

ANDRAGOGY

Before describing the andragogical assumptions about learners and learning, it is helpful to look at what we mean by “adult”; there are a few definitions to see. First, the *biological* definition: we become adult biologically when we reach the age at which we can reproduce, which is in early adolescence for most. The *legal* definition: we become adult when we reach the age at which the law says we can vote, obtain a drivers license, marry without parental consent, and the like. The *social* definition: we become adult socially when we start performing adult roles, such as that of a worker, a spouse, parent, voting citizen, and the like. Finally the *psychological* definition: we become adult psychologically when we arrive at a self-concept of being responsible for our own lives, of being self-directing. From the viewpoint of learning, it is the psychological definition that is most crucial.

We become adult by degree as we move through childhood and adolescence, and the rate of increase by degree is probably accelerated if we live in homes, study in schools, and participate in youth organizations that foster our taking increasing responsibilities. But most of us probably do not have full-fledged self-concepts of self-directedness until we leave school or college, get a full-time job, marry, and start a family. Of course there are always exceptions to the rule, and those who have had a particularly rough upbringing may reach adulthood much faster than others.

The andragogical model is based on several assumptions that are different from those of the pedagogical model: *The need to know*. Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it. When adults undertake to learn something on their own they will invest considerable energy in probing into the benefits they will gain from learning it and the negative consequences of not learning it. A primary task of the educator is to help the learner become aware of the “need to know”. Often students in school and even college fail to understand why they need to know what they are being taught; most take courses simply to earn credits toward a degree. If teachers made an effort to explain how what the students are learning will be used in real life, more would be learned.

The learners’ self-concept. Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. They need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. They resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them. This presents a problem because often when adults enter an educational setting they remember previous school experience and assume the role of dependency and expect to be treated like children. There is a conflict between the “dependent

learner” role and the real need to be self-directing. This may account for the high rate of dropout in much voluntary education.

The role of the learners’ experience. Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience. By virtue of simply having lived longer, they have accumulated more experience than they had as youths. This difference in quantity and quality of experience has several consequences. For one, it assures that in any group of adults there will be a wider range of individual differences than is the case with a group of youths. Hence, the great emphasis in adult education on individualization of teaching and learning strategies.

For another, it means that for many kinds of learning the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves. Hence, the greater emphasis in adult education on experiential techniques; techniques that tap into the experience of the learners, such as group discussion, simulation exercises, problem-solving activities, case method, and laboratory techniques – over transmittal techniques. There is also a greater emphasis on peer helping strategies.

This greater experience that adults have also has some potential negative effects. As we accumulate experience, we tend to develop mental habits, biases, and presuppositions that tend to cause us to close our minds to new ideas, fresh perceptions, and alternative ways of thinking. An adult educator should work to help adults to examine their habits and biases and open their minds to new approaches. Sensitivity training, value clarification, mediation, and dogmatism scales are among the techniques that are used to tackle this problem.

Another reason for emphasizing a learners experience has to do with the learner’s self-identity. Young children derive their self-identity largely from external definers—who their parents, brothers, sisters, and extended families are; where they live; and what churches or schools they go to. As they mature, they increasingly define themselves in terms of the experiences they have had. To children, experience is something that happens to them; to adults, their experience is *who they are*. The implication for this fact in adult education is that when an adults’ experience is ignored or devalued, they perceive this as not rejecting just their experience, but rejecting them as persons.

Readiness to learn. Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations. The implication of this assumption is the importance of timing learning experiences to coincide with those developmental tasks. For example, a factory worker is not ready for a course in supervisory training until he has spent time on the factory floor mastering the work that he will be supervising. It is not necessary to sit by passively and wait for readiness to develop naturally,

however. Readiness to learn can be induced through exposure to role models of superior performance, career counseling, simulation exercises, and other techniques.

Orientation to learning. In contrast to children's and youths' subject-centered orientation to learning in school, adults are life-centered (or task-centered or problem-centered) in their orientation to learning. Adults are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations. Furthermore, they learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations.

A few examples illustrate this assumption. It was discovered by educators having terrible results reducing illiteracy in America teaching courses in reading, writing, and arithmetic that the words presented in the standard vocabulary lists in the reading and writing courses were not the words these people used in their real life situations and that the mathematical problems presented in their arithmetic courses were not the problems they had to be able to solve when they went to the store, the bank, or a shop. When the courses were reorganized around life situations and the acquisition of coping skills many of the problems disappeared or were greatly reduced. For many years the exact courses that were taught to teenagers during the day were taught to adults during the night, with poor attendance results. Once the titles of the courses were changed, for example "Composition I" to "Writing Better Business Letters" or "Composition II" to "Writing for Pleasure and Profit", attendance levels improved dramatically.

Pedagogy and andragogy are not antithetical, one is not bad and the other good. The truth is that both pedagogy and andragogy have their place in both children and adult education. There are many circumstances where children and youth seem to learn better when some features of the andragogical model are applied. Also, a number of teachers of adults describe situations in which they find the andragogical model does not work. If pedagogical assumptions are realistic for a particular learner in regard to a particular learning goal, then a pedagogical strategy is appropriate, at least as a starting point.

For example, if someone were to enroll in a course they had no prior knowledge of, say a course in nuclear physics; that person would need to have a didactic instructor teach them what the content is, how it is organized, what the special terminology is and what the resources are for learning about it before they would be able to start taking the initiative in learning more about it. It would be appropriate to begin with a pedagogical model.

The big difference between how an ideological pedagogue and an andragog is that the person who accepts the pedagogical assumptions to be the *only* realistic assumptions will insist that the learners remain dependent on the teacher; whereas the andragog will perceive that movement

toward the andragogical assumptions is a desirable goal, and will do everything possible to help the learner take increasing responsibility for their own learning.