

## **ANDRAGOGY: APPRECIATING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ADULT LEARNER**

Donna Wood  
*State Technical Institute at Memphis*  
*Memphis, Tennessee*

In a changing world of alternative lifestyles, challenging career options, and an emphasis on technical advances, more adults are realizing the need for educational training. In the decade of the 90s, the adult learner represents about one-third of the total college student population.

Malcolm Knowles, recognizing the growing number of adults attracted to higher education, introduced the theory of andragogy to American adult educators in 1968. His landmark work distinguished between the pedagogical and andragogical theories of learning; in other words, he distinguished between teacher-directed activities usually considered appropriate for children and self-directed activities that are seen as appropriate for adults. Understanding and incorporating this theory into instructional design are essential components for achieving success with adult students.

### Theory and Process of Andragogy

Knowles' theory of the andragogical model includes the following aspects:

1. The adult learner is self-directed. The adult learner makes his/her own decisions and is responsible for his/her own actions.
2. The adult learner has had numerous experiences. Because of the variety and scope of the adult learner's life roles, the learner has accumulated a quantity of experiences on which to base his/her learning.

3. The adult learner is ready to learn. Adult learners seek answers to solve a specific need to know. Changes in developmental tasks or life change are sometimes responsible for creating a need to know.
4. The adult learner is oriented to learning. This orientation may be task-based with a life-centered or problem-centered component to learning.
5. The adult learner is motivated to learn. This motivation may stem from internal forces that cause the learner to gain self-confidence, recognition, improved self-esteem, and a better quality of life.

With these adult characteristics in mind, the resulting curriculum design is process-based rather than the content-based curriculum for children. This process design allows the instructor to act as a facilitator who links numerous resources with the adult learner.

The elements of the andragogical process include:

1. Setting a climate conducive to learning. This includes giving attention to the physical environment, creating mutual respect and supportiveness, and creating a system of mutual respect.
2. Involving learners in mutual planning.
3. Involving participants in diagnosing their own needs for learning.
4. Involving learners in formulating their learning objectives or goals.
5. Involving learners in designing learning plans.
6. Helping learners carry out their learning plans.
7. Involving learners in evaluating their learning.

## Principles for Effective Adult Learning

Jane Vella (1994) offered twelve principles for effective adult learning that she purports offer insight into the educational processes and which nurture the adult learner. She emphasized the value and importance of the dialogue between the facilitator of adult learning and the learners. She believed that the following twelve principles afford opportunities to begin, maintain, and nurture the dialogue between teacher (tutor) and learner.

1. Needs assessment: participation of the learners in deciding what is to be learned.
2. Safety in the environment and the process: involves trust in the competence of the teacher (tutor)/learner relationship and in the means of acquiring new information.
3. Sound relationship between teacher/tutor and learner for learning and development: involves respect, safety, open communication, listening and humility.
4. Careful attention to sequence of content and reinforcement: involves appropriate programming of knowledge, skills and attitudes moving from simple to complex tasks from group-supported to sole efforts.
5. Praxis: involves action with reflection; that is, acquiring new knowledge, practicing new skills and attitudes and then reflecting on what was accomplished.
6. Respect for learners as subjects of their own learning: this means allowing adults the opportunity to make their own decisions.
7. Cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects: the emphasis placed on these three aspects of learning breaks the learning task into more manageable units.

8. Immediacy of the learning: adult learners want to be able to use the newly acquired information.
9. Clear roles and role development: recognition of the clear roles in the communication between learner and teacher/tutor with attention being given to the impact of cultural orientation.
10. Teamwork: team and group work provide both a process and a principle in real life situations. Learners must be able to function independently as well as in groups.
11. Engagement of the learners in what they are learning: this requires an active rather than a passive role in the learning task.
12. Accountability: how do they know they know?: this is an outcomes assessment of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Vella stated that these principles are based on educational principles, they apply across cultures, and they have been proven to work under diverse and difficult conditions. She held that adult learning is best achieved through dialogue between the learner and the teacher.

### Conclusion

These two authors' works span a period of nearly three decades. Knowles and his contributions to adult learning in the 1950s are time-honored and respected today. His message to adult educators is classic and clear: the adult learners are self-directed and strive to be independent learners. They thrive on participatory decision-making in terms of planning and setting goals and they appreciate opportunities to collaborate on learning

projects. They make use of numerous resources available to them on the campus, in the classroom, and in the community.

Vella's work is timely for the 1990s as she helps adult educators extend their knowledge and rethink adult educational practices on national and global scales. In her international teaching experiences, she incorporated the underlying principles of Malcolm Knowles' andragogical model and focused on the importance of establishing and maintaining honest dialogue across diverse cultures, genders, classes, and ages. Malcolm Knowles and Jane Vella have made outstanding contributions to the discipline of teaching adults. Tutor trainers wisely acknowledge these basic principles and apply them in establishing successful programs.

## References

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