Andragogy: Adult Learning Theory in Perspective

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Considering that the education of adults has been a concern of the human race for a very long time—as Grattan well documents in his In Quest of Knowledge—it is curious that there has been so little thinking, investigating, and writing about adult learning until recently.

Although many of the ancient great Chinese, Hebrew, Greek, and Roman teachers taught adults and philosophized about the aims of adult education and invented techniques especially for adults (such as the Socratic dialogue), I can find nothing in their writing that indicates any interest in the processes of adult learning. They had theories about the ends of adult education but none about the means of adult learning. They presumably made the assumption that adults learned in precisely the same way that children learned (or, better, in the same way that they believed that children learned).

These assumptions and beliefs (and blindspots) persisted through the ages well into the twentieth century. There was only one theoretical framework for all of education, for children and adults alike—pedagogy—in spite of the fact that pedagogy literally means
the art and science of leading children.

Starting shortly after the end of World War I there began emerging both in this country and in Europe a growing body of notions about the unique characteristics of adults as learners. But only in the last decade have these notions evolved into a comprehensive theory of adult learning. It is fascinating to trace this evolutionary process in this country.

Two streams of inquiry are discernible beginning with the founding of the American Association for Adult Education in 1926, with funding for research and publications by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. One stream we might call the scientific stream, and the other the artistic stream. The scientific stream, which seeks to discover new knowledge through rigorous—and often experimental—investigation, was launched by Edward L. Thorndike with the publication of his *Adult Learning* in 1928. The title is misleading, however, for Thorndike was not concerned with the processes of adult learning but rather with learning ability. His studies did demonstrate that adults could learn, and this was important, for it provided a scientific foundation for a field that has previously been based on the mere faith that adults could learn. Additions to this stream in the next decade included Thorndike’s *Adult Interests* in 1935 and Herbert Sorenson’s *Adult Abilities* in 1938. By the onset of World War II, therefore, adult educators had scientific evidence that adults could learn and that they possessed interests and abilities that were different from those of children and youth.

**Lindeman’s Pioneering Theories**

It was the artistic stream, which seeks to discover new knowledge through intuition and the analysis of experience, which was concerned with how adults learn. This stream was launched in 1926 with the publication of Eduard C. Lindeman’s *The Meaning of Adult Education*, in which appear such insightful statements as these: “... the approach to adult education will be via the route of situations, not subjects. Our academic system has grown in reverse order: subjects and teachers constitute the starting-point, students are secondary. In conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum; in adult education the curriculum is built around the student’s needs and interests. Every adult person finds himself in specific situations with respect to his work, his recreation, his family-life, his community-life, et cetera—situations which call for adjustments. Adult education begins at this point.”

“... the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience. If education is life, then life is also education. Too much of learning consists of various substitutions of someone else’s ex-

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3 Herbert Sorenson, *Adult Abilities* (Minneapolis, 1938).
experience and knowledge. Psychology is teaching us, however, that we learn what we do, and that therefore all genuine education will keep doing and thinking together. ... Experience is the adult learner's living textbook."

"Authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking, rigid pedagogical formulae—all these have no place in adult education. ... [aspiring adults] who are led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after wisdom and not oracles: this constitutes the setting for adult education, the modern quest for life's meaning."6

"Apologists for the status quo in education frequently assert that the great majority of adults are not interested in learning, are not motivated in the direction of continuing education; if they possessed these incentives, they would, naturally, take advantage of the numerous free educational opportunities provided by public agencies. This argument begs the question and misconceives the problem. We shall never know how many adults desire intelligence regarding themselves and the world in which they live until education once more escapes the patterns of conformity. Adult education is an attempt to discover a new method and create a new incentive for learning; its implications are qualitative, not quantitative. Adult learners are precisely those whose intellectual aspirations are least likely to be aroused by the rigid, uncompromising requirements of authoritative, conventionalized institutions of learning."7

Two excerpts from other Lindeman writings elaborate on these ideas:

"I am conceiving adult education in terms of a new technique for learning, a technique as essential to the college graduate as to the unlettered manual worker. It represents a process by which the adult learns to become aware of and to evaluate his experience. To do this he cannot begin by studying 'subjects' in the hope that some day this information will be useful. On the contrary, he begins by giving attention to situations in which he finds himself, to problems which include obstacles to his self-fulfillment. Facts and information from the differentiated spheres of knowledge are used, not for the purpose of accumulation, but because of need in solving problems. In this process the teacher finds a new function. He is no longer the oracle who speaks from the platform of authority, but rather the guide, the pointer-out who also participates in learning in proportion to the vitality and relevance of his facts and experiences. In short, my conception of adult education is this: a cooperative venture in non-authoritarian, informal learning, the chief purpose of which is to discover the meaning of experience; a quest

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5 Ibid., pp. 9-10.
6 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
7 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
of the mind which digs down to the roots of the preconceptions which formulate our conduct; a technique of learning for adults which makes education coterminous with life and hence elevates living itself to the level of adventurous experiment."  

"None but the humble become good teachers of adults. In an adult class the student's experience counts for as much as the teacher's knowledge. Both are exchangeable at par. Indeed, in some of the best adult classes it is sometimes difficult to discover who is learning the most, the teacher or the students. This two-way learning is also reflected by shared authority. In conventional education the pupils adapt themselves to the curriculum offered, but in adult education the pupils aid in formulating the curricula . . . . Under democratic conditions authority is of the group. This is not an easy lesson to learn, but until it is learned democracy cannot succeed."  

I am tempted to quote further from this pioneering theorist, but these excerpts are sufficient to portray a new way of thinking about adult learning. Lindeman here identifies several of the key assumptions about adult learners that have been supported by later research and that constitute the foundation stones of modern adult learning theory: (1) Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; these are, therefore, the appropriate starting points for organizing adult learning activities. (2) Adults' orienta-

tion to learning is life-centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects. (3) Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience. (4) Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it. (5) Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning. 

It is interesting to note that Lindeman did not dichotomize adult versus youth education, but rather adult versus "conventional" education—thus implying that youth might learn better, too, when their needs and interests, life situations, experience, self-concepts, and individual differences are taken into account.

Early Theories From the Journal of Adult Education

The artistic stream of inquiry which Lindeman had launched in 1926 flowed on through the pages of the Journal of Adult Education, the quarterly publication of the American Association for Adult Education, which between February, 1929 and October, 1941 provided the most distinguished body of literature yet produced in the field of adult education. The

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9 Ibid., p. 166.
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following excerpts from its articles reveal the growing collection of insights about adult learning gleaned from the experience of successful practitioners:

"...Earning and living are not two separate departments or operations in life. They are two names for a continuous process looked at from opposite ends. ... A type of education based on this vision of continuity is, obviously, the outstanding need of our times. Its outlook will be lifelong. It will look upon the industry of civilization as the great 'continuation school' for intelligence and for character, and its object will be not merely to fit men and women for the specialized vocations they are to follow, but also to animate the vocations themselves with ideals of excellence appropriate to each."  

"The most significant fact in American industrial and professional life at present is this steady transformation of industry and the professions into educational institutions. The American people seem to realize that their greatest material success depends upon the degree to which each worker finds the right opportunity for self-education on the job."  

"Surely between ages 12 and 18 schools can, if they will, greatly idealize practices of self-education to be systematically entered upon when full-time attendance ceases. Surely large proportions of the programs of adult education provided by public, philanthropic, or private agencies can in a degree be so constructed as to throw upon the learner individual considerably greater responsibilities for educative effort on his own behalf than is now the case. . . .

And should not similar short unit courses be available as a part of a program of adult education, designed to push the personal teacher into the background, to push forward the learner's own powers of self-help, and to emphasize also the libraries, bibliographies, analyses and like upon which these can work?"  

"At the other end of the traditional academic ladder the adult educational movement is forcing recognition of the value and importance of continuing the learning process indefinitely . . . But among the farseeing leaders of the movement in the United States it is recognized not so much as a substitute for inadequate schooling in youth as an educational opportunity superior to that offered in youth—superior because the learner is motivated not by the artificial incentives of academic organization but by the honest desire to know and to enrich his experience.

There is gradually emerging, therefore, a conception of educa-

11 Charles R. Mann, "Education for More than the Job," ibid., p. 56.
tion as a lifelong process beginning at birth and ending only with death, a process related at all points to the life experiences of the individual, a process full of meaning and reality to the learner, a process in which the student is active participant rather than passive recipient.”

“A person is a good educator among adults when he has a definite conviction about life and when he can present intelligent arguments on behalf of it; but primarily he does not qualify as an adult educator at all until he can exist in a group that collectively disputes, denies, or ridicules his conviction, and continues to adore him because he rejoices in them....

...there is positive evidence that no adult education system will ever make a success of collegiate methods of instruction to adults in the cultural fields. Something new in the way of content and method must be produced as soon as possible for adult education, and probably it will have to grow up in the field. No teacher-training-college hen can lay an adult education egg.”

“Agencies for adult education might profitably spend a large part of their time and resources on establishing forums and discussion groups; not for ruddier discussion, but for planned and directed thinking under trained leaders, using every available source for the acquisition of true knowledge.... We have indeed many groups modeled on the New School of Social Research scattered around the country in which, under trained leaders, men may discuss trends and theories. These men are not so much being educated as educating themselves.”

“It cannot be pointed out too often that all education is self-education. Teachers may help define procedure, collect equipment, indicate the most propitious routes, but the climber must use his own head and legs if he would reach the mountaintop.”

“Teachers want help in planning courses and units of study; in setting up definite objectives consistent with the needs of their students; in keeping their courses flexible and adapted to the developing interests of their students. They want to know how to bring the experiences of their students’ daily lives into the framework of a course of study; how to take advantage of spontaneous and unpredictable educational opportunities; how to cut across ‘subjects’ in dealing with the ways of thinking and of acting that are characteristic of everyday adult life.

Teachers want to understand and master the methods of group work and study; to learn how to lead a group without dominating; how to provide opportunity for democratic participation; how to get students increasingly to accept

responsible for planning their own programs of study and activity; how to help students to broaden their interests; how to conduct the work of a group so that it shall be reflected in the life of the community.

Teacher education at all times should exemplify and demonstrate the teaching methods found most effective with adult groups. Because of the variety of needs to be served, a teacher-education program will give opportunity to utilize many teaching methods: group discussion to solve common problems; discussion by a panel, composed of representatives of community welfare; forums to supply information on public affairs. Group projects, observation, individual study, and lectures may likewise be employed in appropriate situations. If the use of each method is preceded by an examination of its potential values and is followed by an analysis of its effectiveness, every lesson will not only serve its own specific purpose, but will also demonstrate a technique of teaching."  

"In a day school, where the students are usually children or young adolescents, a learned-teacher-ignorant-pupil relationship is almost inevitable, and frequently it has its advantages. But in a night school the situation is entirely different. Here, so far as the class is concerned, the teacher is an authority upon one subject only, and each of the students has, in his own particular field, some skill or knowledge that the teacher does not possess. For this reason, there is a spirit of give-and-take in a night-school class that induces a feeling of comradeship in learning, stimulating to teacher and students alike. And the quickest way to achieve this desirable state is through laughter in which all can join.

And so I say again that, if we are really wise, we teachers in night schools will, despite taxes or indigestion, teach merrily!"

"Authoritarian adult education is marked throughout by regimentation demanding obedient conformity to patterns of conduct handed down from authority. Behavior is expected to be predictable, standardized. . . . Democratic adult education employs the method of self-directing activity, with free choice of subject matter and free choice in determining outcomes. Spontaneity is welcome. Behavior cannot with certainty be predicted and therefore is not standardized. Individual, critical thinking is perhaps the best description of the democratic method and it is here that the gulf is widest between democracy and the authoritarian system."  

"On the whole, adult education is as different from ordinary schooling as adult life. . . is different from the protected life of the child. . . ."

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17 Mildred G. Wiese and G. L. Maxwell, "As We Are Taught So Do We Teach," *Journal of Adult Education* 11, 2 (April 1939): 174-175.
19 Ben M. Cherrington, "Democratic versus Authoritarian Adult Education," *Journal of Adult Education* 11, 3 (June 1939): 244-245.
individual and social responsibilities, is different from the protected life of the child... Adult education, accordingly, makes special allowance for individual contributions from the students, and seeks to organize these contributions into some form of social purpose.20 'Let the class do the work' should be adopted as a motto. There must be ample opportunity for forums, discussions, debates. Newspapers, circulars, and magazines as well as textbooks should be used for practice in reading. Extracurricular activities should become a recognized part of the educational process. These are some of the elements that must be incorporated in a program of adult education for citizens if it is to be successful."21

By 1940 most of the elements required for a comprehensive theory of adult learning had been discovered, but they had not yet been brought together into a unified theory; they remained as isolated insights, concepts, and principles. During the 1940s and 1950s these elements were clarified, elaborated on, and added to in a veritable explosion of knowledge from the various disciplines in the human sciences. (It is interesting to note in passing that during this period there was a gradual shift in emphasis in research away from the highly quantitative, fragmentary, experimental research of the 1930s and 1940s to more holistic longitudinal case studies—with, in my estimation, a higher yield of useful knowledge.).

Examples

From the discipline of psychotherapy.—Rogers provided strong evidence of the need of the human organism to move from dependency toward self-directedness as it matures, and he demonstrated the central importance of the quality of the relationship between teacher and learner in effecting learning.22 Maslow presented the clearest conceptualization yet of adult motivation.23 Erikson clarified the stages of personality development and contributed the concept of identity-formation.24 In fact, the central role of self-concept in human development received increasing reinforcement from the entire field of psychiatry as it moved away from a medical model toward an educational model in its research and practice.

From the discipline of developmental psychology.—Havighurst identified the developmental tasks associated with different stages of growth.25 Pressey and Kuhlen pioneered the collection of research on human development into a sequential picture of changes in personality characteristics with age through the life span26—an undertaking more

22 Carl R. Rogers, Client-Centered Therapy (Boston, 1951).
26 Sidney L. Pressey and Raymond G. Kuhlen, Psychological Development through the Life Span (New York, 1957).
recently resumed by Bischof and by Goulet and Baltes.27

From the disciplines of sociology and social psychology.—A great deal of new knowledge about the behavior of groups and larger social systems, including the forces which facilitate or inhibit change in them, has come from the works of Kurt Lewin, Leland Bradford, Warren Bennis, Kenneth Benne, Robert Chin, Chris Argyris, and many others.28 Together with the sociologists, the social psychologists have also contributed important new knowledge about environmental influences—such as culture, race, population characteristics, and density—on learning.29

From the discipline of education.—The behaviorist and cognitive researchers in education have been primarily concerned with the responses to teaching of animals and children, and so relatively little knowledge about adult learning has come from their work.30 Considerably more useful knowledge has come from the works of the humanistic educators.31 But the most useful new knowledge has come from studies of adult learners directly. Houle’s pioneering in-depth investigation of 22 “continuing learners” gave us the insight that some adults are goal-oriented, some are activity-oriented, and others are learning-oriented in their approach to learning.32 His demonstration of the fruitfulness of the case method of research spawned a number of doctoral dissertations and a major work by Allen Tough, The Adult’s Learning Projects.33 Tough’s study has taught us much about how adults learn naturally (in contrast to when they are being taught), including the fact that they organize their learning activities into “projects” (not courses) and the fact that they seek out “helpers” who are both knowledgeable and supportive. A rash of interdisciplinary studies of the processes of aging and their implications for learning since the mid-1950s has also provided a

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30 An exception to this generalization is a very recent series of investigations into cognitive processes in adult years. See L. R. Goulet and P. B. Baltes, Life-Span Developmental Psychology (New York, 1970); J. Botwinick, Cognitive Processes in Maturity and Old Age (New York, 1967); and L. F. Jarvik, C. Eisdorfer, and J. E. Blum, Intellectual Functioning in Adults (New York, 1972).
31 For an overview of this literature, see D. A. Read and S. B. Simon, Humanistic Education Sourcebook (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1975).
33 Allen Tough, The Adult’s Learning Projects (Toronto, 1971). The increase in dissertation research concerning adult learning is indicated by the fact that three such studies were listed in 1960 (Adult Education 10, 4 [Summer, 1960]: 195-198), while 58 were listed in 1970 (Research and Investigations in Adult Education ERIC Clearinghouse in Adult Education, Syracuse: [1970], pp. 13-29).
large volume of new knowledge. Attempts to bring the isolated concepts, insights, and research findings regarding adult learning together into an integrated framework began as early as 1949, with the publication of Harry Overstreet's *The Mature Mind*, and continued with my own *Informal Adult Education* in 1950, Edmund Brunner's *Overview of Research in Adult Education* in 1954, J. R. Kidd's *How Adults Learn* in 1959, J. R. Gibb's chapter on "Learning Theory in Adult Education" in the *Handbook of Adult Education in the U. S.* in 1960, and Harry L. Miller's *Teaching and Learning in Adult Education* in 1964. But these turned out to be more descriptive listings of concepts and principles than comprehensive, coherent, and integrated theoretical frameworks. What was needed was an integrative and differentiating concept.

Andragogy in Europe

Such a concept had been evolving in Europe for some time—the concept of a unified theory of adult learning for which the label *andragogy* had been coined to differentiate it from the theory of youth learning, *pedagogy*. I was first introduced to the concept and the label in 1967 by a Yugoslavian adult educator, Dusan Savicevic, and introduced them into our American literature with my article, "Androgogy, Not Pedagogy" in *Adult Leadership* in April, 1968. (Note my misspelling of the word until I was corrected through correspondence with the publishers of Merriam-Webster dictionaries). Since this label has now become widely adopted in our literature, it may be worthwhile to trace the history of its use.

A Dutch adult educator, Ger van Enckevort, has made an exhaustive study of the origins and use of the term andragogy, and I shall merely summarize his findings. The term (Andragogik) was first coined, so far as he could discover, by a German grammar school teacher, Alexander Kapp, in 1833. Kapp used the word in a description of the educational theory of the Greek philosopher Plato, although Plato never used the term himself. A few years later the better-known German philosopher Johan Friedrich Herbart acknowledged the term by strongly opposing its use. Van Enckevort observes that "the great philosopher had more influence than the simple teacher, and so the word was forgotten and disappeared for nearly a hundred years."

Van Enckevort found the term being used again in 1921 by the German social scientist Eugen Rosenstock, who taught at the Academy of Labor in Frankfort. In a report to the Academy in 1921

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34 For a recent treatment of this literature, see G. Grabowski and W. D. Mason *Learning for Aging* (Washington, 1974).

he expressed the opinion that adult education required special teachers, special methods, and a special philosophy. "It is not enough to translate the insights of education theory [or pedagogy] to the situation of adults... the teachers should be professionals who could cooperate with the pupils; only such a teacher can be, in contrast to a 'pedagogue,' an 'andragogue.' Incidentally, Rosenstock believed that he invented the term until 1962, when he was informed of its earlier use by Kapp and Herbart. Van Enckevort reports that Rosenstock used the term on a number of occasions, and that it was picked up by some of his immediate colleagues, but that it still did not receive general recognition.

The Dutch scholar next finds the term being used by a Swiss psychiatrist, Heinrich Hanselmann, in a book published in 1951, *Andragogy: Nature, Possibilities and Boundaries of Adult Education*, which dealt with the non-medical treatment or re-education of adults. Only six years later, in 1957, a German teacher, Franz Poggeler, published a book entitled *Introduction to Andragogy: Basic Issues in Adult Education*. About this time the term started being used in other than German-speaking countries. In 1956, M. Ogrizovic published a dissertation in Yugoslavia on "penological andragogy," and in 1959 he published a book entitled *Problems of Andragogy*. Soon other leading Yugoslavian adult educators, including Samolovcev, Filipovic, and Savicevic, began speaking and writing about andragogy, and faculties of andragogy offering doctorates in adult education were established at the universities of Zagreb and Belgrade in Yugoslavia and the universities of Budapest and Debrecen in Hungary.

Andragogy started being used in the Netherlands by Professor T. T. ten Have in his lectures in 1954, and in 1959 he published the outlines for a science of andragogy. Since 1966 the University of Amsterdam has had a doctorate for andragogues, and in 1970 a department of pedagogical and andragogical sciences was established in the faculty of social sciences. In the current Dutch literature a distinction is made among "andragogy," which is any intentional and professionally guided activity which aims at a change in adult persons; "andragogics," which is the background of methodological and ideological systems which govern the actual process of andragogy; and "andragology," which is the scientific study of both andragogy and andragogics.

During the past decade andragogy has come into increasing use by adult educators in France (Bertrand Schwartz), England (J. A. Simpson), Venezuela (Felix Adam), and Canada (a Bachelor of Andragogy degree program was established at Concordia University in Montreal in 1973).

**Andragogy in the U.S.**

In this country, to date four major expositions of the theory of andragogy and its implications for
practice have appeared, a number of articles have appeared in periodicals reporting on applications of the andragogical framework to social work education, religious education, undergraduate and graduate education, management training, and other spheres; and an increasing volume of research on hypotheses derived from andragogical theory is being reported. There is growing evidence, too, that the use of andragogical theory is making a difference in the way programs of adult education are being organized and operated, in the way teachers of adults are being trained, and in the way adults are being helped to learn. There is even evidence that concepts of andragogy are beginning to make an impact on the theory and practice of elementary, secondary, and collegiate education.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The field of adult education has long sought a glue to bind its diverse institutions, clienteles, and activities into some sense of unity; perhaps andragogy will give it at least a unifying theory. And, extended in its application to the concept of life long education, perhaps andragogy will provide a unifying theme for all of education.

"Andragogy" is not yet a word that appears in any dictionary. But apparently its time is coming.

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