The Role of Adult Education Philosophy in Facilitating the Online Classroom

Teaching philosophy is much more than just teaching style, or a framework for a course. It can be defined as our beliefs about life that are carried out in our teaching practice, which serve as a foundation for our educational philosophies (Zinn, 2004). In general, teaching philosophy can be a tool for improving practice; there are several, significant reasons for exploring our adult teaching philosophies more fully (White & Brockett, 1987). In an earlier work, Apps (1973) identified the following benefits of developing a philosophy, including: informed and improved decision-making relevant to practice, more effective planning of educational programs, and analysis of situations. More recent works have expanded Apps (1973) description, showing that personal philosophies towards adult education are developed by factors such as positionality, referring to race, class, and gendered identity (Bank, Delamont, & Marshall, 2007; Brown, Cervo, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000); introspection and understanding of our individual roles as adult educators (Cranton, 2006; Heimlich & Norland, 2002); prior educational experiences (Taylor, 2003); and, consideration of philosophy as an opportunity to explore alternative viewpoints to our own (Beatty, Leigh, & Dean, 2009).

The majority of literature addressing philosophies in adult education practice focus on how philosophy influences traditional, face-to-face classroom settings (Elias & Merriam, 1995; Strom, 1996; Tisdell & Taylor, 1999). However, little information exists that describes how philosophy relates to online adult education instruction. The purpose of this article is three-fold. First, it describes the intent and purpose of adult education philosophy. Second, it examines key differences between traditional and online instruction, with the main body of this paper focusing on the role of adult education philosophy in online education. Focusing on three, updated philosophies - humanism, critical-humanism, and emancipatory education - the final section explores how adult education philosophy undergirds and influences online education program settings, particularly from the standpoint of the instructor's role.

The Purpose of Adult Education Philosophy

Examination of individual adult education philosophies helps us to discover if our beliefs are aligned with our practice (Tisdell & Taylor, 1999). As Beatty et al. (2009) suggest, “Core elements of one’s teaching philosophy can influence course design and the classroom environment” (p. 99). Also, our own self-awareness as educators, including relationships with students, colleagues, and roles in the classroom can lead to a more authentic practice where class structure, approach, and content is aligned with the perspectives of the educator (Cranton, 2006). As Driscoll and Carliner (2005) describe, “differences in reasons for teaching and the societal goals for providing education are the fundamental issues underlying an educational philosophy” (p. 30).

Once we create a basic view of ourselves as educators, we can begin to
determine which philosophical lens is best aligned with our beliefs. Adult education philosophy is typically divided by major categories: liberal, behaviorist, progressive, humanistic, and radical education (Elias & Merriam, 1995). This article focuses on three updated philosophies - humanism, critical-humanism, and emancipatory - as described by Tisdell and Taylor (1999), which were partially based on Elias and Merriam’s earlier work. This article does not dismiss the perspectives presented by Elias and Merriam (1995). Rather, the three philosophies presented here describe what Tisdell and Taylor (1999) present as more current approaches aligned with adult education practice.

Adult education philosophy is not limited to a traditional, face-to-face classroom environment. As adult education programs increasingly utilize online classroom environments, philosophy should inform practice for educators of these programs as well. Of particular significance is how educators understand the characteristics that differentiate these classroom settings and how philosophical perspectives may influence an online learning situation in light of these differences.

**Traditional Versus Online Education Settings**

Having been in existence for centuries, traditional classroom teaching is characterized by several instructional characteristics, with most of these being present whenever this educational format is utilized. These characteristics include: direct contact between the instructor and the students; immediate feedback and interaction during the instructional process (e.g., questions and answers, classroom instruction, etc.); and a defined period of time for each class.

While more difficult to define, online education also has a number of distinct characteristics, although it is far less typical to have all or most of these factors present for every instance of online instruction. These characteristics include: indirect contact between the faculty member and the students, occurring through a variety of methods such as discussion boards and forums (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005); less than immediate feedback and interaction, with the contact being synchronous (occurring with everyone online at the same time) or asynchronous (with communication occurring via e-mail or other methods whenever each individual is online) (Arbaugh, 2001; Maor, 2003); and often, no defined length of time for each class or classroom period, allowing students to study and learn at their own pace within the parameters provided by the instructor for each course (Flowers, 2001).

**An Overview of Three Philosophies of Adult Education**

This paper is focused on three philosophies of adult education. Before analyzing these further with respect to differences, roles in the online classroom, and critiques of each approach, it is important to describe each briefly in more detail. This will allow for better understanding of the application of each to online education, particularly from the standpoint of the educator.

Humanism stems from earlier works of Maslow (1943) and Knowles (1950, 1968), and essentially relies on a learner-centered focus in the classroom. It relies on identification of learner needs, and now to best address them in the classroom. The drive for more “humanistic” learning results in attentiveness to self-direction within the course approach (Hemstra & Brockett, 1994) as well as self-initiated instruction that better supports the learner’s individualized interests (Rogers, 1983).

Critical-humanism captures very similar elements of humanistic education; the emphasis on self-direction,
learner-needs, and motivation are heavily stressed. Critical-humanism, however, steps beyond the learner's own interests and explores the importance of the surroundings and environment that are influencing their needs. Noonan (2004) describes critical humanism as the recognition of differences, particularly among oppressed groups, and viewing self-determination and freedom as universal values of all humans. From a research perspective, critical humanism suggests "orientations to inquiry that focus on human experience [...] that acknowledge the political and social role of all inquiry" (Plummer, 2005, p. 360). The complex nature of this particular philosophy will be described in more detail.

Emancipatory education seeks to empower students to change or influence broader political, cultural, or other sociological areas of society. As Tisdell and Taylor (1999) note, this type of education advocates for social justice, and embraces this notion in classroom instruction. Emancipatory education recognizes factors such as the role of spirituality (Tisdell, 2000), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990; Mezirow, 2003), and positionality (including race and culture) (Brown, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000; Fenwick, 2005) and their subsequent influence on a learner's worldview.

The remainder of this article will more specifically delineate these three philosophies, through further description and a comparison of differences and similarities among them.

**Humanism and the Online Classroom**

Abraham Maslow introduced and formalized the idea of humanism from a psychological perspective. Considered the father of humanistic psychology, one of Maslow's (1943) most significant contributions to the field was his "hierarchy of needs". In brief, Maslow states that there are at least five sets of goals (what he calls basic needs), including physiological, safety, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization, which motivate humans. Building on Maslow's works, Malcolm Knowles brought the concepts that drive humanism to the field of adult education, developing the fundamentals for humanistic learning theory.

In his earlier work, Knowles focused on the importance of understanding the needs of the adult learner. His principle concepts of informal, adult education were student-centered, guided by the overarching characteristics of adults, in general (Knowles, 1950). Soon, Knowles honed his principles for informal, adult education and expanded into his most notable theory of adult learning (Knowles, 1968). By identifying these principles, Knowles had essentially developed a theory of adult learning based on some of his earlier concepts related to the underpinnings of informal, adult education. In essence, Knowles' principles further link the characteristics of adult learners and how they relate to their self-directed need for learning.

One distinct difference among the three philosophies described in this paper is the viewpoint of the educator with respect to the overall purpose of education. Humanism is very much focused on the self-development and fulfillment of learner need. Knowles' recognition of and a focus on adult learners in their learning process brought the idea of a humanistic approach towards adult education to the forefront in the field.

A humanistic approach in an online learning environment is typically targeted towards motivated and self-directed learners (Driscoll & Carliner, 2005). Because one, significant tenet of a humanistic perspective is the self-development of students, an online teaching and learning environment appears to be ideal for educators who align themselves with this particular perspective for a variety of reasons. The World Wide Web allows for the self-directed discovery of knowledge and information, with access right at the fingertips of the learner. One concern, however, is what differentiates learner control from self-directed learning. As Candy (2004), notes, self-directed learning requires motivation, while learner control does not. In an online learning environment, both motivation and learner control must exist in order for learning to take place.

With this in mind, humanistic educators should continue to find ways to incorporate self-directed learning activities into online instruction while ensuring specific goals that attend to learner needs and interests. For example, students can conduct predefined or self-defined web-search applications such as Webquest, an inquiry-oriented lesson format where most or all the information that learners work with comes from the web (Dodge, 2007).

Another difference among humanism, critical-humanism, and emancipatory perspectives of adult education is the role the instructor takes in the classroom. The underpinning concepts that drive humanistic approaches in education are much aligned with those principles presented by Knowles and his successors. The humanistic adult education philosophy seeks to facilitate personal growth and development, where the educator facilitates, but does not direct, learning (Boone, Gartin, Wright, Lawrence, & Odell, 2002). In online learning environments, "facilitator" often becomes a default role for educators, as students are given much control over how and when they partake in the course. Asynchronous learning environments, in particular, give students opportunity to participate on their own time, directing their own
learning within the guidelines presented in a particular lesson.

In the field of adult education, much of the discussion points to ways to progress from a more behavioral (task-oriented) perspective towards a humanistic approach. This involves the incorporation of self-directed learning principles into teaching to empower adults to take personal responsibility for their own learning, and base instructional activities on learners’ perceived needs (Hiemstra & Brockett, 1994). In an online learning environment, if designed appropriately, learners can set their own goals, and, in many ways, set their own strategies to fill those goals. For example, educators can provide an assignment, and the learner can use various websites, develop their own material on the web, and use additional technology tools and resources to meet individual interests and the goals of a course.

Critical-humanism and the Online Classroom

Like humanism, critical-humanism is rooted in the field of psychology. Plummer (2003) describes critical-humanism as recognizing social, historical, changing, and embodied nature of people, often dismissed by classical humanistic thinking. As mentioned earlier, Noonan (2004) describes critical humanism as the recognition of differences, particularly among oppressed groups, and viewing self-determination and freedom as universal values of all humans. From a research perspective, critical humanism suggests “orientations to inquiry that focus on human experience [...] that acknowledge the political and social role of all inquiry” (Plummer, 2005, p. 360).

Critical-humanist education is complex; there is not one, defined approach that makes an educator a “critical-humanist”. To deconstruct this term, it is helpful to look at the meaning of “critical” with respect to adult education. The word “critical” is frequently heard in the term “critical thinking” which serves as a starting point to better understand critical-humanism and education. Brookfield (1987) brings together the idea of the importance of critical thinking with adult education. Critical thinking challenges adults to recognize and view alternate approaches towards problems, situations, and other parts of our lives. During the time of Brookfield’s earlier works on adult education and critical thinking, research emerged which explored these concepts in practice. Research continued to emerge that encouraged educational environments that were conducive to problem-solving and creative thinking (Garrison, 1991), encouraging a platform that cultivated freedom, and empowerment (Benesch, 1993). More recently, critical thinking has been linked to online and distance education platforms through strategies such as development of learning communities (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), on-line discussions (MacKnight, 2000), and student/instructor interaction methods (Bullen, 1998; Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005). From the critical-humanist perspective, the field of adult education accepts critical thinking as a necessary aspect of the teaching and learning process, stemming from continued research that supports this concept.

While both humanist and critical-humanist perspectives recognize the student, the differences that are emphasized and undergird the classroom approach and dynamics are quite distinctive. The perspective of a critical-humanist educator puts more emphasis on the student becoming a socially responsible, autonomous thinker. This is one of the major roles of the educator: to recognize student difference, and facilitate consensus among the group through discussion and cooperation (Tisdell & Taylor, 1999). Another major aspect of critical-humanism is the recognition of difference, that is, the factors that influence our thoughts and beliefs, particularly with respect to our viewpoints in the classroom. Also, critical-humanism combines the approach of a humanist educator with the socio-cultural and political influences on education (Nemiroff, 1992).

The approach of a critical-humanist educator allows for opportunity to challenge, acquire, and create knowledge through discussion, where all of these strategies are involved in facilitating dialogue among students. In an online course, this environment may include freedom for students to debate issues on discussion boards, with the instructor serving as a facilitator. In an online classroom, it is important for the educator (or, in this case, “facilitator”) to be aware of various perspectives and remain cautious when fostering discussion, keeping their own, personal viewpoints at bay. While one may agree or disagree with certain viewpoints, a critical-humanist perspective allows for learning to emerge from a discussion of viewpoints, not a delineation of right and wrong.

The consideration of textbooks, materials, and course content from a more critical perspective is one means towards the recognition of student difference in the classroom. Sandlin (2000), for example, explored various texts used in adult literacy programs, and concluded they had disregarded some of the social, economic, and other factors, which contributed to the oppression of learners. Critical-humanist educators involve themselves in content selection, considering factors that would contribute to the climate of the classroom. Alternative materials, such as popular culture, should be considered as well, as they can serve as a foundation for promoting discussion in
Emancipatory Education and the Online Classroom

According to Sprague and Brown (2008), "education provides students with cognitive tools and self-efficacy to understand and impact the broader structures that shape their life chances" (p. 2). Viewed this way, emancipatory educators hold the potential to shape instruction in a way that cultivates this way of thinking. Their role is to advocate for social justice, posing problems and eliciting dialogue from their students (Tisdell & Taylor, 1999).

As Imel (1999) discussed over ten years ago, emancipatory education had yet to be embraced by the adult education field. Despite some more recent strides towards better understanding emancipatory education and its place in adult education (Collins, 2009; Randall, Tate, & Lougheed, 2007; Tisdell, 2000; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2002) this conclusion remains somewhat true today. Even less empirical research exists that focuses on emancipatory teaching perspectives and online learning environments. There is a major gap in the literature as to what the implications might be for these particular educational settings, where differences such as lack of face-to-face interaction and communication methods are factors.

One area of emerging research that informs this particular area focuses on cultural attentiveness in online learning; that is, how can educators attend to learner difference from a cultural perspective? McLoughlin and Oliver (2000) argue that, in general, web-based instruction is not culturally attentive, since it is focused more on learning theory and content.

Despite this argument, other studies indicate a correlation between cultural difference in the online classroom with student engagement (Hannon & D’Netto, 2007), adjusted teaching practice (Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007), and attentiveness to course design elements (Wang & Reeves, 2007).

While cultural attentiveness is a tenet of critical-humanism as well, emancipatory teaching perspectives keep in mind the end-goal of education - to help individuals become more informed about important issues involving their communities. Critical to emancipatory online education is the flexibility and attentiveness to culturally relevant content:

"... research shows one of the biggest barriers in student views of Internet usage surrounds culturally relevant content (Slate, Manuel & Brinson, 2002). This can become discouraging to those individuals seeking information which they can identify with, and prohibit those in marginalized groups from being motivated to use the computer and Internet. (Milheim, 2006, p. 10).

The instructor may question if a particular discussion is ethnocentric, dismissive or offensive to other cultures. While much of this may be alleviated in the design approach, it is up to educators of online programs to monitor and attend to these potential issues.

Another difference between critical-humanism and emancipatory education, as discussed by Tisdell and Taylor (1999) is the recognition of class differences. For online learning, this can mean the recognition of online access, as well as differences in opportunities to use certain technologies. While there are typically technical requirements necessary for students prior to enrolling in a course, educators should remain aware of potential issues and barriers to computer access and use.

As adult education continues to move toward embracing emancipatory education philosophy, its relationship to online learning environments will need to be addressed in the research. The subset of available research relevant to online learning and elements of emancipatory education (such as cultural attentiveness and access issues) can inform this area; however, major differences that set the unique purpose of this type of education must be addressed for it to truly impact practice.

Conclusion

Adult education philosophy certainly has its place in online learning environments. As educators strive to produce environments conducive to learning, while remaining attentive to their own perspectives regarding the purpose of education, teaching philosophy must also be brought to the forefront of discussion. While more empirical research linking philosophy to online learning is necessary, we can draw upon what is known through...
adult education research in traditional settings to inform this particular area. As we continue to better understand the link between philosophy and practice, those associated with adult education programming can strive to improve online classroom environments.

References


