


A very adult curriculum? How the new BC Education plan reflects the andragogical commitments of adult education

Ralf St. Clair

University of Victoria, rstclair@uvic.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

St. Clair, Ralf (2018). "A very adult curriculum? How the new BC Education plan reflects the andragogical commitments of adult education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2018/papers/48>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

A very adult curriculum? How the new BC Education Plan reflects the andragogical commitments of adult education

Ralf St.Clair
University of Victoria

Abstract: British Columbia is in the middle of introducing a new curriculum framework into its schools, promoting values of personalization and problem-centered learning. To many adult educators this will sound familiar, raised questions regarding the extent to which this development is a genuine moment to shape the school system, and what implications it holds.

British Columbia is in the process of introducing a new curriculum framework into its schools, referred to as the BC Education Plan. As with many jurisdictions, BC refreshes its approach to school curriculum every ten or fifteen years, and this Plan replaces an approach introduced in the very early 2000s. One of the interesting aspects of school curriculum in the Province is the relative activism of the government and the extent to which innovations vary in their effects. In some cases very significant changes are widely seen as significant successes, while in others minor changes are viewed to have been a failure. Nonetheless, school curriculum (and the underpinning pedagogy) are seen as legitimate arenas for legislative intervention.

Despite this, to date the BC school curriculum has not significantly deviated from the North American norm. Experiments with self-paced curriculum and “Free schools” have been relatively short-lived, and the current alternative school settings are both small-scale and largely outside the public system. For most young people in BC their school experience is a conventional K-12 progression culminating in provincial examinations.

Over the last few years there has been a committed attempt to change the system broadly and fundamentally, leading to the implementation of a new curriculum framework across the entire school system. The new curriculum is concerned with an increased representation of Indigenous culture and knowledge, with new forms of assessment and, of particular interest to adult educators, with personalized learning. The curriculum contains no detailed lists of material to be taught and assessed, but focuses on big ideas, leaving the in-class process to the discretion of teachers. At first glance, one could easily think that this curriculum represents the importation of important ideas from adult education into the school system. The purpose of this discussion is to consider the extent to which the first impression holds true. It will address whether the school system is really likely to re-orientate itself in a genuine way towards adult

education approaches. Implications include possible insights into the extent to which andragogy can be considered as an “all-ages” approach to teaching and learning, and the possibility of building coherent educational approaches across the lifespan.

Theoretical framework

When asking about the extent to which a certain development reflects principles of adult education, it becomes clear very rapidly indeed that there are very few such principles, at least that have been widely agreed. In order to frame the question I will adopt an approach based upon Knowles’ andragogical perspective (Knowles, 1980). It is certainly not possible to adopt andragogy as an inclusive and unproblematic perspective on teaching and learning with adults, not least due to its implied position on individualism vs. collectivism and the implied promotion of a Euro-centric male norm (St.Clair, 2002). However, it is equally difficult to deny the extent to which it does encapsulate a number of the strongest commitments of our field (2015). In the current discussion andragogy is used as a guide to analysis, but the cautions that accompany this application are acknowledged.

While andragogy has recently come to be seen in some quarters as a broad term to encapsulate the academic study of life-wide learning (Reischmann, 2004), in North America it is used to represent a particular approach to learning and teaching. Knowles (1980), as part of field building activities in the 1960s, attempted to systematize the key approaches and values of adult educators as he saw them, and referred to this system as andragogy in contrast to pedagogy. The work of Knowles and others led to the popularization of a concept of teaching and learning deeply embedded within an American view of adult empowerment and democratic society. Almost 50 years after its first expression, andragogy remains significant in adult education theorizing, and in recent years the concept has benefitted from increased attention from educational technologists (Holmes & Abingdon-Cooper, 2000; Pappas, 2015).

Knowles’ understanding of andragogy evolved between his first formulation in the late 1960s and the final expression close to his death in 1997. By his latest work Knowles had identified six principles of andragogy (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005):

1. Learning must be driven by the learner’s need to know
2. The learner’s self-concept as autonomous and self-directing must be supported
3. The prior experience of the learner must be acknowledged
4. Learners must be ready to learn
5. The way learners approach learning (eg. problem-centred) must be taken into account
6. The learner’s motivation to learn must be recognized

It is important to acknowledge that this list does not really represent a specific approach to instruction as much as a set of philosophical commitments regarding the relationship of the adult to learning. As noted earlier they should not be viewed as unproblematically universal, but in my judgement they do form a useful set of starting points for analysing the extent to which a particular curricular approach steps outside the relationships represented in traditional schooling. What they do not provide, however, is a fully developed and rigorous framework for curricular analysis.

When analysing a curriculum a researcher is usually limited to the published text rather than being able to examine the curriculum in action, and this is especially true in the BC case, as the curriculum is newly published and not yet fully implemented. This limitation tends to push curricular analysis towards approaches grounded in discourse analysis. In the current research, Basil Bernstein's (1975) curricular analysis tools will be used as a way to bridge between the principles represented in andragogy and the practices entailed by the new curriculum framework documents. Though an older corpus of theory, Bernstein's work allows consideration of multiple dimensions along which curriculum can be organized and differentiated. The two master categories are classification (how things are brought together and set apart) and framing (where the control over different aspects of the curriculum lies).

Classification is the simpler of the two concepts, and refers to the strength of the boundaries between subject areas. So, for example, if students are not permitted to use their home language in English class, this represents strong classification. In the stereotypical high school subjects are extremely strongly classified, with Math never meeting History and so forth. Reflecting on the andragogical principles listed above, it seems that they are not strongly compatible with strong classification. The imperative to recognise, if not follow, the interests of the learner and their readiness to learn presents a significant challenge to rigorous separation of subject areas on the basis of an externally imposed curriculum.

Framing concerns the organization of the content, including whether it is controlled by the instructor or the learner, its sequencing, the pace of learning, and its assessment. A simple example demonstrating the way andragogy can be analyzed using Bernstein's code theory is the notion of readiness to learn. In Bernstein's terms, this would imply that the frames around timing and sequence of learning would be weak, allowing learners to exercise high levels of control. Once again, it appears that strong framing is not compatible with andragogical commitments.

Understanding a curriculum involves both the explicit statements made about it, and the implicit features of the framework. In the following discussion of the BC curriculum the documents form the centre of the analysis, but the context also has to be taken into account. The

social, cultural, and structural aspects of schooling are strongly influential in the actual application of the intended curricular approach.

Curriculum change in BC schools

In the 140 year history of BC schools the current curriculum proposals are the fourth major attempt to change the nature of the schools (Broom, 2016). The first three reforms were attempted in 1937-38, the 1960s and the 1990s. Broom (2016) argues that each of these proposed forms had a somewhat similar dynamic: government worked with academics and other experts they believed would be supportive to develop a highly progressive plan that was then strongly resisted by teachers and parents. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation is an extremely powerful union in BC, intent on playing a significant role in the management of schools, and it is notable that their role in the development of the new plans became more significant over time, paralleling the decreasing influence of university academics. Nonetheless, there is an overarching dynamic of curricular change being led by the Ministry of Education rather than grass-roots interests, and Broom (2016) argues that this represents a democratic deficit at the heart of curricular planning. Broom (2015) has also analyzed the rise of central, bureaucratic control in a number of jurisdictions, and challenges the inevitability of rationalized curriculum as the dominant force in our schools.

The most relevant former attempt at curriculum redesign is the most recent, based on the 1988 Sullivan Report. This proposal contained a number of relatively radical ideas, including starting children in school when they were ready rather than at a specific age, teachers working in interdisciplinary teams, no grades in elementary, individual assessment, and integration of, and articulation with, lifelong learning (Sullivan, 1988). There are a number of elements here that point directly to a weakening of strengthening and classification, and a high level of compatibility with andragogical principles. The proposed curricular evolution was halted in 1993, allegedly because educators found the suggestions too radical (Kilian, 2015). Later analysis has suggested, perhaps somewhat ironically, that the Sullivan Report accepted neo-liberal commonsense regarding the future of the workforce in BC too easily (Austin, 2004).

The trope of using a particular projection of the future of the province, and particularly the economic structures within it, to promote a specific approach to curriculum remains a key dynamic within BC education. This applies equally to the reforms that are currently being put into place, and is nicely illustrated by a quote from the curriculum reform website:

In 2011/12, the Ministry of Education consulted with educators, parents and students throughout the province about the current state of curriculum, assessments and the graduation program. The overwhelming response was a

desire and need for updates to the education system to better prepare students for opportunities and challenges in today's world. (BC undated, ¶1&2)

The "opportunities and challenges" referenced appear to be based in perceptions of the future economy. The splash page for the curriculum talks about:

The future our children must succeed in is different from the one we envisioned even 10 or 15 years ago.

There is an emphasis on real-life experiences - community involvement, gaining business knowledge, and hands-on learning. These are the kinds of skills that build better students and better citizens.

The new curriculum aims to connect students with the skills they need to succeed in their next chapter. (BC undated c).

The concrete changes to the curriculum are considerable. The thick binders of curriculum for each grade and subject have been replaced by brief frameworks featuring several cross-cutting components. These include the big ideas, the core competencies, and the specific curricular competencies for a subject and grade. There is attention given to personalized learning and flexible learning environments, as well as the introduction of overarching literacy and numeracy tests that can be completed between grade 10 and grade 12.

It is helpful to break down an example. One very interesting course is Social studies: Social justice 12. There are four "big ideas" for this course (BC, 2016):

- Social justice issues are interconnected
- Individual worldviews shape and inform the understanding of social justice issues
- The causes of social injustice are complex and have lasting impacts on society
- Social justice initiatives can transform individuals and systems

There are then eight curricular competencies and six areas of specified content. The content elaborations then lay out sample topics and areas that could be covered in the curriculum.

Analysis

In understanding the implications of the new curriculum there are three aspects to consider. One is the process of development. While there are claims that there was widespread consultation, it is very difficult to find any detail of what was involved. Given the history of curriculum development in BC there is reason to be cautious about claims of widespread consultation. It is notable that the main webpage describing the development process for the new curriculum does not contain the word "parent" and only mentions "student" twice, as

recipients of the curriculum rather than agents in its creation (BC, undated a). There is a strong emphasise on the expertise of the individuals involved in the curricular development.

The second area to be considered is classification, representing the extent to which knowledge is formally separated. On one hand there is the separation between everyday knowledge and curricular knowledge, on the other is the separation of subjects within the curriculum. In andragogy there is expectation of weak classification in both these areas; the focus is the learner and their life experience. The BC Education Plan (British Columbia, 2015) claims to have a strong commitment to the learner and their experience, but subjects remain strongly bounded. The one aspect of the curriculum that tends to work against this are the overarching literacy and numeracy requirements, but these appear to be simply tests rather than curricular commitments. They can be seen as a colonization by the school of an area of everyday knowledge, and an extension of classification. There is evidence of weakening of classification *within* subjects due to less prescriptive curriculum documents, which may well encourage a more personalised approach to learning, but little sign of weakening *between* subjects, as would allow a more open and holistic pedagogy.

The third area is framing, concerned with educational process, andragogical theory suggests that each of these should be lie in the hands of learners. In considering framing with respect to the BC curriculum the answer is far from simple, because the curriculum implies real shifts in practice. The curriculum allows selection and sequencing of content to be potentially controlled more fully by the learner, but given the control of time still exercised by the Carnegie unit, the pace remains quite inflexible. Of all the framing factors assessment is often the most telling, and it remains firmly under the control of the teacher. The new curriculum does not fundamentally challenge the hierarchy of control, even though it may provide more discretion to educators. The ostensibly flexible new approach to curriculum is deeply constrained by the hidden curriculum of the school context.

The BC Education Plan espouses many values that appear to be consistent with adult education principles, including increased learner control and personalization. These principles are radically limited in practice however, and it would be quite reasonable to forecast an erosion and marginalization of these principles over time due to the power of traditional school relationships to re-assert themselves. If a school were to fully embrace these principles it would involve very significant changes to the organisational and pedagogic structures of the schools; the curriculum per se is not an isolated element that can be sustainably adjusted on its own.

It would be easy to point to some aspects of schooling that limit the ability of the organization to make the necessary changes, such as the scale of schooling or the challenges of working with people who are relatively inexperienced in educational settings and may have

limited self-management in this context. On the basis of my reflections on the BC situation, however, it seems to me that the challenge is greater. Developing a learner driven system cannot be predicated upon a forecast economic future and the attributes it may require, but must be grounded in a commitment to a deeply democratic educational design that tackles directly the issues of power (both overt and covert) that act to constrain school-centred relationships. Changing schooling requires fundamental changes to schools, and the creation of an adult milieu if we are to deliver a very adult curriculum.

References

- Austin, B.G. (2004). The discourse of neoliberalism in policy documents of British Columbia's year 2000 education reform. Simon Fraser University: Unpublished MA in Communications thesis.
- Bernstein, B. (1975). Class and pedagogies: Visible and invisible. *Educational Studies*, 1(1), 23-41.
- British Columbia. (undated b). Path to Graduation. Available at: <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/graduation>. Last accessed 22 March 2018.
- British Columbia. (undated a). *Provincial Curriculum and Assessment Development Process*. Available at: https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/sites/curriculum.gov.bc.ca/files/pdf/curriculum_development_process.pdf. Last accessed 22 March 2018.
- British Columbia. (undated). *Path to Graduation Info*. Available at: <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/graduation-info>. Last accessed 22 March 2018.
- British Columbia. (2016). *Social studies: Social justice 12*. Available at: www.curriculum.gov.bc.ca. Last accessed 22 March 2018.
- British Columbia. (2015). *BC Education Plan*. Victoria, BC: Province of British Columbia.
- Broom, C.A. (2016). Power, politics, democracy and reform: A historical review of curriculum reform, academia, and government in British Columbia, Canada, 1920 to 2000. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 48(5), 711-727.
- Broom, C.A. (2015). Regulation: The rise of bureaucratic schools and teacher regulation: Control in the interests of efficiency. *Education Matters* 4(1), 6-15.
- Holmes, G. & Abingdon-Cooper, M. (2000). Pedagogy vs. andragogy. *Journal of Technology Studies*, XXVI(2), section 8.
- Kilian, C. (2015). Agenda for a new BC education commission. Available at: <https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2015/04/17/New-BC-Education-Commission/> Last accessed 14 February 2018.
- Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (1998). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.

- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Pappas, C. (2013). The adult learning theory-andragogy-of Malcolm Knowles. *Elearning Industry*. Available at: <https://elearningindustry.com/the-adult-learning-theory-andragogy-of-malcolm-knowles>. Last accessed 14 February 2018.
- Reischmann, J. (2004). *Andragogy. History, Meaning, Context, Function*. Available at: <http://www.andragogy.net>. Last accessed 14 February 2018.
- Sullivan, B.M. (1988). *A legacy for learners: Summary of findings*. Victoria, BC: Province of British Columbia.
- St. Clair, R. (2015). *Creating courses for adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- St. Clair, R. (2002). *Andragogy revisited: Theory for the 21st century?* (Myths and Realities 19). Retrieved from Columbus, OH: