THE MAKING OF AN ADULT EDUCATOR
An Autobiographical Journey
by Malcolm S. Knowles

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Leonard Nadler
Zeace Nadler
College Park, Maryland

3. Experience must be meaningful to the learner.
4. The learner must be free to look at the experience.
5. The goals must be set and the search organized by the learner.
6. The learner must have feedback about progress toward goals" (Knowles, 1960, pp. 58–61).

Beginning to Build a Theory

Gibb's statement convinced me that a beginning foundation of a theory of adult learning was being laid and that this was indeed a worthwhile line of inquiry. When I was invited to Boston University to establish a graduate program in adult education in 1960, my deepest commitment was to work at developing a comprehensive theory of adult learning.

I started experimenting with what I perceived to be adult-oriented strategies in the hope that this would lead to theoretical insights. My first concern was with finding ways to involve the learners deeply in sharing responsibility in planning and carrying on their own learning. I discovered that they could indeed diagnose their own learning needs quite objectively given effective tools, support, and procedures. I found simulation exercises, self-diagnostic rating scales, and peer feedback groups to be useful tools. I had the learners develop learning objectives based on their self-diagnosed learning needs, and found that they came up with objectives that were very congruent with my ideas about what a course's objectives should be—but that the learners had a much deeper sense of ownership of them than if I had prescribed them. We then organized the objectives into "inquiry units" (in the place of a content outline), and I had the learners self-select themselves into teams of from two to four to take responsibility for researching the inquiry units and presenting their findings to the class. I found that the teams became excited and enthusiastic about their learning projects and that their presentations were much more creative than I could have planned. I experimented with such other strategies as self-evaluation, setting a classroom climate that was conducive to learning, and using learning contracts.

As I was beginning to evolve a theoretical framework from my own experimentation, I was getting increasing reinforcement from the literature. Houle's (1961) *The Inquiring Mind* helped me understand more deeply the meaning and theoretical underpinnings of self-directed learning. Bruner's (1966) *Toward a Theory of Instruction* introduced me to the theoretical base of discovery learning, which I discovered was what my use of inquiry teams was about.

My Introduction to Andragogy

By the mid-1960s a rough outline of a theoretical framework of adult learning had evolved in my mind, and in 1967 I had an experience that made it all come together. A Yugoslavian adult educator, Dusan Savicevic, participated in a summer session I was conducting at Boston University. At the end of it he came up to me with his eyes sparkling and said, "Malcolm, you are preaching and practicing andragogy." I replied, "Whatagogy?" because I had never heard the term before. He explained that the term had been coined by a teacher in a German grammar school, Alexander Kapp, in 1833, in journal articles explaining how differently he was dealing with adult students in his evening classes from the teenage students in his day classes. The term lay fallow until it was once more introduced by a German social scientist, Eugen Rosenstock, in 1921, but it did not yet receive general recognition. Then in 1957 a German teacher, Franz Poggeler, published a book, *Introduction into Andragogy: Basic Issues in Adult Education,* and this time the term was picked up by adult educators in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Yugoslavia and used extensively in their literature. (Incidentally, Eduard Lindeman was introduced to the term in Europe and used it in two articles on workers' education in 1926 and 1927, but it did not appear in any other American publications.)

It made great sense to me to have a term that would enable us to discuss the growing body of knowledge about adult learners in parallel with the pedagogical model of childhood learning. I used it in the next article I wrote, "Androgogy, Not Pedagogy," in *Adult Leadership* in April 1968. (I did not learn that the correct spelling is *andragogy* until I corresponded with the publishers of Merriam-Webster dictionaries in 1968; Knowles, 1980, pp. 253-254.) But the first full-blown presentation of my andragogical model appeared in my *Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy* in 1970 (revised, 1980). At this point I saw the andragogical and pedagogical models of assumptions about learning as being dichotomous and antithetical: andragogy was good and pedagogy was bad; or, at best, pedagogy was for children and andragogy was for adults. Hence, the *versus* in the subtitle.

Andragogy Revised

During the next ten years I began getting reports from elementary and secondary school teachers who had been exposed to the andragogical model explaining that they had been experimenting with it in their programs and had found that children learned better under the andragogical assumptions and strategies in many situations. I also got reports from teachers of adults that they had found that the pedagogical assumptions and strategies were necessary with adults in some situations—such as when the learners were entering into totally strange new content areas or were learning to operate unfamiliar machines, especially where health and safety were involved.

So in the revised edition of *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* in 1980 the subtitle was changed to *From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. And I presented the two models as two parallel sets of assumptions about learners and learning that need to be checked out in each situation; in those situations in which the pedagogical assumptions are realistic, pedagogical strategies are appropriate, and vice versa. The problem with this solution is, I have discovered, the ideological pedagogs will do everything they can to keep learners dependent on them because this is their main psychic reward in teaching. Andragogs will accept dependency when it clearly is the reality and will meet the dependency needs through didactic instruction until the learners have built up

a foundation of knowledge about the content area sufficient for them to feel confident about taking responsibility for planning and carrying out their own learning projects. It has been my experience, though, that even very pedagogical teachers are willing to start experimenting with the andragogical model once they experience what it is like to be treated as an adult learner, even in a one-day workshop, and are exposed to the assumptions, principles, and methods of the andragogical model. Moreover, when they experience the greater psychic rewards of learners becoming excited about learning, these teachers are converted.

Later Influences

My ideas about adult learning have been enriched and modified in the last few years as the result of several other influences. Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* made me aware of the importance of "consciousness-raising" as a part of the learning process. Maslow's (1970) *Motivation and Personality* gave me, in the framework of the hierarchy of human needs, a deeper understanding of the meaning of readiness to learn as well as the concept of the self-actualized person. Goulet and Baltes's (1970) *Life-Span Developmental Psychology* enlarged my vision of the developmental process during the adult years. *Learning to Be*, by Edgar Faure and others (1972), helped me put my ideas about adult learning into the perspective of lifelong learning. Neal Berte's (1975) *Individualizing Education by Learning Contracts* helped me refine and improve my use of contract learning as a strategy for enhancing self-directed learning. Kay Torshen's (1977) *The Mastery Approach to Competency-Based Education* deepened my understanding of and commitment to this reorientation to the purpose of learning, the critical importance of which I discuss in Chapter Eight.

I have also found a good deal of reinforcement and enrichment from the writings of contemporary adult educators, particularly, in addition to the ones already cited, Jerold Apps (1981), Edgar Boone and Associates (1980), Stephen

Brookfield (1986), Patricia Cross (1976, 1981), Gordon Darkenwald and Sharan Merriam (1982), Ronald Gross (1977, 1982), John Ingalls (1976), Roby Kidd (1973), Alan Knox (1977, 1986), Morris Keeton and Associates (1976), Patricia McLagan (1978), Leonard Nadler (1970, 1982), and Raymond Wlodkowski (1985).

Where I Stand Now

My current thinking about the pedagogical and andragogical models is summarized below.

Assumptions of the pedagogical model:

1. Regarding the need to know: Learners only need to know that they must learn what the teacher teaches if they want to pass and get promoted; they do not need to know how what they learn will apply to their lives.

2. Regarding the learner's self-concept: The teacher's concept of the learner is that of a dependent personality; therefore, the learner's self-concept becomes that of a dependent personality.

3. Regarding the role of experience: The learner's experience is of little worth as a resource for learning; the experience that counts is that of the teacher, the textbook writer, and the audiovisual aids producer. Therefore, transmittal techniques (lectures, assigned readings, audiovisual presentations, and the like) are the backbone of pedagogical methodology.

4. Regarding readiness to learn: Learners become ready to learn what the school requires them to learn if they want to pass and get promoted.

5. Regarding orientation to learning: Learners have a subject-centered orientation to learning; they see learning as acquiring subject-matter content. Therefore, learning experiences are organized according to subject-matter units and the logic of subject-matter content.

6. Regarding motivation: Learners are motivated to learn by extrinsic motivators—grades, the teacher's approval or disapproval, parental pressures.

Assumptions of the andragogical model:

1. Regarding the need to know: Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it. Tough (1979) found that 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. Consequently, one of the new aphorisms in adult education is that the first task of the facilitator of learning is to help the learners become aware of the "need to know" (a process akin to Freire's consciousness-raising).

2. Regarding the learner's self-concept: Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own lives (the psychological definition of *adult*). Once they have arrived at this self-concept, they develop a deep psychological need to be seen and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. They resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their will on them. But this presents a problem to us in adult education: the minute adults walk into an activity labeled "education" or "training" or any of their synonyms, they hark back to their conditioning in previous school experience, put on their dunce hat of dependency, sit back, and say, "Teach me." As we have become aware of this problem, adult educators have been working at creating front-end learning experiences in which adults are helped to make the transition from dependent to self-directed learners (Knowles, 1975; Smith, 1982).

3. Regarding the role of the learner's experience: Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youths. This difference in quantity and quality of experience has several consequences for adult education.

For one thing, it assures that in any group of adults there will be a wider range of individual differences in terms of background, learning style, motivation, needs, interests, and goals than is true in a group of youths—hence, the great emphasis being placed in adult education on individualization of learning and teaching strategies.

For another, it means that for many kinds of learning the richest resources for learning are within the learners themselves. Hence, the greater emphasis being given in adult education to experiential techniques—techniques that tap into the experience of the learners, such as group discussion, simulation exercises, problem-solving activities, case method, and laboratory methods—over transmittal techniques. Hence, too, the greater emphasis on peer-helping activities.

But the fact of greater experience also has some potentially negative effects. As we accumulate experience, we tend to develop mental habits, biases, and presuppositions that may cause us to close our minds to new ideas, fresh perceptions, and alternative ways of thinking. Accordingly, adult educators are trying to develop ways of helping adults to examine their habits and biases and open their minds to new approaches. Sensitivity training, value clarification, meditation, and dogmatism scales are among the techniques that are used to tackle this problem.

4. Regarding readiness to learn: Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know or to be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations. An especially rich source of readiness to learn is the developmental tasks associated with moving from one developmental stage to the next. The critical implication of this assumption is the importance of timing learning experiences to coincide with those developmental tasks.

5. Regarding orientation to learning: In contrast to children's and youths' subject-centered orientation to learning (at least in school), adults are life centered (or task centered or problem centered) in their orientation to learning. Accordingly, learning experiences in adult education are increasingly organized around life tasks or problems—for example, "Writing Better Business Letters" rather than "Composition 1."

6. Regarding motivation to learn: While adults are responsive to some extrinsic motivators (better jobs, promotions, salary increases, and the like), the more potent motivators are intrinsic motivators (the desire for increased self-esteem, quality of life, responsibility, job satisfaction, and the like). Tough (1979) found in his research that all normal adults are motivated to keep growing and developing, but that this motivation is frequently blocked by such barriers as negative self-concept as a student, inaccessibility of opportunities or resources, time constraints, and programs that violate principles of adult learning.

But More Changes Are Coming

This, then, is where my thinking about adult learning stands at this time. As I predict in Chapters Seven and Eight, however, we are now on the verge of some major breakthroughs in our understanding of the learning process. I am therefore certain that if this book is revised in ten years, it will report substantial changes in my thinking.