



SABES Program Support PD Center

MA ABE Teacher's License Module 4: Adult Learning Theorists Andragogy: The Adult Learning Theory of Malcolm Knowles

Basic Tenets

Knowles' theory of andragogy is an attempt to develop a theory specifically for adult learning. Knowles emphasizes that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for decisions. Adult learning programs must accommodate this fundamental aspect.

Andragogy makes the following assumptions about the design of learning:

- (1) Adults need to know why they need to learn something. They should be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
- (2) Adults need to learn experientially. Experience (including mistakes) should provide the basis for learning activities.
- (3) Adults approach learning as problem-solving. Adult learning should be problem-centered rather than content-oriented.
- (4) Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value. Learning should be immediately relevant to the adult learner's job or personal life.

Application

In practical terms, andragogy means that instruction for adults needs to focus more on the process and less on the content being taught. Strategies such as case studies, role playing, simulations, and self-evaluation are most useful. Instructors adopt a role of facilitator or resource rather than lecturer or grader.

Adult educators can learn more about concepts of andragogy, and other significant adult learning theories, in this Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy (TEAL) [Factsheet on Adult Learning Theories](#). The TEAL project further suggests some concrete ways to connect the principles of andragogy with instructional strategies (TEAL, 2011):

Principle	Instructional Strategy
1	Work collaboratively with learners to select methods, materials, and resources for instruction
1	Evaluate the quality of the learning experience and make adjustments, as needed, while assessing needs for further learning
2	Involve the learner in solving real-life problems
3	Focus on tasks that adults can perform, rather than on memorization of content
4	Assess and develop learning objectives based on the learner's needs, interests, and skill levels

Example

Andragogy applies to any form of adult learning and has been used extensively in the design of organizational training programs. Knowles (1984, Appendix D) suggests that adults need to understand the value of what they are learning and its connection to their lives. He provides an example of applying andragogy principles to the design of personal computer training:

1. There is a need to explain why specific things are being taught (e.g., certain commands, functions, operations, etc.)
2. Instruction should be task-oriented instead of memorization — learning activities should be in the context of common tasks to be performed.
3. Instruction should take into account the wide range of different backgrounds of learners; learning materials and activities should allow for different levels/types of previous experience with computers.
4. Since adults are self-directed, instruction should allow learners to discover things for themselves, providing guidance and help when mistakes are made.

(See [computers](#) for further discussion of this topic).

References

Knowles, M. (1975). *Self-Directed Learning*. Chicago, IL: Follet.

Knowles, M. (1984). *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species (3rd Ed.)*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.

Knowles, M. (1984). *Andragogy in Action*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

The Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy (TEAL) Center, (2011). *TEAL Center Fact Sheet No. 11: Adult Learning Theories*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE).

Related Website

For more about Knowles and his work, see <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm>