

**Adult Education: Implications for the Improvement
of Training Design and Implementation**

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In today's training world, adult education is of paramount importance. Yet the field continues to be "murky" with conflicting theories about adult learning practice and purpose. Since training in the business world has emerged as a vital function, we need to be steadfast in our commitment to clarify the most effective adult learning models, yet side step the trap of getting polarized and thus contribute to even greater confusion. As with adult learners, professionals must struggle to keep an open mind, lest the fledgling democratic relationship between facilitator/ learner be dashed by returning to perfectionistic, autocratic beliefs about the nature of change in education. (Dewey, 1969, p. 65)

I will address some of the reasons why adult learning theory is so crucial to contemporary training designs. I will show how ideological tensions originate and persist in education, most specifically around adult learning. I will also highlight the essence of adult learning, what is missing, and suggestions for improving educational services for adults.

The social and industrial worlds are so dynamic that change is occurring at higher and higher frequencies. We can no longer assume that an individual can learn skills that will be relevant throughout a single lifetime. Adults will need to be retrained to change careers two to three times. Companies will need to continue to revise service procedures and production strategies at even faster rates. Industries will have to shuffle personnel and change employee job functions as a matter of course, just to survive. This "flux" of today is frightening. I, myself, am in one of these states of transition.

Until recently in this country, it was assumed that education would be compressed into a few years and be sufficient. But since knowledge and demands for change are so rapidly developing, this assumption is totally irrelevant. (Houle, 1984, p x.) Adults desperately need ongoing educational opportunities and business must cultivate employee activities in "learning how to learn, acquiring the skills of self directed inquiry." (Whitehead, 1931, pp. viii-xix, in Knowles, 1990, p.167). Training designs only have meaning from the standpoint of adult learning theory which provides for the flexibility and individual creativity necessary for adequate response to the enormous turbulence of life in our time.

"The central conception of education in the future is likely to be that of life-long learning." (Houle, 1984, p. 223)

The history of adult education has been little more than a series of often unrelated events and declarations "with but little continuity of conception and program" (Ibid. p. 171). We were left with the pedagogical model of learning as the basic for adult education and supervision. Organizations became habituated in the paternalistic style of management. Resistance was set up between teacher and student and tension was created between employees and management as a result of treating adults as children. We are painfully aware now that adults learn more effectively when their experience constitutes the substance of education rather than that of the teacher. (Knowles, 1990, p. 55). In Androgogy in Action, Malcom Knowles outlines the difference between pedagogy and androgogy.

In the pedagogical model, learners are dependent on the teacher, entering with little life experience that is valued, externally motivated to learn for the future, labeled as subject oriented without a need to know what will be learned and why. In this approach, the teacher

uses the lecture format in a one way exchange with devalues learner ideas and feelings. (Knowles, 1984, pp. 8-9). In what I'll term, "positive pedagogy", the advantage to this approach lies in transmitting instructions efficiently in circumstance where learner centered views would not be relevant. For example, in areas where technical abilities have never been cultivated, externally structured instructions would be more advantageous initially at least if learners have had no experience of procedures that require set patterns of behavior for successful assimilation. In Social Work Education at the University of Georgia, the curriculum proved more effective with pedagogical principles in the beginning courses (i.e., how to organize case records to meet government and ethical requirements.) (Ibid, 255- 266). It seems reasonable to embrace positive pedagogy to some degree as "experience alone is too slow a teacher to meet modern requirements." (Houle, p. 201) I see no point in my trial and error efforts to format a floppy disk to download data from a computer hard drive, when someone could just show me how to do it and free me up to be self activating in more creative ways. Sometimes lecturing is the easiest, most efficient way to support Androgogical learning. (Feuer & Geber, 1988, pp. 31-39).

Androgogy, or adult learning, is described by Knowles from the perspective of the learner as self directing, with the dual phenomenon of responsibility and learner reversion to dependency when exposed to so-called "educational activities"; having greater volume and quality of experience with the dual phenomenon of adults being rich resources for other adults and learners being their "own worst enemies" with preconceived, habituated assumptions about their realities and capacities; "needing to know" how learning relates to present life as opposed to future life; motivated by needs, as in life passages and developmental stages, problem centered and task oriented. (Knowles, 1984, pp. 9-12). In this approach, action must mate with knowledge. "In the process of learning, there should be present in some sense or other, a subordinate activity of application" (Whitehead, 1948, p. 161).

In this model, adults learn through "mutual inquiry" a colleagealship between the facilitator and learner. Success was reported from Vanderbilt University Law School with such contracts, as instructors receive direct feedback as to the relevance of their conceptual approach. They also found that both learner and instructor had to deal with the passivity of traditional learner roles and the notion that faculty were solely responsible for whether learning occurs. They concluded that adult's attitudes and behaviors changed far more as a result of influences by classmates and experience than the classroom. (Knowles, 1984, pp. 231-233).

Research shows that traditional classroom teaching accounts for a very small segment of adult learners. In Intentional Changes, Allen Tough says that 73% of all learning projects are self planned. He quotes Albert Ellis who contends that most learning has occurred for thousands of years without professionals in the form of adult self help methods. Even now, his data shows that only 10% of all intentional adult learning can be accounted for through courses and classes. These findings are humbling for those of us in the "professions." We have to reconsider our beliefs about the importance of formal education as we've known it, especially when we consider the evidence that 67% to 87% of all adult learning originates and becomes implemented by the changing person. These astounding results conclude that professional help is not central in adult learning. (Tough, 1982, pp. 53-74).

How can we respond to the assertions of Androgogy that adult learning theory must

avoid drawing from the familiar classroom methods of pedagogy and generate methods emerging from learner's experience outside the classroom? First, we can further illuminate the "muddy waters"

of debate by revealing John Dewey's late 19th century critique on school's failure to become student centered in 'My Pedagogic Creed.' He says that the child's "instincts and powers" should be the origin for all education. He goes on to say that education is "a process for living and not a preparation for future living." We also see his commitment to action in that "expressive or constructive activities" need to be central to education. When Dewey also states "The school must represent present life" I have to question along with Feuer and Geber whether pedagogy and androgogy are all that different in regards to the needs of adults as opposed to children. I also question whether Dewey didn't map out the major androgogical principles in 1897. (Dewey, 1969, pp. 4-10).

At any rate, Dewey and Knowles agree that to "free intelligence" democratic principles must be ingressed into classroom designs and classrooms must expand their boundaries to include life outside its walls to create true adult learning. The teacher must become a facilitator of development from within the learner rather than from without. (Maslow, 1954, p. 183). I'm aware of several strong beliefs I carry that contrast with this view: I have to stay in charge of the class to remain competent; I have to keep the respect of learners by modeling perfection and make sure my mistakes aren't noticed; I have to avoid classroom controversy that might "throw us off track"; I have to explain away opposing views to my own to retain the role of expert; I have to make sure that all materials are presented to protect myself from attack by those who employ me; I have to stay in control of students until they demonstrate that they are capable of controlling themselves.

I attempted all of this for a while under the guise of science. The behaviorists provided me with a conscious method of control, while I acted out an unconscious fear of losing control. The existentialists provided me with an explanation and a reason not to challenge "existential dread", as it was merely a part of the human experience that had to be accepted. I've had to confront my naïve interpretation of these two forces in life- the futilism of determinism and the paralysis of "existential fear."

I'm still in awe of the power of classical and operant condition. B.F. Skinner reflects the assumptions of Watson and Pavlov in that all behavior is determined- whether explained by reinforcement contingencies or stimulus/ response paradigms.

"The exploration of the emotional and motivational life of the mind has been described as one of the great achievements in the history of human thought, but it is possible that it has been one of the great disasters." (Skinner, 1974, 182)

Yet, the Androgical Model depends on acknowledgement of the learners subjectivity and democracy depends on freedom of choice. Facilitation of adult learning must integrate antecedent/ reinforcement planning with learner emotionality and willfulness. As a result of my experience in behavior modification and training in empathic communication, I've shifted my belief system to integrate behaviorism into a humanistic container- that is, I believe in reinforcing self actualizing behavior while allowing natural consequences to confront self defeating behavior.

In regard to the existentialists, I quite possibly would tend to ignore the suffering due to lack of adequate boundaries in a classroom, believing that creativity comes through pain

and conflict. It's as though we need to "cut off an ear" to achieve the greatness of Van Gogh. In my earlier interpretations, ignoring human needs became the only choice in the face of the void, since to lose my beingness and be consumed by nothingness is my fate. The denial of pain and human limits in a stoic teaching style could have also been my fate.

Yet, as I experience adulthood and a greater sense of my mortality, I've grasped the true spirit of existentialism as I've come to understand it. I bring to the classroom an appreciation for living in the here and now.

"I have no claim on any but the present moment. Mine is the responsibility of making the moment intense and full- responsibility of separating at every moment in my life the essential from the inessential, the genuine from the false. This responsibility can only be assumed if one has learned to live in the face of death." (Buford, 1980, p. 593).

Other emerging values that will enhance my ability to use adult learning theory include: groups and systems are larger than the sum of their parts, group synergy is a major resource for learning; as in gestalt theory, with awareness, archaic beliefs will change, advice actually interferes in this process along with controlling efforts to make change happen (Mermin, 1974, pp. 15-20); the wisdom of the organism is the greatest resource for learner direction in education; since no two people are alike, no standard of measure is adequate to judge what is right for another person, especially perfectionism; the learners will tell me when I'm responsive to their needs either verbally or nonverbally; I will need to give up all or part of my design in every educational activity; my "okness" does not depend on learners behavior, they are responsible for what they learn; any anxiety is more about my old beliefs and habits than the actions of the learners in the classroom; my modeling speaks to learners louder than words; I'm secure enough to model accepting myself, even when making mistakes; I believe that safety is a necessary element in adult education.

As I'm taking inventory on my belief system, I'm aware of the importance of experience as the only remaining difference between children and adult learners. (Feuer and Geber, p. 35). Within the "quality and quantity of experience" are several significant differences that could be amplified. Children lack a sense of mortality and an ability to think abstractly. (Piaget suggests this). Even during the acquisition of formal operational thought, late adolescents exhibit ungrounded thinking patterns. To be adult "means experiencing without the self-consciousness of the adolescent." (Maslow, 1971) Two previous qualifications in the andragogical model need to be revisited to highlight suggestions for improvement.

- adults revert to dependency in educational settings
- adults carry preconceived assumptions that interfere in learning

Both these problems can be explained in large measure by what Alice Miller describes as "poisonous pedagogy"- the notion that children are raised under the rules of obedience to authority, and blamed for the shortcomings of their caregivers. This lot includes teachers. Androgogy needs a strategy for addressing such "unfinished business" in order to "free intelligence." The challenge here, of course, is to avoid turning classroom activities into therapy. (Alice Miller, 1993, pp. 3-91; Maslow, 1984, p. 49).

I submit that adults can complete unfinished business in a way that children and adolescents cannot. They can think abstractly and understand the limitations of adults. They can imagine that reality can be different than that proposed by authority. They can grasp the fact that authority figures are fallible. To presume these capabilities in children's education would be a disservice. Therefore, I propose that an addition be made to Knowles' Androgical principles”

Regarding the adult learner's ability to think abstractly and recognize adult limitations: the androgical model assumes that adults can address "unfinished business" in a manner appropriate to the classroom setting. (Dewey, 1969, p. 4; Maslow 1971, p 49)

This effort will disrupt the tendency toward dependency producing spontaneous age regressions and learner shifts into adaptive childhood preconceptions.

Certainly, other facets of adult education theory have gone a long way towards keeping learners in their adult ego states by avoiding the practice of “poisonous pedagogy” and promoting androgical principles. Several of these elements are found in the adult learning model: climate setting that promotes respect and self esteem; safety through clear ground rules, mutual learner nurturance, minimum critical specification and curiosity along with problem solving continuity (Kline and Saunders, 1993, pp. 79-80); preparation based on contract learning and learner based assessments; structuring activities with peers to move from short term knowledge to experience and foster group synergy in support of long term change; use circular questioning and echoing to encourage critical self reflection and democratic relationship; self directed learning which promotes polarity vs. polarization; experiential learning to personalize applications of new concepts; and performance based evaluation to assess generated methods and their capability to achieve fulfilling outcomes for participating learners, rediagnosing learning needs. (Knowles, 1984, pp. 417-442; Knowles, 1990, 120-142).

Along with climate control, the most important element of S-O-R and core aspects of adult education is the sequential patterns of learning approach: “based on the observation that at any given time an individual is engaging in a complex pattern of learning activities. In this conception, life span learning is centered on the analysis of how such patterns shift (or can be made to shift) with advancing age.” (Houle, 1984, p. 223). We need to always remember the epigenetic nature of learning as well as the rich combinations of simultaneous learning options possible at all times for adult educators. To sustain such a commitment, we need to embrace the democratic principles articulated by John Dewey a century ago and move from merely a political democracy to a social and emotional democracy called “deep democracy.” Genuine adult education as about deep democracy. “That special feeling of belief in the inherent importance of all parts of ourselves and all viewpoints in the world around us.” (Mindell, 1992, p. 5)

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