MENTORING AND ADULT LEARNING: ANDRAGOGY IN ACTION

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ABSTRACT

The adult learning and self-directed learning has become most popular in the western countries like UK. The paper attempts to make recommendations for the mentoring programme initiated by the London Fire Brigade (LFB). The mentoring of new operational staff in becoming a firefighter has taken on a significant role in London Fire Brigade (LFB). The application of various theories in adult learning and how the concept of Andragogy is in action for mentoring and adult learning has been discussed and presented with the recommendations.

Keywords: Mentoring, Adult learning, Andragogy.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the plethora of theories which underpins adult learning the one theory which stands out among the rest is andragogy. “Andragogy’s core adult learning principles take the learner seriously. They go beyond basic respect for the learner and view the adult learner as a primary source of data for marking sound decisions regarding the learning process” (Knowles et al., 1998, p.183). In the discipline of adult education, the andragogy theory has permeated to a greater extent though there is an enduring debate of its application and usefulness (Atherton, 2003; Brookfield, 1995).

The subject matter of this discussion will present the idea that the andragogical theory can be applied to analyse and elucidate the mentoring scheme in the process of learning. The assumptions of the theory “andragogy” is utilised by most of the educators either fully or partly in their educational efforts (Burge, 1988; Lieb, 1991). Thus, this paper will address the following key principles and assumptions of andragogical theory, (1) the self-direction concept of adult learning, (2) the significance of the role of experience in adult learning, (3) the concept of readiness to learn, (4) the orientation of adult learning approach is problem-centred, and (5) the motivation to learn. Also, the paper will analyse the validity of key principles and assumptions of andragogical model and argues that a successful learning should have the combination of the above principles.

The theme of this discourse will also present the notion that the mentoring schemes should make use of the adult learning methodologies which applies andragogical theory in teaching and learning process as compared with other traditional methods of teaching and learning which is adopted for the content learning. The theory andragogy can be applied to any kind of adult learning and it has been extensively used in the designing the organisational training programmes particularly for "soft skill" areas such as management development (Knowles,
1984). Hence, this paper accomplishes the following objectives. First, an assessment of the literature in adult learning and the thought of andragogy in adult learning; second, the case example of andragogy in action; and third, a discussion on applying andragogical theory to mentoring.

**ANDRAGOGY**

The term ‘andragogy’ is derived from Greek words meaning “man-leading” and it is distinguished from pedagogy which means “child-leading”. Andragogy was originally coined by the German educator Alexander Kapp in 1833 (Knowles, 1990) and it was developed as an adult education theory by Malcolm Knowles, an American educator.

Andragogy is an art and science which helps the adults to learn (Knowles, 1970, p.38). The theory believes that an individual becomes psychologically an adult where the individual at that point accomplishes a self-concept of necessary self-direction. When this occurs a very critical thing happens: at this stage a deep psychological need of an individual develops which is visible to others as being self-directing. Hence, when an individual himself is aware of a situation during which he is not permitted to be self-directed then he experiences pressure and stress between the situation and his self-concept. As a result of this situation the individual is bound to be ruined with anger and disagreement (Knowles, 1978, p.56).

Malcolm Knowles started tagging his work in adult education as andragogy during the late 1960’s (Knowles, 1980). Knowles main assumptions of andragogy in adult learning focus on the feelings of the learner where the learner himself finds responsible for his learning. Carlson (1989) has stated that, through his work Knowles has explored that an instructor should care about the actual learners rather focusing on the belief of instructors as learners’ interest. Knowles (1980; 1984) enveloped his concept of andragogy with the development of five assumptions based on his own experience. The five assumptions are the adult learners are self-directed, they bring experience to learning environment, they are ready to learn, they are oriented to learn in a problem-centred environment, and the internal factors motivate them (Knowles, 1980). His assumptions are distinguished from the assumptions of pedagogy where children are found to be dependent on external factors that bring less or no experience to a learning activities, they are doing the activity as they are told to do so, the matter is subject-centred and they are motivated by external factors like parents and teachers (Knowles, 1984).

The criticisms of the andragogical theory claim that to support the assumptions of the theory it lacks empirical evidence (Brookfield, 1995; Burge, 1988). Andragogy failed to cover the fundamental theory of knowledge and challenges whether adult learning accurately differs from child learning. Andragogy is viewed as a “system of concepts” by Knowles, rather as a theory and educational theorists are influenced by these assumptions which are evident (Knowles, 1984, p.8). Though Knowles viewed andragogy separate from pedagogy there are times during which both the approach might be suitable depending on the situation and the learner needs (Knowles, 1984).
A deep influence of Eduard Lindeman in his adult education approach was acknowledged by Knowles (Knowles, 1984). As envisioned by Lindeman, learning is a life long process rather just a way to the destination (Lindeman, 1926). Lindeman (1926) had a strongly thought that education is based on predetermined curriculum versus situations defined by learner needs and he claims that it is because a learner comes to realize the meaning of education when they are actually “engaged in the process” of education. As purported by Lindeman (1926) the quality of adult education was central to the component of discussions in small groups and the voluntary attendance of the adult learners. This is evident in the assumptions of Knowles andragogical theory and also in the process outlined in implementing them.

It is obvious to see the constructivist theory of education in the work of Knowles. Constructivist theory was discussed by Bruner (1966) in connection with the learning as an active process where the new notions are based on the knowledge already accomplished is developed by the learner. In constructivist theory, the facilitators role is to encourage the learners to explore the knowledge principles on their own and to help them by translating the information into the content which can be easily understood by the learners, therefore facilitating the learners to gain additional knowledge. The curriculums are planned and structured in a way that allows the learners to identify the knowledge deficit areas and to build on the previous knowledge, hence supporting the learners to concentrate on those areas of deficit or gap (Bruner, 1966). The assumption of Knowles’ (1984) focuses on self-direction, experience of the learner, and orientation to learn is problem-centred which are consistent with constructivism.

Carl Rogers is yet another theorist who has strongly influenced Knowles work. It is not actually possible for us to teach anything to anyone but we as educators can facilitate the process the learning process (Rogers, 1967). Rogers’s theory of experiential learning was concentrated mainly to address the needs of learner, which can be accomplished through ‘a personal, trustworthy, and mutually respectful relationship’ (Rogers, 1967; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). It was suggested by Rogers (1967) that the concentration on the prescribed curriculum should be minimal so as the learner to be self-directed. The assumption of Knowles’ self-concept, learner experience and problem-centred orientation in learning are directly from the roots of Roger’s experiential theory of learning (Knowles, 1984).

The andragogical principles developed by Knowles is an impact of Maslow’s motivational or hierarchical theory of human needs. The hierarchy theory of Maslow has five levels in which human needs are classified as physiological needs which progresses gradually to safety needs, love needs or belongingness, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs (Knowles, 1980). According to Huitt (2004), the principles of Maslow’s theory of hierarchy states that an individual accomplishes the lower level needs and he gradually becomes self-actualised and wise. Similarly, Knowles’ (1984) adult learning concept also suggests that as a learner grows and matures they become self-directed and due to the past knowledge and experience they become wise.

**ANALYSIS OF ANDRAGOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

**The concept of self-direction:** As a person grows and matures his self-concept they need to be responsible for their actions and they should be treated as a person who is capable of self-
directed. In this case an adult moves from being one who is depended to one being self-directedness. According to Knowles (1984) the stage at which psychologically a person becomes an adult, is the stage at which he understands himself to be a person of self-directing. This is the stage during which he also experiences a strong need to be thought by others as he is being self-directing. In the process of development, it is both professional and organizational influence which accomplishes self-responsibility in an individual. However, it is finally decided by the individual whether to accept or reject the idea of self-development. The degree of personal responsibility and the choice of individual are implied in it, so that the learning results from the self and from the choices available to bring this out (Pedler, 1986). It is also argued that a person is constructed socially whose mind, intelligence and self-concept are part of social experiences of a person (Strauss, 1964), and the self perception of the individual in the changing world (Fox, 1990). Hence, is it possible for a person to develop on his own behalf? Yes, it is possible for a person to develop on his own behalf and to take “the initiative in creating a potential learning situation” claims Jarvis (Jarvis, 1987, p.67).

The role of experience: In the process of growth and maturity a person accumulates an expanding reservoir of experience which becomes a major resource for learning. It is also assumed that the adult learners have lot of experience in their life and it becomes a part of the richest resource for learning. Knowles valued the adult experience as a great source for learning in an educational environment for both the learners and the facilitators (Knowles, 1980). Adulthood is not corresponded with age and it is viewed as a matter of degree. Knowles (1984) recognised that the adults were the best resources for each other and therefore he encouraged discussions in groups and joint assignments which would result in sharing diversified and expertise knowledge with in the groups. Thus the adults learn more effectively with the experiential techniques such as problem solving and discussions (Knowles 1980). Knowles (1980) also recommends learning contracts to develop a personalised learning plan since the adults have different learning needs.

Readiness to learn: Knowles assumption of readiness to learn is mainly based on his observations that the adults always experience a situation that triggers the need for learning something new. He also states that specific events like, birth, divorce, or loss of job forces a person and it would drive the need for new knowledge (Knowles, 1984). Knowles (1984) claims that adults learn mainly out of necessity and learning for them should bring them rewarding and enjoyable experience. In the process of growth, a person’s readiness to learn is subject to the process of change in responsibilities of his social roles. Tennant (1988, p.21-22) points that, “it is difficult to see how this assumption has any implication at all for the process of learning, let alone how this process should be differentially applied to adults and children”. It clearly shows that there is a scope for the children in performing social roles. However, at this juncture Knowles make some important points about ‘teachable’ moments and he states that the significance of education becomes clear when it comes to situation of carrying out a particular task (Knowles, 1980).

Orientation to learning: The time perspective of a person in maturing stage changes from delayed application of knowledge to immediate application, and for that reason his orientation toward learning shifts to problem centred from the subject-centred. This is viewed
as conditioned process rather to be seen as ‘natural’ process (Knowles, 1984, p.11). It reflects that the problem-centred approach would take place in learning if the young children were not conditioned to be subject-centred. Here the question is not in relation with the age or maturity but the way in which teaching takes place and it is assumed that the adults have greater wish for immediate application of knowledge.

**Motivation to learn:** The internal factors motivate the adults (Knowles, 1984, p.12). Knowles strongly believed the motivation of adults are internal which involves increased self-esteem and self-actualisation. He also believed that when the adults are recognised and appreciated for their individual contributions then they are best motivated to succeed in their learning goals.

**THE CASE EXAMPLE**

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) is the largest fire and rescue service in the UK. It is the only fire service in UK where all the operational staffs are employed full-time. The mentoring of new operational staff in becoming a firefighter has taken on a significant role in London Fire Brigade (LFB). The study shows that the “long-standing form of training, learning and development and an increasingly popular tool for supporting personal development” is mentoring (CIPD, 2008). Another study states that the process of giving ‘general advice or guidance regarding life or career’ is mentoring (Thorpe and Clifford, 2003). It is evident from the literature (Thorpe and Clifford, 2007) that mentoring relationships can exist for a long time, and mentoring may be of formal or informal type.

The significance and interest of mentoring trainee firefighters at London Fire Brigade has been initiated by the recommendations of an equality report at LFB. Since the representation from black and minority ethnic (BME) community has been low. The Brigade offers training and the organisation have anticipated that the trainees will find tough during their first year because of the training course and number of assessments. As a result they introduced having a mentor during the first year and the mentors are selected from the existing firefighters.

The Mentors are selected on the basis of experience, commitment and those who are good listeners, empathic, and non-judgemental. Though training is provided for the mentors it was expected that the best way opted for them is to find out what works while mentors actually having experience mentoring a trainee and mentors also provided advice and support. Based on the feedback the training course was modified twice.

To be more effective mentoring the mentors are matched in pairs according to sex. Before pairing the mentor and mentee the personalities of both are considered as tool for pairing. It is believed that pairing according to the personality match will help both mentor and mentee to communicate well and the relationship will flourish. It was also considered while pairing since the location and shift patterns also support mentoring. All these were well conditioned and the assumptions of orientation to learn are problem-centred which is well applied. The relationships of both the parties are kept informal to arrange meetings at their convenient and both feel comfortable which benefits mutually. The mentoring programme was evaluated by obtaining feedback from both mentor and mentee.
The results showed that it was very helpful for the mentors and mentees in the learning process which helps them to learn without any external force and it concentrated more on personal development. As a result it has been observed in the organisation a more effective and committed work force.

APPLYING ANDRAGOGICAL THEORY TO MENTORING

The study (CIPD, 2008) states that mentoring includes the following characteristics; It is a supportive form of development, It specifically supports the individuals towards career management and enhancing skills, It helps to settle down the personal issues productively rather than only concentrating more on work performance, and It is both individual and organisational goal oriented. These characters are found to be the part of assumptions of Knowles andragogy theory and this can be evidenced in the case of London Fire Brigade (LFB)

The mentoring scheme introduced in London Fire Brigade highlights the self-directed learning of the trainee firefighters. The trainees are expected to be self starter to become a successful firefighter. When the trainees explore problems they are expected to solve them jointly with their mentors. Hence, the culture of self-directedness should be initiated in the framework of mentoring. Andragogy is a theory which is a supporting mechanism to assist the trainees in achieving their goals. It has been argued that it is essential to go for a different approach when we attempt to teach the adults as compared to the children. As compared to the traditional pedagogical approach or the learning process of the children, adult learning process differs radically (Knowles 1980).

The author Knowles is well-known for his theory of andragogy in which he strongly supports the self-directed approach of learning process and the role of teacher as a facilitator in the adult education process. The theory andragogy is different from the traditional pedagogical method of learning. Andragogy supports both self-directed learning approach and the role of teacher as a facilitator in the learning process (Knowles, 1990, p. 57).

Knowles writings on adult learning are filled with the popular concept called self-direct learning and the adults need to learn experientially. It has been strongly emphasised that the adults are mostly motivated to concentrate more on learning something that is really helpful for them to perform their tasks or to solve the problems that they face in the real life situations (Knowles, 1990). Moreover, they effectively learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes when they are involved in the real life situations. It is also supplemented by other authors (e.g. Brookfield, 1986; Collins, 1991; Cotton, 1995; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999) that andragogy is the fundamental principal that guides the adult teaching practices.

It is a challenging task for the London Fire Brigade to introduce a new learning approach in the organisation to implement an appropriate strategy where representation from black and minority community and women in operational roles are very low. In this context it is more essential to have a meaningful training method for promoting an integrated and conducive learning environment. Mentoring scheme is one such training method adopted by London Fire Brigade which helps to learn how effectively the job can be performed and how the
trainees can be supported and integrated in the work place. In this process the organisation should reflect the mission of equality principle, since there is always a gap between the purpose, training, and the organisation. This has reflected in the low representation of the black and minority ethnic community and women in operational roles. The present learning environment is focusing on the flexibility of the trainee firefighters to learn based on their own experience and it is mostly self-directed.

Self-directed approach of learning can be enhanced by allowing the mentors and trainees to arrange for meetings at their convenience. It is very flexible to have meetings on the regular basis and it is arranged at the convenient timings when both the parties are free to meet. The self-directed does not mean that learning takes place in isolation or without any external support. It has been argued that “the most effective self-directed learners are highly skilful in getting help from peers, teachers, printed materials, audiovisual aids and every other kind of resources” (Knowles, 1984).

The connotation of the existing literature and the writings shows that for an adult learning and education assumptions of andragogical theory is more practical than many other behavioural methods of learning. Since andragogical assumptions are different from the traditional forms of training and teaching, it requires a lot of changes in the fundamental curriculum, normal training and assessments. However the organisations may have its own limitations in the change due to the present and existing conditions of the curriculum. Hence, the change of curriculum to andragogical approach is not so easy without addressing the change in present or existing condition. On the other hand, experienced firefighters and trainee firefighters can both be benefited from the environment that includes andragogical principles of learning.

In terms of practical applicability, andragogy means that the way of instructing the adults should focus more on the process as compared to the content being taught. The most useful strategies of such process involve case studies, role playing, simulations, and self-evaluation. The role of trainers or teachers should also be more of a facilitator rather than a lecturer or grader. The observations from the research (Boydell, 1976; Sutcliffe, 1988; Cunningham, 1999) propose the thought that it is not appropriate to force the individuals to learn or develop with out their interest.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The assumptions of andragogy were developed out of experience, observations and theoretical influences and it is formulated by any empirical research (Knowles, 1984). The theory andragogy is criticised based on the readings of Knowles’ work superficially. Review of the theory andragogy discloses the intention of Knowles to put the learners first, to support them in meeting the needs, and support the educators to accessible continuously to facilitate the learners towards success (Knowles, 1980; 1984). Carlson (1989) put in his writings that, “The failure of Malcolm Knowles may well be that the theory, the philosophy, and the principles he proclaimed did not approach the quality of his actions. His preaching did not live up to his practice” (p. 8).
The application of andragogical theory to mentoring may be the part of the methodology to enhance the process of teaching and learning. Andragogy is popular in an educational and training process. Most of the organisations and institutions have implemented most of the workings of the Knowles andragogical assumptions in training and development of the adults. The research typically focuses on the organisation needs, while training the adults (Sleezer, 1992; Knowles, 1984). For a facilitator in the learning process to become more effective, a teacher should have technical and interpersonal skills which are advocated by andragogical approach.

The case of London Fire Brigade (LFB) would be a good example for the organisations’ willing to introduce mentoring schemes, that the andragogical assumptions are more appropriate and effective in mentoring and adult learning process.

REFERENCES


