A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO ADULT EDUCATION: LEARNING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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Abstract

We approach the adult educator/adult learner relationship from an affective perspective, noting the role of diversity, as we establish parameters for this paper. One of us has stated that a dear friend and adult educator told her many times that more is "caught than taught" (referring to informal and incidental learning that takes place on a daily basis and in most situations). We believe the truth of that axiom is applicable to all interactions between adult educators and adult students. It is essentially, and in the final analysis, a human relationship. We will examine diversity as it relates to teacher-learner interaction specifically in four areas that impact this humanistic educational process: (1) adult educator/adult student interpersonal relationships as they apply to the instructional process; (2) the effect of spirituality on the adult educator/adult student relationship; (3) interaction between the adult educator and adult student in a counseling setting, and finally; (4) the effectiveness of adult educators in evaluating programs for a diverse adult student population.

The Purpose

The learning environment with its psychological and social aspects is greatly influenced by teacher-student interaction that is embedded with intricacies of power, influence, and control. This relationship is a sensitive one. It is usually based on power; the teacher holds all, or is perceived as holding all the knowledge and therefore all of the power and influence. And, the student is expected to sit quietly and absorb whatever knowledge the teacher chooses to share, relevant or not, usually via a non-interactive method, i.e. lecture which, if the student complies, results in the teacher controlling the student and/or the student controlling the teacher.

For the purpose of this paper, we define psychological learning environment as creating a climate in which both learners and teachers are able to engage in genuine exchange. For teachers this typically means learners feel welcome and at ease in the opening minutes of activity. It also involves attending to the fears and doubts that adults may be experiencing. And it recognizes that learners do not come with a "blank slate;" rather, they come with a range of life experiences-some of which can serve as possible learning resources and others (such as pressures, difficult work situations, and domestic concerns) that can detract from learning (Merriam & Brockett, p.150). In this setting, counseling the adult learner is a critical component and a role all educators play to some degree at some time in their relationship with the learner while evaluation contributes to improved program quality and a better understanding of the target group for the program. And, as adult educators we must not neglect the importance of the spiritual growth and development of adult learners if we are to humanistically and holistically advance our field. And, social environment is defined as centering on the culture of the teaching-learning setting. This is where it becomes essential to recognize the importance of factors such as race and sex in relation to how adult educators work with learners (Colin & Preciphs, 1991; Collard & Stalker, 1991; Fellez & Conti, 1990). The social environment is central to discussions of critical approaches to adult education because it emphasizes the place of social context in the adult learning environment, rather than an individual's response to the environment; and, shows how diversity impacts teacher-student relationships that take place in this psychosocial environment (Merriam & Brockett, p. 150).

The Adult Educator

Demographic studies have clearly documented the changing faces of America's population and the impact this will have on education. Many Americans understand this reality on an intellectual

level but nonetheless have difficulty with the emotional aspects of change. In order to understand those who are different from ourselves, we must first recognize that diversity problems in the various forms of adult education (adult basic education, general educational development, continuing education, corporate training, and university education) are associated with patterns of segregation, beliefs of white supremacy, issues of minority inferiority, inequitable distribution of resources, discriminatory pay practices, sexism and classism. Unfortunately, there is still a lack of sensitivity to diversity in mainstream America. There seems to be a lack of understanding or just overt denial of the pattern of favoring one group over another in many educational settings.

In order to re-define adult education and build a new, productive system, we must create an environment where everyone involved can do their best. This entails developing and fostering cooperative relationships and recognizing and dealing with differences. Much of the work of re-defining and building rests on the shoulders of the adult educator. Is the task too great?

It is interesting to note that when looking at the question, "Who is the adult educator?" most answers found in the adult education literature begin with a demographic description which includes the fact that, (1) most teachers of adults begin as teachers of children; and, (2) they are very parochial and most have never interacted with people of color. This is the framework that many teachers of adults bring into the classroom. Rarely is there a discussion of what the teacher represents in the classroom or what the teachers' real role is in the classroom and rarely is class difference between teacher and student mentioned. In order to educate culturally diverse students, teachers must be sensitive and responsive to the similarities and differences between themselves and the students. They must be able to draw on and face their own backgrounds, their empathies, their cultural preferences, and their prejudices.

The Adult Learner

As we look closer at the "adult learner" we find that the adult learner is a real person; the lady/man next door, a veteran, the young mother in need of a GED, the guy on the block who can barely read, the employee looking to enrich/advance his career, the mom who wants to learn arts/crafts or health related information, or the college graduate who simply enjoys learning. Cyril Houle in *The Inquirying Mind* (1960) identified three categories of adult learners: (1) *the goal-oriented adult*; (2) *the activity-oriented adult;* (3) *the learning-oriented adult;* and, Roger W. Axford in *Adult Education: The Open Door* (1969) discovered a fourth, (4) *the undereducated adult.* The adult learner has a real life that includes all of life's daily hassles. This busy person participates in learning activities that are relevant to her/his life and pertain to the seeking of answers to questions. The application of information generated through the answers is then directly applied to solve problems. So, basically, adults attend learning activities to solve problems. And, in order to successfully solve these problems, need teachers who are sensitive, self-actualized, collaborative and understand that these students bring a wealth of practical experience to the teaching-learning process.

Spirituality in the Adult Educator/Adult Student Relationship

All humans have spiritual aspects to their being; but not all are aware of this dimension in their lives. However, it is essential to recognize "authentic spiritual development" as it relates to adult learning. According to English (1983), there are three aspects that facilitate spiritual growth and informal learning in adults. These elements are:

(1) A strong sense of self
   Adults develop a sense of self while interacting and learning in strong, safe relationships with other people. MacKeracher (1996) observes, "spirituality develops from a strong sense of self, without which we would have little inclination to move into the world."

(2) Care, concern, and outreach to others

"A fully integrated spiritual person reaches beyond his or her self and acknowledges the interdependence of all of creation, appreciates the uniqueness of others, and ultimately assumes responsibility for caring and being concerned about other humans and the natural order. Schneider (1986) describes "spirituality
as self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.""

(3) The continuous construction of meaning and knowledge
Through the process of living everyday life we find relevance and meaning in our encounters with others and in our involvement in daily activities. The under- standing that we are part of something bigger than ourselves is "profoundly spiritual."

It is the spirit within us, adult educator and student alike, in spite of our cultural and religious differences, that can become the level at which we meet. Therefore, the role of the adult educator is to first discover or re-discover the spirit within himself in order to recognize and connect with the spirit in adult learners. Tapping into the spiritual reservoir of each student in order to make the most of strengths, opens the door to innumerable possibilities.

Interaction of the Adult Educator and Student

Counseling the adult learner is a critical component in adult education, and a suitable statement for the role all educators play somewhat at some time in their relationship with the learner. The adult learner wants to be included in all phases of his or her education. This shifts at least some portion of the power tools of the relationship, and points to more of a counseling relationship. The instructor is a partner, helper, and facilitator. This humanistic approach to counseling and education focuses on personal growth with the student taking responsibility for his or her own development. "This path emphasizes the importance of our potential for growth, our sense of self, and how we face the mysteries of life, we may spend much time and energy worrying about the past but it is hope for the future that keeps us going. This path pays more attention to what we can become than to what we have been in the past (Enos, 1997, p.29)."

As we explore the role of counselor as educator, we find three typical role-definitions that frame our approach:

(1) Teacher as Content Expert
The adult educator should be a master in the field. Nevertheless, there must be consideration for the experience and knowledge the learner brings to the relationship.

Adult educators' beliefs are shaped by their worldviews. It is diversity of worldviews that guides the way adult educators think and instruct. There should be respect for the ethnicity, gender, and age of the learner (Tiberius, 2001).

(2) Teacher as Skilled Performer
Teachers who assume the skilled performer role deliver information to mold their students. Their primary responsibility is using skilled performances to make learning happen. Today's adult learner, however, wants to be in the loop as it is related to his/her education. We are now in a position to design systems that are centered on the relationship between teachers and students on teaching and learning as a social system. To do this we must begin to respect the diversity of teachers who are legitimate members of the system "their beliefs, competencies and limitations" just as we have learned to respect student diversity (Tiberius, 2001, p.1).

(3) Teacher as Mentor
Mentors support their students, they call out their inner voice, provide appropriate structure, express positive expectations, advocate and explain, challenge their students, and provide vision…Effective mentorship is akin to guiding the student on a journey at the end of which the student is a different and more accomplished person (Daloz, 1998, p.371).

Today's adult educator must interact with the adult learner in varying roles. They must listen to understand the adults' worldview, receiving and giving feedback. There must be meaningful communication with adult learners who also have multiple roles. Meaningful communication is hearing and listening beyond words.

Adult learners also must engage on a personal, social, and academic level. The concept of mentoring we' re putting forth here focuses on caring about another human being. It is assisting the adult learner in achieving maximum human fulfillment.

Evaluating Adult Education Programs

One of the major questions that this paper seeks to answer as it relates to adult education in a culturally diverse society is, "How well are adult educators understanding and addressing the needs of this multicultural population? This question can only be answered through rigorous evaluation of existing adult education programs including minimally the following key elements: definition of terms and evaluation criteria, program accessibility and availability, and selecting evaluation participants.

Many programs purport to address the needs of marginalized groups; however, few really achieve this objective. Evaluation of an adult education program that is targeted to a specific group of people can help meet their needs. There are two very important reasons why evaluation is important, "evaluation can contribute to improved quality" and "evaluation can contribute to increased knowledge among group members" (Russ-Eft, Preskell, 2001, p. 12). The latter reason helps program developers gain a better understanding of the group that is being targeted for the program, which is instrumental in deciding how to meet the needs of the adult learner.

Paulo Freire feels that one of the fundamental goals of adult education is to be "problem-posing," which ultimately enables learners to be "critical thinkers" (Friere, 1999, p. 64). If this goal is in conflict with the goals of adult education program developers, then what is the real goal? Are these goals serving the people or are they politically motivated? The goals of the adult education program should always cater to the needs of the people being served.
The power and influence of one human on another is an important factor to study when evaluating an adult education program. This is especially important when evaluating programs for diverse or marginalized groups. Ultimately, based on the beginning premise of this paper, the judgment regarding the success of an educational program may be revealed in the relationship that learner and teacher establish and maintain.

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