

Olena Ogienko, Iryna Lytovchenko

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OLENA OGIENKO¹, IRYNA LYTOVCHENKO²

Andragogy as Theoretical Basis of Corporate Training in American Companies

¹ Doctor of Science in Education, Professor of Department of Pedagogy of A.S. Makarenko Sumy State Pedagogical University, Ukraine

² PhD, Associate Professor of Department of English for Engineering of National Technical University of Ukraine “Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute”, Ukraine

Abstract

The article analyzes the andragogical foundation of the organization of the learning process in American companies, particularly highlights the issues of andragogy as most commonly known theory of adult learning, the specific features of andragogical model of adult learning and ways of its application in corporate training in the United States.

Keywords: andragogy, andragogical model, corporate training (learning), adult learning principles, adult learning process, American companies

Introduction

Competition in the globalized information economy requires organizations to continuously train their employees to meet the needs of the modern labor market. “The jobs of today often require complex cognitive skills and consequently, continuous learning has been touted as increasingly important for organizational effectiveness” (Ford, 1997, p. 11). Human Resources are now seen as the human capital and their ability to learn – as the main factor of development and competitiveness of companies. To achieve their business goals and ensure the conditions for the successful development, companies are looking for ways to optimize the development of their workforce, improve the learning programs and thus provide the employees with information, skills and competencies, needed to work in the rapidly changing business world of today.

To be effective, corporate training programs need to give consideration to specific features of adults as learners and therefore be designed and operated according to the principles of andragogy as most recognized theory of adult learning. In view of the importance of the problem we are going to analyze the andragogy as foundation for the organization of the learning process in American companies.

Andragogy as most commonly known theory of adult learning

As corporations are trying to optimize the training of their employees, they are seeking knowledge to better understand the adult learner and comprehend how he or she learns best. Investigation of these problems began in the early 20th century primarily in the works of Lindeman and Thorndike, but still there is no single commonly accepted theory that could explain all aspects of adult learning. With the further development and deepening of knowledge in this area scientists have developed a number of models of adult learning and most of them are based on the andragogical principles formulated by Malcolm Knowles, a recognized theorist, practitioner, leader and innovator in adult education, a man whose name is “most associated with andragogy in North America” (Pratt, 1993, p. 15). Andragogy, which he theoretically grounded and implemented into practice and which in different periods of his life he called a technology, theory, model and science of adult learning, still remains the most famous and popular.

Emphasizing the importance of Knowles’ andragogy in the field of adult education, the largest segment of which is corporate education, Merriam argues that it is one of “the cornerstones of adult learning theory today” and “probably the best-known theory of adult learning both within and outside the field of adult education. Proposed by Knowles in 1968 as a new label and a new technology by which to distinguish adult learning from preadult schooling, andragogy became a rallying point for adult educators wanting to distinguish their field from that of education in general” (Merriam, 2004, p. 202).

Specific features of andragogical model of adult learning

Andragogical model has specific principles and methods of learning that are different from those used in education of children (pedagogical model). According to Knowles, the “skeletal” framework of his andragogical model is grounded on the understanding of specific features of adults as learners, which he formulated as andragogical principles of adult learning. Based on these principles, he developed “a new technology – methods, techniques, and materials – that is tailored to these unique characteristics of adults as learners” (Knowles, 1968, p. 351) and a phased process of adult learning.

M. Knowles singles out six andragogical principles which follow from the characteristics of the adult learner, and, according to Merriam, are “inarguably the best known set of principles explaining learning in adulthood” (Merriam, 1993, p. 1): 1) adults need to know why the learning is valuable for them in the present and how they will benefit from it in the future; 2) an adult is an independent person capable of self-directed learning; 3) an adult has personal experience, which is a rich source of learning; 4) an adult’s readiness to learning is linked to his/her developmental tasks; 5) adults are practically oriented in learning and are interested in the immediate application of acquired knowledge;

6) adults' motivation to learning is mainly determined by internal factors (Knowles, 1990, p. 57–63).

The main conceptual differences between the andragogical and pedagogical models, according to Knowles, lie in the role of participants of the education process. In the pedagogical model the dominant role is played by the teacher who determines all the basic parameters of the learning process, including the purpose, content, forms, methods, means, while in the andragogical model the adult learner, due to his characteristic features, is an active participant of the learning activity who plays the leading role in all phases of the learning process defined by Knowles, from creation of a favorable learning environment, assessment of learning needs, setting the learning objectives and planning to implementation and evaluation of the learning process (Knowles, 1990).

Andragogical model of corporate learning in the USA

The andragogical model forms the theoretical framework of corporate training therefore the principles of andragogy are translated into all the phases of the adult learning process in the corporate environment.

The first stage is need assessment. It is of primary importance because only the understanding of employees' learning needs helps coaches to develop customized programs that are much more effective than off-the-shelf programs in providing them with all the necessary knowledge and professional skills. The proper definition of needs ensures the effective development and implementation of the learning process, its outcomes and approaches to their assessment, identification of organizational factors promoting or hindering the success in training. Salas (2001) suggests three ways of identifying training needs:

- job-task analysis which, unlike simple questioning of workers about their learning needs, allows to exactly define what they need to learn and set the learning standards;
- organizational analysis which defines the priorities in training, readiness of organizations to provide it in line with the strategic objectives of the organization;
- person analysis which identifies the employees who need training most of all. If resources are unlimited it is advisable to train all workers, but if the resources are limited, training should be provided only to those with the biggest gap between the required and available job skills.

Before the beginning of training, the workers need to be prepared for it. Coaches explain why the learning is valuable for their work, as well as what outcomes are expected from them.

The next phase of the learning process is formulation of objectives in learning which, according to the needs of learners, can relate to the affective, behavioral and cognitive spheres (Newstrom, 1975; Silberman, 1998; Brophy, 1987).

Affective needs relate to attitudes, feelings and preferences of learners, behavioral needs – to the acquisition of skills and abilities necessary to perform the professional duties, cognitive needs – to the understanding of content of the program.

Achievement of educational goals depends on trainees' motivation which can be defined as effort, interest and perseverance demonstrated by them before, during and after learning (Tannenbaum, Yukl, 1992). Brophy (1987) focuses on the internal and external motivation of learners and states that internal motivation, due to the increase of interest in and pleasure from learning, contributes to achievement of tasks related to the emotional sphere. External motivation is related to the achievement of objectives that relate to the behavioral sphere and are aimed at mastering the necessary professional skills.

At present, companies are increasingly aware of the importance of motivation and realize that each employee should have his or her stimuli which largely determine his achievements in learning.

One of the major studies that have helped change the attitude of companies towards their employees was carried out in 1920s by Mayo (2003), who proved that workers are motivated not only by financial incentives and that their behavior and performance are primarily determined by social relationships and satisfaction from work. His research, known as the Hawthorne Studies, conducted at Hawthorne plant of Western Electric in Chicago, marked the beginning of the transition from the classical to the human relations approach, a direction in management theory that considers intangible incentives as the main factors of increase in productivity.

Scientists (Ginsber, Wlodkowski, 2000) argue that four conditions are needed to improve employee motivation for learning: 1) atmosphere of mutual respect and support; 2) creating a positive attitude to learning; 3) active involvement of trainees in the learning process; 4) raising the trainees' awareness of the value of learning and confidence in their ability to achieve good results.

The efficiency of this process is largely determined by the proper organization of phases that follow needs assessment and goal setting, particularly, planning and implementation of learning, the choice of forms, methods, tools and creation of learning environment. Noe and Colquitt (2002) defined the characteristics of a properly designed learning process: a) learners understand the goals, objectives and expected outcomes; b) the content is important for learners and examples, exercises and tasks are directly related to their work; c) learners are provided with all necessary resources; d) learners study in a safe learning environment; e) learners receive feedback from trainers, observers, peers and tasks themselves; f) learners have the opportunity to observe and interact with each other; g) the learning program is effectively coordinated.

Carefully designed learning strategy, firstly, transmits the information that learners need to know; secondly, demonstrates the desired behavior, process of

cognition, attitudes; thirdly, creates opportunities for the reinforcement of the necessary knowledge and skills; fourthly, provides feedback so that learners can compare their results with those of their peers and thus realize what needs to be improved (Salas, 2001).

An important final stage of the learning process is training evaluation which enables companies to identify effective and ineffective aspects of its organization and, accordingly, make the necessary changes and adjustments to overcome the drawbacks. Kraiger *et al.* defines the training evaluation as the systematic collection of data to answer the question of whether the learning objectives were achieved and whether their achievement has led to the increase in efficiency. These scientists particularly point out that learning is a multidimensional concept that includes affective, behavioral and cognitive components, so the question of whether the learning objectives have been achieved requires measurement of different types of results, such as changes in knowledge, skilled behavior, self-efficacy (Kraiger, Ford, Salas, 1993).

Conclusion

The results of our research give ground to conclude that a conceptual framework of corporate education in the US is the andragogical model based on the andragogical principles of learning following from the perception of the adult learner as a self-directed individual who has rich and varied life experiences, practical orientation in learning, need for immediate application of acquired knowledge and skills in his professional activities, internal motivation for learning and, due to these characteristics, is an active participant of the learning process and plays a leading role in all its phases, from creating a favorable learning environment, determining learning needs, setting learning objectives and planning, to implementation and evaluation of results.

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