

Search

[Home \(../index.html\)](#) ► [Learning Theories \(index.html\)](#) ► [Andragogy](#)

Andragogy (Malcolm Knowles)

Knowles' theory of andragogy is an attempt to develop a theory specifically for adult learning. Knowles emphasizes that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for decisions. Adult learning programs must accommodate this fundamental aspect.

Andragogy makes the following assumptions about the design of learning: (1) Adults need to know why they need to learn something (2) Adults need to learn experientially, (3) Adults approach learning as problem-solving, and (4) Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value.

In practical terms, andragogy means that instruction for adults needs to focus more on the process and less on the content being taught. Strategies such as case studies, role playing, simulations, and self-evaluation are most useful. Instructors adopt a role of facilitator or resource rather than lecturer or grader.

Application

Andragogy applies to any form of adult learning and has been used extensively in the design of organizational training programs (especially for "soft skill" domains such as management development ([../domains/management.html](#))).

Example

Knowles (1984, Appendix D) provides an example of applying andragogy principles to the design of personal computer training:

1. There is a need to explain why specific things are being taught (e.g., certain commands, functions, operations, etc.)
2. Instruction should be task-oriented instead of memorization -- learning activities should be in the context of common tasks to be performed.
3. Instruction should take into account the wide range of different backgrounds of learners; learning materials and activities should allow for different levels/types of previous experience with computers.
4. Since adults are self-directed, instruction should allow learners to discover things for themselves, providing guidance and help when mistakes are made.

(See [computers \(../domains/computers.html\)](#) for further discussion of this topic).

Principles

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.

References

- Knowles, M. (1975). *Self-Directed Learning*. Chicago: Follet.
- Knowles, M. (1984). *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (3rd Ed.). Houston: Gulf Publishing.
- Knowles, M. (1984). *Andragogy in Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Related Websites

For more about Knowles and his work, see:

- <http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/resources/malcolmknowles.cfm>
(<http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/resources/malcolmknowles.cfm>)
- <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm> (<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm>)
- http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating_the_Future/crfut_knowles.html
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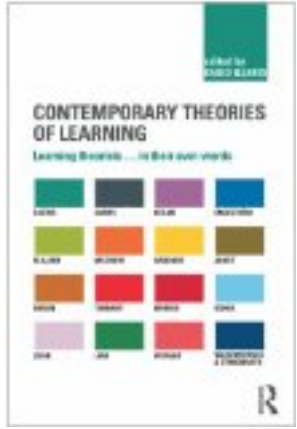
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