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## Andragogy and the Adult Learner

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### **Abstract**

Pedagogy and andragogy are two theories of learning. Pedagogy requires the students to be dependent upon the teacher for knowledge, and any experiences students may have yield little value. On the other hand, andragogy is a theory that puts the learner at the center, and it continues to be discussed as a front-runner for adult learning. According to Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (2005), andragogy includes six assumptions: (1) the need to know, (2) the learner's self-concept, (3) the role of the learners' experiences, (4) readiness to learn, (5) orientation to learning, and (6) motivation. The theory of andragogy can be applied to the online environment, and as such, faculty members who apply the six assumptions of andragogy to their online classes will improve the learning experience for their online learners.

## Overview

Many university faculty members work with adults, a significant portion of whom are transitioning from one career to their second, third, or fourth. As such, instructional success does not necessarily result from teaching using traditional pedagogical theory, since the students have different experiences, which may influence the content and process by which they learn. Employing instruction infused by the assumptions outlined in the theory of andragogy has a greater likelihood of success. This chapter reviews the literature defining pedagogy and andragogy, while advocating for applying the assumptions outlined in andragogy to higher education, and providing examples of how andragogy can be applied to higher education classes.

## Review of the Literature

### Pedagogy

Pedagogy is the traditional method of instruction. According to Knowles et al. (2005) pedagogy means “the art and science of teaching children” (p. 61). The pedagogical theory was developed in the seventh century and it was intended for teaching children (Knowles et al., 2005). It is based on a set of beliefs which “assigns to the teacher full responsibility for making all decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and if it has been learned” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 61). The assumptions of pedagogy include the learner being dependent upon the teacher who determines what and when information will be learned and how it will be learned. The experiences of the learner do not have a lot of value, and the primary methods of instruction are through lectures, assigned readings, and presentations (Taylor & Kroth, 2009a). While this method of instruction may work with young children, applying pedagogical theory with adults may not be as effective. Adult learners are different from children learners in part because adult learners have had more life experiences and they need to be viewed as being capable (Knowles et al., 2005). Thus, instruction for adults should change from a pedagogical, teacher-centered focus to

an andragogical, learner-centered focus to meet the needs of an adult learner.

### Andragogy

The introduction of technology has influenced education to the point of requiring instructors to change the way they educate adults (Horsley, 2010). Simultaneously, adult learners have been required to make the adjustment from being passive students to actively participating in their learning (Turcsanyi-Szabo, 2012). This change in roles (lecturer to facilitator) is a reason to encourage faculty members to apply the assumptions of andragogy to the adult learning environment.

Andragogy focuses on the adult and is based on six assumptions (Knowles et al., 2005): “the need to know why they need to learn something, the learners’ self-concept, prior experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation” (p. 160). These assumptions apply to adult learners because they provide “a sound foundation for planning adult learning experiences” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 157). Instructors who understand and are willing to apply the assumptions outlined in andragogy will have a better chance of meeting the needs of an adult learner, particularly if teaching in an online environment (Cochran, 2015).

While the theory of andragogy has been used as a guide for adult learning (Henschke, 2011) and it is a significant component of online learning (Chametzky, 2014), some scholars have argued that andragogy is not a theory at all and that the assumptions were just “principles of good practice” (Hartree, 1984, p. 205). In fact, Knowles (1989) acknowledged that andragogy is more akin to learning assumptions than a learning theory. A criticism of andragogy is the lack of an instrument that is able to measure whether the assumptions outlined in andragogy are being implemented in educational settings (Taylor & Kroth, 2009b). Nevertheless, andragogy has been applied effectively to higher education programs using face-to-face and online instruction (Harper & Ross, 2011).

The assumptions outlined in andragogy can be used as a guide by instructors (Henschke, 2011), which can enhance the experiences of students (Cochran, 2015). These assumptions can be easily applied to face-to-face classroom instruction, online instruction, or a blended learning environment (Harper & Ross, 2011; Knowles et al., 2005). When an instructor uses

the andragogical model as a frame of reference when designing a class, the instructor can effectively engage the adults and facilitate a class. However, to apply andragogy effectively in an online class, technology issues need to be addressed (Chametzky, 2014).

Rather than using a teacher-centered approach, faculty members should design an online course with a learner-centered focus (De Gagne & Walters, 2009), whereby the instructors take on the role of a facilitator (Smart, Witt, & Scott, 2012). Instructors who are able to transition from a teacher-centered to learner-centered method of instruction should find that the students will be more engaged and they will take responsibility for their own learning. Faculty members who have an understanding of andragogy may have an easier time teaching in the online teaching environments. Understanding how adults learn and implementing the assumptions outlined in the theory of andragogy will help the instructor provide the necessary support and guidance to the online learners, thereby creating an environment more conducive to learning.

## Application of Andragogy in Higher Education

Each of andragogy's six assumptions can be more closely examined to see how they improve the student experience.

### Assumption 1—The learners need to know why they need to learn something

The first assumption states that “adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it” (Knowles et al., 2005, p.64). By explaining the purpose of the assignment and the learning outcome of the assignment prior to assigning the task, the instructor can increase the chance that the adult learner will be motivated to attempt the task. Faculty members may choose to explain or provide an outline of the learning expectations prior to beginning class or lecture, and this would be one method to implement the essential assumption in a classroom environment. Adult students are more inclined to be motivated when they understand what they are expected to learn.

Authentic case studies are useful tools to when developing class assignments for adult learners. Authentic case studies are applicable to life experiences and provide students with collaborative opportunities and time to reflect (Woo, Herrington, Agostinho, & Reeves, 2007). Assignments that connect the learner with life experiences make the class activities more relevant and, thereby, actively engross the students in their learning. Using authentic case studies, which test the learners' skill, can be an effective way to implement this assumption, especially in the online learning environment (Conlan, Grabowski, & Smith, 2011). For example, in City University of Seattle's Performance-Based Master's in Teaching Program, candidates are encouraged to use their prior work and life experiences—even if they were not in the formal K-12 educational environment—and adapt and use those experiences to demonstrate the understanding and application of course content outcomes. When adults are proactive in their learning, they will have a vested interest in learning the material.

### Assumption 2—The learner's self-concept

Knowles et al. (2005) identified adults and children as having experienced life differently to date (Harper & Ross, 2011), and the second assumption states that adults “have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 65). According to Dabbagh (2007), the online learner's self-concept is a key predictor for success, and students who have an internal locus of control tend to be more successful in the online learning environment. The online instructor must be willing to give up control of the course to allow the learners to be empowered to work on the course content together with the instructor as an equal (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004).

Faculty may consider accessing and incorporating an adult's life experiences into class activities since adult experiences are a valuable resource (Taylor & Kroth, 2009b). City University of Seattle's Teacher Certification program instructors are encouraged and, at times, required to address the learner's self-concept in a class by establishing group projects and providing opportunities for interactive discussions (face-to-face and online) to enable learners to discuss their experiences with their classmates. Faculty members and students work together to design instructional materials that are acceptable to both parties to address the learner's needs

(Chan, 2010). Activities to support and encourage online learners in this area should be activities that are collaborative in nature (Dabbagh, 2007). Adults need to be viewed as being capable (Knowles et al., 2005), and collaborative activities provide the opportunity for adults to demonstrate their capabilities. Encouraging student participation in group projects and collaborative activities also aligns with the assumptions outlined in andragogy.

### **Assumption 3—The learner’s prior experiences**

The third andragogical assumption states that adults have different life experiences from children, thereby creating a more heterogeneous group of learners (Knowles et al., 2005). Encouraging learners to connect their learning to life experiences can help the learner gain a better understanding of the material (University of Wisconsin Whitewater, 2006). The course content “must be structured in a way that fosters sharing of experiences among learners such as through the use of group projects and interactive discussions” (Blondy, 2007, p. 121). Course content should be flexible in that it can evolve rather than follow a specific script (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004).

Suggestions for an instructor who would like to implement this assumption course would be to ask the students their opinion regarding the activities they would like to participate in to improve their learning experience (Blondy, 2007). Activities may be collaborative in nature, which allows for student interaction and conversations that may lead to mastery of course material. Students who actively participate and contribute to their learning will be more engaged and motivated to learn (Harper & Ross, 2011) and, thus, be more successful. Instructors should create a learning environment that is encouraging and conducive to learners sharing their personal experiences, ideas, and opinions (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). A useful activity for sharing past experiences involves reflections from a journal. Short writing exercises to share and reflect on learners’ knowledge of a particular topic (Aragon, 2003), which may include their past experiences, can also be used as an effective assessment tool. When learners share their past experiences, the learning environment is enriched (University of Wisconsin Whitewater, 2006).

### **Assumption 4—The learner’s readiness to learn**

The fourth assumption of andragogy is the adult learners’ readiness to learn, which means aligning learning with developmental concepts (Knowles et al., 2005). The needs of the learner must be addressed quickly so as to ensure the success of the online learner (Blondy, 2007). Watkins (2005) suggests asking the learner about specific experiences with topics related to the course content and about expectations for the course. For example, an instructor could post a discussion question to the class, and the students would then be required to respond to the discussion question and to the posts made by their peers. By using an asynchronous environment, the instructor may use discussion questions to encourage student engagement with their peers. In an asynchronous environment, the students have time to reflect on the posts of others and organize their thoughts before they respond. The answers the students provide can help an instructor get a better understanding of the learners’ readiness to learn the course content and it would allow the students to get a better understanding of what they are about to learn.

### **Assumption 5—The learner’s orientation to learning**

The fifth assumption is that adult learners are motivated to learn when given authentic learning activities (Knowles et al., 2005), and as such, the curriculum “should be process based versus content based to allow learners to develop content in accordance with their specific needs” (Blondy, 2007, p. 125). It is critical to the success of learners that instructors provide adults with activities that capture their attention and keep them engaged (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Authentic learning activities provide “meaning beyond the learning environment” (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, p. 84). Examples of authentic activities include case studies, team problem-solving activities, and conducting interviews (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Faculty members may consider focusing on creating task-based activities (Blondy, 2007). Task-based activities can be used to help learners get a sense of how to apply practice to their lives (Knowles et al., 2005).

In the first course of City University of Seattle’s Performance-Based Master’s in Teaching program, candidates are provided with the

opportunity to demonstrate their learning using various methods such as creating an essay, a presentation, wikis and blogs, or conducting interviews. The students have the flexibility to choose the means for how they will demonstrate their mastery of the subject matter. For example, students may choose to write a traditional paper, create a PowerPoint presentation or something similar, upload alternative media, or use another approach not mentioned to provide evidence demonstrating their understanding of the outcomes outlined in the course rubric. They can also choose whether to demonstrate their mastery individually or to create a group of their choosing. Providing these types of choices can help provide motivation for adult learners, and it can help prepare them to serve as an educator in the rapidly evolving K–12 environment.

### Assumption 6—The learner’s motivation

The sixth assumption is that adult learners are intrinsically motivated to learn (Knowles et al., 2005). Instructors can support the students’ intrinsic motivation to learn by providing a learning environment that engages the students and encourages them to be active participants (Aragon, 2003). To create a positive learning environment for adults in an online environment, instructors must be aware of the need of learners to be appreciated, valued, and respected (Blondy, 2007). Using games in the online environment, or simulating a radio talk show to include guests, or using multimedia when appropriate—all have been used successfully to enhance student motivation (Aragon, 2003).

Implementing the learning assumptions outlined above is “invaluable in shaping the learning process to be more conducive to adults” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 2), and it should be used as a guide for developing the adult learning environment (Blondy, 2007). Andragogy is a set of assumptions that can “apply to all adult learning situations” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 2) to include an online environment. A benefit in applying andragogy includes the ability to adapt the assumptions to fit the needs of individual learners and to the learning situation.

Teaching adult learners, especially in an online learning environment, can be challenging. For example, online instruction requires that the instructor use a different skill set than is required in a face-to-face class (Hoekstra, 2014). Instructors who understand the assumptions of andragogy and are

able to effectively apply the assumptions in the online environment may be more successful teaching in the virtual environment, and as such, the learners will also find greater success (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

### Conclusion

Andragogy is an adult learning theory that can be applied to various learning environments, and is particularly valuable when utilized in online courses (Harper & Ross, 2011; Knowles et al., 2005). Higher education faculty members who understand the theory of andragogy can apply the assumptions outlined by Knowles et al. (2005) when they develop courses and student assignments and activities. However, transforming theory to practice can be challenging. For example, some instructors may struggle with changing their instructional method from using a lecture format to becoming a facilitator (Bair & Bair, 2011). Online instructors who have an understanding of andragogy, along with a willingness to design an online class using the above-mentioned andragogical assumptions, will improve the learning experiences of the adult online learner (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

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