

## Chapter 3

# Andragogy and Higher Education in Late Capitalism: A Critique

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Over the past half-century, the word “andragogy” has migrated from the fringe vocabulary to the standard lexicon of adult education. It has identified common psychological traits in “non-traditional” students and distinguished its methods from “pedagogy,” the teaching of children. This chapter will explore andragogy’s apparent strengths and arguable weaknesses in terms of its socio-economic assumptions and the social class interests it may wittingly or unwittingly serve. It will conclude with a critique.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Confronted as we are by profound changes in everything from our understanding of neurology (mental health), ecology (environmental sustainability), and the implications of particle physics and cosmology for our understanding of the universe and, perhaps, the hope of finding a meaningful place in it (spiritual sublimity?), it is no great revelation to find ourselves in basic agreement with the far-famed British philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) who, in 1931, expressed awareness of the fleeting nature of human cultures, the ideas they are said to embody, and the words people use to describe them. So, Whitehead realized that confidence could be had in the validity of declarative statements “only when the timespan of cultural change was greater than the span of individuals” (Whitehead, 1931).

Contemporarily, from learned debates about cultural relativism to street-level concerns about “fake news,” “conspiracy theories,” and the ethics of artificially intelligent plagiarism and Chat-GPT essay-writing, our sense of disconnection from an absolute, eternal, non-negotiable *truth*, or at least in the merit of the pursuit thereof, has never (at least from our admittedly provincial, presentist perspective) seemed more elusive. Deprived of (or liberated from) the comfort/confinement to be found in unquestioned, received wisdom about (and faith in) eternal verities, our age of endless uncertainty and socially

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constructed reality has led us to believe that the recognized and revered certainties of our or any other community, whether they relate to practical actions, empirical facts, ethical preferences, or supernatural (metaphysical, theological) speculations, are at best tentative, conditional, contingent, very likely transitory, certainly incomplete, and quite possibly wrong.

So it is that andragogy, the core concept in this chapter and in this book, may be taken as a passing fancy—once a neologism, serviceable in the present moment, often elevated to “a badge of identity” (Brookfield, 1986), and methinks, destined eventually to be an archaic cultural remnant.

We may hope that its fancy will not pass too soon, of course, lest the contributors to this volume be complicit in an elegant practical joke played upon them/ourselves. We may have, I think, some confidence that it will be around for a while; but, we may also hope that its demise is so distant that our comments on it will not be obsolete before it is dropped from our ever-shifting and sifting lexicological (dis)order. After all, no less an expert than Patricia Cross (1981) long since told us that “although the word andragogy makes a neat contrast with the more familiar and traditional pedagogy, the contrast appears difficult to maintain.” And yet, here we are still talking about it forty-plus years later.

The fragility of terms should, however, be kept in mind. Some create splashes in various pans and speedily disappear; others endure for centuries. So, Ray (2013) reminded us a decade ago that not only do neologisms have discernible patterns of creation, evolution, and presumably ultimate extinction, but they (or their proponents) also compete with others for recognition and dominance. Accordingly, while “pedagogy” (childhood learning) seems to have held sway in that particular field and seems also to have successfully colonized others up to and including post-secondary (though chiefly undergraduate) education, and while “eldergogy” (Yeo, 1982) has apparently tussled unsuccessfully with “geragogy” (Battersby, 1987; Johnson, 2016, Wright, 2016) for recognition as the teaching of older adults, newer terms continue to burst forth from the crowded, confused, and confusing jabberwocky of educational theory.

One such is “metagogy.” Whether advanced by identifiable human beings (Propenko, 2009) or artfully/artificially intelligent and potentially posthumans (mplsbohemia, n.d.; Rollermation, 2011), its supporters boast that it not only “is inclusive of an andragogic approach, but also includes conventional pedagogical approaches as they are appropriate” (Peterson & Ray, 2013, p. 83)—more a “mix-and-match” than a classic Hegelian dialectic. Wagers on their relative longevity will be made only by the most adventuresome.

In this chapter, I plan to treat the concept of andragogy lightly insofar as debates about its target audience’s demographics, motivations, self-concepts, intellectual capacities, and the like are concerned. That is because I am less concerned with the educational theory *per se* than I am in the political economy of education. Abstract concepts may float in the clouds, but the attitudes, actions, and pertinent effects of their use in the world as we find it have material consequences. Andragogy, like most words and the activities they describe are designed and deployed by detectable political and economic sectors and interests. While psycho-social factors cannot be neglected, the premise of this chapter is that, although they may explain the beliefs and behavior of individuals and groups, those individuals and groups are always to be found within a firm and fixed ideological and institutional environment. That environment, furthermore, is constituted by the overall mode, means, and relations of knowledge production and dissemination. Our ability to understand that environment is, I respectfully submit, the key to comprehending the patterns of culture that are ultimately responsible for everything from the allocation of research funding for projects in technology and the sciences (highly valued) and those in the humanities (very much less so) to the current “culture wars” that pits critical race theory against the apparent epidemic

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