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ANDRAGOGY AFTER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

Daniel D. Pratt

ABSTRACT: Andragogy's contribution to adult learning is examined through four questions regarding the meaning of learning, antecedents to learning, facilitation of learning, and the purposes of learning.

Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years the sheer volume of articles, books, and discussion related to andragogy has been impressive, though not necessarily coherent in thematic focus or clear in defining the central concept of learning. For some, andragogy has been a prescriptive set of guidelines for the education of adults. For others it represents a philosophical position vis-a-vis the existential nature of adults. For still others, it is an ideology based on beliefs regarding individual freedom, the relationship between individual and society, and the aims of adult education.

Throughout all of this the enduring voice of Malcolm Knowles is remarkably clear and present. Amidst debate, clarification, challenge, refutation, and articulation his message has not only persisted but is the voice most associated with andragogy in North America. Some have suggested he endures because he speaks to people's experience, articulating a recognizable reality. Whatever the case, there is no denying that his place in the history of adult education is both secure and significant because of his promotion of andragogy.

The purpose of this chapter is to ask one central question: What contribution has andragogy made to our understanding of adult learning? In order to assess such a contribution the question will be broken into four subordinate questions that have framed the twenty-five year debate:

1. *What is learning?* Do we know any more about learning after nearly twenty-five years of discussion and debate? What does learning mean, from an andragogical perspective?
2. *What are the antecedents to adult learning?* This is a question about the relative influence of human agency vs social structures on adult learning. Where does andragogy stand in this debate?
3. *How can we facilitate adult learning?* The central issue here is one of freedom vs authority. How are the tensions between freedom and authority dealt with in andragogical methods and relationships?
4. *What are the aims of adult learning?* On what basis are andragogical methods and perspectives on learning justified? Should adult education seek the transformation of the individual or society?

1: What is Learning?

Many adult educators in North America have either assumed or hoped that andragogy would be the basis for a theory of adult learning. As recently as 1989 Knowles alluded to his own "comprehensive theory of adult learning" as expressed in his writings on andragogy (Carlson, 1989). Yet, as prevalent as that hope is, there has been virtually no attempt to clarify the central concept of learning. Consequently, much of what follows, regarding antecedents to learning, means of facilitating learning, and aims of adult education are intimately linked to this concept and lacking in clarity because of its neglect. The philosophical, theoretical, and empirical claims to truth regarding the characteristics of adults as learners and the means to facilitate adult learning are dependent upon the concept of learning. Without a clarification of that, it is doubtful that we can agree on much of what follows.

During the 1950s and '60s in the United States behaviorism and empiricism dominated our views on learning. From this perspective it was assumed that the world existed independent of the learner or knower. To know something was to know its essence, or nature. Learning was the objective perception of the world as it is, unmediated by personal interpretation or distortion. Learning which was not observable was either inaccessible, untrustworthy, or insignificant. The most common definition of learning was a change in behavior. Learning and knowledge were portrayed in terms of a person looking at the world and asking how well he/she could mirror the nature or essence of the world. In other words, if the learner was active in constructing meaning and interpreting experience, knowledge and truth were compromised.

Knowles took a different perspective, though only implicitly, about the nature of learning. Although he was not the primary force behind a shift in educational thought away from behaviorism, he was the most potent adult educator to move in this direction since Lindeman. Working backwards from Knowles' five assumptions about (1) self-concept, (2) prior experience, (3) readiness to learn, (4) learning orientation, and (5) motivation to learn, we can draw inferences about andragogical perspectives on learning and knowledge. First, the world may exist but it is the individual's experience of that world that is most important to learning. Learning is not, therefore, the discovery of an independent, pre-existing world outside so much as the construction of meaning through experience. Second, learning is more subjective than objective, with an emphasis on individual interpretation, integration, and even transformation of knowledge. Therefore, andragogy appears to rest upon two implicit principles of learning: First, knowledge is assumed to be actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment; and second, learning is an interactive process of interpretation, integration, and transformation of one's experiential world.

2. What are the antecedents of adult learning?

The second question deals with the nature of adults as learners, particularly those aspects of the person that are assumed to influence adult learning. In this case we have explicit statements from which to assess the message and contribution of andragogy. Indeed, Knowles' five assumptions about characteristics of adults as learners form the very heart of andragogy; they are the basis from which everything else flows and may constitute the recognizable reality which informs many adult educators' views of the adult learner. There is no doubt that with these assumptions Knowles struck a cord of recognition and harmony with a great many adult educators, particularly English speaking North Americans.

Just what is this portrait and how is it constructed? First, there is an emphasis on the psychological and individualistic nature of the learner with the person's self-concept, prior experience, and perceived needs as antecedents to learning. Second, each individual is assumed to be, by nature, autonomous and desiring of self-improvement, and to have the capacity to be self-directed in learning quite apart from the social structures¹ which might bear upon personal characteristics, aspirations and the learning process. Third, each person is believed to be unique and individual differences, whether arising from experience, felt-needs, or genetic nature are to be respected and nurtured as individuals move toward self-fulfillment. Thus, we are presented with a portrait of adult learners largely separate from their cultural and historical contexts, capable of controlling and directing their learning, and expected to develop according to their own idiosyncratic path or potential.

In turn, what is left out and with what consequences? On the surface it may seem to be the familiar debate about the characteristics of the adult as learner. Yet, it is also a more profound debate about what adults bring to the existential moment of learning, consciously and unconsciously, willingly and unwillingly, and how that influences learning. As Mezirow argues, social structures form the basis for our "conceptual categories, rules, tactics, and criteria for judging implicit habits of perception, thought, and behavior" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 20).

This is the focus of one strand of the debate on andragogy, often characterized as a debate between psychological and sociological perspectives on the nature of adults as learners (for example, Collins, 1992; Podeschi & Pearson, 1987). It is also, in essence, a debate between human agency and social structures as significant antecedents of adult learning. Clearly, andragogy comes down on the side of human agency describing the individual in psychological terms, separate from social, political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts. As Podeschi (1987b, p. 195) puts it, instead of viewing individualism as Maslow did, with the self socially situated as part of a larger whole, andragogy, "has the self as the primary reality, not only as the center of volition but as the target of life."

¹Social structures are those institutions and systems in society that produce and re-produce rules and resources which influence (1) the communication of meaning, (2) the exercise of power, and (3) the legitimation and judgment of conduct. (Giddens, 1984) A partial list would include the family, religious institutions, political parties, economic policies, systems of education, cultural traditions, and historical periods.

Andragogy's view of the learner, operating as if he or she has risen above the web of social structures, only superficially acknowledges those structures by calling our attention to experience and identity. It does not acknowledge the vast influence such structures have had on forming the person's identity and ways of interpreting the world, much of which is received and accepted without conscious consideration or reflection. In this sense the learner is portrayed as an uncritical and unwitting member of institutions and structures that generate rules about meaning, dominance, and judgment in society. From this point of view, it is inconceivable that adults could be in control of that which they are unaware, for example, the cultural and historical rules and schemata about self and society which are deeply embedded within their consciousness and only rarely surface for critical examination. The messages we receive while growing up and which bombard us daily through the popular media and other social structures of our society are assimilated uncritically into our consciousness. To suggest, therefore, that adults stand apart from society as they construct meaning is, for some, to misrepresent a significant aspect of the person and the realities that engulf adults as learners.

In this regard, andragogy may be accused of psychological reductionism, implying complex social, cultural, political, and historical factors are largely reduced to matters of individual perception, experience, need, and ultimately, human agency. This is, in part, a product of a particular historical period in the U.S.; it is also a continuation of the pre-eminence of psychology in education, wherein complex social and educational issues are framed in psychological terms. In turn, not just the learner is so conceived, but the means and aims of adult education as well.

For many who challenge Knowles' conception of andragogy there is a reconceptualizing of the learner, and the educative process, in ways that recognize the nesting of human agency within a web of social structures and relationships. While individual needs and self-concept, as reconceptualized, remain important, the primary focus of attention shifts to an analysis of the social construction of meaning, domination, and morality as it affects learning (Giddens, 1984). Issues of interpretation and power are seen as antecedent to individual needs and more urgent in the planning and conducting of adult education and the concept of self-direction as conceptualized in andragogy is rendered naive if not redundant (for example, Law and Rubenson, 1988).

Thus, while andragogy posits the individual at the interpretive center of learning and cognition, many adult educators now believe there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and social structures -- each one giving meaning and shape to the other. This perspective takes us beyond Knowles' assumptions to a recognition that learning and cognition are fundamentally situated within, and related to, social and historical contexts.

3. How can we facilitate adult learning?

For many, andragogy is a set of procedures and practices that constitute a distinctive form of education, in contrast to pedagogy, and most suited to adults because it acknowledges their needs, experience, and self-directed nature. This methodology of andragogy has attracted an enormous following in North America and virtually around the world. Andragogical methods or approaches have been applied in formal education settings as well as nonformal. In this sense, andragogy has become a technology of

instruction or facilitation of learning, transported from one culture to another and across various settings for a multitude of purposes (for example, Diflo, 1982; Knowles, 1986; Potvin, 1975; Roy-Poirier, 1986).

It is here that much of the 'gospel according to Knowles' has been uncritically adopted as technique, leaving behind the underlying purposes and ideology that buttressed the initial conception of these techniques. Knowles calls this an "andragogical process design" which includes seven elements: (1) Climate setting; (2) Involving learners in mutual planning; (3) Involving participants in diagnosing their own needs for learning; (4) Involving learners in formulating their learning objectives; (5) Involving learners in designing learning plans; (6) Helping learners carry out their learning plans; (7) Involving learners in evaluating their learning. (Knowles and Associates, 1984, pp. 15-18)

A cursory read of the headings reveals the central tenets of choice and participation in this approach: It is important to involve learners in setting their own direction and means of learning and evaluation as a way of facilitating personal autonomy and self-direction in learners. In this sense, self-direction has become a keystone in the arching methodology of andragogy; the needs and experience of the learner are to take precedence over the expertise of the instructor. Collins calls this the "technology" of self-directed learning:

Malcolm Knowles formulated self-directed learning into a readily deployable technique that has been evoked as a guiding principle and widely applied throughout the field of adult education.... *Self-directed Learning: A Guide for Learners and Teachers* is a how-to text which embraces without question an ideology of technique. It describes self-directed learning and then sets out, in formulaic terms how it has to be done, directed self-directed learning, so to speak. Those practitioners who sense that the text is not sufficiently formulaic will find reassurance in Knowles' most recent book, *Using Learning Contracts*. (1992, p. 6)

Yet, while much of the attention has been on the methodology of andragogy there is, within Knowles' writing, another consistent and significant message about *relationship*, suggesting that the essence of facilitation lies not in the approach one takes as much as the relationship that exists between learner and facilitator. He emphasizes this point throughout his writing when he says that andragogical approaches require a psychological climate of mutual respect, collaboration, trust, support, openness, authenticity, pleasure, and humane treatment and it is the responsibility of a facilitator, "to provide a caring, accepting, respecting, helping social atmosphere." (Knowles and Associates, 1984, p. 17)

Implied within these words is a form of relationship that is, above all, respectful of the individual's freedom from authority and control that might inhibit the natural tendencies of growth and development. This emphasis on the nature of the relationship between learner and instructor (facilitator) is clearly related to his assumptions regarding the nature of the adult learner and seeks to address the existential balance between freedom and authority (Podeschi and Pearson, 1987). In this sense it also begs the question of whether such a relationship can or should take precedence over situational factors in the exercise of individual freedom and control over instructional processes, particularly the evaluation of learning. This too has been a part of the debate (for example, Delahaye, 1987; Grow, 1991; Pratt, 1988).

Thus, what lies beneath andragogical guidelines for facilitating learning is more than simply a process design *cum* technology of instruction. Indeed, it may be the

emphasis on methodology to the exclusion of relationship that has produced such mixed results in the efforts to empirically test Knowles' process design (Beder and Carrea, 1988; Conti, 1985).

4. What are the purposes and aims of adult learning?

This may be the most crucial of the four questions because it seeks to clarify the essential beliefs and values that legitimate other claims regarding the meaning of learning, antecedents to learning, and means to facilitate learning. As is often the case, the values and beliefs that buttress andragogy lie beneath the surface and must be extracted by careful analysis. This section will rely heavily on the work of Podeschi (1987a; 1987b; 1991) and Carlson (1989) who have consistently and thoroughly probed the philosophical roots of andragogy.

Knowles' conception of andragogy is based, in part, on beliefs about human nature, the relationship between individual and society, and a commitment to a democratic society. Starting as early as 1950 there is evidence of these values when he says, "In adult education 'the customer is always right' in so far as his desires are compatible with the objectives of our society. Under no other assumption is democratic adult education possible, for in a democracy responsibility rests with each individual to decide the course of his own growth" (Knowles, 1950, p. 11). Again, in 1973, in a book review for a German periodical, Knowles made clear not just his commitment to self-determination but the exclusivity of the goals of learning.

I believe that the only obligation common to all adult educators is the nurture, facilitation, and provision of resources for the growth and development of individuals toward their own unique, self-determined, self-actualization... It also implies that the goals of learning are exclusively the responsibility of the learner... I see a sharp distinction among the roles of political, economic, and educational change agent in working toward this end... The goal of the political and economic change agents is to produce defined changes. The goal of educational change agents is to produce greater competence on the part of people in bringing about change... I believe that unless we keep our role clearly differentiated, and use only educational strategies, we will diminish our potency as adult educators. (in Podeschi, 1991, p. 205)

He is consistent and clear in his commitment to individual needs and interests as a means toward achieving a more democratic society. This same theme is expressed yet again in the *Modern Practice of Adult Education* (1980) as his writing became more prescriptive, pretentious, and even presumptuous but no less focused on the ideals of a democratic citizenship and the belief that civic and democratic virtue would arise out of natural self-fulfillment through adult education (Carlson, 1989). Consistently, he has proclaimed an ideology of middle-class America with an emphasis on self-reliance and self-fulfillment in which private interests overshadow public ends (Podeschi, 1991). Knowles' andragogy has never offered a challenge to hierarchical or exploitative structures in society. Indeed, the freedom of learners from external control, a fundamental tenet of American democracy, is seen to be contingent on the learners' needs being compatible with the objectives of society (Carlson, 1989).

Thus, andragogy appears to be based on at least five fundamental values or beliefs:

- 1) A moral axiom that places the individual at the center of education and relegates the collective to the periphery;
- 2) A belief in the goodness of each individual and the need to release and trust that goodness;
- 3) A belief that learning should result in growth toward the realization of one's potential;
- 4) A belief that autonomy and self-direction are the sign-posts of adulthood within a democratic society;
- 5) a belief in the potency of the individual in the face of social, political, cultural, and historical forces to achieve self-direction and fulfillment.

Collectively, these beliefs constitute a particular world view that legitimates certain forms of learning, approaches to instruction, and judgments about priorities in adult education. Clearly, andragogy is saturated with the ideals of individualism and entrepreneurial democracy. Societal change may be a by-product of individual change but it is not a primary goal of andragogy.

Andragogy's Contribution to Understanding Learning

Andragogy has been adopted by legions of adult educators around the world and influenced the practice of adult education across an impressive range of settings. Very likely, it will continue to be the window through which adult educators take their first look into the world of instructing adults. As such the "recognizable reality" that reflected back to so many in the past twenty-five years will continue to offer familiar and recognizable ground from which to conduct adult education. From this point of view, it has made an enormous contribution to adult education.

However, in terms of the original question, andragogy's contribution to our understanding of adult learning is not as grand in substance as in scale. The wide-spread and uncritical adoption of a particular view of adults as learners should not be the only measure by which we assess andragogy's contribution. From one perspective, the legions of adult educators who ascribe to andragogy may have a better understanding of adults as learners; from another perspective that understanding may be severely limited and even distorted. Further, while andragogy may have contributed to our understanding of adults as learners, it has done little to expand or clarify our understanding of the process of learning itself. We cannot say, with any confidence, that andragogy has been tested and found to be, as so many hoped, either the basis for a theory of adult learning or a unifying concept for adult education.

This is not surprising when we examine the debate through the preceding four questions. Andragogy is seen to be not so much an explanatory theory about adult learning as a philosophical stance with regard to the purposes of adult education and the relationship of the individual to society. As Freire notes, there can be no separating practice from philosophy:

All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator's part. This stance in turn implies -- sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly -- an interpretation of (humanity) and the world. It could not be otherwise... The critical analyst will discover, in the methods and texts used by educators and students, practical value options that betray a philosophy..., well or poorly outlined, coherent or incoherent. (1985, pp. 43-44)

Collectively, the four questions highlight two persistent tensions that are likely to characterize further debate about andragogy. First, there is a tension between freedom and authority, especially regarding the management and evaluation of learning. Andragogy leans heavily toward learner freedom (vs teacher authority) on this issue on the basis of promoting self-direction and personal autonomy. Second, there is a tension between human agency and social structures as the most potent influences on adult learning. Here andragogy is unconditionally on the side of human agency and the power of the individual to shed the shackles of history and circumstance in pursuit of learning. The persistence and pervasiveness of these two tensions explain why the discussion has moved back and forth across philosophical boundaries only to return to familiar arguments and conclusions. As Podeschi (1987a, p. 14) notes, "empirical research cannot resolve philosophical questions, nor dissolve the philosophical assumptions of the researcher". As long as the debate is fractured along philosophical lines there can be little hope for agreement as to definitions, antecedents, means, and aims of adult learning.

If it has done nothing else, the past twenty-five years of discussion on andragogy confirms the idea that there can be no value-neutral position with regards to adult learning and facilitation. What has been too often missing is a clarification of underlying values and beliefs and the central concept of learning. As a result, the debate seems at times to have taken one step forward and two backward. Therefore, as we continue to analyze and discuss andragogy we should guard against the hegemony of representing our own interests and values as universal ones, whether in terms of definitions of learning, antecedents to learning, means of facilitating learning, or ideals for society. This may be the most serious challenge to the on-going debate especially if we wish to include adult educators from both inside and outside North America who's values are not precisely those of andragogy.

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Daniel D. Pratt is Professor of Adult & Higher Education in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. His research and teaching is focused on issues related to adult learning and instruction, with particular interest in comparisons between cultures.