Adult learning (andragogy)

Thinkpiece
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It is important to recognise that adult and professional learners do not always respond well to a continuation of the pedagogic practices that they might have encountered during their schooling experiences. Over the past 30 years, new theories and principles about how adults learn have developed and Knowles (1983) adopted the term 'andragogy'. Knowles believed that pedagogy and andragogy are different. He says:

Skilful adult educators have known for a long time that they cannot teach adults as children have traditionally been taught.

Knowles 1970:54

Knowles put forward four assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners on which traditional pedagogy is premised:

The first assumption relates to adults being self-directing human beings.

The second assumption takes into account the fact that adults have a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.

The third assumption considers adults as having a readiness to learn that becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles.

The fourth assumption considers that adults have the ability of time perspective change, from the postponed application of knowledge to the immediacy of application.

He later added a fifth assumption in his book 'Andragogy and action' (1984) which highlighted that adults are motivated to learn because of internal factors such as self-esteem, recognition, better quality of life, greater self-confidence or the opportunity to self-actualise.

Outside the United States there are two dominant viewpoints on adult learning:

...one by which the theoretical framework of adult education is found in pedagogy or its branch, adult pedagogy...and the other by which the theoretical framework of adult education is found in andragogy... as a relatively independent science that includes a whole system of andragogic disciplines.

Savicevic, 1981:88

It is important that all those concerned with running adult learning programmes and engaged in developing leadership learning communities understand these ideas. Briefly, the theories and principles behind adult learning can be summarised as:

- The central importance of personal experience in learning: our past experience and present needs are the most important resource for further learning.

- The creation of a supportive but challenging learning climate in which participants can give and receive support from learning colleagues, as well as from facilitators.

- The involvement of learners in identifying, articulating and clarifying learning needs.

- The mutual responsibility of learners and facilitators for managing and developing learning experiences.

These principles acknowledge vital factors relating to learners' aspirations, commitment, motivation and involvement. They set learning within a context of self-direction and emphasise the importance of creative collaboration between learners and teachers. As Paula Allman has observed:

As adults' sense of identity or knowledge of themselves and others grows in depth and meaning they become increasingly in control of how they think about themselves. Reflective minds and minds not crowded with detail but in search of concepts, ideas and principles mean that people are in control of their thinking and have greater control over their transactions within their socio-historical contexts.

Allman, 1983:119
Knowles and the andragogical movement, as some refer to it, have not been without critique. Carlson (1989) and Welton (1995) brought together four other colleagues who shared in various ways a more radical philosophy of adult education. They present several arguments against aspects of andragogy and self-directed learning.

However, it is clear that Knowles’ work has brought considerable attention to the adult education field and that andragogy has developed as a separate field during the past three decades. Applied correctly, the andragogical approach to teaching and learning in the hands of a skilled and dedicated facilitator can make a positive impact on the adult learner.

Our consideration of Knowles’ thoughts on pedagogy and andragogy suggest that these approaches to learning are not mutually exclusive but, rather, reciprocally beneficial to the teacher and facilitator. Knowles in his later work recognises this too.

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.

Knowles et al (2005)

Reflective points

- Is there still such a clear-cut distinction between pedagogy and andragogy as Knowles believed? What evidence do you have for your answer?
- Are there transferable skills that can be gained through teaching adults and children? What, for you, are the critical transferable skills?
- What does this mean for you as a facilitator of adult learners working in the context of leadership development?

References

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