

Pedagogy is for Kids:

Andragogy is for Adults

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ABSTRACT

Malcolm Knowles laments the paucity of “thinking, investigating, and writing about adult learning” in the opening sentence of his theoretical framework of “Andragogy” (1998, p, 35). Knowles’ central argument is that we learn differently as adults from how we learn as children, so we should tailor adult education accordingly. Knowles highlighted his position in the very title of his 1983 article, “Adults Are Not Grown-Up Children as Learners.” Indeed, Knowles has argued consistently since as early as 1968 for “andragogy, not pedagogy.” As Clardy (2005) reminds us, however, Knowles did not coin the term “Andragogy,” rather, it goes back to nineteenth-century Germany. In fact, Lindeman brought the term to American education discourse as early as 1926 (Clardy, 2005, p. 4). Additionally, Knowles features Lindeman’s five key assumptions about adult learning in Knowles’ 1998 work on adult learning theory (p. 39). Knowles himself set forth his own similar set of six assumptions in 1980 (St. Clair, 2002, p. 3). While St. Clair and Clardy fairly criticize Knowles for overreach and his imperfect empirical sources, Knowles’ central point and at least two of Knowles’ assumptions are well founded.

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Andragogy, Assumptions, Knowles, and His Detractors

Malcolm Knowles laments the paucity of “thinking, investigating, and writing about adult learning” in the opening sentence of his theoretical framework of “Andragogy” (1998, p, 35). Knowles’ central argument is that we learn differently as adults from how we learn as children, so we should tailor adult education accordingly. Knowles highlighted his position in the very title of his 1983 article, “Adults Are Not Grown-Up Children as Learners.” Indeed, Knowles has argued consistently since as early as 1968 for “andragogy, not pedagogy.” As Clardy (2005) reminds us, however, Knowles did not coin the term “Andragogy,” rather, it goes back to nineteenth-century Germany. In fact, Lindeman brought the term to American education discourse as early as 1926 (Clardy, 2005, p. 4). Additionally, Knowles features Lindeman’s five key assumptions about adult learning in Knowles’ 1998 work on adult learning theory (p. 39). Knowles himself set forth his own similar set of six assumptions in 1980 (St. Clair, 2002, p. 3). While St. Clair and Clardy fairly criticize Knowles for overreach and his imperfect empirical sources, Knowles’ central point and at least two of Knowles’ assumptions are well founded.

Adults Have a Higher Level of Background Knowledge and Life Experience

It hardly bears argument that we gain experience with age. A person at thirty years of age has infinitely more background knowledge than she or he did at thirty months. And although Imel (1989) cites several studies showing that teachers of adults do not vary their practices significantly from teachers of children, this is not to say that adults do not use their experience to learn in a way that is different from how children learn. Instructors of adults have much greater opportunity to draw on the experience of students in discussion than teachers of children.

Knowles also points out that groups of adult learners will be more heterogeneous than groups of children due to the varying age and experience levels amongst adult learners.(1998, p. 66).

The author currently teaches ballroom dance at a community college to students as young as 17 and as old as 67. The 67 year-old has been dancing since before she was 17 and is learning ballroom dance mostly as a refresher. The 17 year-old has no experience with ballroom dance, and seems most interested in meeting someone to date. This learning group could hardly be more heterogeneous, and the implications for practice are many. As advised by Knowles, (1998, p. 66) the author emphasizes individualized instruction and uses a wider variety of learning strategies than when he teaches ballroom dance to high school students. Teens are usually grouped with other students within one year of their age, and with whom the teens also share other classes, friends, and even former teachers. Adult learners are much less likely to be as similar to their classmates.

Adults Need to Know Why They Should Learn Something

While Day and Baskett (1982) argue correctly that it is common for employers to dictate learning experiences in vocational settings, Knowles correctly asserts that adults do need to know why they should learn something in order to be motivated to learn (1998). Knowles goes on to recommend that facilitators “make the intellectual case for the value of learning in improving the effectiveness of the learner’s performance or the quality of their lives” (p. 65). Knowles also properly rejects the common pedagogical practice of assigning full responsibility to the teacher for methods, timing and content, and recommends a more transactional approach for andragogy (p. 72). Such an approach would do well to include addressing the learner’s need to know subject matter from the beginning of the learning experience. While this is also advisable for teen and child learners, this is most important for adult learners. This is especially

true, given the voluntary nature of most adult learning and the many competing demands on the time of adults (p.69). Children, on the other hand, are more trusting of their teachers, and are more likely to view their teachers as omniscient or infallible. The need to know for a child may be nothing more than the teacher said so.

Conclusion

Many methods and principles apply well to both pedagogy and andragogy. As an obvious example, Skinner's work on reward and consequences to modify behavior works with students of all ages (Boshier, 2006). Both children and adults are motivated by good grades and avoid bad grades. Despite his flaws and detractors, Knowles' central point is well taken; adults are different from children, they learn differently, and educators do well to teach adults differently. In the end, Knowles reminds us well that andragogy is a set of assumptions that includes the pedagogical assumptions and adds to them (p. 72).

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