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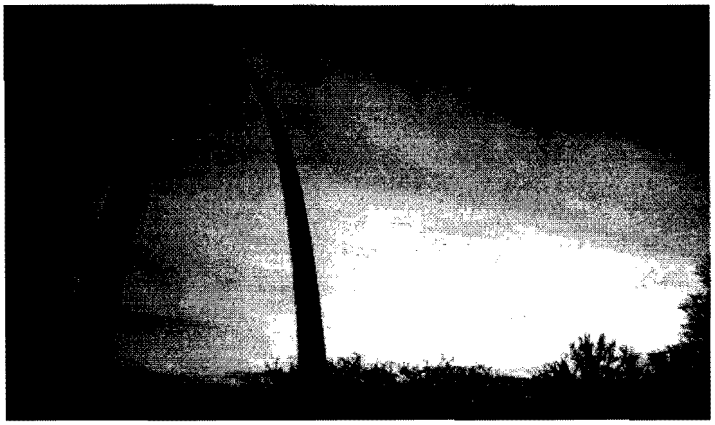

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Comparing the American and European Perspectives on the International Concept of Andragogy and the Implications for the Development of Adult Education Theory and Practice

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Keywords: andragogy, international, theorizing

Abstract: In this research paper we present a thorough picture of both the American and European perspectives on andragogy. We believe this to be much needed in the ongoing development of what many erroneously consider a static concept.

Purpose of This Research

The purpose of this research was to answer the question: What are the major English language works published around the world on andragogy [the art and science of helping adults learn] that may provide a clear and understandable comparison between the American and European perspectives of this international concept of andragogy; and what, if any, are the implications of this research for the development of adult education theory and practice? Included in this research were: Any material in English that presents various aspects of the concept of andragogy; and, a presentation and view of the content of andragogy within any country of the world Sources included: Data bases, journal articles, practice pieces, conference proceedings, books, dissertation abstracts, and bibliographic references within the above materials. More than 250 items were found. The interpretive form of research design was used.

Positioning the Study of Andragogy Internationally

Merriam (2001) posited that international scholarship on andragogy since 1990 has taken two directions. One seeks to establish it as a scientific discipline; and, the other critiques andragogy for its lack of attention to its learning context. She also asserts andragogy and self-directed learning as the two "pillars" of adult learning theory that will engender debate, research, discussion, and enrich our understanding and practice of facilitating adult learning.

King and Wang (2007) said that the overall continuing research on andragogy conducted since the year 2000 by Cooper and Henschke (2007), presents a much needed continuing development of what many erroneously consider as a static concept. Savicevic (personal conversation with Henschke, 9/27/06, in Bamberg, Germany) emphasized that the ongoing study of andragogy and publication of the same by Henschke and Cooper, has singularly become very important in "bridge-building" not only between the American and European perspectives of andragogy, but also the numerous worldwide perspectives on andragogy.

The European Perspective

Beginning with the European perspective on andragogy, Savicevic (1999) provided the broad foundational European perspective with comparing andragogical concepts of ten European Countries – five western (German, French, Dutch, British, Finnish), and five eastern (Soviet, Czech-Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, Yugoslav). This comparison showed common roots but

results in five varying schools of thought: (a) Whether andragogy and pedagogy are parallel; (b) whether the science is integrative of the process of learning, guidance, and orientation; (c) whether or not andragogy is prescriptive on the teaching and learning of adults; (d) andragogy as a science is considered doubtful and refuted; and (e) the possibility of andragogy being a scientific discipline.

Savicevic (1999) clearly aligned himself with the fifth school of thought in that this research aims toward establishing the origin and development of andragogy as an academic discipline. He put forth the various perspectives of Europe and America that have the longest traditions and/or strongholds in andragogy.

The European concept of andragogy is more comprehensive than the American conception, even though Europeans do not use the terms andragogy and adult education synonymously (Young, 1985). European andragogy accompanies adults to become more refined and competent. European pedagogy assists a child to become an adult. Likewise, there should be differences in the relationship between a teacher and adult pupils and the relationship between a teacher and children.

The American Perspective

Turning then to the American perspective, Knowles (1995, 1996) provided the most articulate expression and understanding of andragogy from the American perspective. The structure of the theory is comprised of two conceptual foundations: The learning theory and the design theory. The learning theory is based upon adults and their desire to become and/or to express themselves as capable human beings and has six components: Adults need to know a reason that makes sense to them, for whatever they need to learn; They have a deep need to be self-directing and take responsibility for themselves; Adults enter a learning activity with a quality and volume of experience that is a resource for their own and others' learning; They are ready to learn when they experience a need to know, or be able to do, something to perform more effectively in some aspect of their life; Adults' orientation to learning is around life situations that are task, issue, or problem centered, for which they seek solutions; and, Adults are motivated much more internally that externally.

Knowles' (1995) conceptual foundation of the design theory is based in a process, and is not dependent upon a body of content, but helps the learner acquire whatever content is needed. There are eight components of the design process: (a) Preparing the learners for the program; (b) setting a climate that is conducive to learning [physically comfortable and inviting; and psychologically – mutually respectful, collaborative, mutually trustful, supportive, open and authentic, pleasurable and human]; (c) involving learners in mutual planning; (d) involving learners in diagnosing their learning needs; (e) involving learners in forming their learning objectives; (f) involving learners in designing learning plans; (g) helping learners carry out their learning plans; and, (h) involving learners in evaluating their learning outcomes. Active involvement seems to be the watchword of Knowles' (thus American) version of andragogy, and each step of the andragogical learning process.

Knowles (1970, 1995, 1996) successfully tested and refined his theory and design on a broad spectrum in numerous settings: corporate, workplace, business, industry, healthcare, government, higher education, professions, religious education, and elementary, secondary, and remedial education. Houle (1992) also emphasizes the impact of Knowles on American andragogy, and how he has worked this out in practice especially in non-school settings and the workplace. He went on to indicate that scholars and theorists may find great value in Knowles'

discussion of the development of learning theories in the educational literature, and his exploration of the roots of his own thinking about theorizing. He also spoke about Knowles' work being practical and providing concrete examples and in-depth case studies of how learning activities are planned, structured, and executed.

Criticism of the American Perspective

Nevertheless, there was strong criticism of American andragogy, and that coming from Europe and Australia (Candy, 1991; Jarvis, 1984). At the time Knowles articulated andragogy, self-expression and personal development were in vogue. Thus, andragogy was best understood in curriculum terms as an expression of the romantic, was launched into a romantic philosophy, similar to it and receptive to it. So it would seem that andragogy emerged at a time when its romantic philosophical structures reflected the romantic structures of the wider society.

Welton (1995) leveled the assertion that "the 'andragogical consensus' [anchoring the study of adult education in methods of teaching and understanding the individual adult learner], formulated by the custodians of orthodoxy in the American Commission of Professors in the 1950s and solidified by Malcolm Knowles and others in the 1960s and 1970s, has unraveled at the seams" (p. 5). The fundamental accusations expressed are that because of this perspective, adult education has abandoned its once vital role in fostering democratic social action, is on a shaky foundation, works to the advantage of large-scale organizations, and is conceptually inadequate to serve the interests of the disenfranchised in North American society.

Savicevic (1999) indicated that Knowles was inconsistent in determining andragogy and thus has caused much confusion and misunderstanding. He identified six mistakes of Knowles regarding his perspective on andragogy that are presented here. First, Knowles defined andragogy as 'science and art' following in the footsteps of Dewey in doing the same thing with pedagogy. Second, he defined andragogy as 'the science and art of helping adults to learn' thus reducing it to a prescription or a recipe for how a teacher needs to behave in educating adults. Third, he declared andragogy as a 'model' for teaching even in pre-school, thus moving it away from just applying to adults. Fourth, he directed andragogy only toward problems of learning, thus neglecting social and philosophical dimensions of adults. Fifth, he emphasized an individualistic approach to learning and education with no link to adults' existing circumstances, education level, and other factors relating to learning. Sixth, Knowles' lack of historical awareness prompted him to think he was the first to use andragogy in the American adult education literature.

Grace (2001) considered that Knowles' (hence the Knowlesian American) andragogy as a theory of how adults learn, ascended to prominence in the U. S. adult education after the 1970 publication of his book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy.* By 1990 it was losing much of its punch as a result of the discussion and controversy surrounding it. He felt that Knowles' perspective is too much caught up with individualization, institutionalization, professionalization, techno-scientization, self-directed learning, the politics of exclusion, maintenance, and conformity. Grace also believed it ignores resistance and transformation, and sees mainstream U. S. and Canadian adult education as having been complicit in sidelining cultural and social concerns, thus depoliticizing and de-contextualizing adult learning. Although he saw Knowles' andragogy as having been effectively dismantled in the 1980s and 1990s, Grace presents a vigorous case for its needing more of the same to neutralize its continued prominence and influence. Others could be detailed but are too numerous to mention for lack of space here.

Continuation and Sustaining the American Perspective

Consequently, one may wonder how, in the face of all the criticism, Knowles' (and thus the American) version of andragogy not only survives, but also thrives and remains robust in the adult education field. A number of explanations from different sources may shed some light on this question. First, Knowles (1989b) provided a clue about a major ingredient necessary and quite obviously present in everything he did and everyone he touched deeply. In his development and revision of his theory he considered both pedagogical and andragogical assumptions as valid and appropriate in certain varying situations [to the delight of some and to the dismay of others]. The pitfall and problem he discovered with this approach is that ideological pedagogues will do everything they can to keep learners dependent on them, because this is their main psychic reward in teaching.

However, on the other hand, Knowles (1989) saw that andragogues will accept dependency when it clearly is the reality and will meet the dependency needs through didactic instruction until the learners have built up a foundation of knowledge about the content area sufficient for them to gain enough confidence about taking responsibility for planning and carrying out their own learning projects. And even pedagogues, when they experience being treated like an adult learner, experience greater psychic rewards when learners become excited with learning, and begin experimenting with andragogy. Knowles (1990) indicated the crucial importance of equality, openness, democracy, realness, genuineness, prizing, acceptance, and empathic understanding on the part of the andragogue. The andragogical teacher/facilitator accepts each participant (student) as a person of worth, respects his feelings and ideas, and seeks to build relationships of mutual trust and exposes his/her own feelings regarding the relationship between the teacher and adult learner.

Second, Illeris (2004) a Danish adult educator for 30 years, who is not an andragogue, but a pedagogue, was convinced that adults need to be actively involved in developing and executing adult education programs. He asserted that it is of "... entirely decisive importance that the point of departure of planning is that the participants in adult education programs are *adults*, humans that both formally and in reality are responsible for their own actions and decisions" (p. 163). He went on to indicate here that he is quite in line with Knowles in his agitation for andragogy as a discipline, which is in many ways different from the pedagogy of children's schooling and upbringing.

Third, Peters and Jarvis (1991) call Malcolm S. Knowles one of the best-known and most respected adult educators of all time. They had him provide as an epilogue to their book, an andragogical vision of the future of the adult education field.

Fourth, Long (1991) speculated that although Knowles' form of andragogy is weak in empirical confirmation there are five reasons it has survived the criticism leveled against it: (a) His humanistic ideas appeal to adult educators in general; (b) the limited empirical refutation of andragogy has not been strongly convincing; (c) his reaction to criticism was flexible and encouraging, and he later incorporated some of the criticisms; (d) he is a leader widely respected for other contributions; and, (e) the inclusion of Knowles' concept of andragogy provided a framework for integrating self-directed learning.

Fifth, Griffith (1991) credited Knowles as being the best-known American adult educator. His presentation of andragogy as a fresh way of thinking about adult education has attracted thousands of disciples from the ranks of practicing adult educators. Knowles' "...concept of andragogy has undoubtedly inspired countless practicing adult educators to adopt the term, to embark upon graduate study in the field, and to profess allegiance to their perception

of the concept. Knowles has also stimulated a great deal of interest in the self-directed learner and the use of learning contracts" (p. 105).

Sixth, Donaghy (2004) in the process of his doctoral dissertation had an interview with Allen Tough and he said that Knowles was a wonderful and special man, pioneered self-directed learning, was more approachable than Kidd and Houle, was on a first name basis with everyone, had enormous amounts of energy and outgoing warmth, attracted an enormous number of students who carry on his work, and documented the accomplishments of his students in each one of his books.

Seventh, Houle (1996), said that Knowles' andragogy remains the most learner-centered of all patterns of adult educational programming. He added that Knowles kept evolving, enlarging, and revising his point of view and therefore became something of a moving target, particularly since he was intimately involved with numerous projects at every level of magnitude in both customary and unusual settings all over the world. He could bring to discussions and debates a wealth of experience that his opponents could not match. In addition, some of his followers developed variant conceptions of andragogy, thereby enlarging the discourse. Knowles' idea on andragogy had application to learners in a wide variety of settings, and "...significantly...influences every other system...in the creation of a climate in which they can most fruitfully learn" (p. 30).

Conclusion

To conclude, Robb (1990) believed that South African andragogics can enable the improvement of understanding between Continental European and American adult educationists. To help, he saw the need for studies on: whether andragogy terminology is necessary; whether adult educationists are scientists; and, where adult educationists differ in America and Continental Europe as paving the way for a more adequate description of what andragogy is. We hope that this may help support the idea that both perspectives are important and needed for a comprehensive understanding of andragogy and its place within the worldwide Field of Adult Education. Application of these expressions helps improve the study and scholarship regarding the research, theory and practice of adult education.

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Comparison of American and European Andragogy

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

49th Adult Education Research Conference

University of Missouri - St. Louis
June 4-7, 2008

Presentation by
John A. Henschke, Ed. D
Mary K. Cooper, Ph. D.

International Andragogy

- One of Two Major Pillars of Adult Education
- This Discussion is Meant to Be Bridge-Building

European Perspective

- Broad Foundation includes Ten Countries – East and West
- More Comprehensive & Theoretical than American
- Strongest Supports Andragogy as An Academic Discipline

American Perspective

- Mainly Identified with & Impacted by Malcolm Knowles
- Six Assumptions about Learners
- Eight Elements in the Learning Process
- Applicable to Numerous Venues
- Practical

Criticism of American Perspective

- Self-Expressive & Romantic
- Abandonded Once Vital Role of Democratic Social Action
- Knowles Thought it Applied also to Children
- Caught up in Individualism
- Failed to Live up to Its Promise of Being Comprehensive

Continuing & Sustaining American Perspective

- How Does it Survive & Thrive?
- Fosters Growth & Responsibility
- Adult Learners take Initiative
- Knowles Most Respected AE
- Humanistic Appeal to Adult Eds.
- Andragogy As Fresh Thinking

Continuing & Sustaining American Perspective [*ctd*]

- Knowles' Students Carry It On
- Enormous Application to Lifelong Learning
- Most Learner-Centered of All Patterns of Adult Education
- Applies to Internet Learning
- Significantly Influences Every Other Learning System
- Creates Fruitful Learning Climate

South African View

- Could Help Improve Understanding
- May Pave the Way for A More Adequate Definition