

## *ROI Learning's Professional Guidelines Series*

### **How to Teach Adult Learners**

By

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**Abstract:** At most schools of education aspiring teachers are taught the elements of *pedagogy* – the art of teaching children. Many aspects of teaching adults are fundamentally different than those employed in teaching children and for this reason a new word gained currency in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – *andragogy*. This article highlights the important principles in teaching adults and suggests how they can be applied to business training.

#### **The Meaning of Pedagogy**

According to the American Heritage Dictionary the word *pedagogy* is derived from the Greek *paidaggos* which referred to the slave who took children to and from school. Although commonly understood to be “the art or profession of teaching” [1] most schools of education train new teachers in methods and techniques that are most relevant to the teaching of children. Some critics even suggest that “pedagogy embodies *teacher-focused* education.” [2]

#### **The History of the Term Andragogy**

The German educator Dr. Alexander Kapp coined the term andragogy (actually “andragogik”) in 1833 [3], but it was not widely used until it was resurrected, refined, and popularized in the 1970’s and 1980’s by Dr. Malcolm Knowles. According to Knowles two key differences in the ways that adults and children approach learning are the adult desires 1) to be self-directed and 2) to take responsibility for decisions. [4] Programs that address adult learning must be sensitive to these desires and should be designed accordingly.

#### **How Adults Learn**

The *Theory Into Practice* (TIP) database [5] states that Knowles concept of “andragogy makes the following assumptions about the design of learning:

1. Adults need to know why they need to learn something,
2. Adults need to learn experientially,
3. Adults approach learning as problem-solving, and
4. Adults learn best when [they believe that] the topic is of immediate value.”

J. S. Atherton of DeMontfort University in the UK adds that Knowles emphasized the learner self-concept - that “adults need to be responsible for their own decisions and to be treated as capable of self-direction.” [6]

### **Principles of Adult Instruction**

The TIP article summarizes these principles of adult instruction:

1. Adults need to be involved in planning and evaluating their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their jobs or personal lives.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.

These principles suggest that teaching strategies such as case studies, role playing, simulations, and self-evaluation are most useful. Instructors should also adopt a role of facilitator and resource rather than lecturer and grader. [5]

### **Applying the Principles**

In his 1984 work, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, Knowles describes some rules for applying andragogy principles to the design of courses that teach adults how to use personal computers: [7]

1. There is a need to explain why specific things are being taught (e.g., certain commands, functions, operations, etc.)
2. Instruction should be task-oriented instead of memorization -- learning activities should be in the context of common tasks to be performed.
3. Instruction should take into account the wide range of different backgrounds of learners; learning materials and activities should allow for different levels/types of previous experience with computers.
4. Since adults are self-directed, instruction should allow learners to discover things for themselves, providing guidance and help when mistakes are made.

### **Summary**

Business trainers, coaches, and instructional designers need to understand the dynamics of adult learning as described by Knowles and others. Although

Knowles work has elicited some controversy (particularly among those who felt he set up an artificially narrow definition of pedagogy in order to promote his new ideas [5]), his insights into adult learning behaviors and motivations are generally accepted today.

## References

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## Other Works by Malcolm Knowles

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2. Knowles, Malcolm, **Self-Directed Learning**, Chicago: Follet, 1975.
3. Knowles, Malcolm, **Andragogy in Action**, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984.

## About the Author



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