

What's New in Adult Learning?

Part One: Back to the Basics

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Since January 2014, I have interned for the Institute for Human Services (IHS). My internship is the final requirement for my Master's Degree in Education in Adult Learning and Development. As an intern, one of my responsibilities is to provide the Trainer Development Work Team with the most current research in adult learning to inform the revisions to the Training of Trainers (TOT) series. As we continue in the TOT revision process, I will share with you the progress of the revisions, as well as the latest research in adult education.

We are currently in the beginning stages of the revision process. We reviewed the current TOT curriculum and began to identify sections that need to be revised to include the current literature in regard to adult learning. Since we are in the beginning phase of the revisions, it seems only fitting that I begin with a discussion about the **Theory of Andragogy**, the foundation for the practice of adult learning.



I first learned about the Theory of Andragogy in my first class in the Master's program at Cleveland State University. The theory was introduced to the field of adult education in the 1970's by Malcolm Knowles. Malcolm proposed a set of assumptions to help differentiate between teaching children, which is known as pedagogy, and teaching adults, which is known as andragogy. The Theory of Andragogy is based on six assumptions (Knowles, 1980):

1. Adults **need to know why they need to learn something** before undertaking the learning process.
2. Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own lives and develop a deep psychological **need to be seen and treated by others as being capable of self-direction**.
3. Adults come into an educational activity with both a **greater volume and a different quality of experience** from youth.
4. Adults become **ready to learn those things they need to know or to cope effectively with real-life situations**.
5. Adults **are life-centered** (or task-centered or problem-centered) **in their orientation to learning**. This is in contrast to children who are subject-centered.

6. Adults are responsive to some extrinsic motivators (e.g. better jobs, promotions, salary increases) however; **the more powerful motivators are in transit motivators** (e.g. the desire for increased self-esteem, quality of life, responsibility, and job satisfaction).

Some people criticize the theory for being too broad and having little direct empirical research on its validity because the concepts are difficult to measure. However, **the Theory of Andragogy provides adult educators with a rubric to help them understand how adults learn and to create programs that meet the needs of the adult learner.**

Here are practical ways you can incorporate the Theory of Andragogy into your trainings:

- Give learners a framework in the introduction of your workshop about why the content and concepts you will be presenting are important.
- Ask learners, at the beginning of a workshop, what they specifically want to know. This is commonly known as the “What’s In It For Me” (WIIFM).
- Treat all learners with respect, listen to what they want to share, and encourage everyone in the group to do the same.
- Use the experience and expertise of the classroom. During the workshop ask learners to share their experiences and knowledge with the class.
- Use examples and case studies that are applicable to their work.
- Provide learners with real-life problem-centered learning experiences.
- Provide a reference list to allow learners to advance their knowledge on their own time.

References

Knowles, M. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Englewoods Cliff, NJ: Cambridge Adult Education.

Make sure to look for the next “What’s New in Adult Learning?” article in the October 2014 edition of *Common Ground*.