

## **The adult learner may really be a neglected species**

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*When we separate the process of learning that is experienced by adults and children from the methods, systems and settings that are used, a clear case can be made for a very distinct, andragogical model. This concept exists separately from the notion that there is undoubtedly a common pedagogy or 'art of teaching' that is shared by the best educators, regardless of whether their audience comprises children or adults. The key to improving the adult learning experience is to acknowledge that adults do have very different needs, expectations and limitations in what they want and need to know, and how they are prepared to experience it.*

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### **Introduction**

In his influential book, *The adult learner: a neglected species* (1973), Malcolm Knowles is credited with popularising the term 'andragogy' in relation to the way adults learn and the way they are taught. The

first references to andragogy can probably be attributed to a German educator, Alexander Kapp, 150 years before, who referenced Plato. The word originates from the Greek translation which literally means 'man-leading'. Adults were seen as self-directed and teachers as facilitators of the learning experience. At this time 'andragogy' was seen as distinct from 'pedagogy' which related to how children learn and are taught. By 1986 Knowles' original book had reached its fourth edition and Knowles' thesis had changed, with andragogy now encompassing and not separate from pedagogy. He concluded that there was a continuum from self-direction to teacher-led instruction and that both adults and children could experience many different learning styles according to need and the situation. We began to hear about 'the ageless learner' and life experience as a basis and foundation for all learners.

In the contemporary Australian context, adult learning takes place in a variety of settings such as the workplace, vocational training institutions such as TAFE, universities and private colleges. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in any one year, nine out of ten Australians aged between 15 and 64 are engaged in some form of learning. It can be formal and lead to accredited qualifications within the Australian Qualifications Framework (which conceptually bridges secondary schools, vocational education and higher education), or completely informal and unaccredited. If we test the notion that there is a single pedagogy for both adults and children, the starting point could be the differences in the settings where learning takes place.

### **Outside the classroom**

Educating children largely takes place within the confines of the classroom. While there have been a range of contemporary learning aids to complement this setting, such as interactive whiteboards and computer labs, the basic premise of the school room setting remains largely unchanged. Children are exposed to some developmental

options such as buddying, peer mentoring and e-learning, but these still take place within the classroom setting.

Some adult learning also takes place in a classroom setting, however, it also embraces the workplace as the setting via mentoring, coaching, shadowing and buddying programs (all loosely grouped as development options). Workplace learning via distance education, communities of practice or e-learning also broadens the adult learning context, taking place beyond the confines of the classroom. Placing the learning within or close to the workplace setting means the learning experience can be coupled with the learner's work role, heightening the likelihood that the learning transfers into practice and increasing the motivation and meaning which attach to it.

Adults tend to want to learn 'in the moment', meaning they seek out learning that is relevant for them at that time, whereas children have compulsory attendance for the majority of their learning experiences. This paradigm is being challenged for children as a result of social media and the internet. They must now learn how to find what they need to know, rather than learning what they might need to know, bringing them 'into the moment' in a different way. This process has the ability to begin the journey of the lifelong learner in childhood.

### **The tools we use**

There is no escaping the fact that workplace-based, adult education is dominated by Powerpoint presentations. These often form the basis of the individual lessons and an entire course is often based on the framework of a Powerpoint presentation. This has given rise to the evolution of the presenter/facilitator as distinct from the teacher/educator. There is a sense that almost anyone who is willing to lead a group can deliver a Powerpoint presentation and educate. There is often a short 'train the trainer' session to familiarise presenters with the basic expectations of the session.

The classroom teacher in the school setting comes to their role after a minimum of three to four years' tertiary training which incorporates on-the-job learning in the form of 'prac teaching' and rigorous curriculum development. Not just anyone can be a school teacher. It is this disparity in qualifications and preparation for the role that prevents adult education from being recognised as a true vocation and not just an extension of the human resources function in an organisation, or worse still, an activity in which anyone can simply become involved.

Workplace-based, adult education tends to be evaluated at micro-levels (i.e. after each module, session, one-day course, etc.) via a 'happy sheet' or 'reactionaire'. This can be a brutal process for those involved. This exercise often serves to unrealistically elevate the session to 'pass or fail' status for the hapless presenter and can put enormous pressure on the individual trainer to meet expectations. School teachers do not face this micro-level of scrutiny about their work.

The school environment is a continuous learning environment. Workplace learning often occurs in short bursts according to need. Children become comfortable with the learning process because for them it is continuous and varied. Their job is to learn. The downfall of this is there is little opportunity for them to apply their learning in real life or for it to be attached to a task or skill. Often they are left learning something new just for the sake of it which, of course, has both benefits and limitations. Conversely, adults have the opportunity to apply their learning, but often do not have the right scaffolding or blended approach to learning to support them to do so.

According to the *2010 e-learning benchmarking survey*, conducted by the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, e-learning remains the fastest growing platform for adult learning. Employees demand the convenience of being able to learn at their desktop as they juggle their daily routine. The Federal

Government survey estimated that 43% of vocational education and training activity now involved some form of e-learning.

### **The teaching technique**

Adults have far less tolerance for bad classroom training and for poorly constructed learning experiences wherever they take place. Adults can more easily judge the value of the learning and its relevance to their lives and their needs to acquire particular skills or knowledge. The classroom teacher in a school setting who is not effective is not subject to the same levels of scrutiny from the child. Teachers are not going to be questioned by the children they are teaching in the same way the adult demands that a learning experience meets their expectations. Adults will let the trainer know what they are thinking during the training, and then afterwards, via reactionaries or reports to their supervisor or the learning and development branch in their organisation.

Attention spans between adults and children are not as wide as one might think. Good teachers work hard to change the dynamics of the classroom regularly so that children remain engaged. They do this via regular activities, variety in their delivery and mixing talk with participation and action. Only the best adult trainers take this approach. They often falsely assume that they have the group's attention just because people seem engaged. Often they mistake engagement for daydreaming. Children also daydream, but they are not so willing to sit quietly and still while a teacher delivers a long lecture.

In adult settings the room often manages itself, via peer pressure to conform and lack of tolerance for those who do not want to participate constructively. In the case of children, they can have an influence on the room dynamics but the primary responsibility still rests with the teacher.

## **Can trainers be teachers?**

It is not uncommon for people to make the transition from school teacher to adult educator/trainer. However, it is rare for the reverse to be true. The barriers include the need to obtain specialist tertiary and practical qualifications. Even in the delivery of formal accredited courses under the Australian Qualifications Framework, adult learning only requires a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment which is easily obtained and contains almost no practical grounding in course delivery and curriculum writing.

Training in workplace settings is commonly constructed and then delivered by people who have little or no formal training themselves in how to teach people to learn. Conversely, many of the developmental processes used in the workplace to promote adult learning, such as mentoring, coaching, buddying and shadowing, are undertaken by people who are experts in the core business of the organisation or who have earned respect as successful managers. The value they add comes from their knowledge not of the learning process but of human behaviour and the processes of work.

Other general training that employees need such as relationship skills, teamwork, analysis, problem solving and project management can also be learned on the job or by undertaking tasks associated with their daily work routine. Small businesses in particular must be creative about how their employees learn as the cost of conventional training strategies is often prohibitive.

## **Adults in learning organisations**

Organisations which have an evolved learning and development function have now commonly embraced the concept of the learning organisation, as described by Peter Senge (1990) in his book, *The fifth discipline*. This concept couples an employee's desire to learn about their job role and themselves as a continuous process. It also

elevates the role of learning and highlights the critical importance of adult learning as a means of building organisational and personal capability.

The organisation places great value on the role of learning and development, linking the planning process with systems and resources. The learning organisation embraces the concepts of personal mastery and a commitment to lifelong learning. It views training in the conventional sense as only a component part of the learning process. Employees are encouraged to be self-directed learners and the organisation provides access to a framework via a range of learning opportunities for individuals, managers and teams to learn and to challenge assumptions, values and norms. It is in this sphere where adult learning is connected to the broader needs and aims of the organisation that real differences can be drawn between this and what a child's learning experience means.

## **Conclusion**

When we separate the process of learning that is experienced by adults and children from the methods, systems and settings that are used, a clear case can be made for a very distinct, andragogical model. This concept exists separately from the notion that there is undoubtedly a common pedagogy or 'art of teaching' that is shared by the best educators, regardless of whether their audience comprises children or adults. One of the fundamental problems with adult learning in the contemporary sense is that the contrasting needs and differences to the learning experiences we expect for our children are not readily acknowledged (summarised in Table 1). As a profession, adult education does not have the same status or resources available to refine and develop it that school teaching enjoys. The key to improving the adult learning experience is to acknowledge that adults do have very different needs, expectations and limitations in what they want and need to know and how they are prepared to experience

it. If we accept this is true, Malcolm Knowles was right—the adult learner really is a neglected species.

*Table 1: Some of the critical differences in the adult learning experience*

<b>Adults</b>	<b>Children</b>
Classroom learning just one of many learning modes. Also e-learning, workplace-based learning, distance learning and development initiatives such as mentoring, coaching, buddying shadowing and communities of practice.	Classroom based learning still the dominant mode.
Motivation for learning: career, qualifications, direct knowledge needed to do a job.	Pure learning for staged advancement.
Adults seek out learning that has meaning for them at the time.	Children have compulsory attendance for the majority of their learning experiences.
Emphasis on self-directed learning. Learning is process-based, collaborative, facilitated and often problem-oriented.	Teacher driven. Learning is often passive and dependent.
Adults bring life-long and life-wide experience to the subject.	Children don't bring broad life experiences to the learning.
Adults often have strong values and need to unlearn and have these values challenged.	Children are not as hampered by a value set.
Few formal qualifications are needed for adult educators (Certificate IV level required by Registered Training Organisations). Some school teachers make the transition to adult education.	Minimum three years' tertiary training required for school teaching. Adult educators rarely make the transition to school teaching.



## References

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## About the authors

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