knowles was the pioneer of introducing adult theory into the late 20th century, and a significant aspect of his work was the six assumptions of andragogy that he implemented, facilitating the adult learner so that they are able to accommodate their educational aspirations to this current day (Tainsh, 2016). Even though Knowles' concept of andragogy was practically orientated, many people said that he explained his theory on adult learning through assumptions, where he made suggestions regarding planning, directing and evaluating adult's assumptions (Loeng, 2018).

This theory recognises six fundamental assumptions of adult learners, which comprise of:

- 1) Adults have by now recognised a self – concept and are equipped for self-directed learning;
- 2) Adults have previous work experiences on which they can delve into and aid their learning;
- 3) Adults have a strong willingness when the subject material is comfortable for them;
- 4) Adults have a problem-focused orientation to learning, and thus want to exhaust their new found knowledge instantaneously;
- 5) Adults need to know how, why and what they will learn;
- 6) Lastly, adults have an intrinsic motivation to learn (Dachner and Polin, 2015).

Despite Knowles' positive impact that he had on adult education thus far, and the legacy that he created, there has been some criticism aimed at Knowles regarding his write up within his book, with many declaring that there is not much of an apparent difference between child and adult learning. One of the first person to give such criticism came from Houle (1972, cited in Draper, 1998, p.15), where he stated:

“If pedagogy and andragogy are distinguishable, it is not because they are essentially different from one another but because they represent the working out of the same fundamental processes at different stages of life.”

Other criticism has come Grace (1996), where he points at the fact that andragogy focuses exclusively on the individual and not working from a detailed social programme, as well as debating the affiliation of adult education to society. Many other educationalists have urged adult learning to go past the teaching and learning transaction, and to comprise some aspects which deliver needed outcomes, which can include incorporating a paradigm of self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1986). Pratt (1993) also criticises andragogy for not accepting a critical example of adult learning, issuing that andragogy is interrupted with individualism and entrepreneurial democracy.

Although these individual critics issued their concern over andragogy years back, the logic today still applies to the current context of adult learning and the adult learner today. However, having investigated the features of andragogy which does not incorporate outcomes such as social change and theory, it is worth noting that andragogy does not need to integrate these attributes into its theory.

A contemporary concern is nurturing adults' capability to adapt to a forever changing world, and this current apprehension not only involves adult educators and curriculum developers, but also the personnel involved with human resource development (Morris, 2018). However, according to Knowles (1980), he declares that there are many components that are pivotal to instruction rooted in andragogy: containing experiential learning, self – directed learning, engagement, and transformative learning, all of which are present within adult learning today and have such encouraging response.

Andragogical learners are self – directed, entering an educational domain with various life experiences, where they are able to use those experiences and help them evolve their learning, as well as having alternative motives: perhaps motives representing self – esteem and the need for acknowledgment (Peltz and Clemons, 2018). However, the concept of andragogy differs from America and Europe. From a European perspective, Heinschke & Ratana – Ubol (2015) clarify that andragogy was more comprehensive based on its orientation, as it helps adults become more defined and competent within education, guiding them to fulfil their academic capability. Furthermore, Popovi and Reischmann (2017, cited in Peltz and Clemons, 2018) clarified that adult learning, particularly within Europe, supports personal, organisational, as well as social change. The current significance that andragogy has within education is monumental, as it provides the prospect of personal development for individuals with their subject area, as well as offering the opportunity to satisfy their intellectual necessities.

Adult learning and the adult learner has developed extensively overtime. This initially commenced through the work of Malcolm Knowles, where he emphasized the significance that andragogy has within the educational system today. The formation of the six assumptions enabled adult learners to accommodate their educational needs, and really dissect the theory of adult learning and how the adult learner can extensively benefit as a result. However, the work of Knowles and the development of andragogy did not come without its critics. Many individuals lambasted its relevancy, the nature of the concept, with many issuing areas where improvements could be met. However, withstanding the negativity that has come by, the current use of andragogy provides the adult learner with a clear direction, enabling them with the best opportunity of gaining a competent education.

Reference List

Blankson, L., Blankson, J., and Ntuli, E. (2019). *Care and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Online Settings*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Brookfield, S. (1986). *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*. Buckingham: Open Press University

Chacko, T. (2018). 'Emerging Pedagogies for Effective Adult Learning: From Andragogy to Heutagogy', *Archives of Medicine and Health Sciences*, Vol.6 (2), pp.278-283. [Online] Available at: <https://doaj.org/article/ad8925e8bf83411f95e7840b3bfdf842> [Accessed on 09.05.2019]

Dachner, A., and Polin, B. (2015). 'A Systematic Approach to Educating the Emerging Adult Learner in Undergraduate Management Courses', *Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 40 (2), pp.121-152. [Online] Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1177/1052562915613589> [Accessed on 08.05.2019].

Draper, J. (1998). 'The Metamorphoses of Andragogy', *Ontario Institute for Studies in Education*, Vol.12 (1), pp.3-26. [Online] Available at: <file:///C:/Users/P146328/Downloads/2011-Article%20Text-2510-1-10-20130807.pdf> [Accessed on 09.05.2019].

Grace, A. (1996). 'Striking a critical pose: Andragogy – missing links, missing values', *International Journal of Lifelong Learning*, Vol.15 (5), pp.382-392. [Online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248982996_Striking_a_critical_pose_Andragogy_-_missing_links_missing_values [Accessed on 09.05.2019].

Knowles, M. (1980). 'Malcolm Knowles on "How do you get people to be self – directed learners?"', *Training & Development Journal*, Vol.34 (5), p.96. [Online] Available at: <https://web-b-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=864ed804-fd07-47dc-a2f7-26170e8757a1%40sessionmgr103> [Accessed on 09.05.2019].

Loeng, S. (2018). 'Various ways of understanding the concept of andragogy', *Cogent Education*, Vol.5 (1). [Online] Available at: <https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/2331186X.2018.1496643?needAccess=true> [Accessed on 07.05.2019].

Morris, T. (2018). 'Adaptivity Through Self – Directed Learning to Meet the Challenges of Our Ever – Changing World', *Adult Learning*, Vol.30 (2), pp.56 – 67. [Online] Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1177/1045159518814486> [Accessed on 09.05.2019].

Peltz, S., and Clemons, A. (2018). *Multicultural Andragogy for Transformative Learning*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global

Pratt, D. (1993). 'Andragogy after twenty-five years', *Adult Learning Theory: An Update*, Vol.1993 (57), pp.15-23. [Online] Available at: [file:///C:/Users/P146328/Downloads/Andragogy After 25 Years.pdf](file:///C:/Users/P146328/Downloads/Andragogy%20After%2025%20Years.pdf) [Accessed on 09.05.2019].

Ratana – Ubol, A., and Henschke, J. (2015). 'Cultural Learning Processes through Local Wisdom: A Case Study on Adult and Lifelong Learning in Thailand', *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology*, Vol.6 (2), pp.41-60. [Online] Available at: file:///D:/Downloads/fulltext_stamped.pdf [Accessed on 09.05.2019].

Sato, T., Haegele, J., and Foot, R. (2017). 'Developing Online Graduate Coursework in Adapted Physical Education Utilizing Andragogy Theory', *Quest (00336297)*, Vol.69 (4), pp.453-467. [Online] Available at: <https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=40e41938-d2eb-40cc-8eb9-2820161e5716%40sdc-v-sessmgr03> [Accessed on 08.05.2019].

Sharifi, M., Soleimani, H., and Jafarigohar, M. (2017). 'E-portfolio evaluation and vocabulary learning: Moving from pedagogy to andragogy', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, Vol.48 (6), pp.1441-1450. [Online] Available at: <https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=cc7cc7f4-32b4-42f5-b43c-0ac5f6c09d13%40sessionmgr4006> [Accessed on 08.05.2019].

Tainsh, R. (2016). 'Thoughtfully Designed Online Courses as Effective Adult Learning Tools', *Journal of Adult Education*, Vol.45 (1), pp.32-38. [Online] Available at: <https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=cde6e2ba-cfce-4253-a6cf-88c57b537f6f%40sdc-v-sessmgr03> [Accessed 07.05.2019].

Bibliography

Bates, B. (2016). *Learning Theories Simplified*. California: SAGE Publications

Cranton, P. (1994). *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Gravells, A. (2012). *What is Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector?*. London: Learning Matters

Jarvis, P., Holford, J., and Griffin, C. (2003). *The Theory & Practice of Learning*. (2nd Ed). London: Kogan Page Limited

Knowles, M. (1980). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. New York: Cambridge Adult Education

Knowles, M. (1990). *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*. Houston: Gulf Publishing Company

McGivney, V. (2001). *Fixing or Changing the Pattern: Reflections on widening adult participation in learning*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

Rogers, J. (2001). *Adult Learning*. (4th Ed). Maidenhead: Open Press University

Thorpe, M., Edwards, R., and Hanson, A. (1993). *Culture and Processes of Adult Learning*. London: Routledge

Walklin, L. (1990). *Teaching and Learning in Further and Adult Education*. Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes (Publishers) LTD