

Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning: Pillars of Adult Learning Theory*

ILUMINADA ONG



ABSTRACT

The central question of how adults learn has occupied the attention of scholars and practitioners since the founding of adult education as a professional field of practice in the 1920s. Some eighty years later, we have no single answer, no one theory or model of adult learning that explains all that we know about adult learners, the various contexts where learning takes place, and the process of learning itself.

What we do have is a mosaic of theories, models, set of principles, and explanations that, combined, compose the knowledge base of adult learning. The purpose of this paper is to revisit two of the foundational theories of adult learning with an eye to assessing their “staying power” as important components of our present-day understanding of adult learning.

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Early Research on Adult Learning

While we have known for centuries that adults learn as part of their daily lives, it wasn't until the early decades of the twentieth century that learning was studied systematically. The question that framed much of the early research on adult learning was whether or not adults could learn. The first book to report the results of research on this topic, Thorndike, Bregman, Tilton, and Woodyard's *Adult learning* (1928), was published just two years after the founding of adult education as a professional field of practice. Thorndike and others approached adult learning from a behavioral psychological perspective. That is people were tested under timed conditions on various learning and memory tasks.

Findings from much of the early research were a function of research design. Tests of older adults against young people under timed conditions made it appear that being younger meant being a better learner. Lorge (1944, 1947) later pointed out that adult test scores were related to previous education and skills, not to age per se. Since older adults had less formal education and less opportunity to develop test-taking skills, it only appeared that they were less-capable learners. Moreover, when Lorge focused on adult's ability to learn rather than on the speed or rate of learning (that is when time pressure was removed), adults up to age seventy did as well as younger adults.

The development of intelligence test also came during this period. As with learning tasks, student scored well when compared to adults, as did young adults when compared to older students. As the measurement of intelligence became more complex, scores indicated declines on some subtests but not on others. Today it is recognized that adults scored better on some aspects of intelligence as they age and worse on others resulting in a fairly stable composite measure of intelligence until very old age (Schale and Willis, 1986).

In addition to intelligence, other aspects of

human learning such as problem solving and cognitive development have been the focus of study by educational psychologists since the 1950s. Much of this research has not differentiated adults from children. When adults are included as part of the sample, the emphasis has been on how advancing age influences the ability to recall, to process information, and to problem-solve. Generalization from this set of literature is difficult to make, as much of the research has been conducted in laboratories or other artificial settings, making its applicability to real-life situations questionable. Further, deficits and declines are often shown to be functions of non-cognitive factors such as level of education, training, health, and speed of response (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

Until mid-twentieth century, adult educators relied on research in psychology and educational psychology for an understanding of adult learning. As described, these insights about adult learning were extrapolated from research with children or research that placed adults under the same conditions as children. But as part of the drive to differentiate adult education from other forms of education, adult educators began to consider whether adult learning could be distinguished from learning in childhood. A new inquiry drove this effort. The question of whether adults could learn was put to rest, and the new focus of what was different about adult learning emerged. Thus the drive to professionalize, which included the need to develop a knowledge base unique to adult education, was the context in which two of the field's most important theory-based building efforts—*andragogy* and *self-directed learning*—emerged.

Andragogy

In 1968, Malcolm Knowles proposed "a new label and new technology" of adult learning to distinguish it from pre-adult schooling (p.351). The European concept of *andragogy*, which he defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn," was contrasted with *pedagogy*, the art and science of helping children learn (Knowles,