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Malcolm's Neglected Species

In 1950, Malcolm Knowles published a book that shared information he gleaned from being a program organizer for the YMCA. Two books later he published a book in 1984 titled: The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species. By 1980 Knowles formalized his first four assumptions. When he wrote the book in 1984, he added the fifth. Malcolm Knowles's assumptions about adult learners are as follows.

Assumption	Explanation
1. Self-Concept	As a person matures his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.
2. Adult Learner Experience	As a person matures he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
3. Readiness to Learn	As a person matures his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.
4. Orientation to Learning	As a person matures his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. As a result his/her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness.
5. Motivation to Learn	As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal.

(Knowles 1984:12)

It is often misrepresented that Malcolm Knowles coined the term Andragogy. Although he did not put the term together, he did make it a very popular and well-known term. The term Andragogy is an offshoot of the ancient Greek term pedagogy, “peda” meaning child and “-gogy” meaning leading. In the same vein, the term “Andra-gogy” means “man-leading” in Greek. However, it was not until 1833 where the term was first put into print by Alexander Kapp, a German educator. (Educators technology 2015) As it is used today Andragogy loosely defines any educational event that was specifically designed for adult learners.

In this paper, I support the idea that Knowles has present by including the phrase “as a learner matures”. I build support around this element of his thought process by observing two types of adult learners. The first is the adult workforce member, often working as an individual contributor, who has been forced into the classroom for compliance purposes. The second is the self-directed adult learner who as voluntarily re-entered the classroom for personal development. (Knowles 1998, 65)

It is fitting, and almost comical, that Knowles used the term “assumptions” to describe his observations around how adults learn. Having worked with adult learners for over ten years, I can boldly state that not all adult learners arrive in the classroom at the same level of maturity. You can view a learner as an adult and

although they have a full-sized body, and they dress like an adult we cannot be certain that all the assumptions listed will apply to their given circumstances.

Simply because a person knows how to dress and drive a car is not grounds to assume that they are a self-directed human being. A few members of the adult workforce are heavily dependent on their place of work for all their income, it is their major food source. The culture they have experienced is their only experience around what sort of behavior is appropriate in the workplace. In some cases, these adults have only worked at a single company for their entire career.

1. Self-Concept. As we age we tend to become less dependent on others. This is a key identifier of the maturity of the individual. This idea is not left at the door of the adult learner's classroom. Adults vary in maturity level and the higher their maturity level the more likely they will be to set in their paradigm of reality. Therefore, learning will have to fit in with this viewpoint or effectively alter the learner's perception, to be effective. (Knowles 1998, 65)

2. Adult Learner Experience. Most adult learners, especially extroverts, are eager to share their experiences. As people grow older, they generally bring up topics that are more relevant to the topic being discussed. Where child learners do not have previous experience in most topics, adults are more likely to have experienced the topic being discussed in real life. Therefore, adults feel compelled

to apply that experience to what is being learned. If they are allowed or *encouraged* to do this then that will promote deep learning and increased knowledge retention. (Knowles 1998, 65)

3. Readiness to Learn. Adult learners organize their readiness to learn around the developmental tasks of their social roles. Adult learners are aware of their social standing within their groups. The more mature an adult learner has become the more they will connect the act of learning with leveraging a higher potential in their social standing. (Knowles 1998, 65)

4. Orientation to Learning. Adult learners desire the ability to use the information in a training to solve a problem or improve/simplify a task. Child learners are fascinated with the new idea and do not seem to need to apply the knowledge to any real-world task to give it value. Adults are motivated by knowing how this new task will improve the quality of life. (Knowles 1998, 65)

5. Motivation to Learn. As Knowles states: "As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal". The key phrase here is "as a person matures". Although we are all getting older, we are not all maturing. Therefore this assumption of adult learners cannot be gauged on age but maturity. As adult learners progressed, they find that relevant knowledge is empowering. The result is that they are internally motivated to learn **if** the topic being learned is presented as

relevant useful information. The outcome is that instructors of adult learners must present the learner with the “What’s in it for me” (WIFM). (Knowles 1998, 65)

There are two different types of adult learners being discussed above. The first is the adult learners are adults involved in workforce training. Oftentimes these learners are in the classroom against their will. The training is mandatory. In these instances, the concept of self-directed learning is less applicable. Not only is the learner required to attend training to keep their job, but the content is often compliance-related and must be understood as it is written for legal purposes.

The second type of adult learner is a true self-directed learner who has returned to the classroom by his or her disposition. They have chosen to improve themselves and have dedicated the time and resources to succeed. In other words, they are invested in the process and this is a motivator. I have used this writing to identify that the second type of adult learner I have presented here is more likely to align with the 5 assumptions of Learners around Malcolm Knowles’ neglected species, the **mature adult learner**. I am not proposing that the first learner is by nature less mature, rather that this learner has less of an opportunity to feel self-directed and will need a stronger emphasis applied to why the learning content is relevant.

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[This video](#) was produced by David Kolmer using the free account on [Powtoon.com](https://www.powtoon.com/).



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