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MALCOLM S. KNOWLES

CONTEXTUALISING ADULT LEARNING

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Having read this chapter you should be able to:

- recognise Knowles' background as a person and an educator
- draw a clear distinction between pedagogy and andragogy
- recognise the distinctive features of adult learning
- critically evaluate his work in relation to its applicability to practice
- apply the theory of andragogy to your own learning experiences.

KEY WORDS

adult education; andragogy; lifelong learning; pedagogy; self-directing; active learning; learning society; knowledge-based economy

INTRODUCTION

Malcolm Knowles, a central figure in the United States education system during the second half of the twentieth century, can be credited with raising awareness of adult learning in America, reorientating **adult education** from 'educating people' to 'helping them learn' (Knowles, 1950: 6). Knowles is best known for popularising the term '**andragogy**' and conceptualising the way in which adults learn. Through his work with adult learners Knowles determined that when adults were taught in the same way as children they quickly became demotivated, particularly where the application of such teaching methods did not acknowledge the vast amount of practical experience which adult learners often possessed. As such, Knowles devised a model which was responsive to the distinctive characteristics of adult learning (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991).

Following his Master's studies in 1949 Knowles used his research as a basis for his first publication, *Informal Adult Education*, published in 1950. This was followed by a series of further works centring on the adult learner and their specific mode of learning. In searching for a 'coherent and comprehensive theory of adult learning' (Knowles, 1989: 76) he established six assumptions about adult learning which he suggested should be used as a basis for anyone involved in adult education. Rooted in a humanistic and pragmatic philosophy and reflecting the work of theorists such as Maslow and Dewey, he proposed that knowledge should be developed through building on existing experience rather than through authority, and recognised the importance of self-actualisation as a key factor in the success of an adult's learning experience.

Despite entering adult education by chance, originally aspiring to enter the Foreign Service, Malcolm Knowles will be remembered for his work in creating an identity for adult education and, up until his death in 1997, he remained an advocate for **lifelong learning**, ensuring that his writings were practically orientated and influencing adult educators worldwide.

MALCOLM KNOWLES, THE PERSON

Malcolm Knowles was born in 1913 and raised in Montana, where he had a relatively happy childhood. Both of his parents played an influential role in his development as a young boy, albeit in different ways. Knowles recalled his father treating him as an adult from as young as the age of three, while his mother inspired him to be a 'tender, loving and caring person' (Knowles, 1989). As a result of such affirmation from his parents he developed a positive self-concept, leading to a successful school experience which eventually resulted in a scholarship to Harvard University. Throughout his time in school Knowles was a boy scout, which he claimed was as important in enabling him to gain knowledge and skills and perform a leadership role as any of his school experiences.

After graduating from university in 1934 Knowles' intention was to embark on a career in the US Foreign Service. However, having passed the entry exams, he was informed by the State Department that only the most urgent vacancies were being filled and that there was likely to be a three-year waiting list before any jobs became available. Having a wife to support, it was necessary, therefore, for him to accept a 'holding job' as director of related training for the National Youth Administration (NYA) in Massachusetts. Having no formal training in the sector, he sought a book to support him in conducting such a programme. Having no success, he went on to enlist the help of associates who were directing similar adult education programmes to form an advisory council to provide him with guidance. Acting on their advice, Knowles carried out an informal survey of local employers to establish what skills they were looking for in potential employees and then developed courses to teach these skills. He found he was able to recruit to these courses and, more importantly, many of the youths began getting jobs. It was from here his love of adult education was born, although he could not at this time give it a name:

> I loved what I was doing, but I didn't know that it had a name. Then around 1937, some-one asked me what I did. When I told him he said 'Oh, you are an adult educator.' So now I had an identity. (Knowles and associates, 1984: 2)

In 1940 he became director of adult education at Boston YMCA, where he organised an Association School for Adults. However, his time there was short-lived as he was drafted into the US Navy in 1943. During his time in the navy Knowles had the opportunity to develop his knowledge of the adult education sector, stating '[I] had more time to read and think than I had ever had before in my life' (Knowles and associates, 1984: 4), and he devoured all the books in print about adult education with a view to developing his own comprehensive theory of adult learning. On leaving the navy he was able to resume his work in adult learning, becoming executive director of adult education for the YMCA in Chicago. He also studied for his Master's degree at the University of Chicago, which was quickly followed by a PhD, working with C.O. Houle (Jarvis, 1998), whose intellectual rigour and teaching style greatly influenced Knowles (Knowles and associates, 1984).

The period that followed was one which showed him continuing to develop his skills and expertise as an adult educator and, as a result, he became firmly entrenched in the academic world of adult education, being invited to become executive director of the Adult Education Association of the USA in 1951. Nine years later he commenced a new graduate programme in adult education as Associate Professor at Boston University, a post which lasted for fourteen years and allowed him to explore the application of the principles of adult education to university teaching.

Throughout his roles in adult education Knowles sought to find a means by which to conceptualise adult education, writing prolifically on the subject. His first book, published in 1950, was entitled *Informal Adult Education* and built on his Master's study. In developing a theory for adult education, he rationalised that the closest he

could come to an organising theme was 'informal education'. While informal education was an important component in adult education it is far from the core, and he went on to identify further characteristics related to informal learning which would maximise the learning experience of the adult learner.

In his development of a theoretical framework for adult learning, Knowles was introduced to the term 'andragogy' by a Yugoslavian adult educator, Dusan Savicevic, who attended a summer session on adult learning run by Knowles. Building on the concept of andragogy, which can be defined as 'the art and science of helping adults to learn' (Knowles, 1980: 43), Knowles published an article expounding how andragogy fitted with his own views on adult learning. The concept 'provided an important identity to adult education at a time when it desperately needed one' (Jarvis, 1998: 70) and led him to expand on his theory in his book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus pedagogy* (1970). In this text Knowles provided a practical guide to adult education methods (andragogy), as a direct comparison to typical school education (**pedagogy**). Here he identified two dichotomous models of learning, but by 1980 the subtitle for this book was revised to *From pedagogy to andragogy* when it became evident that the learning styles could be interchanged depending on the needs of the learner.

Despite retiring in 1979, Knowles maintained his interest in the developments in adult learning, publishing his autobiography, *The Making of an Adult Educator*, in 1989. He explained how he had developed as an adult educator and recognised his own impact in the field of adult education. His work was not without its critics, which will be explored later in this chapter, but he accepted the criticism and continued to develop and build on his theories, particularly in the light of new innovations, up until his death in 1997.

KNOWLES' THEORY OF ADULT LEARNING

Knowles' theory was based around the concept of helping adults to maximise their learning experience. From his work with adults, he identified that the pedagogical model typically used in educational settings, and which was typified by the transmission of knowledge and skills, was not appropriate for the adult learner. As discussed in the previous section, he based his work around the concept of andragogy, a term which has the literal interpretation of 'adult leading', as opposed to pedagogy, meaning 'child leading'. Knowles cannot be credited with originating the term 'andragogy' since it was first used by Kapp in the 1800s and later in the 1920s by Lindeman and Rosenstock (Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990), but popularising the term and bringing it to the forefront of adult education in America is attributed to him.

In developing his andragogical model it was necessary for Knowles to first consider the pedagogical model since, as he stated, '[the pedagogical model] is the only way of thinking that most of us know, for it has dominated all of education – even adult education until recently' (Knowles and associates, 1984: 8). He observed that

one of the reasons why more is known about children's learning is that the study of learning was taken over by experimental psychologists using measurable variables, and while it is possible to control the conditions under which children learn, it is less easy to control the adult learning environment (Knowles et al., 2014). Indeed, the traditional pedagogical model of education dates as far back as the seventh century in the cathedral and monastic schools in Europe and remained the sole educational model throughout the following centuries as secular and public education grew (Knowles et al., 2014).

In examining the pedagogical model Knowles identified a set of assumptions which he used as a starting point when developing the andragogical model. He saw this model as being one which was teacher-directed, with the learner as submissive following the direction of the teacher, and observed that the learner was a dependent, passive recipient of knowledge, allowing the teacher to take full responsibility for the content delivered, how it was delivered and when. Additionally, the teacher assumes the learner has no experience on which to draw, again leading to a transmissional approach to delivery, with the assumption that the teacher directs when students will be ready to learn in order to move on to the next stage or grade. Within a pedagogical model the curriculum is organised in a subject-centred way, allowing students to build on subject content as defined by the curriculum developers. Finally, the motivation to learn comes largely from a desire to pass exams, which is reinforced by external pressures from parents and teachers, rather than receiving any internal gratification from the learning process.

Given the long tradition of the pedagogical model, it is not surprising, then, that early adult educators replicated this style of delivery in their programmes and, given that the adult learner has been conditioned to this mode of delivery based on past experience, it is equally likely that the learner will assume the role of the learner as a dependent, passive recipient of transmitted content. Despite being **self-directing** in all other aspects of life, they would frequently change when embarking on educational endeavours to a mode of 'teach me' (Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990). Knowles, then, looked to the adult learner and devised an alternative set of assumptions inherent to the andragogical model which would encourage a move away from the dependency model and allow adults to learn in a way which better suited their characteristics.

Knowles identified six key assumptions which characterised the adult learner (see Figure 7.1).

In defining the adult learner, Knowles assumed that a level of *self-concept* had already been reached, since the adult is responsible for their own life and as such will thrive on self-direction. The adult is, however, also conscious of how others view them in relation to their ability to take responsibility for themselves, and Knowles believed that resentment and resistance could ensue if it were felt that others were imposing their will without taking the adult's views and feelings into consideration, in which case he recommended the promotion of autonomy through giving the adult some control over their learning.

Self-concept	• A level of self-concept has been reached • Adult learners are self-directing • Self-awareness when reflecting on how others view them
Role of experience	• Adults already have a good knowledge base • Adults become a resource for their own learning • Discussion and problem solving should be part of the learning experience
Readiness to learn	• Adults have a reason for wanting to learn • Learning is a personal choice • Learning leads to better performance
Orientation for learning	• Focus for learning is life-centered, task-centered or problem-centered • Learning has a clear goal
Internal motivation	• Internal satisfaction related to learning – self-esteem, recognition, self-confidence, better quality of life
Need to know	• Knowing the value of learning • Recognizing what and why they need to learn

Figure 7.1   Knowles' six assumptions

Furthermore, Knowles observed that the adult enters education with a vast amount of experience, in terms of both quality and quantity, which led to the development of the second assumption, *the role of experience*. Knowles saw that the adults in question could themselves serve as an essential resource for learning and suggested that discussion and problem solving should play a prominent role in the learning experience, in which the adult educator should tie in the learner's experiences with new material. Alongside this comes self-identity, and by celebrating the adult's experience the esteem of the under-educated adult can be raised as they begin to reflect on the value of this experience.

In his third assumption Knowles acknowledged that 'adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or do something in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives' (Knowles and associates, 1984: 11). That is, something occurs which may trigger the adult to want to learn, such as through career planning or a skills audit in which gaps may be identified between where the learner is now and where they want to be in the future. This becomes a powerful motivator for the learner, especially when they can see that engagement in learning

can assist in solving an immediate or real-life problem. Learning assumes a new importance when its value can clearly be seen. Contrary to the pedagogical model, where the learner is subject-orientated, the adult learner is focused on life-centred, task-centred or problem-centred tasks. They are not learning for the sake of learning but have a clear goal in mind: 'to perform a task, solve a problem or live in a more satisfying way' (Knowles and associates, 1984: 12).

Knowles acknowledged that while the motivation to learn may well be through external factors such as a salary increase or better job prospects, more potent motivators come in the form of internal satisfaction, such as self-esteem, recognition, self-confidence and better quality of life. In this sense a powerful means by which to motivate the adult learner is to identify what these internal motivators might be since this is likely to lead to greater engagement with the learning process.

Knowles added his sixth assumption, the need to know, at a later date, and in this case he acknowledged that adults must know the value of learning and what they need to learn. For adults, it is important for them to understand what is in it for them since this is more likely to increase their attention as they begin to make the connections between what they are learning and the reasons why. Knowles recommended sharing the objectives or outcome of an activity, so learners are aware of why it is important to them.

In order for the andragogical model to be applied successfully, Knowles did however acknowledge that there was a need to initiate the adult learner into an alternative mode of learning that differs from their previous experience. We cannot assume that the adult learner will automatically fit into the andragogical model immediately, and Knowles advised that some degree of orientation would need to be applied if the model were to prove successful.

Initially, Knowles et al. presented the two models, pedagogy and andragogy, 'as antithetical, that pedagogy is bad and andragogy is good', and that pedagogy is for children and andragogy is for adults (2014: 47). However, a decade after he published his original model, teachers in elementary and secondary schools and colleges advised that they had been applying the andragogical model to teaching pupils with some success. Conversely some trainers and teachers of adults reported that the andragogical model was not working, resulting in Knowles revisiting his original model. Later revisions of his model saw Knowles conceive of the two models as parallel and interchangeable depending on the needs of the learner, advising that it is the responsibility of the educator to check which assumptions are realistic in a given situation and apply the appropriate pedagogical or andragogical assumption. For example, an adult learner who is learning an entirely new skill may need to begin with a pedagogical model as they do not yet have experience from which to draw, whereas some young people respond better if given a degree of autonomy in their learning. A key feature of Knowles' revised theory was, then, its flexibility. He considered that having the two discrete models should allow practitioners to make informed choices as to how provision should proceed.

LINKS WITH OTHER THEORISTS

As previously stated, Knowles popularised the term 'andragogy', but he was not the first to use it. In 1833 the German writer Alexander Kapp wrote about the practical necessity of the education of adults in his book *Platon's Erziehungslehre [Plato's Educational Ideas]*. Kapp saw andragogy as the normal process by which adults engage in continuing education. However, the term fell into disuse as Kapp's work lacked any theoretical underpinnings. Indeed, this is an overarching theme when viewing andragogy, since while few dispute the importance of adult education, it can be argued that a theory behind it is superfluous, a suggestion that will be unpacked in the next section of this chapter.

A number of theorists have, however, attempted to contextualise adult learning, and one whom Knowles regarded as his mentor was Eduard Lindeman. Knowles states:

> ... the single most influential person in guiding my thinking was Eduard C. Lindeman, whose book *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926) enlightened me about the unique characteristics of adults as learners and the need for methods and techniques for helping them learn. (Knowles and associates, 1984: 3)

Lindeman was a firm advocate of informal learning and believed in using learners' experience as a starting point for education, particularly with regard to using small-group work as a means of delivering adult education – a concept evident in Knowles' climates for learning, in which he expressed the importance of creating a learning environment conducive to learning through both the physical space and the psychological climate. Lindeman also developed central assumptions about adult education which influenced Knowles when formulating his own assumptions. However, Lindeman did not provide a tight definition for adult learning, suggesting that this could be too constraining, also reflecting the suggestion that adult learning is somewhat difficult to determine.

Lindeman himself was influenced by the work of John Dewey, so it is not surprising that parallels can also be drawn between the work of Dewey and Knowles. Knowles' idea that adult learners were self-directing was not a new concept, since Dewey had previously recognised the self-directing capacity of learners in 1902. Dewey, too, advocated the role of the teacher as one of facilitator, guiding the learner rather than imposing their own ideas, although Dewey's work at this time was predominantly with children rather than adult learners. Another theorist who posited that the teacher be seen as a facilitator was Carl Rogers, who theorised that 'we cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning' (Rogers, 1951: 389) and suggested that an over-reliance on a prescribed curriculum impeded the learner's ability to be self-directed. Rogers put forward a theory of experiential learning which addressed the needs of the learner through the building of mutual relationships, and which arguably formed the basis for Knowles' assumptions of

self-directedness, experience and problem-centred learning (Blondy, 2007). Like Knowles, David Kolb too saw the importance of drawing on experience, stating that 'Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb, 1984: 38). In his theory Kolb suggested that the learner must be able to reflect on experiences in order to form abstract concepts and generalisations, which then enable them to test hypotheses when faced with new experiences, and so the cycle continues.

In focusing on the specific needs of adult learners it might also be pertinent to look at some of the theories advanced at that time. Knowles' work can be positioned in the humanist theories of Abraham Maslow since the andragogical model 'predicates that the more potent motivators [of adult learning] are internal – self-esteem, recognition, better quality of life' (Knowles and associates, 1984: 12), all of which reflect Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which sees the learner aspiring to the uppermost layer of self-actualisation. Furthermore, behavioural and social psychologists at the time were looking at how stage transitions were related to adults' readiness to learn and considering how people changed their behaviour as a result of external and internal stimuli.

Blondy (2007) suggests that aspects of constructivism can be seen in Knowles' work, particularly in respect of Bruner's notion of learning as an active process, with the learner developing new ideas based upon knowledge already attained. Knowles (1984) advised that learning should build on the learners' past experiences through problem-centred and **active learning** strategies, both of which are reflective of Bruner's theory that a curriculum should build on past knowledge, while also identifying gaps in knowledge which should then become a focus for future learning.

Another key figure in adult education was Jack Mezirow, who developed the theory of transformative learning, which proposed that learning activities and events can dramatically transform an adult's learning experience. Mezirow observed that adults exhibit two types of learning: instrumental learning which relates to 'influencing and controlling the environment' (Aubrey and Riley, 2021: 305), and communicative learning which involves how adults communicate their feelings. Like Knowles, Mezirow also saw self-directed learning as the cornerstone of adult education, observing that self-direction was a central concept in adult education (Kheang, 2019). Furthermore, Knowles proposed that adults utilise previous learning experiences in order to contextualise new learning, concurring with Mezirow's theory which proposes that through the process of transformative learning adults think critically as they reflect on past learning experiences in order to generate a new understanding of their current learning, and subsequently generate new understanding (Kheang, 2019).

It can be seen therefore that Knowles' work was strongly influenced not only by people he admired, but also by the changing attitudes towards the adult learner at the time and developments in the social science genre.

CRITIQUING KNOWLES

A major criticism of Knowles' work is how far it can actually be considered a theory. Merriam states, 'the 1970s and early 1980s witnessed much writing, discussion and debate about ... the validity of andragogy as a theory of learning' (2001: 3), a view supported by Hartree (1984: 205), who suggests that Knowles had merely presented a set of guidelines for what the adult learner should be like in the classroom, based solely on Knowles' own observations and not supported by any tried and tested theory of learning. McGrath (2009) observes that even Knowles (1989: 112) recognised that 'andragogy is less a theory of adult learning than a model of assumptions about learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for emergent theory'.

Questions can also be asked regarding the assumptions Knowles made about adult learners and how far these were truly reflective of the student body. He made the assumption that adult learners were motivated to learn because they had chosen to undertake adult education, but the reality of this can be questioned as employers may, in some cases, have encouraged employees to undertake training or gain qualifications without fully investigating the relevance of the course. In such cases the adult learner may become demotivated and resentful, often feeling forced into education for job security rather than through any personal desire for self-improvement. This in turn can have a negative impact on self-concept, which is another important assumption made by Knowles.

Furthermore, Roberson (2002) observes that some aspects of Knowles' work is not reflective of all adult learners and draws on the work of Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995), who propose that the andragogical assumptions of self-concept, self-initiative and self-direction are specifically related to Europeans, arguing that Knowles' theory reflects 'the black and white, segregated world of his [Knowles'] past' (Roberson, 2002: 4). This is further emphasised by McIntosh (1988), who suggests that andragogy's emphasis on self-direction reflects white-male privilege (cited in Roberson, 2002), while Duff (2019) advises that the European ideologies and ways of learning promoted by andragogy fail to 'recognise the multi-faceted experiences of adult black males' (2019: 51).

Sandlin (2005) explored the criticisms of andragogy from a sociologically based perspective and identified five interrelated themes which reflect the marginalisation of some cultures in the andragogical model. She too observes the emphasis on the white middle-class learner and suggests that the model 'ignores' other ways of knowing and being, and in so doing 'silences' the voice of others (2005: 28). Furthermore, according to Sandlin (2005) andragogy fails to acknowledge the relationship between self and society and does not recognise how the learning process might be contextualised through a social, political, cultural and historical lens. In summing up, Sandlin (2005) argues that andragogy serves to reproduce inequalities by maintaining a status quo which does not take account of the way in which culture impacts a person's development and way of learning.

Finally, a frequent criticism of the andragogical model is whether there is indeed a need to distinguish between adults and children as learners (Davenport and Davenport, 1985; Merriam, 2001). Merriam (2001) questions how far there is a distinction between pedagogy and andragogy, suggesting that both adults and children can show elements of both models. She goes on to say it is equally likely that a child can be an independent, self-directed learner with self-concept, while adults can be highly dependent on their tutor for support, depending on the learning situation. Knowles himself eventually revised his own assumptions, observing that following his 1970 book, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus pedagogy*, practitioners in the field of elementary and secondary education identified that students responded well to the andragogical model, while those working with adults suggested that in some cases a pedagogical model still needed to be applied. Nevertheless, while in the revised edition of his book the subtitle was changed to *From pedagogy to andragogy* (1980), Knowles still maintained that the andragogical model was better for adults and pedagogy for children (Davenport, 1987) – a view supported by McKenzie (1977), who saw an existential difference between adults and children which would automatically assume a strategic differentiation in educational practice. Notwithstanding, this still raises the question as to whether it is necessary to put a label on adult learning or whether it is merely the case that a common-sense approach needs to be applied – simply matching teaching style to the needs of the learners regardless of whether they are adults or children.

APPLYING KNOWLES IN THE CLASSROOM

Jarvis states that '[Knowles'] writings were always practically orientated' (1998: 71) and as a result his works are easily translated into the adult learning environment. It could be argued that recent policy initiatives such as the promotion of a **learning society** and the drive towards lifelong learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2000) have seen a renewed interest in adult learning as a concept. The notion of a learning society promotes the idea that 'learning is an activity not a place and goes beyond the school and the university' (Cisco, 2010: i). The learning society is seen as a basis for lifelong learning which in essence supports the **knowledge-based economy**. Schuller sees lifelong learning as 'involving people of all ages learning in a variety of contexts (2017: 4) but with a specific focus on adults returning to organised learning. In his research he emphasises the importance of the quality and nature of learning, particularly in respect of its appropriateness to the individual. Here we see accordance with the original intention of Knowles' work in which he sought to find guidance for educating adults which did not rely on techniques used with children.

Knowles originally observed that the adult learner comes to the learning experience with preconceived ideas of the educational experience, which fits largely with the pedagogical, rather than andragogical, model. As such, Knowles recognises that

it is the role of the adult educator to help students make the transition from dependent to independent learner (Knowles and associates, 1984). It is easy to see how those adults returning to learning as a result of lifelong learning agendas may bring with them these fixed ideas of education, and for Knowles one of the biggest considerations was their understanding of the role of the teacher and how they perceive themselves in the learning environment, since this forms the basis of much of his work. In the andragogical model he views the teacher as a facilitator, believing that this term best fits with the specific role of the adult educator, and sees the facilitator as playing a dual role:

> ... as designer and manager of processes and procedures that will facilitate the acquisition of content by the learners; and only secondarily the role of content resource. (Knowles and associates, 1984: 14)

Indeed, he also acknowledges the wide range of resources available to the facilitator, notwithstanding the experiences of the students themselves, who should therefore be presented with opportunities to share these experiences through, for example, workshops and discussions. This is, however, not without its challenges since students coming into learning entrenched in the pedagogical model of content delivery may become anxious about, or even feel threatened by, a learning experience which exposes them through direct questioning and discussion, requiring the facilitator to skilfully introduce this mode of learning.

It is necessary, therefore, when adopting an andragogical model to set a climate that is conducive to learning, of which Knowles identified two specific areas for consideration: physical space and psychological atmosphere. Regarding the physical space, Knowles observed that a classroom designed with chairs in rows facing a lectern automatically predisposes the learner to believe that the delivery style will be one of knowledge transmission and possibly reinforce their preconceptions of what constitutes a learning environment. While this arrangement presents a challenge in terms of undertaking workshop or group activities, it also encourages students to behave in a certain way, discouraging any form of participation. Knowles suggests, therefore, that the facilitator should arrange the classroom before the students arrive in a manner which reinforces a delivery style more conducive to group activity and discussion, such as having chairs in a circle or table groups, with furniture designed with adult learners in mind. In this way a clear message is given to the adult learner about how a session will be delivered, dispelling any preconceived ideas.

Of even greater importance, according to Knowles, is the psychological climate for learning, which he stresses should be 'one which causes adults to feel accepted, respected and supported' (1980: 47), believing that there should be a spirit of mutuality between students and facilitators as joint enquirers. This can be supported by the adult educator having a secure knowledge of the student body in order that any experiences can be valued and maximised throughout the session. Adults will thrive

if they feel their views are respected and that others understand and value them as individuals. This in turn helps to raise self-esteem, which is an important component of effective learning.

Alongside mutual respect there also needs to be a strong element of trust in an adult learning setting. As Knowles suggests, people are more likely to learn from those they trust. This notion goes hand in hand with the importance of collaboration and removing some of the barriers which the competitiveness of early school experiences often creates. In this respect it is important that the adult learner sees the facilitator as non-judgemental. From their school experience the adult learner may recall the teacher as one who makes judgements, particularly in relation to grading assignments and commenting on performance. While it is of course necessary, by the very nature of their role, for the adult educator to assign marks and grade work, Knowles suggests that this should be done, where possible, in collaboration with the learner, giving them a greater sense of ownership of their work. In applying andragogical principles in practice, Birzer (2004, cited in Chan, 2010: 29) recommended involving learners in self-evaluation, suggesting that this helps to remove bias from a single judgement of the instructor. If an adult understands why a mark or grade has been awarded because criteria have been shared with them, then they are less likely to feel resentful of the person responsible for awarding that grade or mark.

Returning to the assumptions made by Knowles, one important area which differentiated adults from children in their approach to learning, he felt, was the 'readiness to learn'. Most adults in education have made the decision to return to learning for a particular reason, such as to secure a job or for better career prospects, and it is when they are at the peak of their readiness to learn that a 'teachable moment' is presented – this being when the learner is the most receptive to learning. The adult educator should capitalise on this moment and present a curriculum which is reactive to learner requirements. Knowles recommends that a curriculum should be organised in such a way that it is in step with the adult learners' developmental tasks. For example, where possible, learning experiences should correlate with experiences in work placements. Alternatively, a diagnosis of needs may be carried out from the outset in order that sessions may be planned around learners' specific needs and requirements. Involving learners in the organisation of delivery and selection of content may increase student motivation, since, as Knowles states, 'people tend to feel committed to any decision in proportion to the extent to which they have participated in making it' (Knowles and associates, 1984: 17) – the reverse being that they are more likely to feel resentful if the decisions of others are imposed upon them.

In establishing a climate conducive to learning, Knowles suggests that a climate of pleasure should also be aspired to. He reminds us that 'learning should be one of the most pleasant and gratifying experiences in life' (Knowles and associates, 1984: 16), enabling students to achieve their full potential. He also suggests that previous educational experience may have been a 'dull chore', warning that the adult educator would be doing the learner a disservice if they were to merely reproduce what had

gone before. As such, it is important that adult education is an enjoyable experience. McGrath (2009) suggests that the very essence of andragogy is to examine how learning in the classroom can be made more attractive for the student, and teaching styles should be modified to ensure that adults gain maximum enjoyment from the learning experience alongside learning which directly correlates with their specific needs as adults. As such, the facilitator should look to ways of delivering content which engage the adult learner.

OVERVIEW OF APPLICATION: KNOWLES' IDEAS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Following are some suggestions as to how educators might apply andragogical principles in the classroom. As previously noted, while the suggestions may be more fitting to the adult learner, based on the six assumptions identified by Knowles, these are not exclusive to adult learners and may be equally effective in a secondary or even primary classroom.

- Building courses or programmes around the needs of the learners can be a powerful motivator. This might include providing opportunities for learners to be involved in course design or using the objectives of a programme and inviting learners to discuss how they would like it to be delivered.
- Use real-life problems and encourage learners to work together in solving problems. While it is important that key concepts are learned, problem solving provides opportunities to contextualise the concept in a more meaningful way.
- Learn about your learners. Getting to know the needs and intentions of learners helps in tailoring a programme of study which has increased relevance. Furthermore, this enables the facilitator to empower learners by directing questions and asking them to share their experiences at a pertinent moment.
- Involve learners in the assessment process by sharing learning objectives and marking schemes; encourage learners to self-assess, reflecting on how they would have awarded the mark.
- Prepare to be flexible: if a learner raises a point that leads to a new but relevant topic, be prepared to capture the moment and discuss it.
- Ensure that the classroom is conducive to the adult learning experience both in terms of layout and – perhaps more importantly – ensuring a mutually supportive environment in which learners feel able to freely express their views and share experiences without fear of derision or judgement.

SUMMARY

Despite becoming an adult educator by chance, Malcolm Knowles very quickly established himself in the field of adult education and his writing on the subject made him one of the most well-known figures in adult education in America, his concept of andragogy having been adopted by adult educators around the world (Chan, 2010). Jarvis writes of Knowles, 'I do not think that he would have ever claimed to have been a great scholar – but his writings have been very influential in adult education world-wide' (1998: 71). It is perhaps this lack of a scholarly approach which has made his work so accessible to adult educators, since his works were written predominantly with the intention that they would be applied in educational settings.

Knowles had a genuine interest and concern for adults in education and, in identifying that there was little by way of literature on the subject, he made it his work to develop his own understanding of the needs of adult learners, utilising what he discovered to support others in the field. Knowles' work was not without its critics, but he used critical feedback as a means of further developing his work. He acknowledged that his distinction between pedagogy and andragogy may well have been oversimplified, but he remained committed both emotionally and practically to the distinction he had drawn (Jarvis, 1998).

It could be said that Knowles created a legacy which changed the face of adult education. He was the first to chart the rise of the adult education movement in the United States, from which he devised a statement of informal adult education practice, and later he developed a comprehensive theory of adult education through his own interpretation of andragogy. He was keen to advance his theories in view of the changing nature of education and continued to play an active role in the field of adult education until his death in 1997.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Active learning

A method of teaching which actively engages learners in the learning process, normally through practical learning activities and a reflection on their own role in the learning process.

Adult education

Any form of learning undertaken by adults, usually following a period of absence from education.

Andragogy

The theory and practice of educating adults. The term derives from the Greek language and is literally translated as 'man leading' or leader of man. Malcolm Knowles popularised the term in the 1950s in order to conceptualise how educating adults differed from educating children (see pedagogy).

Knowledge-based economy

To recognise the place of knowledge and technology in modern OECD economies. This sees a shift from the traditional economies, such as farming and industry, to one which centres on the production and use of knowledge.

Learning society

An educational philosophy which posits that learning should extend beyond that of formal learning into informal learning to build a knowledge economy. The learning society relates to the activity of learning rather than the place of learning and responds to a widening participation agenda in which lifelong learning is promoted.

Lifelong learning

Learning that is pursued throughout life for personal or professional reasons. Lifelong learning can be flexible and diverse and does not necessarily occur in the traditional educational setting. Lifelong learning has been promoted by politicians, with a growing number of policies directed towards the creation of a 'learning society'.

Pedagogy

The art and science of helping children to learn, directly translated as child leading.

Self-directing

To direct one's own learning in relation to a predetermined set of aims and values. The self-directed learner knows what they want to achieve and will determine for themselves the most effective way of reaching their goals.

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