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ABSTRACT

Teaching adults should be different if adults learn differently than children do. Theories or perspectives on adult learning, such as andragogy, make a number of assertions about the characteristics of adults as learners. If there are indeed distinctive characteristics of adults, on which claims for the uniqueness and coherence of adult education are based, then one might expect them to be taken into account in all organized education for adults. However, each of these characteristics is contested. Some question the extent to which these assumptions are characteristic of adults only. The literature promotes learner-centeredness as another distinguishing characteristic of adult education. Research indicates learner centeredness is an expression of a teacher's values, not a teaching method. Adult learners are more concerned with teacher character and appropriate teaching methods; adult students' conceptions of good teaching include a mix of teacher-directed and learner-centered characteristics. Ongoing debates--andragogy vs. pedagogy, teacher directed vs. learner centered--may mean no single theory explains how adult learning differs from children's learning. Appropriate choices about teaching practices should be based on numerous considerations, including context, learner knowledge and characteristics, and teacher beliefs and values. (Contains 22 references) (YLB)

Teaching Adults: Is It Different? Myths and Realities No. 21

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Teaching Adults: Is It Different?

To be considered a distinct profession with a unique knowledge base (Merriam 2001), the field of adult education advances the idea that teaching adults is different than teaching children. The subject of much debate, this issue has generated assumptions, opinions, and research. This publication takes a look at all three in discerning myths and realities associated with the teaching of adults.

Adults and Children as Learners

Teaching adults should be different if adults learn differently than children do. Theories or perspectives on adult learning, such as andragogy, make a number of assertions about the characteristics of adults as learners: adults need learning to be meaningful; they are autonomous, independent, and self-directed; prior experiences are a rich learning resource; their readiness to learn is associated with a transition point or a need to perform a task; their orientation is centered on problems, not content; they are intrinsically motivated; their participation in learning is voluntary (Draper 1998; Sipe 2001; Tice 1997; Titmus 1999). For some, "the major difference between adults and younger learners is the wealth of their experience" (Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler 2000, p. 7). For others, the capacity for critical thinking or transformative learning is what distinguishes adults (Vaske 2001). In contrast, pedagogy assumes that the child learner is a dependent personality, has limited experience, is ready to learn based on age level, is oriented to learning a particular subject matter, and is motivated by external rewards and punishment (Guffey and Rampp 1997; Sipe 2001).

If there are indeed "distinctive characteristics of adults, on which claims for the uniqueness and coherence of adult education are based, then one might expect them to be taken into account in all organized education for adults" (Titmus 1999, p. 347). However, each of these characteristics is contested. Courtney et al. (1999) assert that "characteristics of adult learners" refers to a small number of identified factors with little empirical evidence to support them. Andragogy has been criticized for characterizing adults as we expect them to be rather than as they really are (Sipe 2001). Both andragogical and pedagogical models assume a "generic" adult and child learner (Tice 1997).

Some question the extent to which these assumptions are characteristic of adults only, pointing out that some adults are highly dependent, some children independent; some adults are externally motivated, some children intrinsically; adults' life experience can be barriers to learning; some children's experiences can be qualitatively rich (Merriam 2001; Vaske 2001). The emphasis on autonomy and self-direction is criticized for ignoring context. Adults in higher education can be marginalized and deprived of voice and power (Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm 2001). Power differences based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability can limit adults' autonomy and ability to be self-directed (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero 1997; Leach 2001; Sheared and Sissel 2001). Lifelong learning can be coercive and mandatory, contradicting the assumption that adult participation is voluntary (Leach 2001). Adults do not automatically become self-directed upon achieving adulthood. Some are not psychologically equipped for it and need a great deal of help to direct their own learning effectively (Beitler 1997; Titmus 1999). Adults may be self-directed in some situations but at other times prefer or need direction from others (Courtney et al. 1999).

Psychological studies suggest that differences in adult and child learning may not be dichotomies but qualitative and quantitative nuances along a continuum. Research shows that motivational, affective, and developmental factors are more crucial in adults than in younger learners; adults are more able to be self-directed and reflective and to articulate learning goals, and they are more disposed to bring their life experiences to what and how they learn (Smith and Pourchot 1998). Studies of metacognition indicate that children and adults differ at each level due to acquired expertise and active use of expert knowledge (ibid.).

For Draper (1998), pedagogy/andragogy is a false dichotomy; he suggests the differences are qualitative: the *kind* of experiences adults have and the *intent* of their learning are the distinguishing characteristics. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) agree that the *use* adults make of experience is different. These qualitative and quantitative differences are not only what distinguish adults from children, but also what distinguish adults from one another (ibid.). Guffey and Rampp (1997) believe that technology is changing how humans learn, increasing intrinsic motivation, self-direction, and critical thinking at even younger ages.

Learner Centered or Teacher Directed

Learner centeredness is promoted in the literature as another distinguishing characteristic of adult education. Cervero and Wilson (1999) identify a strong thread in the field: "At the heart of practice is the adult learner....The highest professional and moral principle for adult educators is to involve learners in identifying their needs" (p. 29). In traditional teacher-directed education as practiced in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary settings, passive learners receive knowledge transmitted by teachers (Tice 1997). Formal curricula reflect what powerful groups think students should learn and what kinds of knowledge are considered important (Sheared and Sissel 2001; Titmus 1999). In contrast, learners are at the center of policy and practice in adult learner-centered institutions, which are characterized by flexibility and individuation for self-directed, empowered adults (Mancuso 2000).

Such a philosophy implies that traditional teaching practices, not considered appropriate for adults, are suited to the needs of children and adolescents. Some agree with this assumption: "In teaching kindergarten through middle school, pedagogy has a secure place. Children must first be taught to read, compute, communicate, and socialize before they can become involved in deciding their future learning activities" (Guffey and Rampp 1997, p. 31). Others argue that the traditional model does not meet the needs of either children or adults. The learning enterprise as a whole is shifting from transmission of a fixed body of knowledge to a focus on lifelong learning, the essential habits of mind with which adults will be ill prepared if initial schooling continues to use traditional teacher-directed methods (Titmus 1999). Andragogical methods, which purport to provide "a relaxed, trusting, mutually respectful, informal, warm, collaborative and supportive learning environment" (Sipe 2001, p. 89), are more conducive to learning at all ages (Guffey and Rampp 1997; Sipe 2001).

To what extent are learner-centered practices actually used by adult educators? In Kember, Kwan, and Ledesma's (2001) study, instructors viewed adult students as being at the andragogical end of the continuum, but teaching methods stemmed from their conception of good teaching: as transmission of knowledge or facilitation of learning. They also varied the use of teacher-directed and learner-centered approaches depending on which better served learner needs (e.g., designing teaching to be congruent with the relative strengths and weaknesses of students).

In Beder's (2001) research, adult literacy teachers expressed learner-centered intentions and orientations. Yet "observations portrayed a type of instruction that was the near antithesis of learner-centered" (p.

46): predominant use of teacher-prepared lessons, elementary-school-style elicitations, and virtually no substantive learner input. Beder concluded that, although instruction itself was teacher directed, teachers were learner centered in their affective relationships with learners. Learner centeredness was thus an expression of values, not a teaching method.

Do adult learners prefer learner-centered approaches? Beitler (1997) found midcareer adult students more concerned with teacher character and appropriate teaching methods; for example, they preferred teacher direction in courses with a clearly defined body of knowledge to master, such as accounting. In Donaldson et al.'s (1993) study, adult students' conceptions of good teaching included a mix of teacher-directed and learner-centered characteristics.

How much autonomy do learners or teachers have in formal contexts? In the current climate of accountability and quality assurance, learner experience may be valued in class discussions, but not in assessment (Leach 2001). Learning contracts are a typical learner-centered approach, but postsecondary institutions control what credit will be given for (ibid.). Adult educators with a transformative/emancipatory philosophy may find institutional limits on their ability to challenge inequities (Leach 2001; Sissel et al. 2001). At the same time, their focus on raising learner awareness can be disorienting and painful for adults, rather than nurturing and supportive (Leach 2001). The educator's role as facilitator in learner-centered approaches does not account for intersecting power dynamics that "privilege some, silence some, and deny the existence of others" (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero 1997, p. 240).

To Cervero and Wilson (1999), learner centeredness is a politically naive and ethically blind position, because there are always multiple interests at stake in adult education activities and no generic adult learners. They assert that meeting learner needs is not a viable guiding principle; at the heart of practice should be the question of who benefits and who should benefit from adult education.

Conclusion

The ongoing debates—andragogy vs. pedagogy, teacher directed vs. learner centered—may mean that no single theory explains how adult learning differs from children's learning (Vaske 2001). As more is discovered about the ways in which we learn, the principles, practices, and philosophies of teaching and learning will continue to evolve.

Appropriate ways of teaching begin with conceptions of learning: Is learning the acquisition of knowledge and skills? Social participation in knowledge construction? A natural process of making sense of the world? Reflection on and adaptation to experience? (Courtney et al. 1999; Taylor et al. 2000). The answer is likely all of the above for learners of all ages, at different times and in different contexts. It may be that adults and children do not learn differently, but the configuration of learner, context, and process has qualitative and quantitative variations that should be reflected in teaching practices (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Moving beyond the debates, choices about teaching practices should be based on numerous considerations: context, learner knowledge and characteristics, teacher beliefs and values (Ross-Gordon 2002). Ross-Gordon advocates reflection on learners, learning processes, teacher-learner relationships, and the social context of learning as a source of guidance. Instead of conceiving of adult learners as generic, educators should address the power issues identified earlier. Finally, the question posed in the title may best be answered by restating it: teaching *different* adults (or children) is (or should be) different.

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