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John Henschke  
jahenschke@gmail.com

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# The Four Forces Behind Knowles' Andragogy

John A. Henschke, EdD



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# The Four Forces Behind Knowles' Andragogy

Marti Sopher and John Henschke

The career of "the father of adult education" in the U.S., Malcolm S. Knowles, was a phenomenon in itself. Although Knowles is the most referenced adult educator of his time (Sopher, 2003a), he has, at times, also been the most misunderstood adult educator in the U.S. Knowles' (1989b) autobiography provided some insights into his writing style, his highly successful career, and his thinking, but it did not document the process of naming his collection of thoughts, his theory of adult education -- the introduction of "andragogy" in the U.S. -- nor did it provide context for a deeper understanding of the times, what influenced his thinking and his contribution to the field of adult education. Therefore in this paper and session, we will identify the major forces that influenced Knowles, which Knowles most likely influenced as well.

## In Search of Understanding the Phenomenon

The only historical accounting of Knowles' influence in adult education was in the form of two dissertations (Henschke, 1973 and Sopher, 2003a) in addition to Knowles's (1989b), which he subtitled as an autobiographical journey. More context was needed to both document and understand Knowles' career in adult education, especially surrounding his use of the term "andragogy" in the U.S. to describe his "theory" of adult education. His use, or misuse of the term as some believe, created history itself.

The autobiography that Knowles offered the field of adult education was a classical example of his writing style and a chronological accounting of his career. It was not, however, an analysis of what influenced his thinking or details of how he was introduced to the term "andragogy." Therefore, the context of his career was not apparent to the reader. Without context, his thinking, his theory of andragogy, can be misunderstood -- and was, as demonstrated in the literature of adult education (Sopher, 2003a).

Knowles wanted nothing more than for his theory of adult education to not only be understood in a theoretical and a practical sense but also to be applied by practitioners well beyond academia. Knowles (1962, 1977) shared his interest in articulating his perspective through writings about our field and preserving the history of our field, as well as his willingness to actively take part in practical research in our field. Knowles (1989b) expressed his desire for raising our spirits by putting our field in an historical perspective which was uniquely his. And that is exactly what he did throughout his career as well as in retirement, when he still remained an active participant.

The social movements, which provide context of Knowles' times included: the humanistic adult education movement, the human services movement, the group dynamics movement, and the human resource development movement. Though Knowles had an eclectic philosophy of adult learning, humanism, a common theme through the movements, is central to the assumptions included in his theory. From the humanistic movement, Knowles gained consistency in philosophy. From the human services movement, he recognized the need to be practical in his approach with adult learners. From the group dynamics movement, he became

more authentic in his style. From the human resource development movement, he used action research to share the application of andragogy with others (Sopher, 2003a and Henschke, 2006).

Reaction in the literature and the discourse which followed has continued since Knowles introduced the term in the U.S. and has, at times, been out of context. Knowles' work can best be understood by practitioners and researchers if it is historically accurate, within his humanistic philosophy, and explained in context of his times.

In addition, details of Knowles' recollections were not completely accurate. For example, Knowles (1989b) claimed in his autobiographical journey that he and Dusan Savicevic met in 1967 (p. 79). Documenting the context of that event, however, proved that they met in August, 1966 (Sopher, 2003a).

Knowles (July, 1967) first introduced "androgogy" (*sic*), his theory of adult learning, in the form of a speech in 1967. Knowles' speech then appeared as a written published article (1968), which introduced his theory to a larger audience and where it was visible in print for the first time. At that time, he had misspelled the term andragogy by spelling it androgogy.

History needed to be rewritten (Sopher, 2003a). This provided context to complement Knowles' (1989b) autobiographical journey, *The Making of an Adult Educator* and to document an historically accurate account of one of the most important turning points in the history of adult education.

### **Importance for both Research and Practice in the Adult Learning Field**

What took place when Knowles and Dusan M. Savicevic met in 1967 had never been documented. Neither Knowles nor Savicevic had ever been interviewed about their first meeting. An accurate accounting of this historical exchange did not exist. Knowles himself documented that he had been formulating his ideas, his "theory" of adult education, prior to meeting Savicevic. However, how Knowles decided to make use of the term andragogy to name his "theory" of adult education had not been documented.

The context of the times had not been included in writings about or by Knowles, leaving out a dimension for deeper understanding of his work -- and understanding his work within context of his philosophy of adult learning. The social movements in the U.S. that were most likely the major influences of his thinking, what occurred during Knowles' times, did not exist in the literature of adult education.

Analysis of Knowles' (1989) 'autobiography', *The Making of an Adult Educator: An Autobiographical Journey*, noted what is in and not in it. The context of his career was not included in his autobiography. A need existed to develop a unique historical biography to tell another version of Knowles' story by adding historical context to his autobiography -- and involving Knowles in the process of creating it. This was accomplished by Sopher (2003a).

By applying Sartre's (1963) progressive-regressive model for interpretation, the event -- actually a series or related events 1966-69 in this case -- were analyzed. The story started in Boston, in 1966, after Knowles' career in the YMCA and while he was teaching adult education at Boston University. It was here that Knowles learned about the term andragogy from a Yugoslavian adult educator, Dusan Savicevic. Then Knowles made a decision to use this "new" word to label his "theory" of adult education and introduce it in the U.S.

Applying the process of Sartre's (1963) progressive-regressive model for interpretation built context. The Denzin (1989) model made use of what is required involvement of the subject (Knowles), in the form of an interview with the subject. Therefore, the opportunity for it to be

replicated no longer exists. From a variety of some of the more than 200 publications authored by Knowles, as listed in his autobiography (1989b), it appeared he had most likely been involved in action research related to andragogy throughout much of his career. That experience was complementary to directly taking part in this inquiry and he was not hesitant to be interviewed as part of this "re-write" of his autobiography. Making use of this model allowed for Knowles to also be involved in the process of interpretation, as well.

This inquiry is a starting point of future research in the field related to the context, the foundation provided here. This examination of history can be used to aid teaching of the history of the field. It can also be useful in learning more about any of the social movements included in this study as well as the history of the use of a word within the language of any field. And as anyone who knew Malcolm would agree, these four movements most likely did not influence Knowles without Knowles also influencing them -- another future research topic.

### **Conclusion**

In his autobiography, Knowles did not explain in any detail his choice to make use of the term andragogy. Through the assistance of historical documents, it was established that Knowles and Savicevic shared an exchange about the word andragogy, introducing the term to Knowles in 1966, in contrast to Knowles' (1989b) recording of the event as occurring in 1967. Knowles deliberately chose to make use of the term andragogy as he saw fit to name the collection of ideas he had been developing as his theory of adult education. He used the term andragogy in a new way in the U.S., and therefore created social change related to the new meaning he gave to the word (Foner, 1976).

In addition, the actual dialogue that occurred between Knowles and Savicevic in their initial meeting most likely encouraged Knowles to use the term to describe his own style of teaching adult learners. Knowles' style of teaching adult learners was construction of an adult learning 'nameless' theory that had been in progress for many years prior to their meeting. Savicevic, who attended one of Knowles' courses at Boston University, introduced himself to Knowles by excitedly telling Knowles that Knowles was practicing andragogy. Coupled with Knowles' response of "Whatagogy?" most likely placed the initial focus on the word and as it applied to Knowles's delivery of an adult education model at that time in Boston, MA rather than the broader European use of the word (Knowles, 1989b).

At times, the discourse that followed Knowles' new use of the term andragogy was discussed out of context (Henschke, 2009, 2010), without recognizing Knowles' preferences and intent. Therefore, at times his critics missed the meaning he gave to the term "andragogy" and as a result, Knowles as well as his "theory" of andragogy were sometimes misunderstood. The claim by some critics that he misused the term andragogy is a demonstration of the lack of understanding of Knowles' decisions regarding his use of the word andragogy. Without context, misunderstandings resulted.

In addition, Knowles' further chose to share his theory of andragogy outside of academia with the larger audience of practitioners. Thus, he deliberately chose to write about andragogy in a style different than the typical academic writings. This decision was most likely influenced by the times he lived in and what he gained from experiencing the social movements of his times. In addition, this was most likely Knowles' way of being involved in action research, a method closely related to the group dynamics movement as well as organizational development.

In his times, Knowles was a pioneer, leader, maverick, agent of change, and rebel in the field of adult education. The four movements he was involved in collectively provide context of his times. They most likely had an influence upon his thinking as an adult educator and his perspective of “andragogy.” From the humanistic adult education movement, Knowles gained consistency. From the human services movement, he recognized the need to be practical. From the group dynamics movement, he became more authentic. From the group dynamics and HRD movements, he contributed action research. These characteristics can be recognized in his practice of andragogy as well as in his conceptualization of the theory itself.

It is likely, also, that Knowles had an influence on these social movements, which should be researched further. This may be accomplished by applying Gottschalk’s (1969) historical research model and building upon Henschke’s (1973) research. Sopher (2003b) proposes a hierarchy of andragogy, suggesting that Knowles missed acknowledging the levels of andragogy. The documentation of his teaching clearly demonstrates that he practiced with a recognition of the varied levels of preparedness for engaging in the andragogical model.

By rewriting history, this research records one version of the context, and therefore the meaning, of a moment in the history of adult education and the career of Malcolm Knowles, an adult educator in the U.S. It is recorded as told by Knowles and as interpreted through our eyes, with his involvement in the process of interpretation.

The introduction of the term andragogy to Knowles by Savicevic was accurately recorded in detail for the first time. Insight was provided into Knowles’ decision to make use of the term and give meaning to the term within the context of adult education in the U.S. The evolution of the discourse following this event was organized by decade (Sopher, 2003a). The most obvious finding was the combination of social movements identified in this study. By making use of the term andragogy in spoken and written formats to describe his practice of adult education, Knowles demonstrated a practical application of the field as well as gained popularity among the larger audience of non-academics. Knowles and his theory of adult education (andragogy) are best understood within the context of his times as well as the meaning he gave to it through deliberate decisions on his part.

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- Marti J. Sopher, Ph.D. Cardinal Stritch University and Center for Active & Collaborative Learning (CACL), Madison, WI. (608) 772-0794; [cacllc@charter.net](mailto:cacllc@charter.net)
- John A Henschke, Ed.D. Chair of the Andragogy Doctoral (Ed.D.) Lindenwood University, St. Charles, MO. USA. (314) 651-9897; [jhenschke@lindenwood.edu](mailto:jhenschke@lindenwood.edu); Andragogy Website: <http://www.edu.education/andragogy.cfm>
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