

## **The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development, 8th**

By Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, & Richard A. Swanson. (2015), 402 pages, ISBN:978-0-415-73901-6. \$195

**Subject:** How to be a better teacher

**Useful for:** Useful for teachers who have already had some exposure to pedagogical theories and want a deeper understanding on concepts like self-directed learning and cognitive differences.

**Format:** Chapters with introductions, end-of-chapter summaries, and review questions.

### **Reviewer's Comments:**

Roughly 70% of my family is/was employed by one educational institution or another. I grew up watching my mother grade papers and hearing my aunt talk about implementing Individualized Learning Plans. Since becoming a law librarian and shifting my sights to teaching legal research, I've dug into books like Teaching Law By Design and Tools for Teaching. However, neither of those books were quite as initially intimidating as The Adult Learner and its initial sentences, including "alternative to the methodology-centered instructional design perspective" (p.3). I gritted my teeth and prepared to slog through.

By chapter 3, the fear fell away. Simply put, andragogy is the study of adult learning. This contrasts with pedagogy, the study of how children learn, which often relies upon memorization and the student having a very dependent self-concept. The instructor is on a pedestal handing out knowledge, and the student must figure out "what the teacher wants."

Once I got through chapter 5, I couldn't stop talking with my coworkers about how we could try to inspire our students to be more self-directed learners. Self-directing is the core of andragogy, as adults tend to "resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their will on them" (p. 44). In my experience, this can be particularly frustrating for law students, who are often also struggling because the pedagogical model with which they grew up with is likely failing them for the first time. Memorization and outlining is not enough; law school requires students to take initiative to understand the larger concepts and all their moving parts, with minimal to moderate direction from the professor.

The core concepts of andragogy are introduced in Part 1 of the book. Parts 2 and 3 are geared towards academics studying andragogy, and they trace andragogy's rise from other theories and thinkers of learning and teaching that you may remember from an intro psychology course—Skinner, Maslow, and John Dewey for example. If you are just looking for a practical introduction, I would skim the end-of-chapter summaries for these parts. Part 4 picks back up with more practical tools, including guidelines for using learning contracts mentioned earlier in the book and core competency diagnostics and planning guides. Part 5 shifts back to international and future theories of andragogy, which again, may be more useful for those seeking a master's degree in education. All in all, parts 1 and 4 are easy for the casual reader to focus on while skimming the rest of the book. Apparently, the book was heavily reorganized for this edition, and I wonder if it was precisely for this purpose.

**Reviewed by:** Savanna Nolan, Georgetown University, in 2018.

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