

**Malcolm S. Knowles:
A Review of Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning**

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Abstract

This paper deals with a critical review based on the works of Knowles such as, 1) *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*, 1975. 2) *the Adult learner: A Neglected Species*, 2nd ed, 1973,1978. 3) *Andragogy in Action*, 1984. 4) *the Adult learner: A neglected Species*, 1990, pp 44-63, and some other literatures. It will be divided into headings to be discussed including themes, educational practice, tradition, identity, my own practical adjustments as teacher, and the contribution of Knowles work to adult learning and the analysis of Knowles' work.

Key Words: andragogy, self-directed learning

INTRODUCTION

Malcolm Knowles perhaps the figure or champion in adult learning. His contribution in adult learning has sparked a revolution in adult education and training by promoting differentiates between adult and children learning. (Feuer & Beverly, 1988, p.31). I will examine and discuss Knowles' major themes that are 'andragogy and self-directed learning' in order to explore what are those theory contribute or impact the educational practices in adult learning, find out whether of not there are significances or triviality. In particular, I really want to deepen my understanding about adult learning as I do not have many experiences in learning as adults, in a sense of realizing that I am one of them, and in teaching adults.

1. Themes

The major themes of Knowles' work in general, and especially from the four books that I have read, are andragogy and self-directed learning.

1.1. Andragogy

Knowles admits that he has been looking at the best formula for adult learning theory for decades, which may cover the unique characteristics of adult learners because he found that many of the educators indicate adults learn as same way as children. This assumption should be reconsidered as the fact which

he found in literature said that pedagogy literally means the *art and science of teaching children* (1984, p.27). In the other hand, as he comprehends the term andragogy as *the art and science of helping adults learn*, Knowles than chooses 'andragogy' because he believes it will represents all assumptions about adults learn, including the notions that adults learn best in informal, comfortable, flexible and in a non-threatening setting (Knowles, 1990, pp.51-52).

Introduced in 'The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species', 1973 Knowles' hypothesized that the adult learner can be distinguished from the child learner from the premises of andragogy and pedagogy. There were at least four crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners on which traditional pedagogy is premised. These include, first, '*Self-concept*' which is to describe a person's maturity movement on his self concept from being dependent toward one of being self-directed human being. Second, '*Experience*' is a maturity movement which builds up from collecting experiences to become increasing learning recourses. Third, '*Readiness to learn*' is a maturity movement from ready to learn becomes the development tasks of social roles. The last is the '*Orientation to learning*' which describes the maturity movement of time perspectives change from delays applications of knowledge becomes immediate application (Smith, 2002, p.8). Later in 1984 Knowles adds a new assumption of the characteristics of adult learner that is '*Motivation to learn*', which describes the motivation to learn is internal for a mature people (p.12). In 'Adult Learner: A neglected Species' 1990 there was another assertion and change. The assumptions about adult learning are characterized as the following, 1) *The need to know*, 2) *Learners' self-concept*, 3) *Role of experience*, 4) *Readiness to learn*, 5) *Orientation to learning* and 6) *Motivation* (pp. 55-61). In summary, Knowles differentiates the assumptions of children and adult learning as listed as the following.

1. *The need to know*: Children need to know that they must learn what the teachers teaches if they want to pass the exam while adult need to know why they learn something before they undertaking to learn. It is mentioned in Knowles 1984 that the reason why adults want to know what they learn because they feel more secure about trying something new and they want ammunition to use in persuading their bosses to go along with the idea.
2. *Learner self-concept* : Children are considered as dependent personality while adult have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives.
3. *Role of experiences*: Children have little worth as a resource of learning because they normally count on the teacher materials such as text-book; while adult have both a greater volume and quality of experiences from youths. The quality and quantity experiences have several consequences in adults learning. Therefore children learners derive their self-identity from external definers such as parents, where they live, and what school they go.

learning, should have learned skill of self-directed learning because as the *third reason*, self-directed learning may help adult learners and adult educators to prevent experiencing anxiety, frustration, and often failure. (Knowles, 1975, pp.14-15). So that adults' learners are expected to have their self-directed competencies, they are: the ability to relate to peers collaboratively, to diagnose their own needs, to translate needs to objectives, to identify resources and to evaluate. (Knowles, 1975 in Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1987, p.203).

2. Educational Practices

Regarding the practices of his assumptions of adult learning, again Knowles differentiates adult and children as andragogical and pedagogical models that results in two very different approaches to the design and operation of educational program. The basic differences format between both models are, a *content plan* for pedagogical model and a *process design* for the andragogical model. A content plan requires the 'teacher' to understand and to responsible to what content need to be covered, how it can be organized, what is the logical sequences, and what would the most efficient techniques in transmitting this content. In contrast, a *process design* assigns a dual role to the facilitator (In term of the title for the educator Knowles prefers to call adult educator with the title "facilitator" because they rather help adults to learn than to control them to learn). The first role is the designer and manager of processes or procedures of learning will facilitate the learner to acquire the content. This is the primarily role. The secondary one is content resource other than the teacher, including peers, material and media resources, and field experiences (Knowles, 1984, p.14).

Another important point is that Knowles says there are seven elements to be considered when designing andragogical learning experience. 1) climate setting, 2) Involve learners in mutual planning 3) Involve participants in diagnosing their learning needs 4) Involve learners in formulating their learning objectives 5) Involve learners in designing learning plan 6) Help learners carry out their learning plan 7) Involve learners in evaluating learning (*ibid.* pp.14-18). Therefore, he promotes *Informal Adult Education* and training, to be able to cover the adults need in the way of friendly and informal climate. Those including the flexibility of the process, the use of experience, the enthusiasm and commitment of participants, comfortable, flexible and in non-threatening settings. However, he does not give any specific definition of informal education.

One of the popular issues of Knowles' works is '*Learning Contract*'. Knowles defines *learning contract* as "a binding agreement between two or more persons or parties". For the purpose of self-directed learning he suggest one to make a contract to him self to be come a self-directed learner so that one will be a learner whose the direction of where to go and will be informed when arrive there (*ibid.* p.26). Tough (in Knowles, 1975, p.129) says that when adults go about learning something naturally (means not being taught), they are highly self-directing. In other words, if they learn by their own initiative they will learn

more deeply and permanently. However, Knowles assumes there still some factors which may affect the development of their characteristics of being self-directed learner. Therefore, he suggests five steps in developing a learning contract of being self directed learners. A self-directed learner should be able to responsible during his/her contract, as the shown as the following steps.

- Step1: take the initiative in probing to eliminate any confusion.
- Step2: choose and decide own objectives to be accomplished and be sure that the objectives describe what to be learn, what action to be take, and so on.
- Step3: participate in selecting a consultation team
- Step4: carry out the strategies, collecting the evidence,
- Step5: reporting evidences to the instructor for comments or judgments

3. Tradition

To indicate Knowles tradition I should comeback to see what his assumption of adult learning, his purpose of education and his educational practices. From what I have discussed above it is described in this paper that Knowles assumption of adult learning are based on six assumptions, they are, the need to know, learners' self-concept, role of experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning and motivation. From these assumption Knowles than choose 'andragogy' which he assumes can be an ideal theory of adult learning because he believes this may represent the purpose of adult learning, that is to help adult to learn. That is why it is appropriate to call the educator with 'facilitator'. His result of taking andragogy as an alternative way of learning have been interpret by others as he tries to differentiate adult and children learning. The purpose of his theory is to help adult to be self-directed learner so that they able to be independent learners who are able and responsible to take initiative to probing in order to eliminate any confuses. Adult are expected to be independent learner with or without help. In addition, his suggestion about learning contract is reasonable because it may build and organize the adults to learn and to achieve their goal. Therefore, one may say Knowles' theory and influences belongs to the traditions with the purpose of the education are individual development and self-achievement. These purposes are to enable learners to achieve their learning goals. *Learning contract* can be one of the approaches because it provides a structure which can assist learners to achieve their goals.

4. Identity

Knowles influential theory was unconsciously gained by the history of when he was a child. Together with his father Knowles feels like a companion rather than an inferior. His father often asked about what his opinion about something before he declares his own ideas. He experience it as 'being respected'. His mother always helping him through her examples and care to be more 'tender' loving, caring person'. His schooling supports his positive attitude

toward his self-concept'. From Boys scouting he experiences both knowledge and skills (Smith, 2002, p.1). Then he read Lindeman's book *Meaning of Adult Education* (1989) which became his chief source of inspiration and ideas (*ibid.*, pp.1-2) It inspires him to produce ideas about adult education.

He spent about 14 years which time he produced his key texts: *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (1970) and *The Adult Learner* (1973). These books is located him at the centre of adult education discourse who popularize the notion of andragogy.

As Knowles confidently promotes his tradition of adult learning, I assume Knowles believes in modernism paradigm who concern of only one 'true', that is to say adult learners are able to learn independently, able to make initiative and become proactive learners. I reinforce my assumption by comparing this paradigm with postmodernism who believes in mutual truth, in term of able to see and consider about 'self' and 'others'. (Kilgore in St.Clair& Sandlin, 2004, p.46).It also has more than one way to find out about something. In contrast, Knowles has shown that he has one line in progress of finding the truth about his theory. He starts from the influences of his background following by maintaining his interest in adult learning, maintaining his goal and become founder of what he looking for.

5. My Practice adjustment

Knowles basic assumption about adult learners is that they are independent. However, I believe not all of adult are independent learner, particularly in a new place without any background knowledge about what to learn. Apart from this case, I am concern about cultural differences. For example, I was a university student in Indonesia before I came to Australia. And I am now a university student in Australia. There are differences between both conditions. I am dependent learner in Indonesia and I did not consciously discover my personal learning needs. Some of my lecturers are still very 'teacher-oriented'. Some lectures are dictator, some others are democratic. Some of the lecturer may give a space for students to criticize or challenge teachers' ideas but some are not. My motivation of learning is mostly affected by external factors. For example, job requirement and education stages (level from elementary to university). One of my internal motivations is only to have a valuable activity and contact with other people. Indonesian tradition and culture teach the people to give high respect to the teacher, so that some students are difficult to explicitly express their ideas.

At the beginning I was (and still) struggle studying in Australian education circumstances. I believe a learner is as same as a blank paper that waiting to be painted by the teacher and trust the teacher or facilitator or trainer, no matter how old are they. However, my self-concept has been built as dependent learner but I still did not realize it. After I learn something about adult learning, particularly I read about Knowles, I now realize that I was gradually changed from dependent learner to become independent learner. Yet, I assume not all of Knowles' assumptions are applied in the university in Australia. For

example, the unit has been design without involving students before design it. Even though the educators have created a friendly and non threatening climate during the learning process, yet the concept of power is still dominant. Educators' experience and expertise show the superior power.

If I relate between Indonesia and Knowles's theory, I think Indonesia may have one similarity about the notion of being teacher or facilitator. Indonesia has at least two sayings about teacher. First is, "*guru, digugu dan ditiru*" means a teacher should be followed and be as a model. The other saying is "*tut wuri handayani*" it is borrowed from Sanskrit words, which interpreted as a teacher should stand behind the students. They only guide and help in case the students go to the wrong ways. So, I assume there is a meaning between the lines that in one case they are teachers, in the other case they are facilitators.

6. Knowles' contribution

In education practice in general, as it is described previously, his contribution in adult learning may be seen as how Knowles differentiate adult from children with assumptions about their learning. This is to promote his theory andragogy which may portrayed as an adult learning theory in education practices due to the notion in which pedagogy is the only one theory of teaching. In my context, Knowles' theory of andragogy makes me consciously learn about what happened inside me before and after I read about self directed learning and andragogy. Even if I do not have a direct experience of teaching adult since I have not really taught adult yet, I assume Knowles' ideas of adult education can be useful in teaching adult in several ways. I believe that there is an alternative solution which is the involvement of students does not have to be in all of the sectors of learning. There always specific time for the teacher to have chance to see whether or not a learner need to be helped and when a teacher should facilitate them, and also when they should be a great educator, so teacher's privilege and students' privilege always in balance.

ANALYSIS

As I have stated in the introduction, I will not discuss the issue of Policy and organizational context because I do not have any experiences in teaching adult but will discuss later in this paper my own practice as an adult learner. Instead the following paragraphs will bring some analysis related to what I have understood about Knowles and his theory of adult learning.

Self -directed learning that Knowles proposed is helpful to adult education profession in the way that adult can be active rather than just a passive receiver of knowledge. Active participation in knowledge will be useful to the students themselves because they gain the knowledge through their own efforts not the educator. The educator's position in this case is facilitator. The main agents of finding the knowledge are students themselves. However, I am also aware that there are critics on the issue of andragogy and self-directed learning. for

example; Brookfield told *Training* that the 7 elements (see education practices) of andragogical design are overestimate. He says, "People think that if you walk into a classroom and say, "Look this course is yours, you'll choose the topic, find the resources, and generate the evaluation criteria', there will be this wonderful sense of relieve and exhilaration among learners. They assume that student will jump into this self-directed learning mode like ducks take to water. Further more he states that "the more common reaction is confusion, anxiety and often anger". He believes that students will say "We paid a high price and we want your expertise. We don't feel equipped to design our own curricula." (Brookfield as cited in Feuer & Beverly 1988, p.33). In other words, the expertise of the educators will be questioned.

Cyril Houle (1972, p.5) argues that the adult learning theory, andragogy, could never be the foundation for a unifying theory because he assumes that adult and children learn basically the same way. He further more argues that those assumptions which differentiate pedagogy and andragogy are denied by those who believe education is fundamentally the same whenever and wherever it occurs.

In addition, Hartree strongly criticizes the theory of andragogy by saying that the most notorious theory of adult learning is andragogy. Even though Cross (1981) reinforce Knowles works by saying that Knowles' work has had considerable in fluencies in America and being quoted increasingly in this country, Hartree considers that Knowles theory is confusing. It is not clear whether of not Knowles has contribute a theory of learning or theory of teaching, whether adults are different from children in learning or adult learning are different from children learning. Therefore, she supposes Knowles theory is more influenced by philosophy rather than psychology. As long as education is relevant with psychology, Knowles' theory is considered irrelevant and the theory of adult learning still in a big question (1984, p.203-204).

In term of language matter, I may say that there is a small puzzle of why Knowles also differentiates the meaning of andragogy with pedagogy as he interprets the meaning as '*teaching children*' with '*helping adult*'. he uses the Greek word which the first stem is "paid" for pedagogy means children and "aner" for andragogy means adult. I can comprehend and accept that these words have different meaning or we can easily interpret the meaning of "peda" and "andra", which mean "children" and "adult". Nevertheless, the second stem "agogus" or "gogy" are both found in *peda-gogy* and *andra-gogy*, but he put them as different meaning, that is 'teaching' and 'helping'. Based on this different meaning then he decided to choose title teacher for pedagogical model which aimed at teaching children and facilitator for andragogical model which aimed at helping adults learn. (Knowles, 1975, p.33).

I suppose it is important point to take into account because the different of those small words may affect the whole theory in adult learning in particular, and education in general.

Further more, I believe there are several aspects that Knowles did not mention or consider in promoting his theory, for example, students' social background and

cultural differences may affect the outcome of the learning whether or not they have been taught or become a self-directed learners.

Hence, this theory or model of assumption, according to Meriam (1987), "...has given adult educators a 'badge' identity which distinguishes the field from other areas of education. This statement gives a sense of the meaning of 'one area to another' in education, that is adult and children. Therefore, Knowles theory becomes an indication that there are differences between children and adults. However, after he admits that both models are in equal position regarding helping adults to learn according to different context and situations, some writers comment that andragogy or the assumption of adults learn is not 'unique' anymore. Thus, it seems that its status as a theory of adult learning is questioned (Merriam, 1987, p. 190).

CONCLUSION

Considering the differences between children and adult learning, I come to the conclusion that there are both advantage and disadvantage in adopting teacher-centered or self-directed learning. In self-directed learning students may have freedom to express their ideas and structurally reach their goal and they may learn in supportive circumstances at all time. However, the high self-discipline and consequences are obligatory. Once students break their consequences, they may fail at the end. In the other hand, if they strict to their concept, their will have big opportunity to apply their knowledge and later success in what they really want to do in their life.

Contrary, Teacher-centered may be important for students who think it is hard to manage their own learning because discipline not always works for every body. The social background, culture differences and family are factors that may affect students' self-concept. Teacher can be a strong motivation for students to learn. Nevertheless, it is a positive side. However, teachers' expertise and quality may become willpower for students' successes. For example, as an EFL teacher, I some time must teach Geography in my work place because it is the only position which available at that time. Therefore, students outcomes will be "up in the air".

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