

# Adult Education in the West: Part I — Definition

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*With hardly an exception, the national attempt towards education has concentrated itself upon the minds of our youth. And yet everybody knows that the only material which can be shaped by real education is a grown-up personality.... Education must be mixed and seasoned with life experience, which is the one element no school can give and no young person can have (Fisher, 1927, p 8).*

## Introduction

Adult Education as an academic field emerged in the 1960's (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). Since then, it has experienced tremendous growth in both practice and research. In research, for instance, whereas once adult education was perceived as being no more than the "teaching of adults" the same way we would teach children (Knowles, 1990), it is now embodied with its own educational theory, known as "andragogy." Likewise, whereas once, the sprinkling of adult students were awkwardly integrated into traditional classes, now, a whole corps of educators exist who teach adults exclusively. In the United States alone, for example, in 1994, adult educators were estimated to number about 590,000 (Grisom, 1997, p. 4). Indeed, the field has become so encompassing that it would not be wrong to refer to it as a "culture."

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This paper is the first in a series. The series will examine the origins of this educational genre: academia involving adults as students. By examining its definitive history and philosophy, its early changes, evolution, and transitional periods, we can better understand the social incubus that has led to its current role. The area of investigation will be limited to parts of Europe and the United States, since this where, a century later, the emergence of Adult Education as a discipline took place.

However, before looking at the history of adult education, let us define its most fundamental concepts. This will be the focus of Part I in the series.

## Definition One — Adult Education

To define adult education—according to some scholars who have contributed to its evolution—would be to offer confusing and often conflicting opinions since, according to them, the term is complex and varied.<sup>1)</sup> For instance, according to Hall-Quest (1927), the definition of adult education is complicated and impossible to articulate, since it encompasses a wide variety of methods in which to educate adults. Verner (1964) also finds adult education difficult to define but succeeds in condensing his opinion into one sentence: "... the term adult education is used to designate all those educational activities that are designed specifically for adults" (p. 1). It is worth noting that, in general, unstructured adult education may not be as beneficial to the individual or society as a structured academic challenge. Therefore, adult

education may also be defined as a distinct methodology by which adults are instructed by professional educators.

Certain theorists, such as Alan Rogers (1996), define adult education in terms of whether or not the students are treated as adults. Contrary to the way younger learners are taught, adult education refers to the process whereby anyone "over 16 (or whatever)" are treated "as adults — capable, experienced, responsible, mature and balanced people" (p. 47). In such a definition, "adult education" is used synonymously with "andragogy."

For our purposes, however, which are more historical than pedagogical, adult education will be defined as all segments of the culture which includes the education of adults, including, but not confined to, access to public libraries, study groups, business education for the purpose of social and economic development and education at the primary and secondary level, such as elementary math, composition, etc. Adult education will also be interpreted in the context of structured adult higher education, meaning adult education at the undergraduate college level and / or beyond.

Such a definition is workable in terms of the institutionality of adult education, but lacks in ethnography. What segment of the population shall we define as "adult?"

#### Definition Two — Adult

A number of definitions have been used, which generally fall into two categories, development-based definitions and age-based definitions.

Society at large, with the exclusion of the legal system, defines "adulthood" in developmental terms. One becomes an "adult" when one has acquired certain life experiences, or adopted a certain attitude. However, depending on which cultural lens we use, the definition changes. In terms of attitude, for instance, white Americans tend to associate adulthood with self-sufficiency and independence — the ability to have one's own

opinions and "stand on one's own two feet." The Japanese, however, define it differently, and in some ways, an opposite way. Japanese do not consider those who "stick to" personal opinions, or who place first priority on satisfying their own desires, as adults. Rather, these attitudes are seen as childish. Instead, they view adulthood as the ability to sacrifice or submerge one's own desires.

A similar problem exists with the developmentally-based definition used by researchers in the field. Most researchers can be divided into two schools. Kohlberg, Gilligan, Loveinger, Kegan, Perry, Fowler and others belong to the "Developmental Stage" theory of adult development. The road to adulthood has a series of stages that must be passed through. However, more recently, their work has more been questioned by others, such as Hayslip & Payek, Tennent, Goodnow and Merrill, who can be classified as "Life Span / Systems" theorists (Ellis & McElhinney, 1993). They define adulthood in terms of the certain experiences, such as living alone, gaining full-time employment, getting married, etc. or in terms of attitudinal / epistemic changes. However, there is little agreement as to which of these changes define adulthood.

Since both the popular and research-based developmental models show little agreement, and also since they are difficult to use in population analysis, most specialists in adult education tend to use the legal / biological definitions, which are based on age. Depending on the source, adulthood can start at anywhere from 22 to 30, but the most commonly used breakoff point is the one used by the government, 25 (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1990), which is the definition that we shall accept. As Carol Kasworm recently wrote in an the Adult Education listserve (AEDNET) posting:

"Probably the most recent comprehensive discussion of stats regarding adult undergraduates is: Profile of Older Undergraduates: 1989-90... NCES 95-167 from the National Center for

Educational Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, April, 1995, U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. [I believe that other stats regarding adult learner enrollment including graduate work is in the compilation report of Higher Education statistics published also by NCES.]

“As for the age of 25 . . . you will find that many researchers have attempted to identify a chronological age — which represents individuals who have “characteristics” of an adult — such as a break in schooling, family, work. A chronological age does target these folks . . . but there is greater probability that they may reflect adult status. In looking at the government stat — they have their break of age at 24, other researchers focus on the age of 30. In essence, age is not the most helpful definer in this issue, but it is an easy demographic to get and to create categories for analysis.”

### Definition Three — Andragogy

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, pedagogy was the only conventional process formulated to educate both secondary and post-secondary students. “Pedagogy” — the teaching of children — comes from the Greek words “paid” (child) and “Agogus” (leader of). It was developed by European monks between the seventh and twelfth centuries as a means to train young boys. It has since become so dominant a theory of education in the West that some consider it an ideology (Knowles, 1994). Within this model, the students are made dependent upon the teachers. The teacher controls what is learned, how it is learned, and when.

“Andragogy” — the teaching of adults — has since emerged as an alternative theory of education. Not only has the theory led to controversy, the very term itself suffered an exile that lasted a hundred years.

According to a Dutch educator, Ger van Enkevort, who has made an exhaustive study into the origin of “andragogy,” it was originally used by a

German teacher, Alexander Kapp, who coined the term when describing the theories of Plato (Knowles, 1990).<sup>2)</sup> Andragogy simply differentiates adult learning from youth learning (pedagogy). Without realizing that the use of this word would cause an uproar among classical scholars, Kapp used it to refer to the teachings of Plato in his articles and instruction, much to the dismay of well-known scholars such as German philosopher Johan Friedrich Herbart. Since the opposition to use of the word was so vehement, it quickly faded from the world of academia and was not used again for nearly a hundred years. A reliable source which could explain why this happened was not found, but after examining the definition of pedagogy and, briefly, its history, a possible theory has emerged as to why the word was shunned for so long.

Plato was one of the innovators of adult education in that he would teach anybody (women included). As a result, he provided the model of the instruction of adults. Adult learners have far more experience than children and are thus not dependent upon the instructor. As a result, the concept of their education needed a different definition, which became andragogy. The educational world was simply not ready for a revolutionary educational concept which might tenaciously survive.

In 1921, van Enkevort’s research indicated that the word was used in 1921 by German scientist, Eugen Rosenstock, a professor at the Academy of Labor in Frankfurt. Rosenstock was of the opinion that a teacher of adults was to be an andragogue as opposed to a pedagogue, a teacher of young people. In 1926, Eduard C. Lindeman opposed the concept of the “pedagogy” in adult teachings in his book, *The Meaning of Adult Education* :

“Authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking, rigid pedagogical formulae — all these have no place in adult education . . . Small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and vigor-

ous; who begin to learn by confronting pertinent situations; who dig down into the reservoirs of their experience before resorting to texts and secondary facts; who are not led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after wisdom and not oracles: this constitutes the setting for adult education, the modern quest for life's meaning (Lindeman, 1926, pp. 10-11)."

In these analyses of early historical accounts of andragogy, or adult education, the concept is addressed in a manner that stresses values, meanings and their creation and recreation in the course of everyday living as well as a formal and structured academic format.

Andragogy, thanks to the work of Malcolm Knowles, has once again been accepted and widely-used term. Basically, it represents an educational philosophy which is the antithesis of pedagogy. Whereas pedagogy is the instruction of a dependent personality (the child), andragogy is the for the instruction of a non-dependent personality (the adult). Adult learners are considered to have more experience, a greater need to be self-directing, and a greater interest in life-centered topics. Whereas children are more commonly referred to as "students" who are "taught," adults are more commonly referred to as "learners" who are "facilitated." However, it must be noted that even adults, especially when the subject matter is unfamiliar, prefer to be taught or lectured (Knowles, 1990) in a dependent style.

#### Following Parts of the Series

This article examines the basic definitions in adult education, but such definitions cannot be fully understood until one has considered the historical milieu from which they sprang. Future articles in the series will focus on the history of adult education, particularly, events in the United States that shaped adult education.

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#### ENDNOTES

1) Examples of the complexity of the term,

adult education, would encompass discussions involving myriad levels and perceptions which exist, i. e., university extension programs, lectures, television commentaries, correspondence courses, non-credit evening courses in both academic and subjects such as ceramics, etc.

2) This term was originally identified as “Andragogik” by Kapp.