

## Chapter 1

# The History of Adult Learning Theory

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The implementation of new programs for adult professionals has been the salvation for many small colleges struggling with retrenchment during the 1980s. Some of these programs were hastily assembled with little rationale other than to create cash for the traditional campus. Thus, they are often the object of suspicion by educational traditionalists looking for sound programs based on good educational theory. This chapter demonstrates that these adult programs are based on sound educational theory and practice. In fact, many programs which target the adult population have been more deliberate in planning and implementing quality programs than other education programs, whose theories and practices are rooted in tradition. This chapter explores the theoretical basis out of which modern adult programs descend.

The model of adult learning comes from a very strong historical tradition. Continuing education programs, via the YMCA, Veteran's Administration, public schools, and corporations, have been an important force in the development of American labor since the Great Depression. These programs were usually quite separate from university programs, which educated younger people. It became clear to early practitioners like Houle and Knowles that adult education, though vital to the growth of the nation, was fundamentally different than the education of children.

As adult education programs have spread to traditional colleges and universities, they have come under close theoretical scrutiny. Suddenly there is a wealth of research and writing on adult education, treating them as a new innovation in education. In reality, these programs have been around for over 70 years – they are just new to the university campus.

### The Development of Adult Education in the Twentieth Century

Lacking its own discipline, adult learning theory has developed along several disciplinary lines throughout the Twentieth Century. These disciplines included philosophy, psychology, and sociology. In the later part of the Twentieth Century, there has been an effort to synthesize adult learning theory to create its own discipline. This section reviews the theoretical antecedents of the modern adult learning models and discusses contemporary attempts to synthesize a theory of adult learning.

#### The philosophy of experiential learning

The contemporary practice of adult education traces its roots to the experiential learning philosophy of John Dewey. He pioneered the field of reflective learning-- education gained through meaningful experiences. In the 1920s he was invited to the University of Chicago to develop a laboratory school for the Department of Education,

where researchers could study the impact of educational structures on learning (Dewey, 1963). This is the department where Houle and Knowles also studied.

Dewey's ideas formed the basis of the lifelong learning movement. He believed that individuals had the ability to grow throughout life. This contrasted with the view of the day which said that learning and growth are finite: once an individual reaches adulthood, maturity has occurred and learning diminishes (Cross-Durrant, 1987).

In his new educational methodology, Dewey proposed relating school learning to the whole of life. One would judge an educational institution according to how far it succeeds in enabling and developing an individual's innate powers of learning (Cross-Durrant, 1987).

Dewey believed that learning best occurs within an institution which will not obstruct experience. Traditional education produces lower-level knowledge where the answers are already worked out. He proposed a more progressive education which would promote higher level knowledge. For Dewey, the truth cannot be worked out in isolation from experience. Tradition is the wrong kind of experience to promote real growth. A progressive institution will shape experience by reorganizing the surroundings and providing an environment which will be conducive to growth. The outcome should be a fully integrated personality whose successive experiences are integrated with one another. This is the creation of self control gained as a product of reflective learning (Dewey, 1963).

Dewey's ideas form the basis for the facilitated workshop model which is utilized by many adult programs. Dewey believed that college educators (professors as well as administrators) shape the students' experience and must consider what surroundings are conducive to growth experiences. The sequence of activities must be well-planned. Every experience should prepare one for others. For Dewey, the college is a community held together by these common activities. This is why a strong core curriculum is essential. Dewey believed professors should be seen as group leaders guiding experiences (Dewey, 1963).

### Developmental psychology

The modern adult learning model also takes into consideration social psychological theories of adult development. Adults are psychologically different than traditional college students who are in the later stages of adolescence. Thus, their learning style is different, requiring a completely different learning structure. The theories of Erikson, Havighurst, Kohlberg, Gilligan, Magolda and Bronfenbrenner are relevant here.

Erik Erikson's psychosocial-development theory traces personality development across the life span, including eight critical stages each involving a crisis. Adult stages include intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation; and integrity versus despair. As an individual ages there is a search for meaning which does not exist in the child. There is a need for vital involvement in one's world as opposed to the spurious

flirtations of youth (Erikson, 1982). Thus adult education must aid in one's search for meaning and purpose.

Havighurst views developmental tasks of adulthood as meeting the needs of the individual in a social context: finding a mate, learning to live with a mate, establishing career and civic responsibilities. According to Havighurst, adults have a "teachable moment" when they can learn new behaviors in order to meet these task demands. Such practical application is the motivation for the adult learner (Romero, 1990).

Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development model (1984) has implications for the cognitive development in adult education. Adults begin with conventional morality (conformity to social expectations) and move to post-conventional morality (abstract beliefs such as human rights, equality, dignity and justice). Respect for individual dignity, which is emphasized in the APS cohort learning model, is the foundation for this higher level of morality (Romero, 1990).

Carol Gilligan (1982) concludes that Kohlberg's approach is oriented toward values that are more important to men than to women. This is significant here because the majority of adult students are women. Gilligan has developed a schema of moral development for women similar to that of Kohlberg. Where Kohlberg emphasizes rights, Gilligan emphasizes responsibilities. Women's participation in reproductive activity profoundly affects their orientation. Females are less separate than males. A woman's moral development stresses the necessity to be responsible in her relationships, to be sensitive to the needs of others, and to avoid giving hurt (Gilligan, 1982).

Magolda (1992) has made more recent contributions in the field of gender-related patterns of intellectual development. She found that men in the early stages of knowledge (absolute knowing) tend to use interaction with instructor (mastery pattern) while women tend to be detached from authority figures (receiving pattern). Since women have fewer opportunities for mentoring, key interaction with authorities is limited. By the end of their college program, application oriented knowing (transitional knowing) becomes important. Women tend to use peers to facilitate this in an interpersonal way, while men extend their patterns of knowing to learn applications in an impersonal way. Higher levels of knowing (independent and contextual knowing) also tend to be facilitated by women in an inter-individual pattern while men tend to focus on their own thinking.

The implications of this work for adult education indicate that more effort needs to be made to match women's pattern of knowing and reasoning with teaching strategies. Female students in the early stages of absolute knowing appreciate relationships with peers. At this stage it is important that the classroom is relational and the student has an opportunity to feel comfortable about the instructor's style of teaching and grading. Later during transitional and independent knowing, they need close relationships with instructors. Unless they perceive that they care about them, women will avoid relationships with instructors and instead rely on peers for development. Women benefit from positive interactions with students and need to be allowed to get involved in classroom activities. In many of the best practices in adult programs, students are actively engaged in the learning process through the workshop and study group format.

Most of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) research is on children, observing them in natural settings to discover the impact of their socio-cultural environment on development. His work has important implications for adult education because he saw learning as a function of social interaction. A person's development occurs within a large system of interlocking social structures. Each of these structures-- home, school, church, media-- create an ecological context through which a unique individual emerges. Development is enhanced when there are a variety of cultural contexts. Lasting change comes in the way a person perceives and deals with the social environment. Many of the best practices in adult learning are derived from this social model of learning. Cohort groups represent diverse cultural contexts and experiences. Learning is facilitated when interaction is enhanced. In many of the best programs, a strong mission becomes the tie that binds, in spite of cultural differences, which in another context may be overwhelming to the individual.

### Critical theory of learning

Critical theory comes out of a sociological analysis of education which sees social institutions as potentially oppressive to individuals. Adult education, in this context, ought to transform individuals so they may change society. This transformational model has been posited first by Lindeman and later by Mezirow and Freire.

Eduard Lindeman was an early 20th century American shaper of adult education. One of his most important contributions is the introduction of the concept of andragogy – though his conception was considerably different than that developed by Malcolm Knowles (1980). Lindeman was a sociologist interested in the use of adult education to foster social and political change. Thus his work is the origin of critical theory in adult education (transformational education). His proposed curriculum included heavy doses of political and social debate. As such, his work has found less relevance in the U.S. system which emphasizes career training and development: education as a force for social stability rather than social innovation (Brookfield, 1987).

One emphasis of Lindeman's, which has been felt in contemporary adult education, is his advocacy of the primacy of experience and interpersonal exchange as the vehicle of learning. This means that a discussion methodology is most appropriate for adult education. Also he emphasized situations rather than subjects. Therefore the curriculum and mode of delivery was radically different than the schooling of his day (Brookfield, 1987). This is more similar to curriculum utilized by best practices in adult programming which emphasizes practical experiences.

According to Mezirow, learning is a dynamic process which leads to the creation of meaning. Meaning perspectives (habits of expectation) serve as perceptual and cognitive codes to structure the way we perceive, think, feel and act. Mezirow uses the conceptual frameworks of Habermas and Dewey to discuss emancipatory or reflective learning which leads to the understanding of oneself. Emancipatory learning occurs through reflection on meaning schemes or assumptions. Reflection can change or transform both meaning schemes (specific attitudes and beliefs) and meaning perspectives (sets of meaning schemes) (Mezirow, 1991).

At the same time, educational theorists specializing in young people's education have also been fascinated with the manner in which knowledge is constructed. Recently, a new theory called constructivism has emerged and been applied across the curriculum. This theory posits that meaning is created by the learner rather than passed down from educator to learner through rote. In this way "human beings have no access to an objective reality since we are constructing our version of it" (Fosnot, 1996, 23).

Constructivism has been vigorously applied to produce classroom innovations in science, mathematics, literature and other subjects from pre-school to college. This new approach to learning contributes to the thread of thinking that produces an adult model that stresses learning over teaching. In the adult classroom, learners are cooperatively constructing a new reality for themselves based on their world experiences. Their reality is infinitely different from those around them. They require a curriculum that guides their learning without limiting the unique process of the creation of knowledge.

Paulo Freire comes from a past speckled by controversy and confrontation. He is a writer as well as an activist for social change. He was "invited" to leave his native Brazil after the military coup of 1964. After a few years in exile in Chile he emigrated to the United States. His Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) has created a stir in the Third World which has reverberated in the U.S. His neo-Marxist style seeks to empower the oppressed using education to raise consciousness.

Freire points out that traditional education is a tool by the elite to oppress the masses. In the traditional "banking system" of education, "all-knowing" professors deposit selected bits of information into students minds and withdraw that knowledge later on a test or assignment. Thus, by choosing the readings, the syllabus, the lecture topics, and the test questions, the professor controls the minds of the students. Traditional education oppresses students by controlling their access to information. But reformed education has the potential to be transformational. By reforming the educational institutions we raise the consciousness of the oppressed so that they may free themselves (Freire, 1970).

Reform starts by liberating the educators. Freire sees in the colleges of education around the world a rediscovery of teacher-student dialogue rather than control (1970). At APS, college students become interactive in their learning, so that they will be liberated and in turn, liberate their world.

### Conclusion

Adult education became a social movement in the United States beginning early in the Twentieth Century. Theorists from philosophy, psychology and sociology contributed ideas which formed the basis for the practice of adult education today. The next section will review contemporary efforts to synthesize these ideas into a unified theory of adult learning.

## **Synthesis: The Design of a Model of Adult Education**

Practitioners have drawn from theories of experiential learning, developmental psychology, and critical sociology to design a model of education which meets the needs and demands of adult learners. Much of this work comes from Dewey's Department of Education at University of Chicago, which became a pioneer in the Adult Education movement. Two pioneering scholars from Chicago include Houle and Knowles, whose ideas have framed the contemporary discussion of adult education.

Cyril Houle's career is characterized by his efforts to increase the acceptance of adult education, establishing it as a credible sub-field in education. As chair of the graduate program in Higher Education at University of Chicago, he worked toward strengthening the bond between it and adult education (Griffith, 1987).

Houle is very interested in categorizing educational theory, situations, and systems. Houle's system is based on the following assumptions:

- Learning occurs in a specific situation
- Education planning should be based on realities of human experience and upon their constant change.
- Education is a practical art.
- Education is a cooperative rather than operative art.
- The planning or analysis of an educational activity is usually undertaken in terms of some period that the mind abstracts for analytical purposes from complicated reality.
- A generalized educational design should be used to strengthen (not replace) the values that arise from profound belief, dedication, or creativeness.
- A program design should be based on decision points, not prescriptions.

(Houle, 1996, pp. 41-53)

In this way Houle attempted to systematize and unify many of the ideas about adult education and moderate tensions between philosophic positions. He searched for balance and harmony among the elements of education. For example, in the mid-twentieth century, when so many adult educators were focused on literacy, he balanced the research by continuing work on higher education (Griffith, 1987). By the 1980s, the doctoral program in higher education at University of Chicago had subsumed the adult education degree, a product of Houle's thinking that the two fields were one.\*

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• At the time the author was a doctoral student in Higher Education at University of Chicago in the early 1980s, the focus of the program was on the history and philosophy of higher education and its implications amid a rapidly changing educational market. Adult education was one of many subfields of critical analysis.

One of Houle's most renowned doctoral students was Malcolm Knowles, who also became a leader in the field. Knowles' other early influences include Lindeman (his first supervisor as director of related training for the National Youth Administration), and Carl Rogers, whose work on "student-centered learning" led to his emphasis on study groups (Jarvis, 1987).

Knowles argues that adult education is a separate field with a separate theory. He borrows the term "andragogy" from a German educator to name this new type of education. The first edition of his important book: The modern practice of adult education contains the subtitle Andragogy versus pedagogy which sparked much debate in the field. The proponents on Knowles side maintain that since adults are existentially different than children the teaching of adults must be distinctively different than that of children. Proponents on the other side argue that androgogy is not a fully developed philosophical system deserving of its own discipline. When the revised edition of his book came out in 1980 the subtitle had been changed to Pedagogy to andragogy indicative of Knowles' new thinking that the two were not discrete processes based on age but that certain teaching methodologies are more effective for adults and others more effective for children. The two are now viewed as different curriculum models: one focuses on content, the other on process (Jarvis, 1987).

Andragogy is premised on assumptions about learners that are different than the assumptions of pedagogy. As persons mature they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning. Their motivation to learn is closely related to their social roles and they need an immediate application of their knowledge. Their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of performance-centeredness (Knowles, 1980).

The implications of these assumptions lead to a learning environment which draws heavily on the learners' experience. The psychological and social climate must be one of acceptance, respect and support. Emphasis should be placed on the involvement of the adult learners in diagnosing their learning needs, planning, implementing and evaluating their learning. The structure of the learning process should take full advantage of their rich experiences. There must be sensitivity to the timing and grouping of learning to take advantage of their readiness to learn. Programs must have immediate application to take advantage of the adult's focus on problem solving. Knowles discusses the process of helping adults learn. This includes:

- Setting a climate for learning;
- Establishing a structure for mutual planning;
- Diagnosing needs for learning;
- Formulating directions (objectives for learning);
- Designing a pattern of learning experiences;

- Managing the learning experiences;
- Evaluating results. (Knowles, 1980, pp. 222-247).

These are the principles which greatly influence the construction of the best practices of adult focused institutions. The physical environment for learning gets much attention, making sure it is comfortable and flexible. Curriculum is heavily managed, including clear objectives and study group activities to enhance learning. Within study groups, learners manage their own learning activities. The following chapters elaborate on how these principles are implemented in successful adult programs.

Knowles also addresses the organization and administration of adult education programs. He recommends the development of semi-independent structures for adult education within the larger structure, which give them freedom to be innovative. The best models usually improve the whole institution as changes begun in adult education affect the larger organization. (Knowles, 1980, p.70). Knowles cites that those institutions which give adult education a separate division and administrative freedom are stronger programs than those in which adult education has remained a secondary function within a larger department. In the chapter on administration, which follows, we explore the ways in which this semi-independent structure is implemented in adult-focused institutions.

In addition to the practice of andragogy, the best practices in adult focused institutions also apply contemporary ideas about women's education. It is clear that, particularly for adult women (who comprise the majority of adult learners), there is a need for a new teaching style. The traditional classroom, with seats in rows facing a professor behind a podium, is well suited to males' learning styles, but is not designed to benefit women (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). This is relatively easy to remedy, given a little creativity. For example, some successful adult-focused institutions have transformed the individual desks into connecting tables forming a "U" shape. They have abandoned the lecture format for small group learning.

Social psychologists have found that adult women are more likely to succeed when learning is interactional. Magolda (1992) and others have indicated that women are likely to use peers to facilitate learning. Knowledge for women is gained by seeing the world from other perspectives. This requires meaningful interaction with other learners. Adults, particularly women, thrive when they discover they share responsibility for the content of learning. The professor is not viewed as an expert imparting substantive information, but a co-learner. Women in such classrooms construct their own meaningful realities through the acknowledgement of deep positional differences with others. However, the traditional university structure hinders the realization of such knowledge as emphasis is placed on substantive blocks of knowledge rather than interactive "situated knowledge" (Maher & Tetreault, 1994).

In light of all of this knowledge about adult learners, particularly women, it is not surprising to see the growth of semi-independent structures for adult learning with a specialized teaching style. These structures embrace the unique learning styles of adult

learners, and create an atmosphere which removes barriers to higher education for those whom traditional education fails.

In conclusion, adult learning theory is not new. It has roots in the progressive thinking of John Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning. It is informed by adult developmental psychology, applying insights from Erickson, Kohlberg, Gilligan, Bronfenbrenner, and others. It gains inspiration from the critical theories of Lindeman, Mezirow and Freire. It has been synthesized and systematized in the past thirty years by Houle and his student, Malcolm Knowles. As Adult Education divisions have boosted university enrollments, attention to the learning model has increased. The next chapter will analyze the demographics of these new university students- their motivations and expectations.

### The application of adult learning theory to formulate best practices

From the experiential learning philosophy of John Dewey, adult developmental theory of psychologists like Erikson, and critical learning theory of sociologists like Lindeman, comes a model of adult education. This model was developed and systematized by Knowles and Houle and is informed by the most recent demographic data about adult students. The overall mission of today's best adult programs is to serve a constituency previously denied access to a quality higher education program. The distinctive features of the best programs are their semi-independent structures, interactive learning in study groups, and experiential learning. This section will outline the rationale behind each of these features. In the chapters which follow, we will suggest ways in which institutions may move forward to implement these innovations.

### A semi-independent structure for adult education

The best practices in adult programs operate within a semi-independent entity. Sometimes accreditation necessitates the joint administration of some programs. But the daily administration of the adult programs is substantially different than that of the traditional program. Faculty are recruited differently, students are recruited differently, classes are independently scheduled, and assessment is independent. The degree requirements are fundamentally the same; however the specific course requirements are adjusted as appropriate for adult students.

The rationale for this semi-independent structure comes from the thinking of Knowles(1980) on the need for a separate educational structure for adults:

My observation of adult-education programs in all kinds of institutions across the country supports the generalization that there is a direct correlation between the strength of a program (as measured by size, vitality, quality of output, and support from the system) and its status in the policy-making structure...the strongest programs in universities are in those institutions in which the adult-education unit is parallel to academic affairs, student personnel, and equivalent function, and the chief executive officer is a vice-president for continuing education...the more important

consideration is that with autonomy and status the adult-education unit is able to concentrate on processes uniquely effective for the education of adults. And it is better able to attract specialists in andragogy to manage the program. (p.71)

By thus separating the administration of the adult programs, many institutions have been able to build strong programs which truly apply principles of sound learning theory for adults. In Chapter 3, Mark Smith discusses how this is actually implemented at Indiana Wesleyan University and some other institutions.

### Interactive learning

Interactive learning-- including cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and learning through discussion-- has become a widely respected innovation in learning. In fact the term "self directed learning," which has also grown in popularity among adult educators, is actually a form of interactive learning. Brookfield (in Merriam and Cafarella, 1991) posits that self-directed learning can only happen in the context of reflection, action, collaboration, etc. It is never truly self-directed. Interactive learning through a study group, is at the heart of the APS model.

The emphasis on interactive learning represents a paradigm shift: from teaching to learning. Millis and Cotell (1998) make a good case for interactive learning, as a proven method for increasing comprehension and depth of knowledge. The research supporting this method is overwhelming. It is particularly appropriate for the growing number of non-traditional students for whom traditional delivery methods are less effective. In interactive learning, the instructor de-emphasizes the position of "authority" and instead become a "consultant" in small group discussions (Hill, 1977). Instead of the instructor asserting authority by evaluating the discussion groups, they are often self-assessed.

Interactive learning enables students to see things from a variety of perspectives and discover situated knowledge in the context of interaction. This knowledge is often more meaningful to adults than that gained through reading and lecture. Situated knowledge is of a higher order because it places knowledge within the daily course of living. Through interactions learners negotiate the meaning of their experiences. Therefore learners are active participants in the creation of knowledge rather than being external to it. Through community, learners interpret, reflect and form meanings. Community provides the context in which learning can take place (Stein, 1998).

Interactive learning is so well supported in the literature, one would wonder why the lecture method still survives at all. Lectures may be appropriate for younger students who have few experiences from which to draw knowledge. However, for adults, interactive learning is much superior than the use of non-human tools (study guides, sophisticated audio-visuals, etc.) (Cross, 1981). For adults, the most important tools for learning are a small group and a comfortable place where chairs can be arranged in a circle. Instead of a focus on teaching, there should be a focus on learning.

### Experiential learning

Through the use of interactive learning, the best adult programs articulate John Dewey's ideal of experiential learning. He envisioned a progressive institution wherein students' experiences would form the basis for reflective learning. The success of an educational institution would be measured in the extent to which it can unlock the power of experience as a tool to learning (Dewey, 1963). Likewise Lindeman emphasized the primacy of experience interpreted through interpersonal interchange as the most powerful vehicle for adult learning. To him, the adult curriculum should emphasize situations not subjects (Brookfield, 1987).

In the best practices of adult focused institutions, students' experiences are at the heart of the curriculum. According to Knowles (1990), adults demand practical application of knowledge. Through assignments of research and other learning activities, the study group can do this efficiently. When assignments are tailored to specific work concerns, students take pleasure in applying their knowledge to address challenges faced at work. Study group members add currency and relevance to theoretical analysis when they can describe how the concepts they are studying are being applied in their place of employment.

Learning, for both adults and children, is an interactive process. The distinction of adult education is that the student brings a rich array of previous experiences and demands practical application for the education process. Children need to be given resources and structured activities to enrich their experience and aid interaction. Adults already have these experiences but need a vehicle by which they can interactively interpret these experiences. In addition, adults need to see the practical application of their knowledge in order to be motivated to continue (Knowles, 1980). In many of the best practices in adult focused institutions, a study group becomes a forum for interpretive interaction. The application orientation of assignments and the accelerated format allow students to see the practice beyond their learning.

### ALFI Model Development

One of the more recent developments in research comes from the Consortium of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Their ALFI project consisted of a study of best practices across several institutions. These case studies produced several Principles of Best Practice which form the basis for this volume. CAEL's project utilized methods of self-reflection and interaction among institutions that had been identified as "best practice". The Principles of Best Practice were induced from the analysis of these examples. This chapter has cited the theory which helps explain the success of these practices. This present volume will focus on the steps an institution may take to implement these principles.

### Conclusion

The model of adult education utilized by many of today's programs is not a new invention. It is the synthesis of nearly a century of work in the areas of experiential philosophy, developmental psychology, and critical sociology. Adult education programs have been an important part of the growth and development of the contemporary society. As these programs have become attached to universities, the programs have gained structure, rigor, and recognition.

Adults learn best in an interactive format with heavy emphasis on the practical application of their learning. Adults desire a learning situation which does not ask them to compromise family and professional demands.

These principles are addressed in the following chapters. We hope that this volume will be a practical guide to institutions wishing to transform their adult programming efforts to maximize learning for larger numbers of adults. By increasing access to quality programs, such models can be world changing.

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