

## Adult Learning Theory

Teaching adults is different than teaching children. Part of being an effective educator involves understanding how adults learn best. Andragogy (adult learning) is a theory that holds a set of assumptions about how adults learn. Andragogy emphasizes the value of the process of learning. It uses approaches to learning that are problem-based and collaborative and also emphasizes more equality between the teacher and learner.

Malcolm Knowles (1980, 1984) is attributed with developing the most cogent model underlying the assumption that teaching adults should differ from teaching children and adolescents (Beder and Darkenwald 1982). By contrasting "andragogical" or learner-centered methods with "pedagogical" or teacher-centered methods, Knowles argues that adults differ from children and adolescents in a number of important ways that affect learning and, consequently, how they approach learning. Therefore, according to Knowles, the more traditional pedagogical model is inappropriate for use with adults.

The following assumptions underlie Knowles' (1984) andragogical model:

- Adults tend to be self-directing.
- Adults have a rich reservoir of experience that can serve as a resource for learning.
- Since adults' readiness to learn is frequently affected by their need to know or do something, they tend to have a life-, task-, or problem-centered orientation to learning as contrasted to a subject-matter orientation.
- Adults are generally motivated to learn due to internal or intrinsic factors as opposed to external or extrinsic forces.

Adults learn best when:

- They understand *why* something is important to know or do.
- They have the freedom to learn in their own way.
- Learning is experiential.
- The time is right for them to learn.
- The process is positive and encouraging.

Resources:

- Beder, H. W., and Darkenwald, G. G. "Differences between Teaching Adults and Pre-Adults: Some Propositions and Findings." *ADULT EDUCATION* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 142-155. (ERIC No. EJ 262 809).
- Knowles, M. S. *THE MODERN PRACTICE OF ADULT EDUCATION*. Rev. ed. Chicago: Association Press/Follett, 1980.
- Knowles, M. S. "Introduction: The Art and Science of Helping Adults Learn." In *ANDRAGOGY IN ACTION: APPLYING MODERN PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING*, by M. S. Knowles and others. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984.