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This is the author version of Conference Paper published as:

Choy, Sarojni C. and Delahaye, Brian L. (2002) Andragogy in Vocational Education and Training: Learners' perspective. In Proceedings 5th Annual Conference off the Australian VET Research Association (AVETRA), Melbourne, Australia.

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Andragogy in Vocational Education and Training: Learners' perspective

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Abstract

Knowles (1970) defined andragogy as the art and science of facilitating adult learning. The assumptions about how adults learn form the foundations of andragogy. Andragogy is most evident in the implementation of the theories and principles of adult learning and a common practice in Vocational Education and Training (VET) within Australia.

The research reported in this paper investigated learners' perspectives on the practice of andragogy. A survey using the Student Orientation Questionnaire (SOQ) was conducted with 266 youths aged 17-24 years, and enrolled in Vocational Education and Training programs. The results of the survey showed that youth preferred pedagogical as well as andragogical practices. To gain an understanding of specific aspects of pedagogy and andragogy that they preferred, the response patterns to the SOQ were analysed. The results of the survey were also presented to focus group participants, who had responded to the questionnaire, and asked to explain their perspective on andragogical practices.

The findings show that youth learners prefer only the 'feel good' aspects of andragogy, and are not willing to assume learner responsibilities associated with andragogy. The findings have implications for effective delivery by facilitators of VET programs.

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Introduction

The principles of adult learning form the underpinning theoretical framework for research about adult learning. The founding theories and principles have become instrumental in the practice of adult education. It was Knowles (1970) who popularised the term 'andragogy' to describe the art and science of helping adults to learn.

Unlike the practice of pedagogy, which is teacher-centred, andragogy is learner-centred, with the role of the teacher primarily that of a facilitator. According to Hadley (1975), who advanced Knowles' (1970) theory, the purpose of andragogy is aimed at

... education [that] grow[s] from students' needs at a particular time and in a specific context. Andragogical goals are continuously being created and reconstructed, but more importantly, the learner participates in this creation and reconstruction. (p. 35).

An andragogical approach is recommended as a way of enabling more meaningful outcomes for individuals (Knowles, 1990). In this approach, learners freely choose their learning goals and make independent decisions about what, how and when they want to learn. However, to gain maximum benefit from the approach, learners also need to be self-directed, autonomous and responsible for decision-making. They need to use their experiences as a learning resource (Christian, 1982 and Knowles, 1990). Typically, learners with an andragogical orientation expect the teacher to provide an environment that enhances learning and to have limited control over the process of learning.

The practice of andragogy is based on a set of assumptions about adult learners that were proposed by Knowles (1973):

- The need to know – adults like to relate their learning program to their lives. They prefer active forms of learning that can be easily contextualised into their life activities.
- The learner's self-concept – adults have self-responsibility. They see themselves as individuals who have the capacity to make decisions for themselves and not be led or manipulated by others.
- The role of learners' experience – adults have a range of life experiences that impact on their learning. These experiences are used to express their self-identity and form valuable learning resources.
- Readiness to learn – resulting from realization of the need to learn. This need can be created through models of superior performances, career counselling, simulation exercises, and other techniques (Knowles, 1990, p. 61).

- Orientation to learning –Adults are motivated to learn because they are able to realise the worth/value of learning in enhancing their ability to address issues and problems in their daily lives.
- Motivation – most adults are intrinsically motivated to learn while some are also extrinsically motivated. In an era when rapid changes are occurring across all aspects of life, learning is becoming significantly important for adults (Heimstra, 1994). It has become the key to success and is now seen as a lifelong process.

Within the VET sector, there is evidence of an andragogical approach drawing on these assumptions in the concept of flexible delivery, which supports the notion of learners as individuals in a specific or particular context. Other evidence of andragogy includes:

- Goals and objectives in the Training Packages that are realistic, important and have immediate use.
- User choice.
- VET requiring learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Much self-directed learning is required for self-paced learning materials.
- Learning as a lifelong process.

However, an important and unresolved issue around andragogy is that while the assumptions about adult learners, that are noted above, are widely acknowledged, it is not certain whether adults actually behave or think in the ways that Knowles assumes. For instance, some research shows that there may be a gap between what learners say they prefer and what they actually do when engaged in learning (Cross, 1981).

The study reported here (Choy 2001) is based on a question about whether young people aged 17 to 24, have an orientation to learning that would benefit from the practice of andragogy. Do they display the characteristics assumed of adults? The study investigated the orientation preferences of young people and the aspects of andragogy that they prefer.

The Study

The investigation was completed in two phases. In the first phase, a survey was undertaken to examine the study orientation of young people. In the second phase the andragogical practices that the young people indicated a preference for were explored further in focus groups.

Using the Student Orientation Questionnaire (SOQ) developed by Christian (1982) the survey involved 266 young people aged 17-24 years and enrolled in VET programs. It found that participants expressed preferences for both pedagogical and andragogical orientations. The pedagogical practices they preferred were similar to those used in schools, however it was not clear from the preliminary analysis which particular aspects of andragogy they preferred. Thus further explanation was sought in focus group discussions.

The Survey

The SOQ was the only instrument found to measure both the pedagogical and andragogical dimensions. It has 50 items, each with a five point Likert type scale, thus yielding relative, rather than absolute, measures. Of the 50 questions in the survey, 25 are andragogically oriented and 25 have a pedagogical orientation. A study by Delahaye and Smith (1995) confirmed the construct validity of the instrument¹.

Sample and Procedures

A random sampling design was constrained by access to the wider youth learner population and associated costs. Thus, a convenience sample was surveyed. The sample included four TAFE institutes, two in a metropolitan area, one in an outer suburb and one in a regional area. Access was given to students whose teachers permitted the survey to be conducted during class time.

Survey respondents completed the SOQ voluntarily and were asked to base their responses to the items in the survey on their overall VET learning experiences rather than in specific courses. Just over half were male and just under half were female. The respondents were pursuing qualifications at the certificate and diploma levels in a range of fields.

Each questionnaire had a code number the participants were asked to record. Students who were interested could access the results using this number. The results and interpretation for each institute were presented to the teachers. Following analysis of the survey data to determine the orientation of the sample, results were presented to, and discussed with, five focus groups of young people.

Results and Discussion

The results of the survey showed that young people aged 17-24 have a preference for both pedagogical and andragogical orientations to study. To gain an understanding of this dual preference, the SOQ was critiqued and then the patterns of responses to the statements in the SOQ were examined.

A critique of the SOQ

A review of the items in the SOQ suggests that the instrument has limitations in informing the true orientations of the respondents. Of the 50 items in the SOQ, 47 begin with the phrase "I feel the instructor should" Each item thus has a focus on the role and functions of the instructor/teacher, rather than the learner. Though learners have roles and responsibilities that complement the roles and functions of teachers, the

¹ This study also examined the internal consistency of the SOQ and arrived at alpha values of 0.83 for andragogy and 0.82 for pedagogy. A temporal reliability was also conducted, Pearson correlation coefficients were 0.74 for andragogy and 0.69 for pedagogy. The pilot study for the investigation reported in this paper indicated an alpha coefficient of 0.72 for andragogy and 0.72 for pedagogy (p = 0.000 in each case) (n = 60).

instructions for the SOQ do not ask respondents to consider learner responsibilities when answering questions.

Within the considerable research on andragogy, the responsibilities of learners are not as explicit as those of teachers or facilitators. Bowden and Marton (1999) suggest that in higher education this is because most research focuses on teaching rather than learning. They note that the creation of optimal learning environments is frequently discussed in terms of the pros and cons of different teaching methods as opposed to learning processes or learner responsibilities.

In the practice of andragogy, the roles and responsibilities of learners appear to reside beneath unexamined assumptions. The literature surrounding andragogy highlights the roles of facilitators and the re-engineering of delivery processes in order to accommodate assumptions about adult learners, such as those of Knowles (1980). In this sense, andragogy appears to emphasise the delivery perspective and to neglect the roles and functions that could enable learners to maximise their learning.

Response patterns to the SOQ

For all the questions relating to andragogy a higher frequency of responses indicating “almost always”, “often” and “occasionally”, was noted. This was particularly the case for questions relating to teachers involving the learners in decision-making about their learning.

Of these 25 questions, 16 could be said to relate to the social aspects of learning - the significant role of the teacher in setting up a supportive, ‘social’ learning environment. The responses given to these 16 questions were mostly “Almost always” and “Often”, demonstrating the preference of young people for a supportive, social environment for learning. This perhaps indicates the importance learners place on the social or ‘feel good’ aspects of the learning environment. This interpretation is supported by comments within the focus groups.

Focus Groups

Focus group participants were asked to discuss the aspects of andragogy that they prefer. Participants explained that they liked teachers to be friendly, treat them as adults and also to show concern for students. Essentially, their comments supported features of the learning environment that make them ‘feel good’.

When the researcher explained that in an andragogical approach learners are expected to assume roles and responsibilities that complement those of the instructors, participants began to re-conceptualise andragogy in practice:

You are right. I didn’t think of it that way

Of course... That’s the difference. Mature students do take more control and do a lot without being told....

In discussions, participants clarified that there were only certain aspects of andragogy for which they had a preference. The young people were familiar with the practice of andragogy in the classes that they shared with adult learners and had observed teachers behaving differently towards young people and adults. Based on their observations, they indicated that they liked teachers to be friendly, caring, understanding and to show concern for them as individuals. These views were held by the majority of the young people in the focus groups.

We want them to be interested in us as people not just students who attend their classes.

We'd love the teachers to respect us the way they respect the mature age students [adults] and how they are friendly with them.

One group explained,

With [name of teacher] we can discuss anything.... He is in touch [emphasised by tone of voice] with our world. We can even ring him at home if we are stuck. No other teacher has his level of understanding and care towards us.... He is the best and the greatest.... He also knows when to put us into our place... He can control us too....

On the whole, the young people indicated that they wanted to be treated like adults. Their preference for a closer relationship with teachers, for structured course work and organised assessment procedures is not uncommon. Research by Matthews (1994), Purkiss (1995) and Ommen, Brainard and Canfield (1979) found similar preferences.

When the researcher asked the focus group participants why only certain aspects of andragogy were preferred, they explained that they were not yet prepared to take on many of the learning responsibilities associated with adult students.

It [andragogy] requires too much work and responsibilities. Adults can organise themselves to do that. We don't have the time

... yes, it [andragogy] is a nice option, because at least you can be treated as equal and the teacher can be friendly etc., but things get too tough when we have to do everything on our own..... Didn't realise, andragogy also means lots of responsibility....

The discussions confirmed that the young people preferred mainly the social aspects of andragogy. However, participants were also adamant about the significant pedagogical role of teachers for youths' learning. Participants wanted to discuss teachers' roles as experts and transmitters of knowledge and skill more than the role of learners or the learning process. This is probably because as learners they are more familiar with teacher's pedagogical roles and have expectations reflected by certain behaviours and practices. The teachers sit at the core of their learning, just as they did in school. It was

clear that the young people rarely thought about their own roles and responsibilities as learners or even the learning process. When exactly these responsibilities are assumed is not certain. It may not necessarily be an age factor, rather a result of life experiences.

Stuart and Holmes (1982) argued that maturity was a significant factor that influenced preferences for pedagogical and/or andragogical orientations. The four elements of maturity that they suggest (learner's prior knowledge, past learning experiences, expectation, and attitudes to the future learning events) could be said to be deficient in young people, preventing them from fully appreciating an andragogical orientation. Learner maturity also forms a significant consideration in Delahaye et al.'s (1994) orthogonal model of pedagogical/andragogical orientations. Little is known about the four components of maturity suggested by Smith and Delahaye (1987) (interest, need to learn, willingness to accept the responsibility to learn, and skills in learning) especially among young people

Conclusions

Data from both the survey and the focus groups confirm that young people prefer pedagogical as well as andragogical orientations to study. While they prefer some aspects of andragogy, at the same time, they are not prepared to relinquish the pedagogical practices of their teachers.

The study thus establishes that although young people ideally prefer both pedagogical and andragogical orientations, this does not mean that they are prepared to embrace all aspects of andragogy or that they are willing to take on the corresponding responsibilities of an andragogically oriented learner.

These findings have implications for those with responsibilities for facilitating the learning of young people. It highlights the importance of a common understanding between young learners and their teachers about the roles and responsibilities that each should adopt. It also makes it clear that it would be inappropriate to assume that young learners have the characteristics of adult learners that form the basis of andragogy.

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