



## IN TERMS OF TERMS: THEORETICAL AND RESEARCH ORIENTATIONS IN THE FIELDS OF LIFELONG LEARNING AND ADULT EDUCATION DURING THE PERIOD 1955-2023

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### Abstract:

This paper aims to investigate specific trends in the fields of lifelong learning and adult education. Using the Google Scholar academic search engine, we examine academic papers published between 1955 and 2023 that include key terms related to these fields in their titles. This mapping seeks to identify the specific areas that have attracted scientific and research interest over time.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, lifelong education, adult learning, adult education, transformative learning, andragogy

### 1. Introduction

In many cases within the social sciences, the meaning and content of various terms evolve over time. This evolution occurs either because the actual content of the terms expands to incorporate new theoretical orientations or because new terms emerge replacing, at least to some extent, older ones. It is reasonable to assume that these shifts are reflected in the terminology researchers use when publishing their work. This study examines the frequency of references to certain selected terms related to the field of *adult education* and *lifelong learning* and proposes some interpretations for this evolution.

Before presenting our main findings, we will briefly define the terms under investigation in this article. *Lifelong learning* is used to describe learning—and in many cases, education—as a continuum. The term *lifelong education* has a significantly narrower scope, focusing specifically on education as an institution and the ways societies organize and institutionalize learning. These terms began to be widely used from the 1970s onwards and reflect a holistic approach to learning. Notably, the publication of UNESCO's *Learning to Be* report in 1972, commonly known as the Faure Report (after the

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chairman of the committee), marked the beginning of the widespread dissemination of these terms. However, as Ignatovich (2020) has shown in her research on the period 1839-1959, prior to this, most references to *lifelong learning* primarily concerned the concept rather than the term itself. Both terms describe a holistic approach to learning and education and are not limited, as commonly believed, to *adult education*. However, in European literature, the use of *lifelong learning* instead of *lifelong education* is considered indicative of a shift in educational policies. This shift is associated with the perception of access to knowledge as an individual responsibility (learning) rather than a state-provided right (education). This unilateral emphasis on learning is seen as downplaying the importance of institutional education, thereby contributing to unequal access to educational opportunities.

A few years before the publication of the *Faure Report*, Coombs introduced a typology distinguishing between formal, non-formal, and informal education (Coombs, 1968; Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). According to this typology, formal education refers to the highly institutionalized system that includes all educational levels from kindergarten to university. Non-formal education refers to any organized educational activity outside the formal system, designed for a specific target group and with clearly defined objectives. Informal education encompasses all knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired through participation in activities beyond formal and non-formal education (e.g., museums, libraries, films, etc.). An insightful observation by Coombs is that non-formal and informal education have a much longer history than formal education, which, in its current form, is relatively recent (Coombs, 1976). Consequently, the term *lifelong learning* includes learning through formal, non-formal, and informal activities and should not be conceptually equated with *adult education*. For instance, even early childhood education and all forms of pre-primary education (e.g., family learning) fall within the scope of these two terms (Karalis, 2009).

The term *adult education* refers to all non-formal education targeted at adult citizens, meaning individuals in adulthood. This term encompasses educational activities related to the economic and labor sector (primarily continuing vocational training) as well as activities focused on personal development (such as liberal adult education, general adult education, popular education, etc.).

The term *andragogy* holds a very specific place in the history of Adult Education. It was first introduced in 1883 by the German educator Alexander Kapp. In Loeng's (2017; 2018) In-depth exploration of the term's usage, we find highly interesting insights regarding both its meaning and its application. According to Loeng, Kapp coined the term in a book about Plato's pedagogical ideas, which consists of two parts: one on individual education (*Die Erziehungslehre für die Einzelnen*) and another on state pedagogy (*Die Staatspädagogik*). It is worth noting that the term *andragogy* has direct Greek origins. Specifically, the term *pedagogy* derives from the Greek word *Παιδαγωγική*, which first appears in Plato's *Republic* (*Politeia*), written around 370 BC. This word is formed from *παῖς* (which appears in Homeric Epics and means "child") and *ἀγωγή* (derived from the verb *ἄγω*, meaning "to lead, to guide"). Thus, *Παιδαγωγική* (*pedagogy*)

means the education of children. Similarly, the term *Andragogy* derives from the words *άνδρας* and *αγωγή*, with *άνδρας* originating from the ancient Greek word *άνήρ*. While it refers to the male gender, in certain contexts, it was also used more broadly to mean “human”, similar to the historical usage of “man” in English - a usage that has been criticized for reflecting a gender-biased perspective.

Kapp introduced the term to describe both general education and vocational education of adults (Loeng, 2017). According to the renowned adult education scholar Duncan Savicevic (1991), a few years later, the Russian professor Olesnicki of the University of Kiev became the first to use the term *andragogy* in Russian literature. Additionally, as noted by Loeng (2018, p. 2), Henschke and Savicevic “traced *andragogical thinking back to Hellenistic and Jewish culture in ancient times*.” The term gained widespread traction in 1968 through the work of adult education scholar Malcolm Knowles, who acknowledged that he first encountered the term from Savicevic. During this period, the term gained international recognition when Knowles proposed it to define the field of adult education—or, more precisely, to differentiate *Pedagogy* from *Adult Education*. Notably, in his initial publication, the term was mistakenly printed as ‘androgogy’ instead of ‘andragogy’ (Knowles, 1968). According to Henschke (2010), this initial publication cannot currently be located with precise details; however, a replica has been included in Sopher’s (2003) dissertation, which references the historical biography of Knowles.

The introduction of the term by Knowles sparked approximately fifteen years of active scholarly dialogue regarding the relationship between *andragogy* and *pedagogy*, as well as the content of the former term. From the early 1980s onward, the term gradually fell out of favor, although it is still encountered in some Eastern European countries and occasionally in Northern contexts. Notably, in Serbia, the reputable journal *Andragoške Studije* (Andragogical Studies) is published twice a year by the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy at the University of Belgrade.

The last term we explored is transformative learning. One of the earliest uses of this term can be traced back to the works of Jack Mezirow in the late 1970s. In his 1978 article, he first articulated the foundational ideas surrounding this new perspective on adult learning. Later, he presented the theory more comprehensively as ‘a critical theory of adult learning and education’ in a paper of the same title. In that work, while discussing the central concept of transformative learning— what he calls ‘perspective transformation’—he identifies that ‘the emphasis is on helping the learner identify real problems involving reified power relationships rooted in institutionalized ideologies which one has internalized in one’s psychological history’ (Mezirow, 1981, p. 18). Mezirow’s theory remains one of the most relevant and dynamic frameworks for critical adult learning, which is why we seek research related to this term.

## 2. Methodological Issues

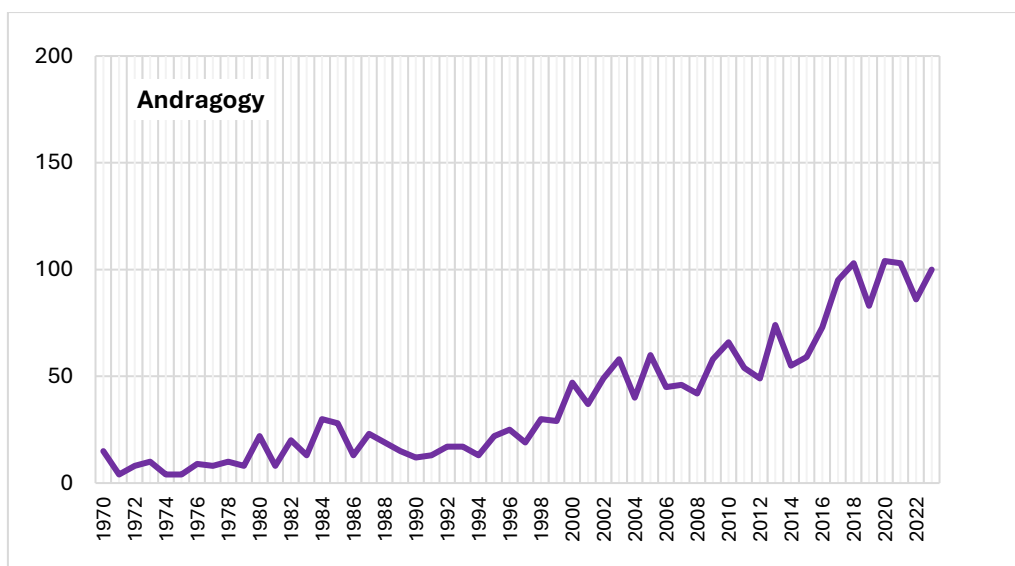
As mentioned in the Introduction, we searched for articles containing the terms *andragogy*, *lifelong learning*, *lifelong education*, *adult education*, *adult learning*, and

*transformative learning* using the Google Scholar academic search engine (Tsafou, 2019). It is worth noting that the search recorded the number of articles including each term for every year from 1955 to 2023, covering a period of approximately seventy years. In this study, we present the trend in a diagrammatic format from 1970 onwards (as references prior to that are quite limited). However, our commentary includes a detailed discussion of the exact recorded figures. The search was restricted to these terms and did not extend to other fields that might be considered somewhat related to lifelong learning or adult education, such as e-learning or higher education (Karalis and Koutsonikos, 2003; Kottara et al., 2023; Raikou & Karalis, 2010; Raikou & Karalis, 2026).

We believe that this documentation provides valuable insight into the trajectory of research output; however, this approach has certain limitations. The first limitation is that an increase in the number of scholarly articles alone does not necessarily lead to reliable conclusions, as the publication rate has been steadily increasing throughout the study period, indicating an overall growth in research production. Therefore, it is essential to present internal growth rates alongside the data to accurately capture the rate at which research output in one field increases in comparison to another. A second limitation is that the mere inclusion of a term in an article's title does not guarantee conclusive insights into the article's content or the context in which the term is employed.

### 3. Presentation of Findings

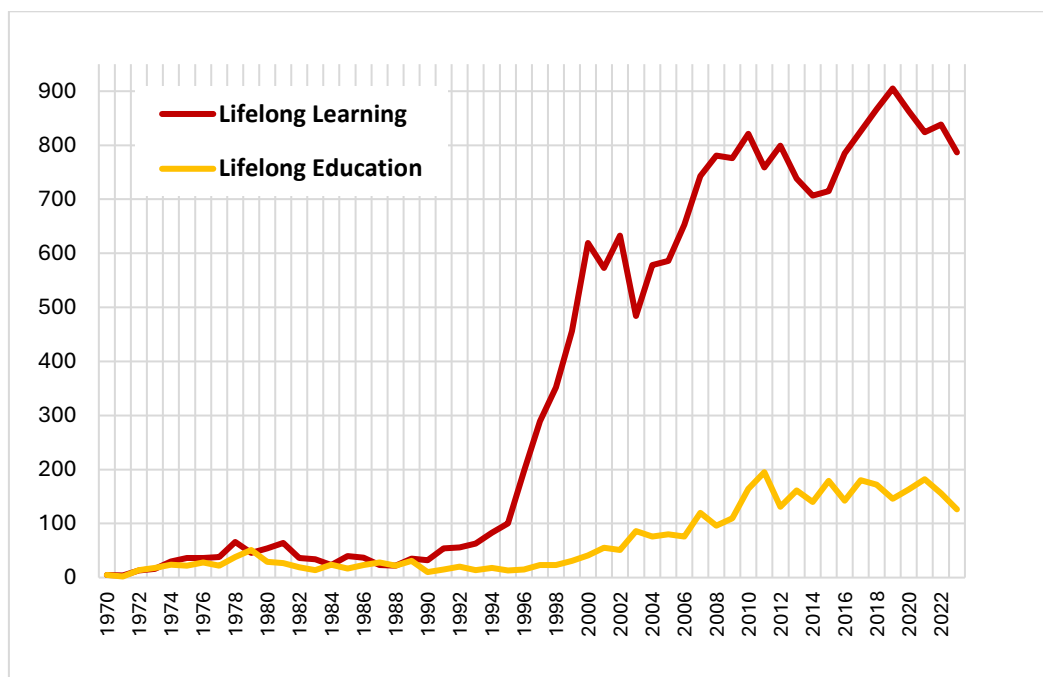
Diagram 1 presents the search results for the term *andragogy*.



**Diagram 1:** Articles with the term *andragogy* in title (1970-2023)

As shown in Diagram 1, the number of articles was very low in 1970 (18 articles), while from 1955 to 1969, a total of just 19 articles mentioned the term. This may serve as an indication of the impact that Knowles' work had in promoting the acceptance of the term. Despite some fluctuations, the overall trend has been one of steady growth,

culminating in a remarkable 450% increase in the use of the term between 1970 and 2023. In total, there have been 2,403 references to the term during the period 1955–2023.



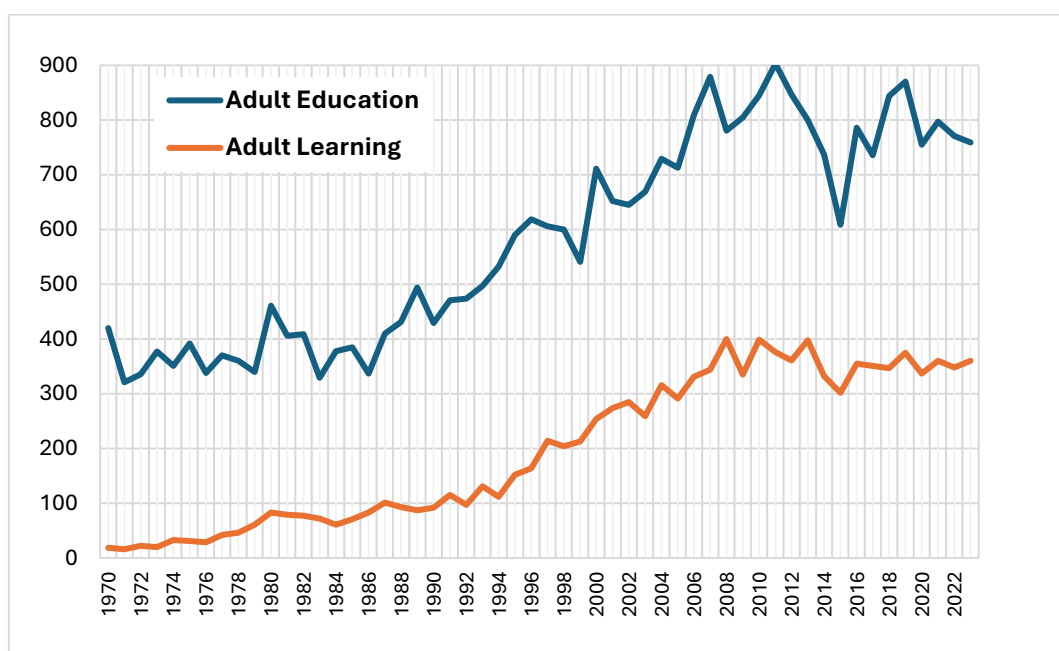
**Diagram 2:** Articles with the terms *lifelong education* and *lifelong learning* in title (1970-2023).

As Diagram 2 indicates, the terms *lifelong learning* and *lifelong education* began at approximately the same low level in 1970 (with 7 and 8 references, respectively), while between 1955 and 1969, their occurrences were similarly limited, with 19 and 11 references, respectively. They remained at similar levels until around 1990, when *lifelong learning* gradually diverged from *lifelong education*, following a significant upward trajectory. The increase from 1970 to 2023 was 1,470% for *lifelong education* and 11,150% for *lifelong learning*, meaning that the latter expanded at a rate roughly 7.5 times higher. Overall, between 1955 and 2023, the number of articles with *lifelong learning* in the title reached 22,146, while those with *lifelong education* amounted to 3,842. As illustrated in Diagram 3, the term has transitioned from academic discourse into everyday usage, as its rising occurrence in the Collins Dictionary online edition closely mirrors its increasing frequency in academic publications.



**Diagram 3:** Frequency of the term *lifelong learning* in everyday language; (source: Collins Dictionary)

The results for *adult learning* and *adult education* are presented in Diagram 4.



**Diagram 4:** Articles with the terms *adult education* and *adult learning* in title (1970-2023)

Unlike the previous cases, these terms exhibited different trends. Articles with *adult education* in the title were already abundant during the period 1955–1969 (2,529 references), significantly outnumbering all other terms examined so far. In contrast, *adult learning* was scarcely used during the same period, appearing in only 98 articles. However, the increase in articles featuring *adult learning* has been significantly higher than that of *adult education* (approximately 25 times greater—1,465% compared to about 60%), likely due to the minimal use of *adult learning* before 1980. Nevertheless, despite its lower growth rate, the term *adult education* appears in a total of 35,273 articles, compared to 11,923 for *adult learning*. Even in the last decade, the term *adult education* continues to appear in roughly twice as many articles as *adult learning*.

Regarding the term *transformative learning*, for the reasons outlined in the Introduction, no articles using this term were found before the early 1980s. This strongly suggests that the term was established by Mezirow as he formulated his theory. In the

past decade, the frequency of its occurrence in articles' titles has increased further, with an average of 310 articles published annually using this term in their titles. Overall, since 1990 – when the term first reached double-digit annual occurrences in study titles – there have been 5,286 articles featuring *transformative learning* in their titles as of 2025. Although not included in Diagram 5, articles with *transformative education* in their titles totaled 3,980 over the same period. This means that while this term is also widely used, it appears less frequently than *transformative learning*. Given that its frequency of occurrence has increased by approximately 2,100%, we can conclude that *transformative learning* represents a theoretical perspective and a research field with considerable momentum.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we examined the evolution of certain terms related to adult education and lifelong learning in scientific publications from 1955 to 2023. Our goal was to investigate the research dynamics of specific areas within these fields. As noted in the methodology section, the increase in the frequency of term appearances alone is not a reliable measure, given that the overall volume of research publications across all scientific disciplines has grown over time. Instead, we consider that capturing the rate of increase in publications provides a more reliable picture. Certainly, the term *andragogy* exhibits the lowest growth rate in scientific publications, indicating that it is no longer widely used in the field of adult education. While it continues to be part of a very specific research perspective and is still utilized in certain countries, it no longer experiences the growth it once had following the initial formulation of this theoretical approach by Malcolm Knowles. Notably, one of the most recent theoretical perspectives on how adults learn - *transformative learning* - has demonstrated a particularly strong growth rate. Approximately a decade after Jack Mezirow first introduced the theory, the term has shown a continuous and uninterrupted increase in scientific publications since the early 1990s, with a particularly strong growth rate from 2000 onward.

References to *learning* - both in *lifelong learning* and *adult learning* - exhibit significantly higher expansion rates compared to those related to *education*. In the case of *adult learning* and *adult education*, the term *adult education* maintains a higher number of publications (approximately three times more) than *adult learning*; however, *adult learning* has a higher growth rate. A contrasting trend is observed in *lifelong learning* and *lifelong education*, where *lifelong learning* not only has the highest number of publications in absolute values but also the highest growth rate - not just in comparison to *lifelong education* but to all the other terms examined in the study. Regarding *lifelong learning* and *lifelong education*, the existing literature supports the notion - though without sufficient and detailed research data - that while these terms emerged shortly before the *Faure Report*, it was this report that established them both as terms and later as a conceptual framework.

If we were to rank the terms in descending order based on growth rates, the sequence would be: *lifelong learning*, *lifelong education*, *adult learning*, *transformative*

*learning, andragogy, and adult education*. Conversely, if we ranked the terms by absolute number of publications, the order would be: *adult education, lifelong learning, adult learning, transformative learning, lifelong education, and andragogy*. Finally, applying the same ranking for the last decade (with absolute numbers of publications in parentheses) would yield the following order: *lifelong learning* (8,453), *adult education* (7,895), *adult learning* (3,597), *transformative learning* (3,110), *lifelong education* (1,691), and *andragogy* (910). In summary, we conclude that publications referring to *adult education* in the broader sense far outnumber those on *lifelong learning*, which, nevertheless, has exhibited remarkable growth over time.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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