

Incorporating Andragogy in Higher Education: Fostering a Learner Centered Approach

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ABSTRACT

Adult learners approach education differently from younger learners, requiring distinct methods for their cognitive and intellectual needs. Andragogy, introduced by Malcolm Knowles, emphasizes learner-centered principles, such as autonomy, experience-based learning, and the relevance of knowledge. However, higher education today still largely relies on traditional, teacher-centered pedagogical models that often fail to engage adult learners effectively. This approach restricts learner autonomy and overlooks the practical and intellectual demands of adults. One critical andragogical principle, the learner's "need to know", is particularly neglected, as traditional pedagogy seldom encourages students to question the relevance of their studies. This paper aims to explore the barriers adult learners face in traditional systems, examine how andragogical principles could be more effectively applied, and advocate for a shift toward learner-centered practices that better align with the needs of adult learners. By addressing these gaps, this study seeks to contribute to the development of more inclusive, flexible, and meaningful educational experiences, fostering a more relevant and engaging approach to higher education.

1. Introduction

Learning is a continuous process, some might even say it is a life-long process. However, the approaches and processes to learning do not remain the same. Traditional pedagogical approaches which are designed primarily for children and dependent learners often fail to accommodate the self-directed nature, lived experiences, and practical goals of adult students. The concept of andragogy, however, introduced by Malcolm Knowles, offers a learner-centered framework to adult education. This framework advocates principles such as the learner's need to know, self-perception, learner's experience, readiness and motivation to learn. Andragogy recognizes that adult learners engage with education differently than their younger counterparts.

Though andragogical approaches are quite different it is not all together dichotomous with pedagogy. Rather implementing andragogical approaches alongside the general pedagogical approaches can assist learners in overcoming the barriers adult learners face within conventional educational systems.

2. Methodology

A descriptive-qualitative research design is chosen to analyze existing theories and frameworks related to adult learning and andragogy. By reviewing literature from books, journal articles, and theoretical models, the study aims to understand the practical application of andragogical principles such as self-directed learning, experiential learning, and the importance of relevant, problem-centered education for adults. This approach will allow for an in-depth analysis of how these principles are applied in real-world educational contexts and the challenges adult learners encounter in traditional settings.

A significant limitation of this study is its reliance on existing literature, which may introduce biases based on the scope and quality of available research. Additionally, since this research focuses on a synthesis of secondary sources, it may not fully capture emerging trends or recent developments in the field of adult education. The findings are also constrained by the limitations inherent in the reviewed studies, such as varying definitions and applications of andragogy. However, despite these limitations, this methodology offers an opportunity to critically assess the current understanding of andragogy and its applications in adult education.

3. Literature Review

In the educational sphere a term that is often at the center of attention is Pedagogy. Generally, it is used to describe the entire procedure of teaching and learning including the methods and processes involved. It is derived from the Greek word 'paidagogeō', here, 'paidos' means child and 'agos' means to lead. Therefore, the term pedagogy means "to lead the child". In Latin there is a similar meaning "child instruction" (Shah, 2021). In *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (1970) Knowles exclaims that in traditional pedagogy the teacher takes an active role whereas the student adheres to a passive role which indicates that the student is dependent on the teacher for the learning taking place. What is to be learnt is also decided by society, authorities or school. The learner's experience is of little importance. Moreover, the knowledge being taught does not come in handy until later in life. In the early 1920s, adult education relied on the traditional pedagogical model, which focused on knowledge transmission through lectures, readings, drills, quizzes, memorization, and exams. However, educators and adult learners soon became dissatisfied, as this approach did not suit adult learning needs. As a result, many learners found it ineffective, leading to high dropout rates (Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Knowles, 1980; Leong, 2023). This situation called for a different, however effective approach to education for adult learners which led to the andragogical approach. Knowles introduced the concept of andragogy in 1970 through his book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* in the United States. He defined andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Leong, 2018). The term *andragogy* is derived from the Greek word 'aner', with the root 'andra' referring specifically to an adult or man, and 'agogus' meaning leader, thus collectively implying the concept of leading adults (Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000). According to Lindman, the inspiration behind the andragogical concept of Knowles, adult education values the learner's past experiences the most, and learning involves making sense of those experiences (Lindman, 1926; Leong, 2023).

4. Theoretical Framework

Tezcan (2022) in her paper simplifies the andragogical learning model introduced by Knowles and outlines several key principles about adult learning. The first principle she mentions is the learner's "need to know" principle. As individuals mature, their motivation to learn becomes internal and they develop a need to understand why they should learn something. The facilitator's role is to help learners recognize why they need to learn something. Though Knowles added this principle later in 1984, it formed the foundation for andragogy which became widely accepted in the English-speaking world (Leong, 2023). The second principle is the learner's self-perception. Adults are responsible for their own lives and decisions. They become more self-directed when it comes to learning. They do not depend on others as children do. Therefore, learning experiences should acknowledge adults as self-directed learners. The third principle focused on the role of learners' experiences. Adults bring a wealth of varied life experiences, which influence their learning. As a result, teaching methods such as group discussions and case studies, which rely on these experiences, should be emphasized. The fourth principle addresses the readiness to learn in an adult. Adults are ready to learn what is necessary to address challenges in their lives. Their readiness is often driven by the tasks and responsibilities of adulthood. The fifth principle mentions an adult learner's orientation towards learning. Adults tend to focus on learning that is task or problem oriented, unlike children who focus on subject-based learning. Adults are most motivated to learn when the content directly applies to their real-life situations. The last principle highlights the motivation to learn. Although external factors (such as better wages or work conditions) can motivate adults, internal factors like the desire for job satisfaction, self-esteem, and improved quality of life are more powerful motivators (Tezcan, 2022).

5. Discussion of Analysis

5.1. Bridging Pedagogy and Andragogy

There has been a longstanding tendency among scholars to view andragogy in opposition to pedagogy. While debates have often framed the two as dichotomous, many contemporary scholars argue that andragogy and pedagogy can coexist and complement each other. Malcolm Knowles himself, originally presenting andragogy as a contrasting

model to pedagogy in his 1970 work *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*, gradually shifted his stance in response to academic critique. He later clarified that andragogy should not be seen as a replacement for pedagogy, but rather as an alternative model of assumptions about learners particularly adults that can be applied based on context. As Knowles noted, “I am at the point now of seeing that andragogy is simply another model of assumptions about learners to be used alongside the pedagogical model of assumptions... the models are probably most useful when seen not as dichotomous but rather as two ends of a spectrum, with a realistic assumption in a given situation falling in between the two ends” (Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Knowles, 1980).

Supporting this perspective, Ozuah (2005) contends that although pedagogy and andragogy present contrasting paradigms, they are not inherently incompatible. Instead, they represent different strategies that may be effectively integrated based on learners’ needs, contexts, and educational goals (Leong, 2023). Therefore, the integration of andragogical principles within higher education where pedagogical methods are traditionally dominant is not only feasible but potentially enriching.

5.2 Barriers Adult Learners Face in Traditional Education

Learning is inherently challenging, and numerous barriers can hinder or disrupt the process. A barrier in this context is an obstacle or hindrance that prevents or restricts progress, understanding or achievement. Various barriers to learning may hamper or negatively influence the smooth learning process of the learner. Adult learners often face unique challenges due to their life circumstances and responsibilities. These challenges can significantly affect their ability to engage fully with academic content. Common issues include financial constraints, time management difficulties, and the need to balance work, study, and family obligations.

Falasca (2011) classifies these barriers into two categories i.e. external and internal barriers. External barriers are factors which are outside one’s control which, however, affects their learning process e.g. aging related factors, health issues, changes in family and work roles, and motivation linked to job requirements. On the other hand, internal barriers refer to a learner’s personal attitudes e.g. negative perceptions of learning, reliance on outdated knowledge, and anxiety about failure.

Many scholars, however, have categorized these barriers into three distinct types: situational, dispositional, and institutional (Beasland, 2020). Situational barriers refer to the life circumstances of adult learners that may hinder their academic progress, such as employment responsibilities, financial constraints, and family obligations (Beasland, 2020; Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017).

Dispositional barriers refer to an individual’s attitudes, self-confidence, and beliefs, which can hinder adult learners’ success in higher education (Beasland, 2020; Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993; Osam et al., 2017). Struggle among non-traditional learners with internal challenges are quite common. These challenges often include relying on past learning habits, difficulty adapting to new perspectives, and skepticism about the value of education. Additionally, lack of confidence, particularly among returning students and academically disadvantaged learners, can impact their willingness to persist (Beasland, 2020).

Institutional barriers refer to policies and procedures that hinder adult learners from accessing education (Beasland, 2020; Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993; Osam et al., 2017). These barriers include limited childcare options, complex enrollment processes, coursework that feels irrelevant, and office hours that are inaccessible to working adults. Additionally, adult learners may struggle to find a supportive peer group, and institutions may not fully consider their external responsibilities (Beasland, 2020).

5.3. The Role of the “Need to Know” Principle

Adult learners differ significantly from children and traditional students. They possess a well-developed sense of self-concept, autonomy, and personal agency (Beasland, 2020;

Fairchild, 2003). While educational authorities often promote the ideal of a pure "thirst for knowledge," the socio-economic reality is that most adults pursue higher education primarily to enhance career opportunities or improve their quality of life (Reischmann, 2017). This practical motivation ties closely to one of the core principles of andragogy: the "need to know." Adult learners typically want to understand the purpose behind what they are learning, how it connects to their goals, responsibilities, and future plans (Tezcan, 2022). If the learning experience fails to make this relevance clear, it can lead to disengagement and a lack of motivation. Traditional educational models that overlook this need often fall short in keeping adult learners actively involved.

5.4. Implementing Andragogical Approaches in Higher Education

Integrating andragogical principles into higher education involves adopting learner centered strategies that acknowledge the unique needs, motivations, and experiences of adult learners. Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy emphasizes self-directed learning, the use of prior experiences, readiness to learn, and a problem-centered orientation.

5.4.1. Experiential Learning

Experiential learning integrates real-world experiences into the academic environment, reinforcing the adult learner's preference for practical, relevant education (El-Amin, 2020). It is a reflection of Knowles learners "need to know" principle. The learners can bridge the gap between theory and practice through internships, apprenticeships, and project-based assignments. It also enables students to apply their learning in professional or community contexts. This hands-on approach increases engagement and motivation by demonstrating immediate relevance, as emphasized in andragogical theory (El-Amin, 2020).

5.4.2. Flexible Learning Models

The implementation of a flexible learning model may help adult learners learn more effectively. Flexible learning models are essential for adult learners who often balance education with work, family, and other responsibilities. These models include online, hybrid, and asynchronous formats which provide learners with increased control over when, where, and how they engage with course content. An example of such a model is the Western Governors University. Western Governors University (WGU) employs a competency-based education model that allows students to progress through courses by demonstrating mastery rather than adhering to rigid timelines (Western Governors University, n.d.). This model supports self-paced study and accommodates individual learning styles, aligning with the andragogical principle of self-direction.

5.4.3. Personalized Learning Pathways

The implementation of personalized learning means acknowledging that adult learners enter higher education with diverse backgrounds, skills, and goals. Competency-based education (CBE) for instance, exemplifies this by allowing learners to progress through coursework based on mastery, regardless of how long it takes (Western Governors University, n.d.). This method adjusts the learning experience to each student's existing knowledge and future objectives, therefore effectively avoiding redundancy. Personalized pathways, supported by mentorship and adaptive technologies, align with the andragogical ideals of autonomy, relevance, and individualization (El-Amin, 2020).

5.4.4. Faculty Development

For andragogical models to be effective, educators must shift from traditional lecturing to facilitation. Faculty development programs should train instructors in adult learning theory, digital pedagogy, and inclusive teaching strategies. Educators need to foster dialogue, critical thinking, and self-directed learning, rather than merely transmitting information. Additionally, training in how to integrate technology, assess competencies, and design experiential learning tasks is crucial (Arutmayanti & Hiryanto, 2023). Faculty development not only improves instructional quality but also models the principles of lifelong learning.

Implementing andragogical approaches in education enables adult learners to enrich their learning experiences while effectively bridging the gap between academic study and real world application. By aligning educational content with learners' needs and contexts, these approaches ensure that education becomes a meaningful and purposeful endeavor, rather than a compulsory but disconnected task.

6. Conclusion

Adult learners bring a wide range of life experiences, goals, and responsibilities to the classroom, which makes traditional teaching methods less effective for their unique needs. Andragogical approaches which are based on self-direction, practical application, and relevance, offer a more supportive and meaningful learning experience. By embracing flexible models, experiential learning, and personalized pathways, higher education institutions can create environments where adult learners not only succeed academically but also feel empowered and valued. As education becomes more aligned with real-life challenges and aspirations, it transforms into a journey of personal growth, confidence, and long-term opportunity.

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