Chapter 14
The Socratic Way and Adult Learning:
Exploring a Nelsonian View of the Socratic Method in Self-Directed Learning Encounters.

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ABSTRACT

Adult learning experiences seem to be influenced by the activity of self-direction on the part of their learners. Adult learners come to educational encounters motivated and possessing a strong sense of self and learning objectives. However, other educational experiences require teachers of adults to assist in the development of self-directed learning (SDL) in their learners. This chapter explores the possibility of how Leonard Nelson's theories concerning the Socratic method can initiate the possibility of SDL (self-teaching) in adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

Baesd on the learning styles of adult learners, and the desire to move adult learners from dependent learning to independent learning, teachers of adults should develop and implement instructional strategies that enhance self-directedness, which as Knowles, Holton & Swanson (2005) argued, is a key component in adult learning. Self-directed learning (SDL) adds to the richness and efficacy of learning and prepares adults for the challenges in today's professional environment and leads to further personal enrichment.

This chapter presents how the instructional strategy known as the Socratic method, specifically theorized by the early 20th century educator and philosopher, Leonard Nelson, assists learning in adult educational contexts and bolsters in adult learners skills in self-directed learning. First, there is a discussion on the theory and practice of adult education and self-directed learning. Second, there is an overview of the

current literature and research on the Socratic method as applied to adult learning. Lastly, the chapter explores how Leonard Nelson's (1949) theories on the Socratic method can improve SDL in adult learners.

ADULT EDUCATION

Adult education emerged as a specific topic of study after World War II (Maehl, 2000). A clear elucidation of patterns and approaches to adult education were developed by Elias and Merriam (as cited in Maehl, 2000). These patterns were categorized as Liberal adult education, Progressive adult education, Behaviorist adult education, Humanist adult education, and Radical adult education.

Liberal adult education stressed the study of classic works, mastering content in an organized fashion and the development of the adult's intellect. Progressive adult education focused on connecting education to reform and social issues; it found its intellectual origins in the thinking of John Dewey and William James. Behaviorist adult education was based on the scientific control of learning; its intention was to produce changes in behavior and articulates specific learning objectives and manages the learning process. Humanist adult education looked to the self-actualization of the adult learner; it championed autonomy, self-direction, independence and trust. This approach was also influenced by the work of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Malcolm Knowles. This approach has gained notoriety, as Knowles laid the foundation for a kind of adult education that promoted and implemented freedom and self-direction. Lastly, Radical adult education was based on the political and social movements throughout history; it recognized the relativistic nature of education and sought to educate those toward the importance of social change (Maehl, 2000).

The development of adult education was tempered by educational theorists investigating the differences between the learning processes of children and adults. From this inquiry emerged the concepts of andragogy and self-directed learning, both theorized and advanced by Malcolm Knowles (Maehl, 2000). Influenced by the ideas of Maslow and Rogers, and his own experiences and research in adult learning, Knowles ultimately argued that there were six fundamental principles in Andragogy: 1) the adult learner's need to know; 2) self-directed learning on the part of the adult learner; 3) past experiences of the adult learner; 4) the adult learner being ready to learn; 5) an orientation on the part of the adult learner to learn and solve problems; and 6) a clear motivation to learn (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005).

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Theories and notions of self-directed, an aspect of adult learning, can be traced back to noted philosphers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Julius Caesar, and Descartes (Hiemstra, 1994). We find notions of self-directed learning in the mid-nineteenth century work of Craik (1840) and Smiles (1859). And in the twentieth century, the research of Houle (1961) and his student, Tough (1979) laid the groundwork for further ideas and studies about SDL (Hiemstra, 1994). Tough concluded in his research that both teacher and learner can perform key learning tasks and that the paths to learning outcomes can be accomplished in indirect ways instead of following a sequential order. Consequently, the following established stages of learning can be eliminated: choosing a learning objective, deciding on meaningful educational activities, finding appropriate resources, determining knowledge and skill level, addressing learners' difficulty in understanding particular aspects of the material, deciding time and location for the learning, dealing with

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