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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Toward a Definition of Andragogy: A Grounded Theory Approach

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#### Abstract

In spite of the widespread use of andragogy it has been the subject of many debates. One of the frequent debates has centered on the question of what is andragogy. It has been described as a theory, an approach, a philosophy, a set of principles, a set of assumptions, and a method for the practice of adult education and learning. The purpose of this study was to examine the literature on andragogy in order to present a working definition. Once a definition of andragogy is agreed upon a resolution to all the criticisms, confusion, and debates may be possible. This study was a qualitative grounded theory design to investigate the numerous definitions of andragogy to aid in a systematic collection and analysis of the information available in the literature. A definition of andragogy is presented. If all involved in the field of andragogy can agree upon and accept this working definition, further empirical research can be completed in the field's search for identity.

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Andragogy has been embraced by numerous disciplines in various countries throughout the world. Dusan Savicevic (1991), a professor in the Department of Andragogy at the University of Belgrade, claimed that andragogy has been adopted by educators and researchers in such countries as Germany, England, Poland, France, Finland, Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. Moreover, it has been employed in a number of disciplines such as education (Bolton, 2006), medicine (Bedi, 2004), criminal justice (Birzer, 2004), and management (Forrest & Peterson, 2006).

In spite of its widespread use, andragogy has been the subject of many debates. One of the frequent debates has centered on the question of what is andragogy. It has been described as a theory, an approach, a philosophy, a set of principles, a set of assumptions, and a method for the practice of adult education and learning (Chan, 2010; Holton, Wilson, Bates, 2009; Merriam, 2001). Joseph Davenport and Judith Davenport (1985) for example, stated that andragogy has been referred to as a theory, method, technique, or a set of assumptions of adult learning. John Henschke (1998), Chair of the Andragogy Doctoral Emphasis Specialty at Lindenwood University, noted that andragogy is a scientific discipline which involves the study of practices (facilitating, teaching, learning, etc) that assist adults in achieving their full potential. Ann Hartree (1984) criticized andragogy as being unclear and vague questioning whether it is about adult learning or about teaching adults.

Despite the criticisms, debates, and variety of definitions, andragogy continues to make a considerable contribution to the field of adult learning and education (Birzer, 2004; Chan, 2010). Merriam (2001) claimed that Cyril Houle, author of a number of books on adult education, maintained that what is important is that andragogy has encouraged adult educators to engage learners in their learning and to design learning environments that assist learners to learn according to their learning styles.

As maintained by James Draper (1988), tracking the evolution of andragogy and adult education (often used interchangeably) is important to the field's quest for identity. As part of this search, adult educators have been forced to debate meanings in order to develop and establish the discipline and define the terms used in the field's practice and study. The search for a definition has been an attempt to improve the discipline of adult education, become more knowledgeable about the education of adults, and to resolve the confusion and conflicts surrounding andragogy (Davenport and Davenport, 1985). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the literature on

andragogy in order to present a working definition. Crafting a workable definition is significant to the continued study of andragogy. Once a definition of andragogy is agreed upon a "resolution may be possible" (p. 158) to all the criticisms, confusion, and debates. Once this resolution occurs, continued empirical research can be completed and the field further developed.

## **Method**

This was a qualitative study using a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is an appropriate method for this study because it attempts to uncover a working definition of andragogy in the literature shaped by a number of investigators to provide a base for further research (Creswell, 2007).

## **Research Design**

This study was a qualitative grounded theory design to investigate the numerous definitions of andragogy to aid in a systematic collection and analysis of the information available in the literature (Creswell, 2007). The systematic collection and analysis of the data used included open coding to identify major categories in the literature, axial coding to determine sub-categories around the major categories that emerged from the literature, and selective coding to present a workable definition of andragogy from the categories and sub-categories presented in the recurring themes (Creswell, 2012). This study, by using a qualitative grounded theory approach, was designed to take the reader into the setting of the early years of the beginning of andragogy through its evolution with a clarity not provided in a more reportorial account (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

In order to gain a clear understanding of the context of the evolution of andragogy, the goal of the research was to focus on details that might not otherwise be detected or considered. The forms of data collection are often so interconnected in qualitative research that researchers compare the relationship of the techniques to a tree with branches extending from its trunk. In a sense the researcher climbs into the tree to gain a better perspective of the developmental process (LeCompte, Millroy, & Preissle, 1992). The information for this study was derived from: articles, books, and online sources. This study was limited to the written material available.

Data analysis included a holistic analysis of research on andragogy to identify themes that emerged during the collection process. Naturalistic generalizations were developed from the emerging themes revealed in the literature as a result of collecting and analyzing the data. These generalizations are implications or suggestions for future empirical research (Creswell, 2007).

## **Findings**

From the inception of adult education, many definitions of andragogy have been offered from a number of perspectives. This has resulted in practical difficulty with teaching strategies, program-planning, curriculum design, program assessment, etc. These difficulties have hampered the development of andragogy. There has not been a consensus on a working definition of andragogy. Moreover, adult education serves a segment of society which has a variety of needs and interests. Consequently, adult education has been criticized as unstructured and having multiple purposes (Suanmali, 1981).

### *Attempts to Define Adult Education*

A number of educators, influenced by the evolving needs and life styles of society, have attempted to define adult education in more specific terms. One such definition stated that adult education should center on the broad needs of society in order to maintain and develop an intelligent, healthy citizenry who recognize their rights and responsibilities and are professional, competent workers (Suanmali, 1981). While Malcolm Knowles, often considered "The Father of Adult Education" (Henschke, Winter 97-98), defined adult education as ongoing individual development aimed at reaching one's potential throughout one's existence constantly renewing civilization by constructively interacting with them. In other words, adult education focuses on the process (experience) rather than the product (act of training) and changes in quality rather than quantity (Suanmali, 1981).

These definitions of adult education produce confusion for educators in the field. For a profession to develop, it requires a clear definition. Currently there is no unified definition in the field of adult education. Some definitions have been wide-ranging and encompassing while others limiting and restricting, some have been leaning toward the differentiation of educational and non-educational activities, and still others have been explained in terms of functional parts of a single structure or relating in form to a functional unit. These definitions include structural aspects (leadership, goals, processes, etc.) and others have described adult education by stating the goals of the operation and the functioning of the parts to achieve the goals (Suanmali, 1981).

An international definition of adult education emerged in 1966 from a conference of twenty-six educators from eight different countries. This definition provided an international perspective which included both individual and societal needs. The definition developed at the conferences is as follows:

Adult education is a process whereby a person who no longer attends schools on a regular and full-time basis (unless full-time programs are specially designed for adults) and undertakes sequential and organized activities with the conscious intention of bringing about changes in information, knowledge, understanding or skills, appreciation and attitudes; or for the purpose of identifying and solving personal or community problems (Suanmali, 1981, pp 4-5).

There were attempts to define adult education as early as 1949. These attempts were mostly in terms of theoretical concepts. A theoretical construct of adult learning had been developing in Europe during the same period. This construct of adult learning distinguished andragogy as separate from pedagogy. In 1967 Savicevic introduced the term andragogy to Knowles while attending a session taught by Knowles on adult learning (Caruth, 2013; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). When Savicevic mentioned the term andragogy, Knowles responded with "Whatagogy?" (Knowles, 1984, p. 6). Andragogy, according to Knowles (1990), was becoming a part of the language when it was included in the "Addenda" to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* in 1981.

Knowles, then professor of education at Boston University, received the Delbert Clark Award from West Georgia College in 1967. This award considered by many to be the highest national honor in the field of adult education credited Knowles for making an impact in the field of adult education (Knowles, 1968). Knowles introduced the term andragogy to the educational community in the United States as the science of teaching adult learners with a focus on the characteristics of adult learners during his acceptance address (Caruth, 2013). The term andragogy was derived from the Greek word *andros*, which means "man" or "grownups" (Knowles, 1968, p. 351) or *agogus* meaning "leader of" (Knowles et al., 2011, pp. 59-60), which translates to "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1984, p. 6).

#### *Evolution of Andragogy*

Savicevic (2008) determined that andragogical ideas could be traced as far back as the Hellenistic and ancient Jewish cultures. Andragogical institutions were created three centuries before pedagogical institutions. Ancient Greek philosophical thought acknowledged lifelong learning and that educating of adults had its own stages of development. For example: Homer influenced the learning and education of generations of Greeks, adults in ancient Athens engaged in self education through the spoken word, sophists who claimed that they could teach any kind of knowledge were the first andragogical practitioners, Socrates was allegedly the most outstanding teacher of all time, and it was asserted that Plato and Aristotle made personal contributions to the ideas of andragogy (Caruth, 2013; Savicevic, 2008).

An American psychologist, Edward L. Thorndike, published *Adult Learning* in 1928 and *Adult Interests* in 1935. Thorndike focused on learning ability rather than on how adults learned. A professor of education, Herbert Sorenson, published *Adult Abilities* in 1938. His book confirmed that adults could learn and that the way in which adults learned was different from the way in which children learned. Eduard C. Lindeman, recognized for his contribution in adult education, published *The Meaning of Adult Education* in 1926. This work influenced John Dewey, an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer (Caruth, 2013; Knowles, 1990).

A Dutch adult educator, Ger Van Enckevort, conducted a comprehensive study of andragogy. He discovered that a German grammar school teacher, Alexander Kapp, first used the term andragogy (andragogik) in 1833 in a book titled *Plato's Educational Ideas (Platon's Erziehungslehre)*; Reischmann, 2000). His book contained the heading "Andragogy or Education in the Man's Age" ("Die Andragogik oder Bildung im m.ännlichen Alter"). However, Kapp did not define the term andragogy (*andragogik*) in his book. It is unknown if he coined the term or heard it first from another source. While Kapp never developed a theory of adult learning, he affirmed the need for adult education (Caruth, 2013; Knowles et al., 2011).

Kapp claimed that learning, introspection, and self-development are primary human drives. He also addressed the importance of life-long learning and the professional education of various vocations. It can be seen from Kapp's early writings that andragogy included the education of one's internal, moral, and external elements. Education occurs not only through educators but through self-reflection and life events. Kapp maintained that Plato used the concept of andragogy in his teachings without ever using the term andragogy. An influential German philosopher, Johan Friedrich Herbart, staunchly opposed the use of the term andragogy. The term andragogy disappeared for nearly a century as a result of Herbart's strong opposition to its usage (Caruth, 2013; Knowles et al., 2011).

A teacher at the Academy of Labor in Frankfort, Eugen Rosenstock, had also used the term andragogy in 1921. Rosenstock claimed that adult education must consider "special teachers, special methods, and a special philosophy" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 57). Rosenstock believed he had created the term andragogy. In 1962, however, he learned of its earlier use by Kapp and Herbart, (Caruth, 2013).

A Swiss psychiatrist, Heinrich Hanselmann, also used the term in his book, *Andragogy: Nature, Possibilities and Boundaries of Adult Education*, published in 1951. The book addressed the "reeducation"

(Knowles et al., 2011, p. 58) of adults. In 1957 a German educator, Franz Poggeler, published a book titled *Introduction to Andragogy: Basic Issues in Adult Education*. By this time Europeans were using the term andragogy. In 1956, Ogrizovic, of Yugoslavia, wrote a dissertation on "penological andragogy" (p. 59). He later published a book titled *Problems of Andragogy* (1959). Distinguished Yugoslavian educators of adults, Filipovi, Samolovcev, and Savicevic, wrote books and spoke on andragogy. Additionally, doctoral degrees were offered in adult education at the Universities of Zagreb and Belgrade in Yugoslavia and at the universities of Budapest and Debrecen in Hungary (Caruth, 2013).

Dutch literature differentiated between "*andragogy, andragogics, and andragology*" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 58). The Dutch defined andragogy as "any intentional professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons" (p. 58), andragogics was defined as "the background of methodological and ideological systems that govern the actual process of andragogy" (p. 58), and andragology was defined as "the scientific study of both andragogy and andragogics" (p. 58). Furthermore a Dutch professor, T. T. ten Have, used the word andragogy in his lectures in 1954 and published an outline on the science of andragogy in 1959. Further use of the term andragogy can be found in various works by adult educators such as Bertrand Swartz in France, J. A. Simpson in England, and Felix Adam in Venezuela (Caruth, 2013; Knowles et al., 2011).

#### *Definitions of Andragogy*

In summary, the term andragogy has a long history of development and evolution which dates back to 19th century Europe. The term fell into disuse until Rosenstock revived it in 1921 at a Frankfurt conference. By the 1960s educators and trainers widely used the term in France, Yugoslavia, and Holland (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). The term was first introduced to the United States by Lindeman who presented the term twice stating that it was a fundamental approach for teaching adults. Knowles reintroduced the term about 40 years later and included much of his experience with adult learning in his definition of andragogy (Henschke, 2011).

Since coming to America there have been a number of different definitions of andragogy offered. In spite of the many definitions there continues to be a misunderstanding of andragogy (Henschke, 2011). Some of those definitions are as follows:

1. The Dutch defined andragogy as "any intentional professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 58).
2. Malcolm Knowles (1980) defined andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn, in contrast to pedagogy as the art and science of teaching children" (p.43).
3. James Draper (1988) defined Knowles' androgogy as a "less authoritarian, out of school education, an inner or self-directed form of learning which was problem or project oriented, a learner centered approach to learning" and that it was "essentially non-formal" (p. 22).
4. James Draper (1988) defined andragogy as "intentional learning" (p. 23).
5. Ajay Bedi (2004) defined andragogy as a process that "facilitates the understanding of student behaviour [*sic*] in the teaching relationship, provides a theoretical reason for teaching behaviour [*sic*] and is a guiding philosophy for how to manage the learning environment towards an effective outcome" (p. 97).
6. Jack Mezirow (1981) defined andragogy is an "organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capacity to function as self-directed learners" (p. 21).
7. Michael Birzer (2004) defined Mezirow's definition of andragogy as a "personal interactive agreement between the learner and the learning endeavor" (p. 398).
8. Stephen Forrest and Tim Peterson (2006) defined andragogy as "teaching humans who perform socially productive roles and have assumed primary responsibility for their own lives" (p. 114).
9. John Henschke (2011) defined andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 34).
10. Bryan Taylor defined Birzer's definition of andragogy as "a set of guidelines for designing instruction with learners who are more self-directed than teacher directed" (p. 59).
11. Kathleen Clemente (2010) defined andragogy as "a way of thinking about working with adult learners, it identifies significant characteristics of adult learners and suggests what educators can do to help adults to learn" (p. 25).
12. Jim Taylor and Tanya Ruetzler (2010) defined andragogy as allowing "adult learners to be active in determining what they want to learn" (p. 3).
13. Karen Clerk (2010) defined andragogy as providing a "framework by which to examine adult learners' capabilities and a way to validate their real-life experiences as an integral part of instruction" (p. 16).
14. Gail Cretchley and Jane Castle (2001) defined andragogy as a learning "process which continues throughout life, and that learning may take many forms" (p. 497).

15. Keichi Yoshimoto, Yuli Inenaga, and Hiroshi Yamada (2007) defined andragogy as a "concept of pedagogical approaches for adult learners in lifelong learning" (p. 75).
16. Brian Hughes and David Berry (2011) defined andragogy as allowing "adult learners more responsibility for individual learning and application of new information" in consideration of the role in the learning process of the "experience of an adult learner" (p. 47).
17. Donald Misch (2002) defined andragogy as "the study of adult education" (p. 153).
18. Donald Finn (2011) defined andragogy as "commonly associated with the instruction of adults" (p. 36).
19. Elwood Holton, Lynda Wilson, and Reid Bates (2009) defined andragogy as "one of the dominant frameworks for teaching adults" (p. 170).
20. Jeffrey Martell (2011) defined andragogy as "teaching or leading of adults" (p. 61).
21. Rūta Andriekienė (2009) defined andragogy as "oriented to self-learning, self-education, self-upbringing" (p. 12).

**Table One: Coding**

Different Definitions	Theme 1 Adults	Theme 2 Self-directed	Theme 3 Student- centered	Theme 4 Change	Theme 5 Others
1. any intentional professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons	X		X (guided)	X	
2. the art and science of helping adults learn, in contrast to pedagogy as the art and science of teaching children	X		X (helping)		art and science
3. less authoritarian, out of school education, an inner or self-directed form of learning which was problem or project oriented, a learner centered approach to learning and that it was essentially non-formal		X		X	problem or project centered
4. intentional learning		X (intentional)		X (learning)	
5. facilitates the understanding of student behaviour in the teaching relationship, provides a theoretical reason for teaching behaviour and is a guiding philosophy for how to manage the learning environment towards an effective outcome			X (facilitates, guiding)	X (effective outcome)	
6. organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capacity to function as self-directed learners	X	X	X (assisted)	X (learn)	
7. personal interactive agreement between the learner and the learning endeavor			X (interactive agreement)	X (learning endeavor)	
8. teaching humans who perform socially productive roles and have assumed primary responsibility for their own lives	X (perform socially productive roles, responsibility)			X (teaching)	

9. the art and science of helping adults learn	X		X (helping)		art and science
10. a set of guidelines for designing instruction with learners who are more self-directed than teacher directed		X	X		
11. a way of thinking about working with adult learners, it identifies significant characteristics of adult learners and suggests what educators can do to help adults to learn	X (characteristics)		X (working with, help)		
12. allowing adult learners to be active in determining what they want to learn	X	X (determining what they want to learn)	X (active)	X (learn)	
13. a framework by which to examine adult learners' capabilities and a way to validate their real-life experiences as an integral part of instruction	X (capabilities)				real-life experiences
14. process which continues throughout life, and that learning may take many forms					continuous
15. a concept of pedagogical approaches for adult learners in lifelong learning	X				life-long learning
16. allowing adult learners more responsibility for individual learning and application of new information in consideration of the role in the learning process of the experience of an adult learner	X	X (more responsibility)		(learning)	experience
17. the study of adult education	X				
18. commonly associated with the instruction of adults	X			X (instruction)	
19. one of the dominant frameworks for teaching adults	X			X (teaching)	
20. teaching or leading of adults	X			X (teaching)	
21. oriented to self-learning, self-education, self-upbringing		X (self)		X (learning, education, upbringing)	

## Discussion

The systematic collection and analysis of the data provided in the literature used open coding, axial coding, and selective coding with the goal to present a workable definition from the categories presented in the recurring themes (Creswell, 2012). The findings in Table One revealed the following four major themes: adult students/learners, self-directed, student-centered, change, and a variety of other themes.

Of the four major themes 14 definitions out of 21 definitions included adult students/learners, 7 definitions out of 21 definitions included self-directed learning (intentional, determining what is learned, responsibility, and self), 9 definitions out of 21 definitions included student-centered rather than teacher-centered, 12 definitions out of 21 definitions included some type of change (effective outcome, learning, education, upbringing, etc.), and a variety of other themes (art and science, problem or project centered, real-life experiences, and continuous learning). From the recurring themes that emerged in the 21 different definitions of andragogy, a working definition was created. Andragogy can be defined as the art and science of facilitating change in adults through self-directed, student-centered approaches to life-long learning.

### **Implications**

If all involved in the field of andragogy can agree upon and accept this working definition, further empirical research can be completed in the field's search for identity (Draper, 1988). Ultimately this will lead to resolution of the confusion, criticisms, and debates (Davenport and Davenport, 1985).

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

It is recommended that this study be replicated by other researchers to determine if the same results are obtained. It is also recommended that ongoing empirical research be completed to add to the body of knowledge to help clarify questions and alleviate concerns about andragogy. Continued research incorporating global perspectives is likely to result in a more keenly understood discipline.

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