

Personal Philosophy of Adult Learning

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My personal philosophy of adult learning is an amalgamation of bits and pieces pulled from three learning theories covered in class. It is too simple to say I am a progressive educator or have humanistic tendencies as no single theory encompasses my individualized view of adult education. Let's start at my beginning. At the center of my philosophy is the learner. This is to say I wish to educate in both the professional and political space in a manner which allows learners to effectively handle new experiences in social contexts and recognize when there is an opportunity to impact change. And make no mistake: Everything we do, whether at work or in our communities, is done in a social context.

In the professional space, this means engaging in peripheral and tacit learning in socially constructed communities of practice, or collective groups of learning in a shared domain of interest (Wenger, 2009). It involves incorporating learner's experiences, allowing them to construct their own knowledge based on their histories, learning "what he or she perceives to be necessary, important, or meaningful." And the resultant meaning-making "depends upon personal goals, interests, attitudes, beliefs, etc" (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 128). It means inviting learners to challenge those responsible for decision-making and giving them resources and situated learning opportunities to develop solutions which fall outside the normal parameters of what is done within the workplace. Within the community, effectively handling new experiences and recognizing an opportunity to affect change means identifying power and oppression, challenging the status quo and ideology, creating actionable solutions and imparting upon learners the belief they are agents of social change. If some of this sounds humanist and constructivist, it is. If this sounds critical or radical in nature, it is. As such, my personal learning philosophy is a fusion of humanism and critical/radical education theory as applied using constructivism.

Throughout this paper, I will explore various learning theories, highlighting what I find valuable and what I do not. I will incorporate these into a larger whole which expands upon the above-mentioned features within my personal philosophy. I will also critique this philosophy, providing examples of limitation in application and resistance from various stakeholders. Let's start at the beginning. For some

time, I have recognized teachers are not the most important cog in the learning apparatus and education can and should be utilized as a vehicle for the betterment of society. Thus, I was initially drawn to progressive learning theory. As Elias and Merriam (2005) note, progressive educators believe the purpose of education is not simply knowledge transmission, “but also to educate persons who would be interested in changing society” (p. 72). There is an implicit social awareness within the progressive school. Making this lofty goal possible is that unlike liberal education theory, teachers using progressive learning theory are not the sole repositories of information. Learners are no longer passive. They are engaged and involved in a mutually beneficial relationship with the teacher. Frankly, students *do* learning in progressive contexts. As Dewey stated, learning,

...is primarily something that students do for themselves. The teacher’s responsibility is to organize, stimulate, instigate, and evaluate the highly complex process of education. The teacher provides a setting that is conducive to learning. In so doing, the teacher also becomes a learner, for the relationship between teacher and learners is reciprocal. Both should plan and learn from each other. (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 68)

So as my personal philosophy of learning evolved, I rejected liberalism in favor of a more learner-centered model. To be sure, I see value in liberal education theory, especially as it pertains to new-hire training and those situations structured around the mere sharing of historical information. Having content experts lecture on resources, processes and other organization specific matters surely seems beneficial. That said, conducting trainings or class in such a way sets the tone for what an employee/student is to expect during their time with the organization or in class. I do not know how new-hire orientations can be formatted differently, though I did find my experiences in such sessions bereft of any real learning. I memorized information, of course, but knowing and learning are not the same things, and liberalism certainly does not respect my experiences.

I also found progressivism more suitable than behaviorist learning theory in which learners are conditioned to achieve what educators believe to be appropriate outcomes. I understand how behaviorism influences modern program planning. I see behaviorism in every learning outcome and learning objective. I see behaviorism in how programs are structured and how accountability is woven into the DNA of almost every training seminar I've attended. I also understand B.F. Skinner's concept of positive reinforcement (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 89). I don't feel it is the most effective way for learners to achieve what I believe to be important. To be sure, my organization gives out awards and recognizes individual achievement, which learners truly enjoy. They find the public recognition validates efforts. It also pushes some employees to reach for those same levels out of sheer competitive spirit or in an attempt to keep up with their colleagues. I find the process limiting, though, as I want learners to *do* for the sake of meaning-making. That is to say, I want learning to be something which manifests internally and out of a sense of longing to find out more. And when I insert my values or beliefs into learner space, I remove the internalized reinforcement or the sense of accomplishment. I also believe that verbally persuading a learner is not as effective at increasing self-efficacy, or "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" (Bandura, 1977, p. 193), as allowing them to arrive at the information in a learner-driven, collaborative environment. It is through the process of discovery learners develop the drive and desire to learn more. It is through the independent unmasking of forces which oppress that the faith in being able to change the system arises. Controlling the learning experience and structuring it in such a way there is only one set of agreeable outcomes takes discovery off the table. Progressive learning theory seemed to support what I strive for as an adult educator.

As my understanding of learning theory evolved, however, it became apparent progressivism goes too far and does not go far enough when applied through the lens of what I wish to accomplish as an adult educator. Take, for example, the progressive belief educators can exert their influence over

learners in certain situations. To be sure, educators taking an active role in knowledge transmission are typically not doing so with malice. As Elias and Merriam (2005) point out, “When teachers exercise control, it is not a matter of personal power, but of acting in behalf of the group” (p. 69). There is danger in this, however. As Brookfield (2005) states, educators can work “diligently to promote practices” they believe are “unequivocally positive without realizing” they are exerting control. (p. 371). It must be noted here that Brookfield is referring to teaching critically (which we will get to in a moment), and while there is some crossover, progressive learning theory is not the same as critical learning theory. That said, the cautions posited by Brookfield ring true for progressive-based approaches: In exercising control, educators oppress. Freire actually believes this to be a form of violence, as “imposing curricula, ideas, and values ...submerges the consciousness of the students and produces an alienated consciousness since students are not actually involved in a real act of knowing, but are rather given a ready-made view of social reality” (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 159). I find these warnings worth heeding.

I see this in my own work. A session on overcoming objections from students designed as a collaborative endeavor wherein small groups share best practices in role-play exercises can quickly spin in the wrong direction if I provide too much guidance in response to what I perceive to be the taking of the wrong tact. In my mind, I am doing it for the group’s benefit. After all, they have wandered off the path of what I determine to be effective solution-finding. This is a fallacy, however. They are supposed to be finding their own way, using their experiences to shape knowledge construction. It is beneficial to step off the path. But in stepping in, I essentially declare their process void of worth. I rob them of the faith in their ability to think critically and problem solve. At the other end of the spectrum, I feel progressive learning theory can never create true social consciousness within a learner as it does not recognize their experiences at an appropriate level. It is as though progressives teach and share in the process of *acquiring* social awareness. Humanism, on the other hand, leverages experiences, or the self, in the *discovery* of social awareness. The difference is subtle, yet strong.

There is more to what makes humanism so appealing, of course. To start is Maslow's idea of self-actualization. According to Maslow, self-actualized persons are accepting, problem-centered, reflective and self-evaluative, independent, appreciative, spiritual (not religious), empathetic and democratically driven (Elias & Merriam, 2005, pp. 125-126). They are, in practice, intrinsically motivated to learn. Each of these characteristics, I believe, is vital in learners capable of effectively handling new experiences within their situated space and recognizing when there is an opportunity to impact societal change. Furthermore, the humanistic idea that teachers are but facilitators responsible for creating conducive conditions for learning is quite appealing. This stands in contrast to liberalism, behaviorist teachings and, to a degree, progressive ideologies.

I am also drawn to Knowles' andragogy, or "the art and science of helping adults learn." There are four original assumptions to andragogy: self-concept influences learning; adults define themselves based off the accumulation of their life experiences; learning is developmentally tied to life stages; and adults need immediacy in learning (Elias & Merriam, 2005, pp. 132-134). Knowles later added a fifth which states adults find the motivation to learn from internal, rather than external, motivations. Other than the concepts of life experiences playing a critical role in learning, I feel the need for immediacy is especially important in being able to negotiate meaning. As Vella (2002) notes, adults want to focus their efforts on "content that will make a difference *now*" (p. 19). As it relates to being able to respond to new situations and being an agent of change, immediacy means exposure, reflection and action, which ties in directly to educators creating conditions conducive to learning. A organizational training exercise which is not immediately put into some form of action, as an example, will not have the same impact on self and the construction of knowledge as one which is immediately applied.

I believe all of these get directly at the idea an adult's experience must be recognized and nurtured. It is through the reflective process of negotiating meaning we are able to incorporate our past with our present and on into the future. Humanism, not unlike progressivism, also places a lot of value

in collaborative exercises. There is power in group work. Learning does not occur in a vacuum, per se. Yes, it is an individually arrived at outcome, though we must absorb the viewpoints and experiences of others into our meaning-making, seeing the world through lenses not our own. Self-evaluation and democratic participation cannot be sincere if we operate in isolation from other learners. Humanism accounts for this. It isn't a perfect learning theory, however.

To that end, I feel a focus on emancipatory learning, true praxis, recognizing oppression and radical dialogue must be included in my personal philosophy. For this, I turn to critical and radical education theory. Among radicals, I feel Freire brings quite a bit to my personal philosophy. For example, andragogy speaks of immediacy while Freire speaks of dialogue and social forms of praxis, or "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (Freire & Ramos, 2009, p. 168). For Freire, praxis is dialogue followed by reflection and action. Praxis in radical theory is not simply about applying what you've learned immediately. Rather, it is about developing as a conscious being in society, challenging authority and breaking from conditions of oppression, which Freire terms "culture of silence" (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 155). It is, as stated earlier, a dialogic process, which Freire explains in an excerpt from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on 'authority' are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are 'owned' by the teacher. (Freire & Ramos, 2009, p. 169)

This directs us toward emancipatory learning, or breaking free not only from external forces which oppress, but internal ones as well. To that end, I move to Brookfield's interpretation of critical theory, specifically the concepts of unmasking power and liberation. To hear Brookfield (2005) tell the story, adult educators are in an almost untenable situation. Citing Foucault, for example, he notes open-discussion formats, learning journals and accreditations are, in fact, forms of disciplinary power through reconfigured authority (p. 121). Adult educators, using this as the lens, are destined to exert control. To be sure, this is postmodernism in its rawest form, but there is a point within critical theory, according to Brookfield (2005):

In reality we are fated to exercise power. If we accept the view that exercising power is unavoidable, then a critical theory of adult learning would study how it is that adults become aware of that fact and what happens to them when they do.

Also of note within critical theory is the ability to identify self-oppression. For if we are able to identify ways in which we hold ourselves back, then we can identify the structural forces which led us to this point. Accepting the status-quo, for example, is a form of self-oppression. Why do we accept things the way they are, though? Is it because our parents, schools, media and the state have conspired implicitly or explicitly to such an end? The answer is most assuredly. I believe we don't reach the point of identifying such things and being able to impact social change, however, until we see oppression within ourselves. Teaching critically, then, "begins with developing students' powers of critical thinking so that they can critique the interlocking systems of oppression embedded in contemporary society" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 350). It must be noted here there is a hint of constructive postmodernism present in the above statements. As explain by Elias and Merriam (2005), constructive, or liberating postmodernism, "accepts the modern critical spirit, personal autonomy, individual rights, political equality, and other modern notions. But at the same time it does expose the self-contradiction, illusions,

failures, repressions, and the ideological agenda of modernity” (p. 224). This is, subjectively, at the heart of critical theory.

Something worth restating as it relates to my personal philosophy is in the separate or joint application of both humanism and critical learning theory, I remain aware of how learning is situated within the social construct, how experience influences knowledge formation, how learning should make learners uncomfortable and how activities must be authentic with real-world applications. I must allow learners to navigate the often varied ways information fits in with past knowledge and understand meaning-making is a personal matter. These are hallmarks of social constructivism, as detailed by Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2005, pp. 291-294). At work and in the community, this is a political process, involving the liberation of the learner from past conceptions.

To be sure, I have not created my own learning theory. There is some literature currently available on what Bentley, Fleury and Garrison (2007) term critical constructivism. In this specific application, critical constructivism is defined as a pedagogy,

...that enables students to continually shape and reshape their own conceptual biographies through the development of intellectual tools and attitudes about the social basis of knowledge, a pedagogy that enable students to better understand society’s official knowledge as it relates to their own indigenous knowledges, thus developing for themselves a new *rappor au savior*. (p. 20)

So in applying parts of humanism, radical and critical education theory and constructivism, we arrive at the ability to effectively process disjuncture. As described by Jarvis (2009) in Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007), disjuncture is:

...the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values,

emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person. (p. 25)

And as noted in Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007), “The disjuncture between the person’s biography and the experience leads to learning that involves emotion, thought, and action” (p. 104). It is about being willing to reflect on a socially constructed experience, process the emotions involved, put the new opportunity into action and then incorporate this into the way we respond to future situations. Appropriately navigating disjuncture is challenging. Citing Fromm, Brookfield (2005) points out questioning the nature of our individual beliefs, changing the way we accomplish tasks, assuming greater responsibility and recognizing fixed systems are in fact oppressive are terrifying propositions for many (p. 180). As an educator, my role is to foster vision, wisdom and action in learners through the processes delineated above in order for them to incorporate new social situations into their biography. It is how we grow as individuals in the workplace and as participants in our community. I am a partner in the process, engaging in dialogue, unmasking oppression and challenging ideology, even if it’s my own. In practice, this is the manifestation of my personal philosophy. It is also in line with Mezirow’s belief that the primary function of adult educators is to assist learners in becoming “critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced, the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives” (as cited by Welton in Merriam, 1995, p. 177).

What I’ve detailed faces criticisms. At work, I am fortunate enough to have more control over my training sessions than many other professionals responsible for developing and training staff. My work, however, centers on the art of conversation. The qualitative nature of the role and performance appraisal affords me an inordinate amount of flexibility. This does not mean my programmatic suggestions aren’t initially met with doubt and some level of pushback from superiors for being too

radical. The results are mine to own, however, so if we fail, I am ultimately held responsible. This structure of accountability allows me considerable elasticity in planning programs. Learners, too, find not being told what they are to know uncomfortable. Some want me to simply tell them what to do. They are not used to being forced to think critically or arrive at their own interpretation in meaning. In challenging them to learn and apply concepts in a different way, however, they are able to draw parallels to their community. They are able to see how a problem-based learning exercise at work can be modified to fit a local issue. Another thing I must recognize is while I am able to apply my personal philosophy in my professional and political roles, it is not applicable in all settings. Vocations like mechanical engineering, as an example, can't have learners learning what they perceive to be necessary. Some things are mandatory like safety or purely process driven like the operation of a new piece of machinery. These roles are likely better served through behaviorist methods. In the community, I am faced with individuals who simply refuse to look long enough at the state of our society and recognize not only how structures hold us down but how we self-oppress. They are too tied to the status quo to move toward liberation. My challenge is to find ways to reach such persons, helping them find critical awareness.

Finally, I will add that were it not for my role in corporate America, where I largely rely on humanism and general constructivist methods, I feel as though I would fall firmly in the camp of critical/radical theory. As my self-awareness increases, I find it harder and harder to stand in line with capitalist structures designed to oppress and discriminate. As it stands, though, I must navigate corporate expectations with the desire to impart critical thinking skills and social change. It is a fine line. As I continue on my path of discovery, I will continue to look for ways to become more radical in my professional endeavors. In fact, a path which intrigues me greatly is developing a way to infuse critical theory in the professional space without reservation.

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