A Study of Andragogy Overseas

Andragogy and ESL: Friend or Foe

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Abstract

Andragogy has seen stints of popularity in North America for the past several decades, as is attested by the vast array of literature that has been written on the subject, even if much of it revolves around general learning concepts, or acknowledgments and critiques of Malcolm Knowles' work. Still since its launch into the English language in 1833, andragogy has grown into a multifaceted concept for adult learning that can be very effective if learners meet the requirements laid out in Knowles' often cited assumptions for adult learning. However, in andragogy's current state of dismemberment, anything constituting adult learning is being swept under this umbrella, so there is little wonder that the debate on andragogy's position in higher education continues to rage (Rachal, 2002; Brookfield, 2009). Having spent the greater part of my teaching career overseas, the question I must ask is whether andragogy as understood by Knowles could be effective in other cultures? Could it be a replacement for their current system, since in my experience many of their approaches to learning were unsuccessful?

While much of the literature on andragogy suggests it is an ideal method of learning for adults, there is very little research available on more specific areas of adult education, such as that of the ESL (English as a Second Language) learner. This paper will argue that even though andragogy is an effective method of learning, it is not necessarily suited to all cultures, as was revealed in the studies reviewed from Iraq, China, Japan, South Africa, and The Middle East. Despite the fact that most of the literature did not support an andragogical approach to learning; under suitable conditions andragogy could be effective in cultures other than the West. This claim, based on personal experience in South Korea, will draw your attention to the success of the Korean program, as well as the similarities between this case and that of the American study. Included as well is a discussion on how my thinking is being transformed as my awareness of adult learning theories increases. This review will take you through an introduction,

followed by a short historical account on Andragogy's evolution, then onto a discussion of literature in relation to ESL learners, and concluding with a few thoughts and understandings of andragogy as perceived through personal experience and education.

Introduction

Prior to studying adult education, andragogy was not a word I was familiar with, but once introduced to it I became intrigued by the familiarity I felt with a concept I had never heard of. As I reflected on the ideas brought forth by Knowles, I came to realize that since the death of my mother in the seventies, I had been unwittingly thrown into a world of self-directed learning and poignant life lessons at a very impressionable age. In this new world, I learnt what I needed to know when I needed to know it, and I have been living that way ever since. I have never thought of myself as a self-directed learner, it was simply doing what needed to be done, and then following a lifelong dream to experience the world I had only read about. That journey led me through a life of discovery and adventure, which has directed my learning ever since, and now with a grounding in adult learning theories the parallels between my own learning and those of Brookfield's (2009) are more visible than ever. What's more, at this point in my life I have gained a wealth of knowledge and experience, especially in the area of andragogy and self-directed learning. Looking back on my learning experiences, I find it interesting "how cultural factors could convince one to pursue learning projects that are against one's own best interests" (Brookfield, 2009), which was certainly the case in the Middle East and the reason for pursuing this course of study. For a large number of adult learners language acquisition is difficult and many curriculums are not designed with the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learner in mind. Instead they are geared towards those in an English Emersion Course, or living in an English speaking country. With this in mind, I was

interested in examining whether research would support an andragogical approach to learning in English language programs abroad.

<div align="center">Historical Account of Andragogy</div>

While the debate rages on as to whether it is a theory or a set of assumptions, (Rachal, 2002; Davenport & Davenport, 1985) andragogy continues the evolution from its inception more than a century ago to the complex models of today. Its early roots in Europe and America date back to the 1800s, when religion still exercised a fair amount of influence over educational ideals. Though, museums, libraries, and agricultural societies also played a significant role in educating the public, (Reischmann, 2004) it was mainly informal in nature and was certainly not available to the masses. Despite that, it still remained fashionable, and by the late 1920's andragogy had branched into new directions with Lindeman's (Rachal, 2002) concept of teaching adults through discussion. From that point Knowles brought it to North America in the sixties, introducing the idea of a learning contract. It wasn't long after, that Knowles' American version of andragogy became very popular, resulting in the term being widely associated with his concept of adult education. (Cooper & Henschke, 2004; Reischmann, 2004). From there andragogy found its way into Mezirow's theory in 81, where the construction of meaning in the learning process took a central role, something he believed was missing from major adult learning theories (Mezirow, 1989). That same year Suanmali (1989) suggested that adults should function as self-directed learners and that educators needed to help learners take responsibility for their own learning. Those concepts were followed by Bragar and Johnson (1993) who addressed andragogy in relation to business environments and then, Akyol (2007), Burge (1988), and Simonson (2003) conducted studies with adults and distance learning. In addition to that, studies have also been done with technology (Fidishun, 2000), online learning, Gibbons and Wentworth (2001), and in correctional settings as well,

in studies by Gehring (2000) and Cooper and Henschke, (2004). It is clear from this array of ideas and learning environments that the branches of adult learning continues to grow limb by limb, a signifier to the ever evolving changes in andragogy.

A Cultural Journey through Literature

Since its explosion onto the North American scene in the sixties the basic principles of andragogy have been expanded, re-examined, and even compared to the Holy Quran (Akdere, Russ-Eft, and Eft , 2006), and while researchers agree it is an effective method for teaching adults to learn, the literature suggests it is not being practiced in most ESL programs. Though some have attempted it, and many have discussed it, none of the studies reviewed for this paper were completely successful in applying Knowles' andragogical model to ESL programs abroad. The reason for this was often due to the difficulties learners had articulating their needs in a foreign language (Akyol, 2007; Kajee, 2005; Tseng, 2005; Crossman & Kite, 2007). However, the results differed somewhat in a study conducted of ESL students living in the United States, which might indicate that while culture is an important factor in determining the way we think and learn, a person's geographic location may also play a role regarding the depth of their learning.

In the American study learners were given an opportunity to work on a collaborative community service project, where participants exhibited high levels of motivation probably due to the real life assignment they were embarking on. Although these students were not accustomed to the American andragogical method used in the study, the realistic environment they were exposed to allowed them to engage with their more knowledgeable peers, building confidence in both their speaking and presenting abilities, as well as improving their knowledge of the academic and corporate worlds (Crossman et. al., 2007). It is

also interesting to note that while the study found achievement levels were higher in group work, some of the learners found communicating their ideas to be difficult due to their inferior language skills. Assessment also followed the andragogical ideal as learner's evaluations were gauged by their personal reflections.

On the other hand, in the Turkish and South African studies students had differing levels of involvement in their learning, but in each case the participants were encouraged to become increasingly self-directed; although most felt uncomfortable taking complete control of their learning. Moreover, the language abilities of many ESL students is at the low end of the scale, making it difficult for them to articulate their needs, and as the exercises became increasingly difficult, learners experienced problems with comprehension. Unique to the South African and Turkish studies due to their online and distance learning components, findings showed that the less frequent participants relied heavily on the teacher, while those who attended regularly reported higher satisfaction with the program (Akyol, 2007; Kajee, 2005). Additionally, with a low percentage of learner participation in the online chats and complaints of communication problems with the instructors, (Akyol, 2007; Kajee, 2005) it seems andragogy may not have been the best model for these learners. Another factor in the Turkish study that moves them away from andragogical practice was the use of conventional testing methods to assess the learners. At no time during the course were learners provided with feedback of any kind, which certainly had to affect their motivation level. Besides that, it is also important to note that the participants in the South African study were the only marginalized group in the review. As a result of their circumstances, most participants as well as some of the facilitators had little knowledge of technology, and many never had the opportunity for a proper education. At the same time, the schools were not equipped to teach technology, so difficulties prevailed from the beginning.

In the Asian arena the results were similar, but the andragogical studies there provided a look into the ancient cultures of China, Japan, and South Korea, whose philosophical foundations have long been influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism (Ae Han, 2003; Wang n.d. par. 10). With such traditions firmly established in societal and educational policies, applying a method as unstructured and unregulated as andragogy seems to have been unachievable from the start. It is unlikely that teachers could or even would be willing to abandon ancient tradition to embrace a style of teaching whose principles are in opposition to those of Confucius. In addition to that, the culture is so different from those of western nations, that what may be small to us, could be devastating in their world. For example, if a teacher did not know the meaning of an English word, it could cause them a great deal of embarrassment, and if that happened too often their career could be in jeopardy, since the teacher had not met the high standards expected by the Confucius based society (Wang, n.d. par.10). Teachers in these cultures are also uncomfortable with class discussions, because again they would lose face or feel humiliated if they did not know or were unfamiliar with the subject matter. This would then put the teacher in an inferior position to that of the student, and incredibly this faux pas could quite possibly cause the eventual termination of a teacher's career (Wang n.d. par.14). Another fact that is troublesome for andragogy is the Chinese belief that children and adults should be taught using the same methods. This conviction probably comes from their teachings of Confucius, who believed that knowledge was acquired and transmitted and teachers believed to be 'excellent' transmitters of knowledge were emulated in Chinese society (Wang, n.d. par.7).

"Confucius placed a heavy emphasis on knowledge transmission and acquisition: "I transmit but I do not create; I have faith in and a passion for ancient studies; knowing through silent reflection, learning without satiety, and teaching others without becoming weary..." (Wang, n.d. par.10).

Collaboration, another important element of adult learning is seen as disruptive, noisy, and chaotic.

Instead a well disciplined class is the standard in Chinas, as that is considered to be far more stimulating

for learners (Wang n.d. par.15). In addition to those issues, which are in direct opposition to the

principles of andragogy, the Chinese also relied heavily on standardized testing, which surprisingly the

students seemed to prefer. However, that type of testing and the memorization of text could be part of

the reason students scored high in China, but had trouble communicating with professors once overseas,

especially when it came to writing.

In contrast, the Japanese review was far less detailed, but it did suggest that independence was

encouraged and high motivation levels were reported, due mainly to student learning choices such as

career advancement and self improvement. In spite of that, like the other studies those with poor English

skills felt intimidated when they had to speak, and often struggled to communicate their needs.

Analogous to other Asian cultures as well, Japanese learners were not accustomed to directing their own

learning and were certainly not ready to take full control of it. Additionally, students complained that the

university programs were too short for them to gain proficiency in English, but at the same time they

were being encouraged to become more independent (Kirk, n.d. par.11). On the other hand, teachers

were accepting of learner's prior experience and even encouraged them to apply their knowledge. As

well, learners were treated as adults and attempts at assessing their learning needs were made.

Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that andragogy's loose principles could ever take hold in cultures such

as these, whose histories are based on ancient tradition.

In the final reviews we journey to a region with a long and beguiling past, one of many contrasts and

much controversy. Coming from the Middle East these studies provide a unique glimpse into a world

that many never see and research overlooks. In the first study we are given an unusual look at how the

principles of andragogy are represented in the Holy Quran as suggested by the authors Akdere, Russ-Eft,

and Eft, 2006). These researchers discuss several areas in which the principles of andragogy were

praised by the Quran, one of which is the idea of collaboration, shown in the following quote:

> "The concept of teamwork and collaboration for the common goal is also encouraged in Islam. The
>
> socialistic nature of Islam stresses the social life of humanity and the ethics and mechanics of human
>
> society. This society is called the ummah. The Qur'an reads, "The believers are but brethren,
>
> therefore, make peace between your brethren and be careful of (your duty to) Allah that mercy may
>
> be had on you" (49: 10). Thus, through the notion of brotherhood, collaboration and teamwork are
>
> encouraged. Such collaboration and teamwork fit within the framework of study groups or the halqha
>
> that encourage interaction among participants in order to develop and acquire new skills and to
>
> engage in continuous learning." (Akdere et. al., 2006, p. 359)

Also put forth by these researchers is that Islam believes in lifelong learning in all aspects of life, and to

confirm their claim this quote is provided from the Quran;

> "Enwrapped in the perpetual presence of the Qur'an, the life of the Muslim was witness to a
>
> continuous process of education based on the form and spirit of the Quranic revelation as contained
>
> in the Sacred Book and reflected in the very substance and being of the Prophet" (Akdere et. Al.,
>
> 2006, p. 123).

From this idea of lifelong learning the *halqha* or circle developed which began as mosque circles, but then evolved into a learning tool for adult Muslims where study groups formed that encouraged interaction among its participants. It is from these study circles that institutions of higher learning emerged in Muslim society (Akdere et al., 2006). While I consider a comparison between the Quran and the principles of andragogy an interesting concept, the research did not really delve into all of Knowles' assumptions for adult learning, so I was not sure what they were attempting to say, except that the Holy Quran was open to some of the principles of andragogy. Also of importance that was not discussed in this review was the fact that the Islamic education, system like the Chinese is based on the transmission of knowledge and the memorization of large chunks of text, neither of which are conducive to the andragogical style of teaching (Akdere et al., 2006).

Although located in the same region this final review has a very different theme than the last. Here the research looks at the reflections of an Iraqi woman and an American man who believe that an andragogical model could be applied in the rebuilding of Iraq and potentially bring change and peace to the country. In stating how andragogy could work in Iraq she says,

> "…the continued application of principles of andragogy, embracing genuine engagement and mutual respect among people with the volition to rebuild, renew, and revitalize social institutions and human lives, provides a wonderful opportunity for bridging Western and Eastern philosophies. As Iraq encourages its adult scholars to study in other parts of the world, there is opportunity for blending the best of traditional and new ideas" (Akdere et al., 2006, p. 38).

The researchers believe that through education there will be understanding, and with understanding

would come respect, which is important if peace and stability are ever to be achieved. Their thoughts on

using andragogy as a way of change is in line with what Mezirow called "meaning perspectives," which

refers to newly assimilated information transformed by past experience, which is exactly what Mahdi

hopes will happen. The authors remind us that, as the war continues, students are engrossed in real life

problem solving skills related to personal safety, food, and retaining some semblance of normal life in

the chaos of war. (Bright & Mahdi, 2010). Nevertheless, the authors discuss that perhaps now is the time

for an andragogical style of teaching to emerge from the ashes, since the system of the past has been

destroyed, what better time for the creation of a modern curriculum. However, Mahdi fears that "when a

nation is in distress, the culture may revert to traditions of the past leaving little room for innovation."

(Bright, et. al., 2010). In spite of what is happening in her country, she is still optimistic that a

constructivist environment could offer an alternative to passively listening to lectures, which is how

most formal learning programs were conducted. She ends by acknowledging that Iraqi scholars are

beginning to study nontraditional teaching theories (Bright et al., 2010), so perhaps the future holds

change for a land that has undergone so much already.

This final quote from Mahdi's colleague serves to remind me that there are others encouraged by the possibilities

of social change and that my experiences in the Middle East were far from unique even if it seemed that way at

the time.

    "It takes great courage, patience, volition, and commitment to become part of seeking ways to cope with the

    realities of having to return to a society fractured by a war zone. Herein lay the situative andragogical

    opportunity to go beyond cognitive reflection to dialogue and involvement in social action." (Bright et al.,

    2010, p. 39)

Unlike the other studies discussed, this review did not set out to show whether andragogy was an effective learning style; instead its purpose was to bring hope to a region devastated by war with the possibility of rebuilding a future, perhaps around a new model of education using an andragogical approach .

Observations and Understanding of the Literature on Adult Learning

It is unfortunate that more research is not being conducted in this area of ESL, and the few that are available often lack content, or the ancient cultures on which their societies are structured are in direct opposition to Knowles' assumptions of how adults learn. On the other hand, teaching adult learners in Korea was a very different experience than those described in the literature just reviewed. Although these countries are all situated in Northern Asia, and their cultures are all based on ancient traditions, what sets Korea apart from the others is their willingness to welcome outside influences into their society more readily than the other regions of Asia. This I suspect is greatly due to the American influence brought by the Korean War, whose presence continues in society today. It is not that andragogy could not work with adult language learners in other ESL programs, but the problem is that many second language learners have not acquired the language skills necessary to take full control of their learning, which is not an issue inherent just in ESL, as there are also many adult learners in general that do not have the discipline for self- directed learning, nor the level of motivation required to succeed in a self-structured environment. I believe andragogy worked in Korea, (though I was not aware my style of teaching had a name) because they were all internally motivated by increased job satisfaction, greater self-esteem or a better quality of life. As well Korean exposure to American culture via television and the American Army Base located in their capital may have had an influence on language acquisition as similarly suggested in the American study. These adult learners worked in corporate

settings with fairly rigid guidelines, yet many chose a very free style of learning; perhaps to be liberated of an environment they found stifling, or to emulate conversations that occurred while conducting business with their Western counterparts. In any case their command of the English language was excellent, so they were able to articulate very clearly how they wanted their learning to be conducted, and it certainly did not involve conventional methods. This would be my first experience as a facilitator using principles I was yet to hear of, but proved to work quite well. Their sessions with me involved a lot of self-study, which brings to mind Loughran's (2005) paper on teaching, since much of their learning involved reflecting on their problems, using the group sessions to inform and develop their new awareness and then putting that knowledge into practice. As their understanding of Western business etiquette and small talk improved they could look at the problems they encountered and amongst themselves find new ways to resolve them, which is something many people are not comfortable doing. A good example of that was seen in the Argyris review (1991) in the course of the dialogue of a manager discussing problems with his employees, whom of course were not willing to take responsibility for their part in the concerns raised regarding their clients.

This issue of accountability is not new, but in some cultures it is far more prevalent than others, one such place being the Middle East. In my experience having taught there for six years, the people I worked with did not encourage self-study nor did they want change of any kind. Additionally, the businessmen who controlled those private colleges were concerned mainly with increasing revenues, having little interest in the quality of their programs. In a society such as this, it would be difficult for an education system to move forward when administrators were so averse to supplying more than just the bare minimum. The college I worked for was the only media institution in the country, yet there was scarcely little media in the program. I thought this provided a great opportunity to steer the college

towards a curriculum that would, at the very least enhance the one currently on offer. Taking complete

control of my learning I spent several years researching projects on how to write a study skills book for

foundation students, as well as how to design an interactive curriculum. In addition to that I taught

myself the basic functions of Adobe Creative Suites for its publishing software. Learning these tasks had

to be completely self-directed, as no such courses or libraries existed in Oman. My facilitators were

internet tutorials and amazon.com. I collaborated with friends and colleagues around the world whose

strengths complimented my weaknesses. After much work and great effort neither faculty nor

administrators were interested in attending the presentations I had developed. This was just one of many

obstacles I encountered in my struggle for educational reform, which was continually being thwarted by

a male dominated society not used to being challenged. Since leaving the Middle East I have struggled

to understand why some people have such difficulty accepting the possibility they could be part of the

problem. The mentality demonstrated by the administrators and Dean of the college seemed to echo that

of the management group in the Chris Argyris (1991) article, except the people I dealt with have never

admitted they made mistakes.

However, it was not until I was researching muted group theory that I came across Cheris Kramarae's

writings, which gave me some insight as to why those in positions of power like the Dean of the College

tried to silence me from speaking about an educational system whose central focus was on increasing

revenues rather than providing a good education. This of course did not make me a very popular person,

but after much effort and dedication, the students (all female) and I were able to effect some change.

While small in scope, it was monumental for them; their voices were finally heard, giving them a sense

of accomplishment they rarely felt. In this case the students were able to look at the problems they faced,

work together as a group, and collaborate with me to effect change. The difficulties we overcame as

women in the Middle East provided us with the confidence to achieve what most thought was impossible, and now with my new awareness of adult learning and communication theories, I am feeling a little less conflicted about my role for educational reform in a land that was not my own. I have also come to terms with the fact that it is highly unlikely those I worked with will ever "reframe their thinking and transform their practice as Loughran suggests in his methodology of self-study (Loughran, 2005).

Conclusion

It is clear from the literature reviewed for this paper that while andragogical methods of teaching have been applied in various cultures, it has rarely been effective in ESL settings. The main reason for this is generally due to poor language skills, which would prevent the learner from expressing their needs or goals. Moreover, some of the cultures examined were based on ancient traditions that were unlikely to be overturned to embrace a style of teaching that was in opposition to their traditional beliefs. At the same time the American study and my experiences with Korean learners reported more favourable results primarily due to immersion in an English language country, and in the case of the Koreans their high motivation levels and a society that is greatly influenced by American culture. What is more, the studies indicated that countries like Turkey, China, and The Middle East emphasize the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, which controls knowledge, comprehension, and its application, (Wang, n.d., Discussion section, para. 2; Akyol, 2000) something most ESL students are capable of achieving. However, it is the higher end of Bloom's scale used by Western nations that employ critical thinking skills, analysis, synthesis and evaluation; all skills that most second language students do not understand or are capable of attaining because it was never part of their curriculum. While andragogy may not have been enormously successful in the literature discussed for this review, it does hold out hope for future endeavours should the right conditions prevail.

Directions for Future Research

Traditional methods like rote learning, memorization, and knowledge transmission, favoured by countries like China, Japan and the Middle East should examine their programs to see if they are meeting the needs of their adult learners. Modernity does not have to mean discarding traditions, as andragogy embraces past experience. It is also necessary to address issues such as learners' lack of critical thinking and problem solving skills, something necessary not just for academic success, but for achievement in their working lives as well. Also of importance is that facilitation or non-traditional instruction is determined by the learner and consideration be given to the learning situation, a sentiment endorsed by Worldview as can be seen in the following quote;

"All Muslims, all Hindus, all Christians and so on do not fit into one easy category of adult learner. We are all a mix of several cultures—national, family, religious, ethnic, local, gender, and so on. We each bring this mix to the workplace when we learn. Insofar as it is possible, and it is difficult to do, each adult learner must be treated as a unique learner with unique needs and unique processes that work best for him or her" (Worldview: Rethinking Adult Learning in the Workplace. McLean 2006).

Final Thoughts

I believe understanding is the foundation for many a great thing, but the problem is finding it, learning from it and taking action as a result of it. Studying the literature for this review has helped me identify areas in second language learning that could benefit enormously from further research, and the material

from the course gave me the knowledge to apply it to problems encountered in my practice. It is my love

of knowledge that keeps me moving, reading, and studying, so I leave you with this quote as it speaks to

my never-ending love of the written word.

"The resource of highest value in adult education is the learner's experience.... Experience becomes the

adult learners' living textbook...already there waiting to be appropriated (Bright et. al. p. 39)

I always knew there was something inside me; I just did not know it was a textbook!

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