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Kelsey Moore
University of Kentucky

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The Limits of Pedagogy

Kelsey Moore

School of Information Science
College of Communication and Information
University of Kentucky

When we discuss teaching, we often draw from our understanding of *pedagogy*: the art and science of teaching children. Although pedagogy has weathered time and trends in higher education, it also poses limitations, especially for the changing populations and needs of higher education students. Further, pedagogy may lead us to assume that traditionally aged students (i.e., 18-22 years old) possess inadequate life experience, favor particular learning styles, and share similar circumstances, all of which may not reflect our students' profiles. Adult learning theory, or *andragogy*, has a rich history of engaging and challenging assumptions about higher education. The notion of "traditional and nontraditional students" may be too simplistic a delineation that limits approaches to teaching and learning. Additionally, the number and percentage of adult learners in higher education is rising, which urges further consideration of how to teach these students. Hence, pedagogy alone may be an insufficient approach for changing student populations, and andragogy may be one approach that can address such limitations.[1]

Who are Adult Learners?

The American College of Pediatricians states that an adolescent's brain is not fully developed until between 23 and 25 years old. Even further, some neuroscientists have argued that brain development continues until 30 years of age. Most scholars and physicians agree that the largest difference between a fully-developed and developing brain is the prefrontal cortex, which analyzes, plans, regulates impulses, reflects, and allows the individual to take on the perspectives of others (Somerville). Thus, when considering who counts as an "adult" learner beyond the fact of age (e.g., in legal definitions), it's important to include cognitive development and life experience. These evolve differently for everyone, which makes identifying the threshold of adulthood even more difficult. For simplicity's sake, many scholars use age 25 as the delineation (Beebe & Frei).

Based on this definition, adult learners include nontraditional, graduate, and professional students, even faculty and staff. And, traditional students, although arguably not yet adult learners, may still benefit from andragogic approaches to teaching and learning. According to National Center for Education Statistics, 71% of students in higher education are nontraditional. Typically, this is identified by age (at least 25), but other factors have been used to identify nontraditional students, e.g., work full-time, have children, are a veteran (MacDonald). The number of traditional students has increased as well, but the percentage of nontraditional students is expected to grow faster, with projection rates of 14 million by 2024 (McFarland, et. al.). Next, there are more adult learners due to increases in graduate school enrollments. According to the Council of Graduate Schools survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees, the average yearly increase in graduate enrollment from 2006 to 2016 has been 1.1%. In 2016, over 500,000 graduate students enrolled *for the first time* in a certificate, master's, or doctoral program (Okahana & Zhou). Faculty and staff, as well, enroll in traditional courses, professional development programs, and job trainings.

Traditional students may respond more comfortably to pedagogically-driven learning experiences, but andragogic approaches provide additional benefits for these learners. For instance, with an ever-growing pressure for students to seek higher education for career placement or advancement, the function of higher education for many may be to obtain relevant job skills: a motivation typically assumed of adult learners. It is clear that adult learners—and those who increasingly think like adult learners—are prominent in our classrooms and are becoming the majority on college campuses. We would be remiss to continue applying pedagogical approaches to such a changing population.

What is Andragogy?

Andragogy was coined by Malcolm Knowles in the 1960s after several disciplines spent decades theorizing how adults learn in the workplace. Knowles and others argued that pedagogy was

ineffective in explaining, prescribing, or supporting adult learners because of their resistance to pedagogical strategies and their poor retention rates. The result of such an endeavor was the concept of andragogy. Scholars have identified at least five assumptions that influence adult learning and make it distinct from that of younger learners:

1. Adults need a clear understanding of the relevance and value of course content.

2. Adults have more experience for evaluating and applying information, whereas younger learners may not have as much experience to bring to bear on their learning.

3. Adult learners are often more self-motivated and self-directed because they possess more intrinsic motivation (valuing the experience of learning rather than recognition or grades).

4. Adults are more capable of recognizing their deficiencies and, as a result, understand what they need to learn (providing additional motivation).

5. Adults learn best in a framework characterized by problem solving more than content coverage. (Knowles)

These assumptions suggest important differences between traditional understandings of andragogy and pedagogy.

Principle	Meaning for Adults	Meaning for Younger People
Need to know relevance	Problem-or task-centered	Subject-centered
Bring prior life experience	Bring life experiences	Often not applicable
Motivation to learn/self-concept	Intrinsic motivation/self-directed	Extrinsic motivation/other-directed
Readiness to learn	Most change triggers readiness and self-assessment	Often told what to learn and where to improve in order to advance
Orientation to learning	Learning is organized around life/work situations	Learning is organized around acquiring prescribed content

Although andragogy and pedagogy have been portrayed as mutually exclusive and even antagonistic, scholars have also described these two approaches as a dialectic, or operating as two distinct, but necessary aspects of teaching. Indeed, Knowles himself establishes that andragogy and pedagogy "are probably most useful when seen not as dichotomous but rather as two ends of a spectrum with a realistic assumption in a given situation falling in between the two ends" (430). Further, andragogy is not without limitations. Ekoto and Gaikwad, for example, critique (a) the perception of andragogy as a panacea for all adult learners; (b) a lack of valid empirical tests for andragogy's theoretical bases (due in large part to the design of educational systems relying substantially on pedagogical theories);

and (c) a neglect of the contextual, environmental, and emotional elements that comprise adult learners. Thus, it is important to consider andragogic assumptions as only one side of the teaching "coin," so that both sides are used appropriately.

How Does Andragogy Strengthen Pedagogy?

Vincent Cyboran proposes that "treating andragogy as a set of principles or assumptions can be useful both in design and delivery: meaning, we do not directly implement andragogic principles into our training [or teaching], but rather, they inform our choices of solutions (models, practices, and so forth)" (81). There are numerous ways that andragogic principles may strengthen the pedagogical choices for any college classroom, most importantly for the goals of cultivating diversity and facilitating student engagement. First, some implications for the college classroom.

Principle	Meaning	Implication
Need to know relevance	Problem-or task-centered	Activities, assignments, and content involve current events, problems, tasks, or skills of the learners.
Bring prior life experience	Bring life experiences	Activities, discussions, and assignments encourage students to share relevant experiences.
Motivation to learn/self-concept	Intrinsic motivation/self-directed	Syllabus policies, classroom management, and evaluation focuses on intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic (e.g., the concept of professional responsibility versus the threat of a grade penalty for late work).
Readiness to learn	Most change triggers readiness and self-assessment	Self-assessments, personal reflections, and individual goals supplement traditional evaluation methods to facilitate metacognitive and self-regulatory skills.
Orientation to learning	Learning is organized around life/work situations	Content and learning activities are connected, organized, or framed with life/work situations and hypothetical, tangible scenarios.

Universities across the nation seek ways to improve diversity and cultural competencies so that there may be richer learning experiences for all students. By approaching a classroom with an andragogic perspective, faculty members intentionally take the second assumption of adult learning: learners have experiences through which they evaluate and apply new information. Cultivating diversity to improve learning does not merely mean that there are diverse students present in a classroom, but that these students are capable of recognizing their own and others' experiences as unique, valuable, and capable of furthering their own and others' learning. Nontraditional students may share trade, military, professional, or personal experiences, while traditional students, too, may enrich the class

environment with social, academic, and personal experiences that lead to insightful discussions, applications, and perspectives.

Inviting these conversations gives students an opportunity to use their voices, and it allows peers to learn from each other. Instructors may allow students to report reactions to literature readings in humanities courses, to discuss experiences with technology and software in computer science courses, and to reflect on math homework that tracks their performance over a semester. In addition, courses may include assignments and activities that require students to gain or create experiences, such as attending campus events, doing meaningful group work, or conducting field interviews or observations around relevant class principles. All of these ideas and others seek to emphasize and build upon students' experiences, which are then brought into the classroom to explore a variety of perspectives. Andragogy's emphasis on learner experiences aligns strongly with curricular and institutional goals set on the cultivation of diversity and cultural competencies.

These strategies for teaching adult learners can also improve student engagement. Many students, especially nontraditional, may struggle to understand and appreciate the immediate, practical value of some courses. As a starting point, course design, content, and assignments can foreground their relevance to learners. Instructors, for example, may ask students to connect course content to their everyday lives or careers. Engagement also improves with a problem-solution orientation to content that challenges students to use foundational knowledge to solve an important issue. For instance, a basic political science course that overviews the Bill of Rights, its historical context, and related precedents may provide a simulated Supreme Court case that emulates a modern issue. Students may be tasked to use such understanding, together with experience, to defend their verdict on the proposed issue. Similarly, an introductory chemistry course may guide students to apply basic principles of chemistry and propose

> *All students benefit from a sense of relevance and connection to personal goals.*

solutions to current issues such as pollution. Not only will these exercises enhance engagement with content, but they will also allow students to develop crucial skills like applying, evaluating, and critiquing basic principles (as opposed to merely remembering them). For graduate students, this may be a way to develop socially significant research agendas that address current events, issues, and trends. For faculty and staff who are attending professional development, training, and other educational opportunities, this will likely boost their satisfaction and application of the information. All students, regardless of age, benefit from a sense of relevance and connection to personal goals.

Pedagogy represents an important body of theories and practices; without andragogical perspectives, however, we may stunt our ability to provide engaging, diverse, and meaningful learning experiences for students with a variety of learning preferences, backgrounds, and skills. This relieves us of making assumptions, and leads to more effective teaching for all, regardless of age or experience.

NOTES

1. Pedagogy, of course, is a capacious phenomenon that includes a wide range of theories, practices, and socio-cultural orientations; in many cases, specific interpretations align well with the andragogical principles that the essay discusses. The goal here is not to invoke pedagogy narrowly (or andragogy, for that matter), but to question the tacit assumptions about age, experience, and motivation that inform our understanding of the students we teach and, thus, the ways that we design and implement learning experiences in higher education.

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AUTHOR

Kelsey Moore is a doctoral candidate in the College of Communication and Information at the University of Kentucky, with a focus on instructional communication, teaching effectiveness, and faculty support. She teaches courses in the Department of Communication and the School of Information Science. During her five years of higher education experience, she has served as a director of speaker development for students and faculty, an assessment consultant for bystander programs, and a faculty development assistant.