

# The LLL SIG Newsletter

## When an Approach Made for One Kind of Student Fits Others: Part 2- Andragogy for College Students

Curtis Kelly (EdD)

In the previous issue, I described how, counterintuitively, a pedagogy I developed for use with Japanese women students worked surprisingly well with male students. In this issue, I will continue that discussion and describe how andragogy, a pedagogy developed for adults by Malcolm Knowles (1998), works with college students.

### Adult Education and the Typical College Class

Before choosing adult education as a field of study, I read a few books on the subject. One author in particular, stood out – Malcolm Knowles – who proposed that adults must be taught differently than children (1998). He emphasized that adults are life-centered, problem-oriented, non-dependent learners, so he created an educational approach called andragogy that best satisfies their learning needs. The central assumptions of andragogy are:

- (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. (Instructional Design)

As a result, adults need to take part in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of their learning. They are most motivated to study things that help them solve problems in their lives.

In this, my first foray into adult education, something seemed oddly familiar. Andragogy reminded me of an older, little-known teaching philosophy that I had encountered in college: educational humanism. In the last century, educational humanism spawned from the work of avant-garde psychologists and educators like Maslow, Rogers and Montessori. At the heart of humanistic education is the belief that learners should have full choice and control over their learning and that only kind of evaluation that is meaningful is self-evaluation. Many of the “open schools” are offspring of this philosophy.

In fact, educational humanism has sprung up at various times throughout history –the Chautauqua Institution in the mid-nineteenth century, the Progressive movement at the beginning of the last century, in the Humanistic Educational movement in the 1960’s, and finally, in Andragogy – and always in response to a society that takes too much control over learning and that relies too heavily on rote memorization and testing.

I described the educational humanism as “little known,” but “lost” might be a more appropriate term, though not at all lost to me. I took a number of graduate classes in educational humanism at George Peabody College for Teachers, now a part of Vanderbilt University. They even had a program in it, which was probably developed in response to the strong reductionist psychology program next door (think B.F. Skinner). The Educational Humanism classes were held in an old run-down wooden building called “The Annex,” situated right in the middle of some high tech psychology labs, and I still remember the first day of class when the teacher asked us to do discuss something and then added, “Of course, you

don't have to if you don't want to. If you want to go get a coffee or whatever, go ahead." At the time, I thought it was some kind of trap.

This one-year venture into whole different educational philosophy was truly amazing, and offered me new insights into learning. However, after becoming a teacher myself, I was surprised that none of my colleagues had even heard of it, especially in Asia, where the teacher-as-God value system seemed to need this counterbalance. Though there were shades of it in appeals for learner centeredness and group activities, educational humanism as a whole truly did seem lost.

Then, how surprised I was that twenty years later, the values of humanism rose up again in the tenets of adult education. Students are called "learners" and teachers are called "facilitators," which in itself reveals much about the pedagogy. Unlike children, adult learners are described as "non-dependent learners," a concept that forms the basis for how they are treated. The learners choose what they will study and often take part in the evaluation. This description might seem a bit abstract, as it did to me when I first heard it, so let me give you an example of how it was put into practice when I was a learner.

I got my doctorate in adult education from Nova Southeastern University. I was a professor in a Japanese university, and I was on sabbatical. One of my doctoral courses required me to travel from Oregon to California every other month for a weekend of classes (the classes were set up for teachers with real jobs). I had a paper due for the second weekend session, and somehow, life got in the way of me finishing it on time. I felt I had pretty good reasons for not getting the paper done, and on meeting the teacher... um, facilitator... I started apologizing and explaining why I did not have my paper. Right away, the teacher stopped me. She said, "I don't really need to hear why you could not complete the assignment. We are adults, so I'm sure you have reasons. Instead, just tell me when you are going to get it to me."

What a surprise that was, in terms of both her and my own attitudes. I had automatically put myself into the same subservient position my decades of school experience told me was normal, and in a few seconds, she broke that bias. I think that experience made a bigger impact on me than anything else in that course did, including the late paper. Now, when I can, I use this response with my students as well. The point is, of course, that adult educators are more like personal trainers than teachers, and this approach, rather than letting students "get away" with things, ultimately makes them responsible for their own learning. Motivation happens when the learning becomes one's own.

Many other aspects of the program impressed me as well. In addition to the non-dependence thinking, and the weekend and summer classes so that people with jobs could take them, here are a few other things I liked:

- The classes used learning contracts, reflective learning journals, discussion, and other means that allowed us to tailor the content to our own situations.
- Every paper had to be written in APA style, which meant we could publish them as soon as done.
- Since teachers tend to be materials and program developers, we had to study development and evaluation research methods in addition to the more traditional experimental method, which for me, turned out to be very useful.
- We were not allowed to do "pure research." We had to prove each research project we did might help solve a real problem in education that was not being solved by any other means.

- We had to write three mini-dissertations before the big one, which helped us master that dissertation format that so often causes ABD (all but dissertation) dropouts.

I loved the program: The way I was allowed to study and the way I was treated as an adult. And almost as soon as I entered it, because of my familiarity with educational humanism, I knew that these principles were not exclusive to the teaching of adults, but could be used at other levels as well. Malcolm Knowles, himself, also came to that realization. In a later book, he commented on how elementary school teachers told him that the principles he proposed for teaching adults were just as necessary for teaching children (1990).

I believe a humanistic or andragogical approach will work in traditional classes as well, especially those composed of emerging adults, meaning college students. The key to adopting such an approach is revising your primary goal from being “teaching people” to “helping them learn.” So let us review some of the principles of teaching adults and reframe them as concepts that could be applied in other educational venues. Here is a summary of the principles outlined by Knowles in 1998.

- a) *Readiness to learn* – Adults become ready to learn something when their life situation makes the related learning necessary. Educators who integrate their learners’ life situations into their lessons are more effective.

Sample application: For high school and college students, love, romance, and friendship are the compelling issues of their lives. Lodging target English in activities like “what is or is not true love” or “defining friendship” will serve their learning in two ways: in English and life skills. In fact, I taught an ELT course for many years titled “The Psychology of Love” that was successful in getting reluctant learners engaged.

- b) *Orientation to Learning* – Since adults seek learning to solve the problems thrown at them by life, they are task-centered in their orientation towards learning. For example, adults are much more likely to sign up for a course called “Writing Better Business Letters” than “Composition 1” (Knox, 1986).

Sample application: Make clear how what you teach is of value. Simulations and demonstrations help. For example, for a debate course, start with a role play business meeting where each person has a different objective and must convince the others. Their inability to do so will create a readiness to learn. If possible, let them personalize the tasks to their own situations.

- c) *Motivation to learn* – It follows then, that adults are motivated by personal payoff and intrinsic value. While they still seek and respond to external motivators, such as test scores, internal priorities are far more important.

Sample application: Progress charts and activities that produce take-home products help. For example, have them keep a record of their quiz scores, books read, chapters completed, vocabulary learned, etc., in a very visible place, such

as pasted inside the front cover of the textbook. Having them list their learning goals at the start of the course helps too.

- d) *Need to know* – Since adults seek learning as a means to solve problems, they need to know why they study something.

Sample application: Although we rarely do it, starting a textbook unit with a preview of what they can learn and in what language situations it will be useful adds meaning to the following activities.

- e) *Self-directed learning* – Their need to maintain control over their learning brings us to the central concept of adult education: Adults who are self-directed in life also prefer to be self-directed in their studies. Generally, instructors should manage the processes, not the content.

Sample application: Emphasize personalization. Although you might decide the overall frame, format and procedure of an assignment, let them decide the content for it. For example, for a job interview lesson in a college class, have them do the interview for a real company they would like to work for. Ask them to research the company on the Web and develop an interview strategy. Likewise, project work allows for autonomy.

- f) *Role of experience* – Finally, in their need to be self-directing and in their orientation towards solving life's problems, adults need to connect learning to their lifetime of experience and be acknowledged for it. Adults like discussions in which they can share experiences.

Sample application: Again, emphasize personalization. Making a class album the first class, instead of doing self-introductions, is one of the most successful activities I have ever done. Have students interview each other on topics like part-time jobs, travels, favorite musicians, dreams, etc. while filling out a profile sheets. Then photocopy the sheets into booklets for everyone and use them for discussion activities. This helps students bond and allows them to acknowledge each other's experiences and tastes.

Of course, making the transition from teacher to facilitator is not easy; the traditional teacher-centered approach carries far less psychological and professional risk. However, the change has rewards as well. Malcolm Knowles described his own transformation as follows (1998, p. 201):

When I analyzed what had happened to me, I was able to identify very fundamental changes. My self-concept had changed from teacher to facilitator of learning. I saw my role shifting from content transmitter to process manager and – only secondarily – content resource.

In the second place, I experienced myself as adopting a different system of psychic rewards. I had replaced getting my rewards from controlling students with getting my rewards from releasing students. And I found the latter rewards much more satisfying.

Finally, I found myself performing a different set of functions that required a different set of skills. Instead of performing the function of content planner and transmitter, which required primarily presentation skills, I was performing 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.

I have never been tempted since then to revert to the role of teacher.

In conclusion, let us be open to innovation, to change. It seems odd sometimes that we create so much change in others and yet tend to be tied to educational traditions ourselves.

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