

Running head: USING ANDRAGOGY IN CORPORATE TRAINING

Using Andragogy to Improve Corporate Training

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## Abstract

Malcolm S. Knowles was named the "father of adult learning" and the "pioneer in adult education". He put the word "andragogy," the art of helping adults learn, into training dialect.

Malcolm's work had two major themes: control and discovery. He believed there would not be learner resistance if participants were learning what they believed they needed, and the instructor approached training as a facilitator or guide instead of a dictator. Andragogy can be applied in many instructional situations. It specifies learners should take responsibility for their own learning, they should learn from themselves and from others. This makes the learner active participants in the learning process. The theory of Andragogy has been used to improve corporate training programs. Andragogy has become an effective method of teaching adults in the corporate industry.

## Using Andragogy to Improve Corporate Training

Andragogy is an adult learning theory. This method of learning focuses on discovery and control. It expects adults to be motivated to learn about what will help them overcome their daily challenges. Can andragogy be an effective learning style in corporate training? Malcolm changed the view of learning so that adults would be considered independent and decision makers on the progression of their own training needs.

Malcolm put the word "andragogy," the art of helping adults learn, into training dialect. Malcolm's work had two major themes: control and discovery. In his early books and journal articles he was known as the educator who marched to a different drum. Most other educators during that time period matched their styles and valued to what they had experienced in early public education. The teacher controlled the learners and what was to be learned. Participants were seen as dependent, passive and resistant to most learning experiences. The teachers were the experts who gave out information that they felt was relevant and then tested the students on what was taught. During this time the pedagogy or child-learning approach dominated corporate training as well as public schools. (Bell, 1989, p. 43)

Andragogy can be applied in many instructional situations. The theory of Andragogy has been used to improve corporate training programs. Corporate employees share their knowledge and apply it in team situations where they also get the chance to learn from others. In corporate situations the learners are motivated to learn because the knowledge they gain will help

them advance in their careers. This motivation without a dictator's guidance is a key factor in Malcolm's theory of andragogy.

Malcolm S. Knowles was named the "father of adult learning" and the "pioneer in adult education". Malcolm was born in 1913, in Livingston, MT. He graduated from Harvard College in 1934 and took his first job in adult education in 1935 as director of related training for Massachusetts' National Youth Administration. In 1940, he became the director of adult education for the YMCA in Boston. (Lee, 1998, p. 48)

From 1946 to 1951 he worked for Chicago's YMCA where he built a comprehensive education program for adults. In 1949 he earned his master's degree in adult education from the University of Chicago. He was elected founding executive director of the Adult Education Association of the United States in 1951 through 1959. He was a faculty member at the National Training Laboratories Institute in Bethel, ME, in the early 50's. In 1960 he earned his Ph.D. in adult education from University of Chicago. He then became the professor of adult education at Boston University from 1960-1974 and at North Carolina State University until 1979. He retired in North Carolina and continued to work as an independent consultant in Raleigh until 1990. In 1991 he moved to Fayetteville, AR where he died of a stroke on November 27, 1997. (Lee, 1998, p. 48)

In Malcolm's later years, his peers and colleagues recognized him with many awards. He was inducted into TRAINING Magazine's Hall of Fame in 1985. The American Association for

Adult and Continuing Education established the Malcolm S. Knowles Award in 1990, and in 1996 he was inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame.

Malcolm presented a different philosophy to teaching adults. "His concept of andragogy—that adults were a different breed of learners—sparked a new field of research and literature." (Anonymous, 1998, p. 11) He believed there would not be learner resistance if participants were learning what they believed they needed and the instructor approached training as a facilitator or guide instead of a dictator. Malcolm believed, "if participants were allowed to have control over their own learning in a cooperative, nonauthoritarian, informal arena, their motivation to learn would run high." (Bell, 1989, p. 43) Participative approaches that offered invitations rather than outlined rules were much more in sync with the idea of the adult as a responsible, independent, and interdependent learner. Malcolm's belief was that training that focused on shared control, relevance, and authenticity would yield participants who not only gained the information they needed to be effective and successful; but more important, gained the judgment-making competence and confidence that enabled them to be self-reliant.

Malcolm not only changed the view on how the teacher should control the class, but he focused on discovery learning as well. He believed in growth through insight and early opportunity for application. He observed many instances where a great lecture was presented but had very little change in learning. This typically was due to the training program being built around

what needed to be taught rather than what the learner needs to learn. "If learners had a way to connect new learning with old wisdom—then understanding, rather than fact retention would ensue." (Bell, 1989, p. 43)

Pat McLagan, a supporter of Malcom's work, said, "Malcolm is the spiritual father of many of us who persist in bringing the ideas of self-management, personal responsibility, and continuous learning for ourselves and others." (Bell, 1989, p. 40) John Ingalls another support of Malcom's, stated, "When you get to know Malcolm you come to realize that teaching is really secondary. What is primary is the facilitation of adults learning as much as possible from each other in as many different ways as possible." (Bell, 1989, p. 41)

"Andragogy or adult-learning theory, presents a learning model that centers on learners rather than instruction, making them active participants in the process." (Dastoor, 1993, p. 17) This theory emphasizes that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for decisions. Malcolm believed adult learning programs must accommodate this fundamental aspect.

"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 the topic is of immediate value" (Kearsley, 2004)

Instruction for adults under this theory focuses more on the process and less on the content being taught. Strategies such as case studies, role playing, simulations, and self-evaluation are

most useful. While using these strategies the instructor becomes a facilitator rather than the traditional lecturer.

"Andragogy applies the following principles:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of 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 job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content oriented." (Kearsley, 2004)

Andragogy can be applied in many instructional situations. Adults continue to learn on a daily basis whether it is how to repair a whole in a wall, make a new recipe or learn a new computer program to assist them in their job. The theory of andragogy has been used to improve corporate training programs.

As stated earlier, role playing and self-evaluation are two of the most useful strategies. Role Playing is a common learning method used to improve corporate sales teams. Adults are very self-directed; they should be allowed to discover things for themselves. When a sales team uses role-playing activities, they act out what they know from their own experiences and apply that to what their co-workers have learned on the job. By doing this they can share their knowledge together. At the end of the activity the facilitator will often then discuss why the particular activity was used.

For instance, in a scenario on personal image during a sales visit with a potential customer, one sales rep might who has a beard could have received negative comments regarding the

company's product. The sales reps counterpart who is cleanly shaven received compliments on the product by the same person. In this scenario, it could be as simple as the potential customer has a personal problem with people with facial hair. By having the sales reps in the company act out this scenario prior to going out on sales calls, they will then remember to be best dressed and make the best visual presentation of themselves before they speak to the prospect.

Facilitators using andragogy as a method of teaching actively involve learners in planning and directing their learning activities. (Reed, 1993, p. 20) Self Evaluation is another strategy that is commonly used in the corporate industry. In many corporate companies, they encourage employees to plan out quarterly goals and objectives to plan their learning activities for each quarter. Once the quarter is over they then have the employees perform a self evaluation on themselves to see if they have completed their learning goals. Most often times to improve this behavior the company will offer a financial bonus for those employees who met their goal or went above and beyond it. Giving financial compensation in return will increase the employee's self esteem. Also by giving the employees three months to accomplish their goals gives them plenty of time to practice the skills they learned.

Another piece of advice presented by Reed is to take advantage of learner experiences through group discussions, simulations, labs, problem-solving exercises and field work.

(Reed, 1993, p. 20) These types of activities are presented in the corporate world everyday.

Managers who facilitate learning opportunities and duties to employees in this format encourage motivation to learn and help the employee be excited to enhance their career. When it comes to real life problems people face every day, they become more interested in learning how to overcome the problems.

Malcolm discussed a case study of andragogy in use for corporate employees where he looked at the American Management Association's (AMA) Master of Management Program. AMA offers a master's degree program offered for people already in management positions. This program is integrated with the learners' worklife, so that it seems to fit better under the label "management development" than the label "academic classroom courses." (Knowles, 1986, p. 192) In order to get into this program, learners complete a series of performance assessment exercises and special tests. They then return a few weeks later to learn their results in a feedback session. The learner will then design a competency development plan with the aid of faculty advisors, which they will implement at their own pace, using resources from their own work place and using study groups and readings. In order to complete the program, they require use of the competencies on the job and a document of performance to be submitted for evaluation by a faculty panel. This program incorporates all the principles of andragogy.

One downfall to andragogy was stated by Beverly Geber, the associate editor of *TRAINING* Journal. "Andragogy in practice

tends to assume that adults want to take charge of their own learning, relate new ideas to past experiences, and verbalize all that to their peers." (Geber, 1988, p. 8) This is a downfall to the theory because many adults whether they are shy or prefer to be told what to do may not want to do these things. She also stated, "I think andragogy makes tremendous sense as a general, optimistic look at human learning. Ideally, learners should take responsibility for their own learning, they should learn from themselves and from others." (Geber, 1988, p. 8) Although this is ideal, there are a small percentage of people that will not take the responsibility for their own learning programs. These people will still follow the traditional classroom setting with a dictator type of leader to continue their education.

I believe that andragogy is very effective in corporate training situations. Employees are already receiving hands on experience and tend to be in a position where they are already motivated to learn more about their job in order to advance their career. Due to this, managers should be able to facilitate learning experiences either internally or by assisting in guiding employees to external training through other means such as the American Management Association.

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