Andragogy Theory

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Abstract

This paper is a literature review of andragogy. Andragogy is an adult learning theory also known as the teaching of adults. This adult learning theory holds a set of assumptions about how adults learn. It uses approaches to learning that are problem-based and collaborative rather than informative. Andragogy also emphasizes more equality between the instructor and learner. I will begin this literature review by discussing the history and creator of andragogy, Malcolm Knowles. Following the introduction, I will look at what Knowles identified as six assumptions of andragogy. The scholars in this literature review will look at the topic of andragogy and how they relate to Knowles’ founding principles.
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Introduction

There are many components of andragogy. Malcom Knowles identified six assumptions of adult learning that have been the foundation of the andragogy theory for over thirty years. The general themes and implications made in this literature review will be over the six principles. Andragogy originated in Europe in the 1950's as a theory and in 1968 Knowles created four original assumptions of andragogy which were subsequently expanded into six. Zmeyov states Knowles defined andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 105). Andragogy began with Knowles’ belief that adult learning is different than pedagogy (childhood learning). Many common themes in the research of andragogy indicate a focus on learning rather than teaching.

Themes

The first assumption relates to self-concept. The adult learner goes from being dependent to self-directed. Adults must show they are responsible for their actions and empower themselves. An increased desire for independence occurs as the learner matures.

The second assumption is the participant having previous experience (including mistakes) that provides the basis for the learning activities. Forrest and Peterson (2006) discuss how “students bring applicable knowledge and skills to the learning process. They seek to fill the gaps of knowledge in their experience base.” (p. 118). These previous experiences helped make them who they are and will assist them in the learning process. This will enhance their learning and make it more meaningful.
The third assumption discusses the need for the participant to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction. This allows the participant to gear their education toward their own learning goals and impact their self-concept. Adults (instructor and participant) work together so they know what they are learning and why. Merriam (2001) discusses how important the orientation, support and guidance in the learning process from the instructor is for the participant. When this occurs, we see a greater retention rate in higher education.

The fourth assumption Knowles identifies is when the adult is not only willing to learn but also ready to learn. Although the parameters are set, the adult learner is able to explore within those parameters in a self-directed manner. This self-directed learning also impacts the adult learner’s self-concept. The subject matter must appear to be immediately relevant and impactful to the adult learner’s job or personal life. Instructors must make the content relevant to the participant. More interaction between instructors and participants will create more critical thinking among adult learners.

The fifth and sixth assumptions were added later as the theory evolved in the 1980’s. The fifth assumption is the orientation to learning. Orientation to learning is based on solving problems by not focusing solely on content. An example of orientation to learning is helping learners solve problems they face in everyday life. The final assumption of Knowles adult learning theory is the adult learner’s motivation to learn. As a person matures they place a different value on learning for reasons such as family or work. Adults also seek greater job satisfaction as they mature. These factors will be fluid throughout an adult’s life.

Implications

Instructors who believe in andragogy value the adult learners in their classes and want them to be involved. All instructors want their adult learners to pull from their experiences and
personal interests. The instructors want the learners to be self-directed. As a person matures their self-concept moves from being dependent to independent. Then, they go from independent to interdependent in the world of work. The first theme discusses the need for the participant to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction. Chan (2010) agrees with this by discussing the importance of adults to be actively engaged in their learning. Chan (2010) agrees with Knowles that andragogy encourages the involvement of learners, their experiences and their environment. One way to show the participants are involved is to have them help develop the objectives for their learning. Setting the objectives together is another commonality and reflects the motivation level of the participants, which encourages learning in the classroom. Adults need to think critically and instructors should focus on how interaction needs to be increased by constant planning, feedback and encouragement.

As a person matures they gain experience which becomes a resource for learning. The second theme is the participant having previous experience (including mistakes) that provides the basis for the learning activities. Individual experiences can be shared and drawn from as the learner engages with their instructor and peers. Newton (1977) is in agreement with Knowles and goes on to say “The mature individual is a veritable storehouse of codified experiences which are the essence of his central identity” (p. 362).

The importance of the participant being involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction is the third assumption. The learner would have the opportunity to help set the objectives for the course. The learner wants to be able to have immediate gratification and to be able to use the learned material directly after learning it. All learners would also provide input to the evaluation process.
The fourth assumption is the participant’s readiness to learn. For example, educators might provide assistance to individuals or groups of learners in locating resources or mastering alternative learning strategies. The learners would then seek out this assistance through technology or learning centers. Participants will be more engaged in the learning when they are led to become more self-directed when given appropriate learning tools, resources, experiences, and encouragement. Zmeyov (1998) states one way to implement this in the classroom would be to “create an individual program of learning, aiming at the accomplishment of concrete objectives and the satisfaction of specific educational needs, taking into account the experience, previous education and psychophysiological and cognitive particularities of each learner” (p. 106). The sentiment of wanting to learn and a desire for knowledge is also shared in the writing that supports andragogy. This can be shown by adults seeking out opportunities to learn on their own free will. The literature reviewed also finds that adults commonly seek additional education during a transition in their lives and it is typically related to that specific change. This can also be reflected in the learner by their motivation to learn. Roberson (2002) explains that “adults learn within the context of work, family, community, and culture” (p. 8). The authors agree that the sooner the application of the learned material takes place the better for the learner.

The final assumption by Knowles and Associates (1984) states “the most potent motivations are internal rather than external” (p. 12). As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal. The adult learner receives external motivation from grades and rewards (formal and informal). They also are motivated by personal gratification which internally motivates the adult learner.

**Criticism**
Knowles has received common criticism for andragogy. Roberson talks about the lack of diversity reflected in the theory (2002). Andragogy does not consider and look at multicultural issues and has been considered to be a white and western world bias. Knowles andragogy does not bring up issues of diversity and whether or not it is representative of all adult learners.

**Conclusion**

The assumptions discussed prove to be impactful for the adult learner. All information discussed is significant and practical to the participant by taking the individual learner’s experiences and interests into consideration. Participants can discuss what they hope to get out of the course. When instructors make it more meaningful for the learner we know this is more impactful and brings greater motivation. Patterson & Pegg (1999) state “To meet the challenge that adult learning presents, teaching strategies need to be adapted to facilitate the achievement of the goals and objectives of each adult participant” (p. 49). Adult learners have a higher level of motivation due to fulfilling goals, gaining employment and desired lifestyles.

All supporters of Malcolm Knowles, andragogy would agree the six assumptions need to be in place in order to have the best outcome. The authors who support andragogy acknowledge that the adult learner must be at a place in their life to be ready to learn. These are individuals who are motivated and are problem-centered. Supporters agree that adults learn differently than children.
Table 1. *Summary of Literature Review*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Theme/Ideas in the literature</th>
<th>Application of the main ideas in practice</th>
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<tr>
<td>The adult learners are self-directed and must show responsibility for their actions.</td>
<td>The learners go from being dependent to independent learners. The learners decide for themselves what is important.</td>
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<td>Previous experience provides the basis for the learning activities.</td>
<td>The adults will be able to share personal experiences in a variety of ways that will make the learning more meaningful</td>
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<tr>
<td>The need for the adult learner to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction</td>
<td>The learning will be based on what the adults desire to learn and what is important for them to take away from the lesson.</td>
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<td>The adult learner must be ready to learn.</td>
<td>This will allow the learner to have more direct interaction with the instructor. They will experience the learning process together and come up with common goals.</td>
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<td>The orientation to learning shifts from being subject-centered to problem-centered.</td>
<td>The learner’s perspectives change as they mature and they want immediate application of what they are learning.</td>
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<td>Adult learners must be motivated to learn</td>
<td>Adults are motivated to learn because they made the choice not only to learn but also what to learn.</td>
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References


