

10.12. Andragogy and Distance Education: Still Together in the New Millennium

Editorial

I found my way into the Adult Education Department at The Pennsylvania State University with many resources: two degrees in Sociology; all the Instructional Systems Design courses for the Ph.D. that I decided against finishing; more distance education courses than anyone else had taken; and long experience at, and delight in, being a techie. Oh, and don't forget raising nine children, having five grandchildren, and enduring seven years of grad school while working with the chronically mentally ill. This is not exactly the usual kind of background for someone working towards a doctorate in Adult Education.

This eclectic background was not lost on the committee that wrote the questions for my comprehensive exams. In spirit, the first question asked me to justify recommending a degree in Adult Education to someone with a strong technical background (like me), who was looking to move to the academic side of the house. I wasn't told, until afterwards, that it was a most unusual course and the assumption was that there was *no* sensible rationale for it. (You can find the fifth iteration of my successful justification in DEOSNEWS, Vol. 8, No. 9.)

I have discovered in the years since that the most powerful intellectual tools, the ones I use every day in my instructional design work with distance learners and instructors, are the principles of "andragogy"—learner-centered instruction—whose use is eloquently described by Mark Rossman in this month's article.

And, yes, I would still wholeheartedly recommend courses on adult learning and program planning to anyone who wants to teach at a distance.

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DEOSNEWS Editor

Andragogy and Distance Education: Still Together in the New Millennium

Mark H. Rossman

Abstract

Andragogy, as promulgated by the late Malcolm Knowles, is a set of assumptions designed to facilitate adult learning and program planning. Distance education is a process of delivering education used extensively by adult learners. It is a process in which the learner and facilitator are usually separated by time and space. Burge (1988) proposed that the implications of andragogy to distance education be examined. This article continues in that

direction. Following a brief overview of andragogical development, the author presents andragogy as a framework for discussing distance education programs designed for the adult learner. Andragogically compatible processes, such as the “general-to-specific” approach (for developing learning contracts and individualizing course projects) and the “group charter” concept (for learner participation in asynchronous discussion forums), are presented and discussed as examples of how andragogy and distance education work together now as they have before.

Introduction

Since Malcolm Knowles introduced it to North America in the 1970s, andragogy has gained wide acceptance as a set of assumptions designed to guide the development of programs for adults. At its core is “the idea that the attainment of adulthood is concomitant on adults' coming to perceive themselves as self-directing individuals” (Brookfield 1986, 92). Andragogy facilitates a learner-centered approach that has served to produce much information regarding program planning and development for adults.

Recently, distance education programs have assumed a major role in the delivery of adult education. Fewer than ten states were promoting distance education in 1987, while today virtually all states have an interest or effort in distance education (US Congress 1989). This growth, which has escalated unabated into the new millennium, is due primarily to increases in educational requirements that have coincided with the expanding capabilities and services of the telecommunications industry (Giltrow 1989).

Burge (1988) argued that the andragogical assumptions advanced by Knowles would contribute to knowledge regarding the design and development of programs in distance education settings. This article continues that discussion.

Andragogy

Knowles spent a career formulating a theory of adult learning based on research and experience related to the characteristics of adult learners. It was not until the mid-1960s that he was exposed to the term “andragogy” by a Yugoslavian adult educator who was attending a summer session workshop at Boston University (Knowles 1990, 54). Knowles realized that this term more adequately encapsulated his ideas. In 1968, “Androgogy (sic), Not Pedagogy” was published. This introduced the term to North America and began the rise in popularity of the concept and the term.

By the end of the third quarter of the twentieth century, the concept of andragogy (the spelling was changed in 1968 as the result of communication between Knowles and the publishers of Merriam-Webster dictionaries) was firmly a part of adult education vernacular, practice, and policy. It was more fully defined and developed with Knowles' 1970 publication of his now-classic work, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy*. He recognized that “adult education theorists in both Europe (especially Germany and Yugoslavia) and in North America are rapidly developing a distinctive theory of adult learning. And from this theory is evolving a new technology for the education of adults”

(Knowles 1970, 38). To differentiate this new technology from pedagogy, he indicated that he was giving it a new name: *andragogy*, which he defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles 1970, 38). Further, he indicated that andragogy was “premised on at least four crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners on which pedagogy is premised” (Knowles 1970, 39). These assumptions are (1) that the adult self-concept moves from being dependent to being increasingly self-directed; (2) that the learner's experience should be viewed as a rich resource for learning by self and others rather than as something to be built on more than used as a resource; (3) that the adult's readiness to learn is more influenced by life tasks and concerns rather than being age- or curriculum-centered; and (4) that the adult's orientation to learning should be task- or problem-centered rather than subject-centered.

Initially, Knowles saw andragogy and pedagogy as being at opposite ends of a continuum. This was reflected in the subtitle of the book. Many educators reported to Knowles that the model had application to youth and children—“that young people learned better, too, when the andragogical model was applied” (Knowles 1984, 6). So prevalent were these reports that, in 1980, he revised the book and changed the subtitle to “From Pedagogy to Andragogy.” He also added a fifth assumption: that adult motivation is driven more by internal incentives rather than by external rewards or punishment.

Knowles (1984) maintained that andragogy was a “system of alternative sets of assumptions” (64) about adult learning based on adult learning research and experience. He constantly admonished educators of adults to recognize that these assumptions were not empirically validated nor was andragogy a theory of adult learning. These admonitions notwithstanding, many adult educators debated the value of andragogy as a theory of adult learning and program development rather than as a set of alternative assumptions. Knowles himself seems to have added to this debate when he wrote “I believe that andragogy qualifies as a theory according to both definitions (in Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary). However, I prefer to think of it as a model of assumptions about learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory” (Knowles 1989, 112).

A major contribution of Knowles was the development and dissemination of the andragogical process of planning and operating educational programs for individual learners and organizations. The andragogical process (Knowles 1984, 14–21) consists of the following seven elements:

1. the establishment of a climate conducive to adult learning
 - a physical environment which is conducive to the physical well-being of the adult learner
 - a psychological environment that provides a sense of mutual respect, collaborativeness, mutual trust, supportiveness, openness, authenticity, pleasure, and humanness
2. the creation of an organizational structure for participative learning

- planning groups in which learners provide input regarding what is to be learned
 - options regarding learning activities
3. the diagnosis of needs for learning
 - felt needs vs. ascribed needs
 - interest-finding checklists
 - competency models
 4. the formulation of directions of learning (objectives)
 - terminal behavior to be achieved
 - direction of improvement in ability
 5. the development of a design of activities
 - resources and strategies for accomplishing the objectives
 6. the operation of the activities
 - evidence that the objectives were accomplished
 7. the rediagnosis of needs for learning (evaluation)
 - quantitative
 - qualitative

Distance Education

Distance education and distance learning programs are popular ways for adult learners to attain educational objectives. Moore and Kearsley (1996) write that “around the country and around the world, most distance education students are adults between the ages of 25 and 50. Consequently the more one understands the nature of adult learning, the better one can understand the nature of distance learning” (153). The technology associated with this phenomenon allows virtually instantaneous access to instruction at times and places that are convenient for the adult learner rather than for the instructor or the institution. Distance education is a prominent and growing way to reach a widely dispersed population. Among more than 1,000 colleges and universities surveyed, 860 planned to offer distance learning courses in 1998, and 68% planned to use the Internet to deliver these courses (Peterson's 1998). Indeed, in the lead article in the November 19, 2000 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, Taub (2000) states that “perhaps the most far-reaching experiment in higher education is being carried out by a humanities professor and an entrepreneur who have a multimillion-dollar plan to bring college-level courses online” (88).

Moore and Kearsley (1996) define distance education as follows:

Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place

from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements. (2)

While discussing the evolution and advantages of distance education, Cantelon (1995) writes:

Distance education allows for the application of time-sensitive self-paced learning and makes possible continuous registration and new forms of instruction freed from lock-step term or semester constraints. It respects individual learning styles, schedule differences, family responsibilities, and professional commitments.... Gone is the need for a uniform lockstep curriculum geared to the learning speed of the so-called average student. Time rather than space rules. (9)

Verduin and Clark (1991) discuss how distance education serves adult learners. "Before any propositions or designs can be advanced for effective distance education, recent research on what is known about adults, their learning styles, their motivations, and other related qualities needs to be reviewed and analyzed" (21). They present a model of distance education and indicate that "further support for our model comes from some of the ideas associated with andragogy and learning styles" (134). Moore and Kearsley (1996) recognize the value of andragogy as a "very helpful basis for the design and teaching of distance education courses, particularly with respect to motivational aspects" (153).

How does andragogy apply in distance education settings? The response to this question is the basis for the remainder of this article.

Climate Setting

Setting a climate that is conducive to learning is vital. Knowles (1984) indicated that this is so important that he devotes "about 10 percent of the time available to this educational element" (15). There are at least two aspects of climate: physical environment and psychological atmosphere. Within most distance learning settings, classrooms are not used, so the physical environment usually plays a minor role. However, in settings where video is used to transmit the course to simultaneous sites at a distance, it is important that the learning environment be organized so that each learner is able to see the face of the other learners in the group. This assists classmates to "see" what is being said rather than to rely exclusively on hearing, a physiological attribute that tends to decrease in efficiency with passing years.

The psychological climate is even more important than physical climate. Adults must feel secure and safe within any learning situation. They must be treated with respect and dignity. In distance learning settings, the facilitator must work diligently to assure that learner responses are valued and are not belittled. This is particularly important in settings using asynchronous discussion forums in which learners post responses to facilitator questions or post responses to the responses of other learners. In an environment in which the written word is the primary means of communication, it is easy for words to be misinterpreted since

nonverbal cues, a powerful form of communication, is not available.

Adults must also feel supported. Knowles (1980) wrote “people learn better when they feel supported rather than judged or threatened” (16). Learners in online courses using discussion groups, who feel their responses will not be unduly criticized, will be more open to participation. They will be more honest and sincere with their responses. This is not to say that responses should not be subjected to critical analysis for, as Brookfield (1988) wrote, “the ability to be critically analytical concerning the assumptions underlying our own actions and those of others is organizationally and culturally beneficial as well as personally liberating” (43). To avoid the negativity often associated with criticism, distance education facilitators need to establish ground rules or policy related to participation, clearly indicating that responses are directed to what has been written and are not intended as a criticism of the person writing the response. This needs to be established by the facilitator in the initial unit of the online course.

Learners need to feel they will not be belittled for asking a “dumb” question. They need to be assured that mistakes and failures are a natural part of the learning process. Perhaps most importantly, learners need to feel they have been heard.

Learner Involvement

Knowles (1980) wrote “...the starting point in program planning is always the adults' interests, even though the end objective may be to meet their (and an institution's and society's) 'real' needs” (82). Facilitators in distance learning settings need to recognize and value that, often, they are dealing with experienced and competent individuals. Distance learning frequently involves the use of learning contracts or course-completion plans in which learners negotiate with course tutors to design learning activities.

At Capella University, a Web-augmented distance-education university offering accredited undergraduate, graduate, and doctorate degrees in a variety of settings, the learning contract or course-completion plan relies heavily on the andragogical philosophy described by Knowles. The course learning plan (CLP), which is negotiated between the learner and the course tutor, clearly incorporates the andragogical philosophy within the following elements of the learning plan:

- description of course or individualized learning experience;
- learning objectives;
- resources for accomplishing objectives (books, articles, journals, Internet sources, individuals, etc.);
- documentation;
- timeline.

When each element of the CLP has been successfully negotiated, the plan is approved and the learner is authorized to begin working on the course. Capella University incorporates Knowles' andragogical approach wherein it urges learners to negotiate with the course tutor to include individual learning needs within each course. Using the “general-to-specific”

approach, each element of the process is negotiated so that the intent of the course is met, as are the needs of the learner. The “general-to-specific” pattern is one to which both the intent of the course and the needs of the learner are addressed.

For example, the 1999 Capella University catalog of course HD501, *The Survey of Research in Human Development and Behavior*, is as follows:

In this course major theories of human development and behavior across the entire life-cycle will be reviewed. The developing person is the focus of inquiry and this focus connects such areas of study as psychology, anthropology, and biology. The research in this course will approach human development from a number of points of view, including personality theory, developmental “tasks,” and “moral” development.

This course description fits the “general-to-specific” pattern. The first sentence provides a general overview of the course. The next two sentences provide examples of specifics. They also provide the flexibility needed to individualize the course to meet individual learner needs, as within these sentences are phrases inviting individualization: “...such areas of study as...” and “...from a number of points of view, including...” A learner wanting to individualize this course to reflect his or her position as a college instructor, industrial trainer, manager, therapist, or other professional working with adults could add “adult learning” to the fields of study presented in the second sentence, or he/she could do nothing to the description as “developmental tasks” already lends itself to the adult learner, the latter being a matter of perception and perspective.

The formulation of learning objectives presents an excellent opportunity for the adult learner to respond to expressed or felt needs and to be an active player in deciding what is to be learned and when it will be learned. Application of the “general-to-specific” approach when designing learning objectives is useful when seeking ways to meet individual learning needs. Here, the learner negotiates both general and specific objectives clearly emanating from the course or learning-experience description. Knowles (1980) pointed out that learning objectives “...can be made congruent with the spirit of andragogy by describing what ...(a learning plan)...will help learners do, rather than what it will do to people” (121). The suggested learning objectives for HD501 are as follows:

- to become familiar with specific literature in the field of human development and behavior;
- to analyze the coherence and broad ramifications of several major theories of human development and behavior;
- to recognize the characteristics of each of the life-stages and to identify their critical periods of transition;
- to gain an understanding of the major theories which describe and explain the development of the human individual through the stages of life.

Continuing with the example of the learner wanting to individualize this course to reflect an adult-learning perspective, the learner could negotiate with the course tutor to include

objectives such as the following:

1. to become familiar with specific literature in the field of human development and behavior;
2. to analyze the coherence and broad ramifications of several major theories of human development and behavior, *especially adult development*;
3. to recognize the characteristics of each of the life-stages and to identify their critical periods of transition *as related to the adult learner*;
4. to gain an understanding of the major theories which describe and explain *adult development*.

These learning objectives reflect the “general-to-specific” pattern, provide for individualization, and protect the integrity and intent of the course.

Learning Resources

The “general-to-specific” approach also can be applied to the selection of resources and serve as the framework for documentation of course completion. The learner negotiates with the tutor to determine appropriate books, articles, Web sites, etc. Having expertise and knowledge in the areas of adult learning and development, the tutor would suggest several additional references to reflect the adult-learning individualization being negotiated. He/she would also encourage the learner to do a Web search to discover recent references, appropriate discussion sites, or list serves. The tutor should also urge the learner to include interviews, videotapes, audiotapes, and other nonprint sources as part of his/her learning resources. Attendance at workshops or seminars is another possible learning resource, providing it clearly relates to the learning objectives. A guiding andragogical principle is to try to understand how the learner sees each of the resources relating to the learning objectives.

Assigning individually designed course projects or documentation is another way of encouraging active participation in the learning process. In these instances, facilitators and learners have created innovative forms of evidence of course completion reflecting accomplishment of individual interests, needs and objectives. In addition to the more-traditional term paper, final projects can be in the form of an audio- or videotape, a CD-ROM, a revised manual, or some other means of demonstrating accomplishment of individual learning objectives.

Participation in asynchronous online discussion forums can be enhanced through the use of a “group charter” in which the members of the discussion group set and agree on the expectations, rules, and responsibilities to be utilized within the group. This process taps into the notion that the more adult learners have participated in the formulation of rules and practices, the greater will be their participation.

Capella University uses the group charter in some of its online courses. This encourages learner participation, as each learner has an opportunity to add to the discussion regarding the rules and regulations that will govern the asynchronous discussion forum. The following is an example of a group charter formulated by adult learners in a Capella University online

education course:

We will take turns initiating e-mail discussions for each unit. We agree to initiate the discussion by Tuesday evening, and to respond to each other in a timely fashion so as to allow the partner initiating the discussion enough time to form the group response and send it for review by Saturday. The group response will be posted on Sunday—unless both partners have agreed that the response is ready for posting before then. The partner who is not initiating the discussion for the unit is responsible for selecting another group's response to respond to. After discussing the response with her partner, she will post our response to the other group's comments.

The need for recognition is another key to success in andragogically oriented distance learning programs. Distance educators who understand this should

...offer programs designed to increase the economic, social, psychological, and spiritual security of adults, and will provide an environment in which they feel secure while learning. They...also accept the fact that all people need recognition and they will be ingenious in creating numerous opportunities for adults to obtain recognition constructively. (Knowles 1980, 86)

In 1999, this researcher completed a simple document analysis of more than three thousand evaluations submitted by learners enrolled in 154 online courses since the fall of 1996 at Capella University. Using the guidelines suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1981), the narrative responses were ultimately grouped into the categories that were judged to be comprehensive and illuminating: faculty feedback, learner discussions, and course requirements. A more detailed analysis of responses within each category demonstrated that recognition of responses and contributions by class participants (or the lack thereof) was the most frequently mentioned concern.

Conclusion

As Burge (1988) indicated, andragogy provides a context for developing distance education programs. It also provides a framework to build a climate conducive to adult learning and a process for more-active involvement of the adult learner in the distance learning process. Distance educators and program developers are encouraged to review the vast information regarding andragogy and to incorporate the thinking of Knowles and others.

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