Applying Andragogy in College as a Preparatory Work Tool for Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews, with the book “The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development” as its main foundation, the andragogical techniques applied by a business and management course facilitator toward college students in the age category between 19 and 30 years. The author refers to these techniques as “adult learning theory with a grain of pedagogy.” The author subsequently explains the reasons why the application of this approach is important for young adults, and how it may serve as a contribution to their performance as members of the future workforce.

INTRODUCTION

As an instructor in business and management at the School of Business and Management of Woodbury University, I work with students in the age category 19-55 years. The older students, 30 and up, are usually attending “the adult programs”, which are executed in evenings and weekends to accommodate their work schedules. Courses offered in the adult programs are usually presented in an accelerated format, requiring a high percentage of self-study, thorough class pre-class preparation, and a high level of student interaction in order to enhance mutual learning. This typical andragogical approach works well with these mature adults.

However, it is the application of the adult learning concept toward day school students that provides an interesting challenge. The day school students usually have no or very little work-experience; yet harbor enough maturity to contribute to the courses with examples taken from their daily circumstances or topics they have read about. Although it seems that many instructors throughout the world still consider it more appropriate to literally lecture day school college students, I developed a divergent opinion throughout my six years of course facilitation. For clarification purposes to the reader, Wikipedia (2006), the free online encyclopedia, explains that “the word "paidia" refers to children, which is why some like to make the distinction between pedagogy (teaching children) and andragogy (teaching adults)” (¶ 1).

In my interactions with day school college students, I experienced that they showed increased enthusiasm in the course material when being exposed to a predominantly andragogical approach. The reason why I state “predominantly” is because there are, indeed, some situations where I, as the instructor, find that I have to take a firmer attitude than merely that of a facilitator in order to achieve positive results from the students. Fortunately those moments of plainly assigning and dictating tasks are rather scarce. Knowles, Holton & Swanson (1998) explain this need for situational adjustments, such as the one stated above, by asserting that “[andragogical principles] must be viewed as […] a system of elements that can be adopted in whole or in part. It is not an ideology that must be applied totally or without modification. In fact, an essential feature of andragogy is flexibility.” (p.183)

In this paper, I will discuss the andragogical techniques that I am applying toward students in the age category between 19 and 30 years: an approach that I perceive as “adult learning theory with a grain of pedagogy,” and subsequently explain the importance of applying this approach to young adult as a contribution to their strength as members of the future workforce.
The question: Pedagogy or Andragogy?

According to Knowles, Holton & Swanson (1998), students in the age-category of 19-30 years are in many ways still seen as adolescents, especially in the United States where “American culture (home, school, religious institutions, youth agencies, governmental systems) assumes—and therefore permits—a growth rate that is much slower.” (p. 62). By marking the age-area older than 17 years gray, Knowles, Holton & Swanson (1998) also assert that [for this age category] pedagogy is practiced increasingly inappropriately” (p. 62).

However, although some of these students may not meet the standards of adults in the social definition, which is “when we start performing adult roles, such as the role of fulltime worker, spouse, parent, voting citizen, and the like” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p. 64), they do meet the biological (the age of reproducing- Knowles, Holton & Swanson, p.64), the legal (the age to vote, obtaining a driver’s license, and marry without consent- Knowles, Holton & Swanson, p.64), and the psychological (arriving at a self-concept of being responsible for their own lives, of being self-directing- Knowles, Holton & Swanson, p.64) standards of being adults. It has been my finding, just like Knowles, Holton & Swanson assert, that the “psychological definition […] is most crucial” (p.64) in this regard. These students seem to highly appreciate the andragogical approach, or at least the feeling that they are treated as adults with an ability to add value to the learning environment. Andragogy is defined by Knowles, Holton & Swanson (1998) as “any intentional and professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons” (p. 60). Merriam (1993) describes Knowles’ andragogy as “the best-known theory of adult learning, […] based on humanistic assumptions about the adult learner” (p. 106). Merriam continues, “He or she is characterized by an independent self-concept, has a depth and breadth of prior experience that can be used in learning, has a readiness and orientation to learn related to the roles and responsibilities of adult life, and is internally motivated.” (p. 106)

Testing the Andragogical Model.

When testing the andragogical model on my courses with students in the age category 19-30 years, I found that:

1. “The need to know” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p.64) can be triggered by involving the students in the formulation of learning goals. It is my belief that almost any course in a Higher Education program can be tailored - within the given course parameters - to the learning needs of the students. Consequently, this creates the opportunity to engage these adults in a collaborative planning process for their learning (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p.133). In my case I ask the students on the first day of class what their expectations for the course are, given the course title and the brief description in the catalog. Based on their assumptions and wishes I may or may not adjust the syllabus. Without exceptionI have found that the rate of enthusiasm in these classes exceeded my expectations. I therefore agree with Hicks & Klimoski’s assertion, as stated in Knowles, Holton & Swanson (1998), that “students with a high degree of choice [are] more motivated to learn, and learn […] more” (p.134), as well as Baldwin, Magiuka & Loher’s position, as stated in Knowles, Holton & Swanson, that “trainee involvement in planning about learning [will] enhance the learning process” (p. 134).

2. “The learners’ self-concept” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p.65) is not always easy to measure among these students. Like Knowles, Holton & Swanson state, they often “put on their dunce hats of dependency, fold their arms, sit back, and say, “teach me.”” (p.65). However, I also found that this is merely an attitude they adopt because they assume that it is expected from them. Indeed, too often the pedagogical approach is applied in colleges and universities, which makes it understandable that students initially expect a lecturer instead of a facilitator in front of the classroom. Fortunately, there is also truth in the assertion “as adult educators become aware of this problem, they make efforts to create learning experiences in which adults are helped to make the transition from dependent to self-directing learners” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p. 65). I find myself continuously trying to support this
transition within my students by involving them through mutually agreed upon chapter- and book presentations, by motivating them to evaluate current issues pertaining to the course material, and by inviting them to bring up topics for discussion. In my particular experience the construction of self-directed learning that applies to these students predominantly matches Candy’s second conception of personal autonomy, as stated in Knowles, Holton & Swanson, also called “auto didaxy,” whereby “autonomy means taking control of the goals and purposes of learning and assuming ownership of learning” (p. 135).

3. “The role of the learners’ experiences” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p.65), in the case of 19-30 year old students, certainly does not measure up to the ones of more mature learners who have been exposed to extended life and work-circumstances. Yet, when encouraged, this group of young adults turns out to be able to share a significant amount of knowledge on several topics. Actually, I regard it fortunate that these young adults, because they have not been exposed extensively to the aforementioned experiences, seem to be more receptive to new insights. In my perception it is predominantly “double-loop learning” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p. 140) that is taking place in their case, which is interpreted as “learning that does not fit the learner’s prior experiences or schema” (p. 140).

4. “Readiness to learn” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p.67) can also be stimulated when students are invited to look ahead and imagine how the course-material will be applicable in their lives. Although, as these authors claim, adults generally become ready when their life situation creates a need to know, I am convinced that there can also be an increased eagerness to learn when students focus on their possible future circumstances. These students, who are management majors, deliberately chose this major and, hence, this course because it is part of their field of specialization. This creates the assumption that they have substantial “competence in the subject matter” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p. 145). Yet, like the authors stress, some students do require more direction than others because they display a higher general dependence. I find this variance to be true in my classes.

5. With regards to “Orientation to learning” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p.67) it may very well be that the motivation to learn in my courses is simply triggered by 2 facts: 1) The courses are part of the students’ major, and 2) The courses have an up-to-date character because they pertain to a dynamic subject, business and management, which provides many possibilities for discussions about real-life situations. The character of these courses therefore fits well into Knowles, Holton & Swanson’s statement that “adults generally prefer a problem solving orientation to learning rather than subject centered learning [and that] they learn best when new information is presented in real-life context” (p. 146). The regular presentations and discussions of articles about today’s management-challenged organizations in these courses are proof of Knowles, Holton & Swanson’s abovementioned insight, because they definitely increase the students’ interest in the course topics.

6. “Motivation” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p.68) becomes easier when the students are allowed to participate in formulating the learning-goals, based on their own personal interests and future perspectives as explained under points 1 and 2 (shared control over course-topics, articles, books, and other issues). This ties in with Knowles, Holton & Swanson’s (1998) assertion that “adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it,” (p. 149) which is the first principle of andragogy.

Successfully Implemented Adult Learning Techniques Toward Young Adults

During my first semester as a college course facilitator, in fall 2001, I quickly became aware of some important strategies to assure a high success rate in the instructor-student relationship. These insights only strengthened during subsequent years. Listed below are the most significant of these success strategies.
Honesty and Openness. I always start out by explaining to students that I do not delude myself into thinking that I know it all, and that I expect to learn as much from them as they will from each other and me. I found this to be in line with Knowles, Holton & Swanson’s (1998) statement that “in an adult class the student’s experience counts for as much as the teacher’s knowledge,” and that “this two-way learning is also reflected by shared authority” (p. 39). Subsequently, I make sure that in every topic that is reviewed in class, I involve all students, encourage them to focus on their own life-situations when discussing actual business issues, and invite them to incorporate their own opinion in the lecture summaries that are part of their assignments.

Intermediate evaluation. I incorporate a midterm evaluation for my students, in which I request them to anonymously respond to a brief questionnaire, leaving room in the document to criticize my facilitating style, and to provide suggestions on how to make this experience a more rewarding one.

Making it up-to-date. I encourage the students to bring to class articles or other interesting material they find valuable to share. I do so myself. In every class we start with some updates on “what is hot in business.” It works like a charm! Most students will bring in several articles throughout the semester. This little “extra” adds an interesting dimension to the class, enlivens the sessions and makes them more interesting. I found this approach to be in line with Lindeman’s “foundation for a systematic theory about adult learning”, formulated as follows, “the approach to adult education will be via the route of situations, not subjects” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p.37).

Giving students a voice in the course structure. As a team, my students and I agree upon the deliverables and the finals, as well as their submission dates, thereby keeping track of the school-set boundaries. More recently, I expanded on this strategy (as stated earlier) by inviting the students to express their expectations in the course given the course-description, and incorporating their desires in the course structure. When reading Knowles, Holton & Swanson’s book “The Adult Learner” I encountered this recommended approach toward adult learning in the following statement, “[In] conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum; in adult education the curriculum is built around the student’s needs and interests” (p. 37).

Providing choice. Mirroring my own preferences as an adult learner, I present the students the choice of either taking an in-class final exam, or doing a more thorough final essay, requiring in-depth research, yet done within the convenience of their own environment, and in their own time. I do this because it is my conviction that one learns more when studying can be done at a time and location that is favorable for the learner. I have concluded that, without exception, all students consistently choose for the latter, thereby clearly expressing their preference for qualitative instead of quantitative education, as is indicated by Knowles, Holton & Swanson.

The Pedagogical Grain, Needed for Students in the Age Category 19-30 years.

Although I am pleased with the results of applying the andragogical approach to students in the age of 19-30 years, I found that there are occurrences that emphasize the reality that these students are not yet entirely self-motivated. A simple example dating back several years ago may clarify my aforementioned statement. In my syllabus for that semester I had listed partial chapters to be read for certain dates without assigning these readings specifically to certain students. When evaluating the assigned reading for a certain class meeting, the students did not ever speak up or respond to the questions. They expected a summary from the instructor, which I recognized as the earlier mentioned attitude of “[putting] on their dunce hats of dependency, [folding] their arms, [sitting] back, and [thinking], ‘teach me’” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p.65).

As a consequence to this experience, I decided that the only way to at least get some of the students to talk during the reading-evaluation is to assign reading-evaluations to them; one or two students for each session. Initially I
experienced this awareness of having to apply some pedagogy to these seemingly mature students as a disappointment. But after reading Knowles’ restated “position, as reflected in the 1980 subtitle […] that pedagogy-andragogy represents a continuum ranging from teacher-directed to student-directed learning and that both approaches are appropriate with children and adults depending on the situation” (Merriam, 1993, p.8), I understood that the pedagogical approach is sometimes necessary, even for more mature adults than the ones in my student age-category.

**Adult Learning as a Preparatory Tool for Workforce Performance**

In today’s working organizations the mentality of continuous learning is growing out to become of the main priorities. Peter Senge has expressed this issue splendidly in his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. In a meeting between Peter Senge and Peter Drucker in 2000, documented in an article titled “*Meeting of the Minds*”, Drucker eloquently depicted learning as enrichment to the experience of work in people’s lives. Drucker asserted, “The same is true of people I've seen in business who enjoy the work. Their routine is: It's got to be done, and I enjoy it because I enjoy the work” (p. 21). Drucker continues, “And that is the difference, I believe, not between mediocrity and performing, but between what you call a 'learning organization'--one where the whole organization grows and then the process changes--and an organization that maybe does very well but nobody misses it after 5 o'clock” (p. 21).

Congruent with Drucker’s assertion, today’s organizations are increasingly seeking models to apply maximal learning in order to enhance output, return on investment, and employees’ gratification at the same time. In the seventies, Chris Argyris introduced “double loop learning”, a phenomenon mentioned earlier in this paper as having been cited by Knowles, Holton and Swanson as well. In a 1977 article from Argyris, published in Harvard Business Review, double loop learning was explained as “a method that includes the process of detecting and attempting to correct error and the process of questioning underlying organization policies and objectives” (p. 115). It is exactly the process of questioning underlying policies and objectives in work processes that gets developed when applying and motivating andragogy toward all categories of learners. In fact, the application of andragogy as a consistent way of learning in life can reach beyond double loop learning, and evolve toward what I would refer to as “ecumenical learning,” in which not only output, return on investment, and employees’ gratification get enhanced, but in which the well being of all stakeholders (workers, shareholders, customers, suppliers, and the environment in which the business operates) is served.

Students who are encouraged to think along on the road toward accomplishment, will develop into workers that understand and embrace change and growth in their work environment.

**CONCLUSION**

Being a proponent of Rogers’ student-centered approach to education, implying that “We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p. 49), I feel that the process of facilitating younger adults in their education is definitely an interesting challenge, especially because some of the students in this group have not yet reached the absolute level of maturity in the psychological sense. It is my finding, though, that when given a choice, all students prefer being treated as adults. It gives them a sense of responsibility, which may be a useful experience to them. I am convinced that at this stage in their life, young adult learners prefer a more involved approach from their instructors, and a feeling of being seen as adults instead of children. I can therefore only agree with Merriam’s (1993) assertion that the process of learning which is centered on learner need, is seen as more important than the content; therefore, when educators are involved in the learning process, their most important role is to act as facilitators or guides, as opposed to content experts (p. 26).
In sum, it is my opinion that members of the workforce whose curiosity (“the need to know” - point 1 in the andragogical model) gets encouraged, will develop a better self-concept (“the learner’s self concept” - point 2 in the andragogical model), and will consequently feel less inhibited to share their own experiences (“the role of the learners’ experiences” - point 3 in the andragogical model) in problem solving- and output enhancing activities at work. Recognizing a receptive climate toward their input, these workers will, in turn, be more willing to learn from co-workers and work processes (“readiness to learn,” and “orientation to learning” - points 4 and 5 in the andragogical model), and will become more motivated (“motivation” - point 6 in the andragogical model) overall in- and outside of the work environment. The last point contributes toward the general quality of life for these individuals.

Regarding the success strategies in andragogy-driven courses mentioned earlier in this paper, it may also become obvious that “honesty and openness” work as great motivators in every environment, while the approach of “intermediate evaluation” in order to obtain feedback and adjust derails in any process is an invaluable one. The strategy of “making it up to date” is a given in every work environment, yet at the same time a challenge to these future workers to question the status quo and evaluate whether a change would not be beneficial for the organization. This is not possible without incorporating the strategy of “giving them a voice,” in order to communicate their perspectives, and “providing them choice,” which pertains to the application of flexibility when and where possible to accommodate workers and the organization at the same time.

REFERENCES