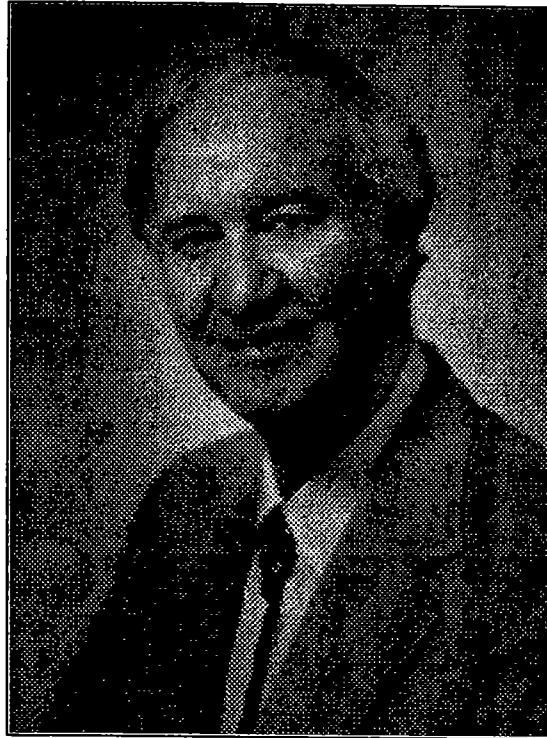


## Malcolm Knowles: Apostle of Andragogy



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Malcolm Knowles was a widely known and influential professor of adult education for almost twenty years before academia dispensed with him through mandatory retirement in 1979. Prior to his university career he had worked seventeen years in the field. About nine of those years he spent as practitioner and administrator with the YMCA. For the other eight years he was executive director of the Adult Education Association, a major national organization of adult education in the United States at that time. Much of his work during those years and since his retirement has focused on the promotion of self-directed learning. His espoused goal has been to advance the cause of the individual and of American democracy in the university and in adult education, in business and industry, and in United States society generally. In the process, he became a theorist and promoter of adult education. Shifting slogans in mid-career, he abandoned "the mature mind" for "andragogy" which he used as both label and package for his product, self-directed learning. This is the story of Malcolm Knowles and andragogy. It is a story that analyzes their potential to influence Americans and American democracy, a potential which ironically threatens to subvert the very cause to which they ostensibly are dedicated.

### **Knowles: The Early Years**

Knowles' optimistic confidence in individualism, self-help, and the democratic process was nurtured by his experience. The son of a veterinarian, Knowles imbibed the business spirit sweeping Florida in the mid-1920s. He channeled his entrepreneurial spirit toward risks befitting a youth, venturing into the nearby Everglades to hunt baby alligators to sell and also to collect and mount exotic butterflies to market to museums. In 1928, he set out to win a major national prize for Boy Scouts, a free trip in the next year to a world Jamboree of Scouting in Birkenhead, England, for the American scout who earned the largest number of merit badges. His achievement of some fifty merit badges won him that coveted trip.

His campaign for the scouting prize had not been hit or miss. He had developed a technique that would help him compete effectively. He drew a large chart with a separate square for each day of the nine month contest. In these squares he systematically planned out the activities he would perform during the year to win the badges. Finding a technique that worked for him, he was convinced it could work for others. "My mother trained me to be systematical," the sixteen-year-old Malcolm told readers of *Boys Life*, the scouting magazine, as he shared with them the self-directing technology that won him the trip. "Make your chart this way, fellows, and you will see how easily you can get your 'fifty.'" He laboriously and mechanistically delineated how to do it. "My original chart, "he told the scouts, "was made out of beaverboard, two by three feet. I had it nailed at the foot of my bed, where it was the first thing I saw upon waking."

A trip to England was not his only objective while in high school. He also decided to seek a full-tuition scholarship to Harvard University. On his return from Birkenhead, he dedicated his senior year to this goal, even as the bubble burst nationally with the collapse of the stock market in the autumn of 1929.

He won his scholarship, though, and entered Harvard in 1930. While professionals like his father could sometimes weather poor economic times more easily than hourly wage earners, Malcolm could not count on family funding for books, room and board, and the many other expenses facing a student living away from home. Such economic problems did not deter Knowles. "It never occurred to me that I couldn't get anything I wanted if I worked for it," he once remarked.

And work for it he did. Even though jobs were scarce, Knowles secured one immediately upon entering Harvard. No big city lad could compete with the boy from the Everglades for the opening at the Agassiz Museum of Natural History for a curator of its butterfly collection.

Knowles spent four active years at Harvard. His participation in scouting had sparked an interest in service, leading him to involvement at Harvard in Phillips Brooks House, a university organization dedicated to social work. This connection led him into volunteer activity with immigrants at Boston's Lincoln House Settlement. At first he led youth groups in discussion and sports. In his junior and senior years he did family counseling with immigrant Italian families. He was also active in Harvard's Liberal Club. He still found time to deliver the *New York Times* in the Cambridge area to earn spending money and to serve as water boy for the Harvard football team, gaining free entry to the games.

The Depression eventually caught up with Knowles. An accident hospitalized his father for several months and cut off financial support from home. After receiving his bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1934, Knowles found himself selling silk stockings door-to-door. Like so many others in Depression-bound America, Knowles was at last down on his luck.

It did not last long. In mid-1935, Knowles read an account of a new agency just established to provide work-study programs for unemployed youths. He noted that the director for Massachusetts of this new National Youth Administration was to be Eddie Casey, the Harvard football coach. When contacted by Knowles, Casey arranged for his former water boy to become his director of related training, the study portion of the work-study program. Knowles accepted the offer, not realizing until later that he had become involved in adult education.

## **Practicing Adult Education: Democracy in Action**

Five years as a practitioner convinced Knowles he had found his calling. In 1940, he agreed to become

director of adult education for the YMCA of Boston. Forty years later, he looked back on that position as:

a very rich experience. It provided me with sort of a laboratory... for testing out ideas that had been generating from my reading and my experience in the National Youth Administration. I didn't have the freedom to experiment with the National Youth Administration that the YMCA provided. So I did an awful lot of experimenting, and many of the ideas that later evolved as part of a comprehensive theory of adult learning had their genesis in that little laboratory.

One experience that deeply influenced his practice of adult education was provided by a retired New England corporation executive. In response to several potential participants who wanted to know more about the stars, Knowles had contacted a leading astronomer at Harvard who recommended his graduate assistant to teach the class. A dozen registrants appeared, but the lecture format did not work well. Interest waned. Numbers dwindled from class to class until Knowles had to cancel the program, although he knew the attenders were still interested in learning about the stars. He began looking for someone who knew astronomy without being "locked into an academic teaching stance." Upon contacting an association of amateur astronomers in the Boston area, one of its members, a retired executive, agreed to teach the class.

The first of these night classes started with a trek to the roof of the YMCA building and a question. Participants were asked to look at the sky and to tell the instructor what they saw that aroused their curiosity. The amateur astronomer jotted down a series of items that were of interest to the group. On returning to the classroom, he used this "curriculum" in a relaxed, straightforward way, avoiding the didacticism that had initially alienated class members from a subject in which they had a deep interest. At the end of the session, he invited them to his home for the next class where they could view the stars from the comfort of his private observatory. By the second meeting the group membership had mushroomed from a dozen into eighteen.

Knowles had found the model of an effective teacher for his institution and for his own developing image of what an adult educator and adult education ought to be. Such experiences with the YMCA taught him that instructors had to care about learners' interests rather than what they believed ought to interest learners. In his positions with the YMCA in Boston, with its USO affiliate in Detroit, and from 1946-1951 with the Central YMCA in Chicago, Knowles avoided professional teachers when possible, favoring knowledgeable laymen who "played with ideas."

His Boston experience was crucial, as was the grounding he received in Chicago. Knowles wrote an article, "The Day I Changed from Teacher to Facilitator of Learning," in which he attributed much of his educational thinking to formal educational experiences he had in Chicago. While promoting and administering the informal adult education program of the Central YMCA, he taught a course at George Williams College. He also enrolled in a master's degree program in adult education at the University of Chicago where, in one course, he encountered the thinking of Carl Rogers through one of Rogers' associates, Arthur Shedlin. Shedlin refused to act as content planner and transmitter. Instead, as Knowles saw it, Shedlin performed "the function of process designer and manager, which required relationship building, needs assessment, involvement of students in planning, linking students to learning resources, and encouraging student initiative." Ever adaptive, Knowles tried the approach on his own class at George Williams College, forming "inquiry teams" to develop, explore, present, and discuss the content upon which they decided. "I had never seen such creative presentations and pride of accomplishment," he wrote. "By the end of that semester I was a confirmed facilitator of learning... I had replaced getting my rewards from controlling students with getting my rewards from releasing students."

The capstone of his YMCA career was a book that shared his experience, *Informal Adult Education*. This was his University of Chicago master's thesis published by the YMCA's publication arm, Association Press, in 1950. As he had done for the Boy Scouts in 1929, he now did for YMCA personnel and others who might be interested. This "how-to" book on adult education presented a compilation of thirteen principles his experience had taught him about methods, programs, and administration of adult education. Reflecting the increasingly popular thinking of Carl Rogers, Knowles wrote:

Teaching is a process of guided interaction between the teacher, the student, and the materials of instruction... Teaching, like medical practice, is mostly a matter of cooperation with nature. The function of the teacher is to guide the student into the kind of experiences that will enable him (sic) to develop his own natural potentialities.

### **Professing Adult Education: Democracy in Theory**

There was in the book, however, a missionary strain of thought at variance with the major thrust of the work. Knowles had borrowed what Harry Overstreet called the "maturity concept" from Overstreet's book, *The Mature Mind* (1949), which was enormously popular at the time. Overstreet, a leading philosopher and practitioner of adult education, called upon adults "to grow up," to be critical thinkers, to put "into effect a wisdom about life that childhood and youth are unable as yet even to possess." While Overstreet thought adults might utilize adult education programs as part of their quest for maturity, he put the onus for achieving that maturity on the individual adult. Knowles, on the other hand, took Overstreet's interest in the development of mature minds and mandated the responsibility, the mission, to adult education. "Adult education faces a task of immense proportions in the immediate years ahead," Knowles wrote in *Informal Adult Education*, "the task of helping millions of grown-up people all over the world to transform themselves into mature adults. By perfecting its science now, it will be equal to the task."

Thus did Knowles begin to define and advocate what he would later call andragogy. He himself had not used the skills and techniques he was advocating in the book for such grandiose purposes as creating "the mature mind." He had been developing and offering programs of interest to people because he saw his job as serving people who wanted to learn. While he continued to practice a humanistic form of adult education, the language of his advocacy became increasingly prescriptive, pretentious, and even presumptuous.

This tendency accelerated in 1960. In that year Knowles received his doctorate in adult education from the University of Chicago and took up the responsibility he had been offered by Boston University to establish a new graduate program in the field. He had left the YMCA in 1951 to become executive director of the national Adult Education Association, based in Chicago, where he served an eight-year stint until his resignation in 1959. In 1960, Knowles took with him to Boston his inquiry team concept from Chicago and began to implement this and his other informal adult education techniques in the formal academic setting of Boston University. A cooperative university and School of Education administration and a few like-minded and well-placed colleagues on the education faculty helped in the grafting of this implant of Knowles' informal adult education onto academia.

His graduate program prospered. Student numbers proliferated. The fact that Knowles, with the help of a tiny adult education faculty, was supervising an extraordinarily large number of dissertations and theses, however, did not set well with many Boston University academics who questioned the granting of degrees for self-directed, or as they might have termed it, undirected learning. Knowles was carving out a

national image for Boston University in adult education. Soon, though, a new administration dedicated to a traditional view of graduate work and scholarship questioned whether the reputation Knowles was building was the one that the administration favored for the university.

The reputation Knowles sought to develop and maintain was based on a term new to North America, andragogy. The source of the term was Dusan Savicevic, a visiting Yugoslav adult educator, who acquainted Knowles with andragogy as a concept current in Europe. Knowles appropriated the term for his own purposes. He entitled his revised book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy* (1970). He cast aside the humanistic European definition of andragogy, adult accompanying adult in the learning process. Knowles redefined andragogy as "an emerging technology for adult learning."

Twenty years of further experience, including a shift into academic life, had changed some of the thinking that Knowles had presented in his earlier book. For one thing, he no longer limited his technology, now called andragogy, to what he had defined as the informal sector. Knowles now held a beachhead in academia from which to advance his techniques into the formal sector of education. He was not about to forego such an opportunity.

Knowles based the revision of this book on a mission he assigned to adult education. He played down Overstreet's maturity concept in the new book in favor of a more current "human obsolescence" argument. He argued:

the greatest danger to the survival of civilization today is not atomic warfare, not environmental pollution, not the population explosion, not the depletion of natural resources, and not any of the other contemporary crises, but the underlying cause of them all--the accelerating obsolescence of man (sic)... The only hope now seems to be a crash program to retool the present generation of adults with the competencies required to function adequately in a condition of perpetual change. This is the deep need--the awesome challenge--presented to the adult educator by modern society.

As in his earlier book, the mission and its objectives professed in *Modern Practice* seemed inconsistent with the self-directed learning he was advocating. "In adult education 'the customer is always right,'" he had written in 1950, "insofar as his (sic) desires are compatible with the objectives of society. Under no other assumption is democratic adult education possible, for in a democracy responsibility rests with each individual to decide the course of his (sic) own growth." In *Modern Practice*, he wrote, "... At its best an adult learning experience should be a process of self-directed inquiry, with the resources of the teacher, fellow students, and materials being available to the learner but not imposed on him (sic)."

At the same time, he emphasized the leadership role of the adult educator. He had spoken in 1950 of teaching as "a process of guided interaction." In andragogy, too, the adult educator was to be the guide. "I make no bones in my own practice with my students about the fact that I am manager of the processes," he told inquirers. "We have a structure, but it is a process structure... The process structure will get at content. But the content is not yet structured. We'll structure that together through the process."

While *Modern Practice*, like his earlier book, was to be a guide and a reference for practitioners, Knowles viewed the rewrite as more than a how-to book. He saw *Modern Practice* as dedicated to exploring "a comprehensive theory that will give coherence, consistency, and technological direction to adult-education practice." The technology of andragogy was to be a seven step process. He called for adult educators to:

- set a cooperative learning climate,
- create mechanisms for mutual planning,
- arrange for a diagnosis of learner needs and interests,
- enable the formulation of learning objectives based on the diagnosed needs and interests,
- design sequential activities for achieving the objectives,
- execute the design by selecting methods, materials, and resources, and
- evaluate the quality of the learning experience while rediagnosing needs for further learning.

That was his technology. Although his own practice of this andragogy was flexible, his theoretical presentation of it in *Modern Practice* rivaled the mechanistic level of his beaverboard technology for winning merit badges.

Knowles' formula for effective adult education gained widespread popularity throughout North America. Through his book and his articles in a wide variety of journals, andragogy penetrated the educational branches of social work, religion, business, and a number of other professions. Triggered by the work of Knowles, some 200 articles and studies related to andragogy were produced between 1970 and 1980.

In the midst of his triumph, his beachhead in academe came under withering fire in 1972 from higher ground, the top administration at Boston University. The new president, John Silber, was unimpressed with andragogy. It seemed to him that too few professors were supervising too many dissertations, that the graduate program in adult education was structured more for students to learn from each other than from the professors, and that democratic process was more valued than intellectual discipline.

Silber's commitment to content and to a more traditional approach to formal higher education led him to exert pressure for change, including threats to eliminate the program. Reluctantly, Knowles took refuge where it was offered in 1974, in the Adult and Community College Education Department at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. From there he continued his campaign for andragogy. He barnstormed the country with seminars and workshops on self-directed learning. Articulate in person and with the pen, Knowles was creating cells of committed andragogues across the country. New England and North Carolina provided the core, but converts seemed to spring up everywhere.

Critics arose to question andragogy as well. They attacked Knowles for coining "artificial foreign neologisms" and for engaging in misguided status seeking on behalf of adult education. They charged him with an indiscriminate willingness to practice andragogy in any setting, particularly when he attempted andragogy's small group and self-directed technology in a plenary session of thousands at an important national conference of adult educators in Boston in 1979. At the same time, he was seen as inconsistent in traveling the world lecturing on behalf of andragogy, a system opposed to the lecture. His own mentor at the University of Chicago, Cyril Houle, and J.R. Kidd, a key figure in Canadian adult education, publicly gave their support to what Kidd called "the seamless robe of learning," an orientation opposed to the andragogy-pedagogy dichotomy of Knowles. Others analyzed the basis of andragogy as beliefs held concerning the characteristics of adult learners, then charged Knowles with clouding that reality with a rhetorical pretense of technology, scientific principle, and comprehensive theory of adult education.

Ever the pragmatist, Knowles tried to coopt the criticism in a 1980 revision of *Modern Practice*. He changed his subtitle. No longer would he speak of *Andragogy Versus Pedagogy*. It was now *From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. He wrote:

I am at the point now of seeing that andragogy is simply another model of assumptions about learners to be used alongside the pedagogical mode of assumptions, thereby providing two

alternative models for testing out the assumptions as to their 'fit' with particular situations.

Such a disclaimer, however, could be rejected by the critics as insufficient and as a protective "afterthought" cleverly inserted by "the potent pen of Knowles."

His embrace of andragogy not only stirred controversy for Knowles nationally and internationally; it also brought him under criticism at his home base in Raleigh as it had at Boston University. The criticism was partly due to andragogy's challenge to traditional university ideology. There was also concern expressed over his lengthy absences from campus on lucrative speaking junkets on behalf of andragogy. Knowles, for his part, believed that North Carolina State had hired him for his reputation and national visibility. Nonetheless, when he reached the university's standard retirement age of 65, no groundswell developed to retain him. He was required to retire. ✓

In his retirement, Knowles could have the last laugh. virtually every mail delivery to the four-story condominium where he lived in North Raleigh brought him new requests to talk about andragogy. His standard fee of \$1,000 a day proved no deterrent to continued invitations. Knowles Enterprises, as he called the company he operated in his retirement, exerted more influence on adult education in North America than either of the universities which had been prepared to dispense with his services. Was that influence for good or for ill?

## **The Social Implications of Andragogy**

Whatever is said of Malcolm Knowles, there is no question that he read North American society accurately. He saw it tantalized by technology, beguiled by neologism, and predisposed to practicable, even facile theory. He packaged his product, his version of a humanistic and democratic education, to sell in that selected market. He was enormously successful as a salesman and promoter.

But what of the product, this much-criticized andragogy, that Knowles was marketing? Through the years, whatever the name, Knowles' profession of his experience or technology projected such pre-set learning outcomes as maturity and modernization. He never recanted his view that education meant guided interaction. Indeed, he constantly reiterated the position that the adult educator was to manage the educational process. And one must always be suspicious when any mechanistic and prescriptive science or technology is trumpeted as releasing students from controls.

Indeed, one wonders just what Knowles was releasing students to do. His ideology was always oriented to middle-class norms and to the status quo. He offered no challenge to an exploitative, hierarchical society. And the release of the learner was contingent: "insofar as his (sic) desires are compatible with the objectives of our society." Here is the rub in the alleged democratic self-directedness of andragogy. Management or guidance of self-directedness, depending upon the manager or the guide, could subvert the process into self-socialization. Managed self-directedness could be turned to highly manipulative ends.

By ascribing lofty mission to an otherwise innocuous vocation, Knowles threatened the humane and democratic practice of adult education. He donned the mantle of the progressive schoolmen who earlier had urged the use of behavioral and managerial science to alchemize all children into efficient, adjusted adults. The high purpose Knowles proclaimed for adult education would overcome the failure of that earlier effort by transforming adults themselves into mature, modernized citizens. He went a step beyond the early progressives. His teacher or facilitator would not impose on adults. The andragogue was to motivate people to use Knowles' self-directing technology to "transform themselves into mature adults,"

into individuals with competencies that would avoid obsolescence. Andragogy could be seen to fit the old dictum that it is easier if you can get a cow to walk into the barn by itself than to carry it in on your back.

Yet Malcolm Knowles the practitioner was generally humanistic and democratic in his own practice, whether relating to people in the university classroom or on the lecture and conference circuit. Nor was he as bound by the prescriptiveness of his principles of andragogy as were some of his disciples. If he had done for adult educators what he did for the Boy Scouts, American society would clearly have been the better for it. Rather than attempting to construct and propagate an elaborate body of theory, he simply would have said, "Here is my experience, fellows. It worked for me. Emulate it if you will and if you can." this would have been an approach befitting that fateful night on the roof of the Boston YMCA. If Knowles is to be faulted, however, it may be for the noblest fault of all, from an American point of view. The failure of Malcolm Knowles may well be that the theory, the philosophy, and the principles he proclaimed did not approach the quality of his actions. His preaching did not live up to his practice.

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