Chapter 8
Adapting Adult Educators' Teaching Philosophies to Foster Adult Learners' Transformation and Emancipation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that adult educators need to adapt their philosophy and their teaching roles to foster adult learners' transformative learning, and it proposes a model that illustrates this process. The most common purposes of adult education are represented by five underlying philosophies as fully discussed by Elias and Merriam. Adult learners possess different needs, interests, and experiences. As teachers modify their roles and methods in response to their students' diverse individual characteristics, they must also adapt their underlying philosophical perspective so that philosophy, roles, and methods are congruent. The authors maintain that in this context, the role of adult educators as facilitators of transformational learning should be examined and their prevalent humanistic and progressive philosophies critically questioned.

INTRODUCTION

Adult education practice is based on complex interactions between learner needs and characteristics, teacher preferences, teacher beliefs and philosophical perspectives, the kind of learning outcomes expected, the context of the teaching and learning, teacher roles, and teaching methods.

Every decision that an educator makes is influenced in some way by these concepts, whether or not the educator is conscious of the basis of her decisions. What is crucial to effective teaching and learning is that teaching philosophies, learner characteristics, teaching roles, and teaching methods need to be congruent with each other. For example, educators should not espouse an emancipatory philosophy of education, and then maintain a teacher-directed approach to practice. Instructional planning models illustrate how

theoretical and philosophical positions and the characteristics of the learners lead into choices of methods and materials for both teaching and evaluation (Cranton, 2012).

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES IN ADULT EDUCATION

The philosophical perspectives that guide adult education practice have been organized into a variety of different frameworks (see, for example, Elias & Merriam, 1995; Tisdell & Taylor, 2000), but aside from some nuances in the terms used and the way the perspectives are grouped, there is a fair amount of consistency in the way scholars view the philosophies.

Liberalism has its roots in the Greek philosophers and the Enlightenment philosophers (such as Locke and Kant). In this perspective, the acquisition of knowledge is valued, especially from a rational perspective, and critical thinking is a goal of education. Liberalism also emphasizes the development of moral citizens and people informed in the arts, classic literature, and philosophy. The product of a liberal education is a well-rounded person. Until recently, liberalism informed higher education, and it still does in countries where universities are not seen as job-training institutions. In the U.S., when people refer to a "liberal arts college" they are talking about the kind of institution where students receive a broad background in the humanities, social sciences, and arts.

Progressivism emerged as a response to the demand for education that prepared people for work in an industrial society. Progressivism is founded in pragmatism, which values practical experience over abstract and theoretical concepts. Dewey (1938) popularized this philosophical perspective, and his influence remains strong today. When Dewey proposed that students (children and adults) learn best by doing things, this was a radical notion in a world where educational methods favored rote recall. Progressivism is the philosophical framework for adult vocational education, apprenticeship programs, skills based training, and technical education, among other fields. Progressivism incorporates problem solving and experiential learning; the teacher becomes a facilitator and mentor rather than an authority figure. Lindeman, who wrote *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926), was strongly influenced by Dewey, and he applied the concepts to adult education. Much later, Knowles (1980) also drew on progressivism as he developed his model of andragogy.

Behaviorism was an attempt to move the understanding of learning out of the subjective and abstract domains. Kidd (1973) points out that the simplistic, mechanical nature of behaviourist learning theories was a "rebellion against sophisticated explanations of learning based on religious or philosophical interpretations and upon an assumption that an individual was possessed of certain properties and faculties" (p. 160). Thorndike was one of the earliest behaviourists, and co-author of *Adult learning* (Thorndike, Bregman, Tilton, & Woodyard, 1928). At the heart of this simplest of approaches to understanding learning, is the stimulus-response chain. When presented with a stimulus, an individual responds with a behavior. If that behaviour is rewarded, the individual is likely to repeat the same response to the same stimulus in the future. Skinner (1974) popularized and made a lasting contribution to behaviourism with his conceptualization of operant conditioning. Responses that are reinforced persist, even though the reinforcement may not be continuous. Responses that are ignored tend to fade away. Chains of stimulus-response can be created to explain complicated sets of learning (Kidd, 1973). Skinner's work provided the foundation for programmed instruction, computer-assisted instruction, modularized instruction, competency-based education, and many of the strategies still used today in training and the acquisition of technical knowledge.

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