

Applying Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning to K-12 Staff Development

Kelly Watson | K-12 Staff Development | July 19, 2026

INTRODUCTION

The two adult learning theories that inform my design for staff development are andragogy and self-directed learning. The theory of Andragogy is a learning theory led by Malcom Knowles, arguing that adults act as self-directed learners who respect learning relevant to their context. This means that adults need to know why they're learning something, differing from typical pedagogical approaches to K-12 professional development (Roberts et al., 2024). Self-directed learning theory is the idea that individuals take responsibility over their own learning. In self-directed learning environments, learners are empowered when they are given autonomy to direct their learning (du Toit-Brits et al., 2024). The purpose of this resource is to outline how these two theories can be utilized to inform professional development to create culturally-relevant instruction for K-12 educators.

Theory 1 Overview: Andragogy

The key principle of Knowles' theory of Andragogy is that adult learners inherently differ from children. Educating an adult using pedagogy instead of andragogy can undermine motivation and engagement (Green, 2024).

Knowles argues that there are six assumptions people should make about adult learners. These assumptions are that learners need to know why they're learning what they're learning, that they are responsible for their own learning, that they have a wealth of experience, that they are ready to learn, that they are problem oriented, and that they are intrinsically motivated (Knapke et al., 2024).

Often educators are taught that students are empty vessels that bank knowledge. While this specific phrasing has been retired in many educational contexts, the core idea still remains. Adults need knowledge as well, but are quite the contrary to an empty vessel. Adults have the capacity and expectation to facilitate their own learning whereas children do not. Ensuring that professional development for educators focuses on their ability to bring their experience, motivations, and readiness to the table leads to more effective professional development.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Andragogy argues that adults are self-directed learners who bring their own experience, motivation, and readiness to the table and facilitators must implement Knowles' six assumptions rather than treating adults as passive recipients of knowledge.

Theory 2 Overview: Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed Learning theory, or SDL, is learning that focuses on a learners autonomy, empowering learners by encouraging critical thinking, problem-solving and continual learning (du Toit-Brits et al., 2024). Many core

principles of SDL are attributed to famous scholars and historians like Socrates and Plato, who detail that independent critical inquiry are essential for life-long learning (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018, as cited in du Toit-Brits et al., 2024). Think about times you've encountered a small problem in your personal life. Say you order a table or some kind of furniture online. When it gets delivered you must build it yourself. Sometimes you just want to approach assembling it in your own way, but you're given directions to guide you. This is what self-directed learning can look like. SDL is our most basic, natural response to new challenges (Guglielmino & Long, 2011, as cited in du Toit-Brits et al., 2024).

Gerald Grow's model of staged SDL outlines learning as a 4-stage process where learners move from dependence, to piquing interest, to commitment, and then to self-directedness. Facilitators should use learners' experiences to create staff development in alignment with these steps. Some staff may be new to a concept, some may be familiar. Ensuring that learners are given the proper support, like a guide, is essential for self-directed learning to work. Self-directed learning allows learners to leverage and reflect on their experience in staff developments and if structured appropriately, apply their learning in their practices (du Toit-Brits et al., 2024).

KEY TAKEAWAY

Self-directed learning suggests that adults naturally take ownership of their own learning process, but they still need scaffolding personalized to their current stage of readiness rather than being left entirely on their own.

Comparative Analysis

Andragogy and self-directed learning meaningfully overlap but there are a few differences that allow them to work together nicely. Both andragogy and self-directed learning assume that adults are intrinsically motivated and capable of directing their own learning. Along with this, both theories suggest that adults do not favor being lectured or told what to do (Merriam, 2001).

Self-directedness is actually a core feature of andragogy, but when looking at SDL through Grow's staged model, we can see the nuance of the two. Andragogy coins self-directed learning as one of the assumptions for an adult

learning audience, and Grow outlines how self-directed learning should be structured for that learning audience. Self-directed learning homes in on the process of adult learning by detailing the amount of control a learner has over their learning based on their previous experience. Essentially, andragogy describes why adult learners learn the way they do and SDL explains how that learning should be structured.

Application to Practice

As an educator at a Title I, International Baccalaureate High School in the heart of Chicago, I see the common issues with staff development first-hand. Many educators have a minimal amount of time in a standard school day to complete their planning, curriculum development, grading, communication with parents, and more. When this staff development time is provided through taking away a planning period, it's even more essential that the time is used appropriately. Approaching staff development with the best interests of the audience can be accomplished through utilizing adult learning theories like andragogy and self-directed learning to inform the learning. Here are a few examples of how this can be seen in practice.

Instead of dedicating professional development time to a lecture on feedback cycles, teachers would engage in a feedback workshop. This workshop would be structured by interest, with different tables indicating different kinds of feedback the learners need help with and an accompanying guide they can work through to solve problems. For example, if teachers need more advice on providing timely formative feedback, they would go to the table with a guide for timely formative feedback. Andragogy is reflected through the learner deciding what they're learning and why, and staged SDL is seen through the learners utilizing guides to independently work through subject matter for their specific need-level.

Instructional Strategies

The following are some examples of strategies that can be used with each specific adult learning theory.

- Andragogy: Allow teachers to choose their own focus for a professional development based on current issues within the classroom. This can be done through choice at the session, or through an anonymous survey before-hand so facilitators have time to prepare.

- **Andragogy:** Give teachers opportunities to build on their current work and tools that can enhance previously made materials. This can look like having teachers in the same subject and level work together to share and build materials.
- **Self-Directed Learning:** Give teachers time to read and create material on their own time. If something needs to be implemented but educators can already do the task independently, allowing them to do so independently without a specified meeting room is an option. Development does not need to be in person.
- **Self-Directed Learning:** Allow teachers to choose which staff development sessions they attend for whole “PD” days. This can lead to stronger engagement and provide opportunities for learners to sort themselves based on their “stage” of development.

Theory-to-Practice Visual



Take the table example. The staff development is based on a relevant subject matter, like feedback. Andragogy represents all of the different tables in the room, but the learner doesn't sit at all the tables. They select one table. The self-directed learning circle within the andragogy circle represents the table a learner chooses based on their stage.

Conclusion

Respect and relevance are at the core of my instructional philosophy. If you don't have a strong understanding of the audience you design for, the design will not work for them. By utilizing the philosophy of Knowles' andragogy and the structure of Grow's staged self-directed learning for educators in a K-12 environment, the facilitator can respect their learning audience and give them opportunities to grow and enhance their practice in a meaningful and actionable fashion.

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