

# APPLICATION OF ANDRAGOGY WITH GRADUATE STUDENTS

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As I sit in my office today reflecting on my journey to becoming a tenure-track faculty member at a research university in the U.S. in my early 30s, I can't help but recall the vibrant yet tumultuous landscape I navigated as an international student during my master's and doctoral studies in Thailand and the U.S. that began in 2012. Every step of that journey shaped not only my academic paths but also my perspective on resilience and adaptability in an unfamiliar world. Born and raised in Cambodia, where Khmer is the official language, my international educational experience began during my master's degree study in Thailand where I first encountered the principles of adult education. This experience paved the way for a study exchange in the U.S. in the fall of 2013, which allowed me to further explore the term "andragogy," defined by Knowles (1980) as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43), and how it is used to facilitate the learning of adults. During this time, I became acutely aware of the distinct learning needs and experiences of adults—an insight that would later shape my academic and professional pursuits.

In this article, I weave together my personal and professional journeys and provide academic insights to argue that the application of andragogical principles has the potential to empower graduate students. By transitioning from conventional pedagogical approaches to more adult learner-centered strategies, we can foster dynamic educational environments that support and enhance the learning experiences of adult learners. Through this narrative exploration, I aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse on effective adult education in an increasingly globalized context.

## REGRESSIVE MOMENT

The idea of becoming an international student in the U.S. once felt like a distant dream—something my 10-year-old self could hardly imagine. I vividly remember the confusion I felt attending nightly English classes, wondering why I needed to learn a language so different from the Khmer spoken at home. When my mother's relatives, who had immigrated to the U.S., visited, I eagerly approached them with questions about life and school in America: "Do you speak English every day? What is school like? Are people kind? How do they greet each other?" Their replies, a mix of accented Khmer and English, only deepened my uncertainty. They spoke of long commutes and early mornings—realities far removed from my childhood world—and I left these conversations questioning whether I would ever fully grasp the education system or culture I so admired from afar.

After finishing high school in 2007, I pursued undergraduate degrees in Finance and Banking and English Literature in Cambodia. My curiosity about the U.S. education system continued to grow, but the vast and fragmented information I found online offered little clarity at the time. Receiving a scholarship to pursue my master's degree in Non-Formal Education at Chulalongkorn University—the Harvard of Thailand—in 2012 broadened my understanding of educational contexts, especially in relation to Thailand and Cambodia. However, I soon realized that comparing the education systems of these two countries was complicated by their vastly

different historical and political backgrounds (Kheang, 2025; Kheang & Ratana-Ubol, 2014). This growing awareness set the stage for a pivotal experience that would reshape my understanding of education and learning.

A transformative moment occurred during a 2013 study exchange in the U.S., where I enrolled in adult education and English courses while serving as a graduate assistant at Lindenwood University, a private institution in the Midwest. Immersed in this vibrant academic and social environment, many of the childhood questions I had carried began to find answers. I encountered a culture characterized by warmth, welcoming gestures, and inspiring examples of lifelong learning. One unforgettable example was an 82-year-old doctoral student who became my partner on a group presentation. Her unwavering dedication—commuting over an hour and a half to attend evening classes, meeting regularly with me to plan assignments, and sitting side by side in class—was both humbling and inspiring. Her kindness radiated in every interaction; she even baked cookies to celebrate her birthday with the class, inviting us all to share in her joy. Witnessing her perseverance and commitment to excellence at an age when many would have long retired deeply moved me. Though she sadly passed away before finishing her dissertation, her spirit continues to inspire my own lifelong learning journey. Her example embodies the resilience and passion I aspire to nurture in all adult learners, fueling my commitment to design inclusive and supportive learning environments where no adult learner is left behind.

These experiences profoundly inform and shape my current teaching. I vividly recall the confusion and yearning for connection I once felt, and they motivate my dedication to creating classroom spaces where adult learners feel genuinely understood, respected, and empowered. My teaching approach is shaped by this lived experience—not through abstract theoretical distinctions but through empathy, inclusivity, flexibility, and responsiveness. I strive to honor each student's unique background and aspirations, cultivating learning environments that balance rigor with support and encourage meaningful, self-directed growth in new and dynamic ways. This profound connection between my past and present work grounds my teaching philosophy and inspires the intentional application of andragogical principles—an exploration I continue in the next section.

## WHAT IF ANDRAGOGY WERE APPLIED TO SUPPORT GRADUATE STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS?

Andragogy, defined by Malcolm Knowles (1980) as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43), has been broadly referenced in European countries since the 1960s, as noted by Dusan Savicevic, a student of Knowles at Boston University (Knowles, 1994). Although Knowles did not coin the term “andragogy,” his use of andragogy resulted in pivotal contributions in three key areas: (1) teaching adult learners; (2) conducting research in adult education; and (3) engaging with trainers, researchers, educators, and adult learners across various disciplines in the workforce since the 1960s (Kheang, 2018).

During my coursework, I observed that my adult education instructor, Dr. John Henschke, who was a student of Malcolm Knowles, embodied the principles of andragogy by adopting an empathetic and facilitative role, rather than that of a traditional instructor who primarily focused on lectures, testing, and grading. He emphasized that andragogy was fundamentally about understanding students as individuals and recognizing their aspirations in both educational and career contexts. This approach was exemplified through the introduction of the learning contract, which invited students to articulate the grade they believed they deserved based on their

performance and efforts. This was the first time I felt a sense of agency in my academic journey; I confidently expressed my desire for an “A” grade and substantiated my reasoning. The learning contract consisted of five main elements that each student had to complete and submit to the instructor for review: (1) learning objectives (What would you learn?); (2) learning strategies/tactics (How would you learn it?); (3) timeline (By when would you learn it?); (4) evidence (How would you know you learned it?); and (5) validation (How would you know it was the right choice to meet your learning objective?) (Knowles, 1991). This contract not only allowed the instructor to gain insights into my goals but also demonstrated a genuine commitment to understanding my learning process. In this environment, I felt respected, heard, and valued, with my educational needs and perspectives acknowledged. This practice undoubtedly reaffirmed my status as an adult learner.

As I was preparing for my own journey as an adult educator, I was deeply inspired by the principles of andragogy that have informed and enriched my educational experiences. I envision creating an inclusive and responsive learning environment where adult learners can leverage their strengths, articulate their aspirations, and actively engage in their educational journeys. By facilitating meaningful conversations and fostering a collaborative learning atmosphere, I aspire to empower my graduate students in the same transformative way that I experienced during my own education (Freire, 1970/2005; Kheang, 2019, 2022a).

After graduating with my first doctoral degree (EdD) in andragogy from Lindenwood University in Missouri, I chose to pursue a second doctoral degree (PhD) in Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development at North Carolina State University. My goal was to become a faculty member capable of teaching students not only the fundamentals of educating adults but also the intricacies of conducting educational research. I aimed to empower them to achieve their educational aspirations and become leaders, educators, researchers, or practitioners in their chosen fields.

### CURRENT SITUATION: PEDAGOGY VS. ANDRAGOGY

Upon graduating with my second doctoral degree in 2023, I joined the University of the District of Columbia as a visiting assistant professor of adult education and then Ball State University in 2024 as a tenure-track assistant professor of educational studies. In my role, I have had the privilege of teaching and working with graduate students—both master’s and doctoral students—who are adult learners returning to school to reach their defined goals. Some seek to become faculty members, while others prefer careers in industry, and still others aspire to leadership or management positions in non-profit and for-profit organizations within their communities.

Having witnessed how adult learners are educated in various settings and disciplines due to my diverse educational and professional backgrounds in Cambodia, Thailand, and the U.S., I have seen how traditional pedagogical practices often fall short in supporting the learning experiences and success of graduate students. I am not the first to have noticed this problem. The ongoing concern regarding traditional pedagogy practices has been a part of the conversation on education since the 1920s. For example, Eduard Lindeman (1926), who was an adult educator in the early 20th century, observed that students who have

“completed” a standardized regimen of education promptly turn their faces in the opposite direction... For him, this life for which he has suffered the affliction of learning will come to be a series of dull, uninteresting, degrading capitulations to the stereotyped pattern of his “set.” (p. 4)

Learning should occur naturally, even while being guided and measured by curriculum standards designed to facilitate the learning of adults. Adult learners learn and thrive in a fun, critical, creative, and positive environment, where the instructor acts as a facilitator, helping students discover and engage with what they need to learn (Henschke, 2013; Knowles, 1995).

Transitioning from a pedagogical mindset—shaped by my early educational experiences—though, has been a gradual process. This evolution began with my empathy for adult learners who may struggle with self-directed learning while navigating uncertainties and balancing responsibilities outside of school, such as work, health issues, and family obligations. Many learners still rely on instructors to tell them what they need to learn, as this is what they have become accustomed to since elementary school. Some need guidance and support to recognize their unique strengths, harness critical thinking skills, and use their experiences as valuable tools in the learning process. This support helps them to feel more confident in becoming self-directed learners (Henschke, 2013; Kheang, 2022b; Tough, 1979). Moving forward, my mission is to discern when traditional pedagogical practices may be appropriate while primarily applying andragogical methods. This flexibility will enable me to accommodate my students’ needs and foster their development as self-directed learners, which ultimately supports their comfort and confidence in the andragogical learning process.

The shift from pedagogy towards andragogy embraces a dialogic approach to learning and knowledge, as articulated by Freire (1970/2005, 1989) and Knowles (1980), and is informed by educators’ experiences in the classroom (Dewey, 1938). Freire (1970/2005) introduced the “banking” concept in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critiquing a pedagogical system he deemed misguided. He described education as an act of depositing information, where students are passive depositories, and the teacher serves as the depositor. Rather than engaging in genuine communication, the teacher issues directives and deposits knowledge that students must simply receive, memorize, and repeat. In this “banking” model of education, students’ engagement is limited to receiving, storing, and recalling information, ultimately reducing them to mere containers of knowledge. Freire (1970/2005) also argued that this method stifles creativity and transformation, which leads to students’ lack of true understanding of what matters in their learning. He stated, “Apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly human” (p. 72). Knowledge, he explained, arises through invention and reinvention, fueled by the ongoing, hopeful inquiry that human beings pursue in relation to themselves and the world around them.

Freire (1970/2005) further elucidated how the “banking” concept operates within traditional pedagogy through several key observations: (1) the teacher teaches while the students are taught; (2) the teacher possesses all knowledge while the students know nothing; (3) the teacher thinks for the students rather than with them; (4) the teacher talks while the students listen passively; (5) the teacher disciplines while the students are disciplined; (6) the teacher makes choices that the students must comply with; (7) the teacher acts, creating the illusion that the students are also acting; (8) the teacher selects the program content without consulting the students, who must adapt; (9) the teacher conflates their authority over knowledge with their professional authority, opposing student freedom; and (10) the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the students remain mere objects.

This view of pedagogical practice is in line with Stenhouse (1985) who asserted that pedagogical methods typically involve traditional practices, such as (1) delivering lectures; (2) the teacher controlling what and how students learn; (3) assessing students through tests and quizzes to determine comprehension; and (4) viewing teachers as the primary source of knowledge, expecting students to follow instructions. Recognizing that learning is a lifelong journey and that teachers are also learners, Freire (1998) thus proposed “critical pedagogy,” wherein educators engage in dialogue with students, which allows for a reciprocal learning experience happen during the learning process. In this model, students are not merely passive recipients of information; they are encouraged to recognize their realities and act upon them.

Knowles (1994), likewise, argued that those teaching adults should adopt the role of facilitators rather than traditional teachers. Instead of concentrating on what to teach, they should understand the unique learning characteristics of their adult students. Knowles (1980) identified six key assumptions regarding adult learning: (1) adults are self-directed learners; (2) adults bring prior experiences to the learning process; (3) adults have specific learning needs and goals; (4) adults are ready to learn and address challenges that arise; (5) adults seek to understand why they are learning something and prefer learning the knowledge and skills that are immediately applicable; and (6) they are motivated by internal factors, including a desire to change their circumstances and enhance their quality of life.

Furthermore, Knowles (1995) established eight components of the andragogical process design to facilitate active involvement in adult learning. These include: (1) *preparation* (understanding who the learners are and planning appropriate lesson content and teaching techniques); (2) *climate* (creating a relaxed, trusting, and collaborative learning environment where learners feel comfortable expressing their concerns); (3) *planning* (collaboratively setting learning objectives and processes that reflect learners’ experiences and needs); (4) *diagnosis of need* (mutual assessment between learners and facilitators); (5) *setting of objectives* (negotiating learning objectives together); (6) *designing learning plans* (using learning contracts and projects sequenced according to learners’ readiness); (7) *learning activities* (implementing diverse instructional methods, such as inquiry projects, independent study, and experiential techniques); and (8) *evaluation* (encouraging self-evaluation alongside constructive feedback from peers and instructors).

Transitioning from pedagogical to andragogical practices requires time, effort, and patience. I recognize that my students face similar challenges in adjusting to my andragogical teaching methods, so I am committed to working with them to address any issues and concerns they may have. My ultimate goal is to empower them to become self-directed learners so that they can take charge of their own learning and are able to embrace their strengths as they navigate their unique paths toward success in their educational journeys.

### SYNTHETIC STAGE: MY ROLES AS AN ADULT EDUCATOR

As an adult educator, I utilize andragogical methods to guide my teaching, research, and service. My teaching philosophy emphasizes a mindful awareness of who my students are, with a dedicated focus on adult learners. Recognizing that adults bring unique life experiences, learning preferences, and motivations, I structure my teaching to promote self-direction and practical application, so that my students receive experiences that are closely aligned with their needs and learning goals.

I aim to align my teaching, advising, and mentoring practices with the qualities of effective teachers practicing andragogy, as described by Henschke (2013). He emphasized the importance of qualities such as humor, flexibility, patience, sensitivity, and a desire to instruct. Rather than employing pedagogical methods suited for younger students (Knowles, 1994), I foster a learning environment where adult learners can laugh and learn from their mistakes, feel empowered to draw on their backgrounds, engage actively, and establish clear connections between their learning and their personal and professional lives.

To embody these andragogical commitments, I intentionally cultivate a classroom climate marked by warmth, openness, and mutual respect. For example, I often begin online sessions with light humor or relevant anecdotes that help ease tension and build rapport, inviting students to share their fun facts, own stories, or challenges related to the topic. My “desire to instruct” manifests through enthusiastic, clear explanations combined with an eagerness to facilitate rather than dominate learning. My patience is evident when I allow students the time and space to wrestle with complex ideas during discussions, encouraging multiple perspectives without rushing to judgment. Flexibility is demonstrated through my willingness to adjust assignment deadlines or modes of participation in response to students’ life circumstances, while sensitivity shows in how I notice subtle cues—such as a student’s withdrawal from discussion—and reach out privately to offer support or encouragement. These practices create an inclusive, psychologically safe space where learners can take risks and bring their whole selves to the educational experience.

In my advising and mentoring sessions, I employ the “question-asking” method to help students identify their learning needs, goals, and challenges. For example, instead of dictating what they should do, I ask them about their objectives and how I can support them in their educational journeys. I also take an active interest in my students’ career goals, which informs the guidance I provide for their learning and research.

Central to my teaching is the collaborative development of personalized learning plans. Depending on the courses I teach, students create learning contracts that detail their learning objectives, learning strategies/tactics, timeline, evidence, and validation for their success. These contracts act as living documents that we regularly revisit throughout the semester to assess progress and adjust goals as needed. For example, in a recent doctoral seminar, one student focused their plan on examining equity in adult education programs through case study analysis. This approach helped the student enhance their literature review skills and make meaningful connections between the coursework and their professional role in a community organization, increasing both motivation and practical relevance. Another student prioritized developing research methods and interview skills to support their dissertation writing, which informed their assignment choices and guided their requests for specific feedback. These personalized plans empower students to take ownership of their learning by linking academic content or objectives to their personal and professional experiences, while enabling me to provide targeted and meaningful support.

In courses where flexibility is more limited, I promote collaborative learning environments where students act as facilitators and support one another. For example, in one of the online courses that I recently taught, each student was assigned to serve as a presenter responsible for summarizing chapters and developing thought-provoking questions for class discussions. They were also tasked with engaging thoughtfully with their classmates’ responses to these questions. Additionally, students reflected weekly on course content and its applicability to their personal and professional endeavors through a “learning summary journal,” which I collected every five weeks.

These dynamic and interactive practices encourage students to become active co-creators of knowledge, helping them build critical thinking and communication skills in a supportive environment. During synchronous discussions, I listened attentively and interjected with probing questions that invited deeper reflection, such as, “How might your professional experience shape your interpretation here?” or “What alternative perspectives might challenge this viewpoint?” By balancing guidance with space for autonomy, I fostered student empowerment and engagement.

As a result, my graduate students expressed enjoyment of these andragogical methods in their final evaluations. Some shared their surprise at how their perceptions of the learning process have shifted; they expected traditional lectures but found themselves more engaged and in control of their learning within the course objectives. Many students appreciated my empathy, understanding, and flexibility in teaching and advising adult learners. For example, one of my students wrote in the comment section of the final evaluation submitted to the university:

The instructor is encouraging and supportive in her comments and online interactions. She responds quickly to messages and is flexible in understanding the demands of adult learners who often work full time and manage family responsibilities. Her expectations are high but reasonable, and the engaging materials and assignments make for an easy-to-follow online course. I thoroughly enjoyed this instructor.

Another student mentioned, “The instructor provides excellent feedback and clear instructions, making it easy to understand the material and improve. She is always eager to help and readily available for assistance.” One student emphasized, “The instructor did a fantastic job facilitating this course! I had everything I needed to successfully complete the course, and any questions I had were promptly answered.” Additionally, another student recognized the motivation aspect, stating, “I appreciated the instructor’s support and motivation for students.”

Reflecting on my use of andragogical teaching methods to enhance graduate students’ experiences and satisfaction, I echo the three indicators of student success proposed by Kheang (2018): (1) teachers’ beliefs, (2) teachers’ feelings, and (3) teachers’ behaviors. My beliefs center on the individuality of my graduate students. I maintain confidence in their ability to achieve learning goals when afforded appropriate support and recognition of their uniqueness. This belief guides me to trust their learning capacities and to help them realize their full potential—primarily through reflective questioning.

Teachers’ feelings encompass my sensitivity and empathy toward students’ progress and achievements. For example, I observe students’ absences or silence in discussions and reach out to express concern for their experiences and satisfaction. When necessary, I offer assignment extensions, particularly for students facing health challenges, work-life balance issues, personal loss, or caregiving responsibilities.

Teachers’ behaviors involve the varied instructional strategies I employ to engage students, such as discussion of textbooks and readings, storytelling, and delivering brief interactive lectures when appropriate. I also provide students with options for demonstrating their learning, fostering critical and creative thinking. Depending on course content, students may submit assignments as Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, or video recordings. Furthermore, I encourage students to leverage diverse technologies to enrich their learning experiences. For example, as long as I can access their submissions, students may use alternative formats such as Zoom recordings, Flipgrid, or VoiceThread. This flexibility empowers students to adopt a creative and proactive role in their learning process (Halverson & Shapiro, 2012; Henschke, 2013; Osadchyi et al., 2021).

As I continue to develop as an adult educator, I recognize that andragogy does not eliminate traditional teaching responsibilities such as lesson planning and lecturing. Rather, it provides a

renewed perspective on adult education that honors adult learners as self-directed individuals and leverages their prior experiences to facilitate new learning (Isenberg & Kheang, 2024; Knowles, 1994; Tough, 1979). My role is to facilitate students' learning journeys and to serve as a resource guiding and supporting their growth and success.

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