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Andragogy, Cognitive Learning, Experiential Learning and Booker T. Washington: The Unexplored Connection

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Abstract: The dominant discourse in the field of adult education has not explored a link between the adult learning philosophies of Booker T. Washington and dominant theories in the field of Adult Education. The purpose of this study is to investigate the link between the adult learning philosophies of Booker T. Washington and three of the dominant adult learning theories, andragogy, experiential learning and cognitive learning.

Introduction

In 1881, Booker T. Washington began his 34-year tenure as the president of Tuskegee University (Tuskegee). During that time he executed a number of programs that provided adult learning opportunities first to African Americans, and later to persons both African Americans and Caucasians, in Alabama and surrounding states. Although vast amount of his work was aimed directly towards adults, Washington has not been recognized as a key figure in the development of the field of adult education. The dominant discourse in the field of adult education has not explored a link between the adult learning philosophies of Booker T. Washington and dominant theories of the field.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the link between the adult learning philosophies of Booker T. Washington and three of the dominant adult learning theories, andragogy, experiential learning and cognitive learning. In order to achieve the purpose, the research was conducted in two parts. First, primary and secondary data sources were analyzed to extract the adult learning philosophies of Booker T. Washington. Second, these philosophies were compared with the concepts of andragogy, experiential learning and cognitive learning.

There have been several research conducted on Booker T. Washington as an adult educator, among them are, Campbell (1969), Denton (1993), Mayberry (1991), Peterson (1996), and Stubblefield & Keane (1994). Denton (1993), in her analysis of Washington, alluded to a link between Washington and dominant theories in the field when she stated “the philosophy and programs of Booker T. Washington in the late 1800's were in surprising harmony with modern practices of adult education” (p. xii). Although Denton alluded to this connection she did not pursue a discussion on the evidence to support Washington’s linkage to dominant theories in the field.

This discussant has been unable to identify any research conducted specifically to examine the linkage of Washington’s adult learning philosophies to andragogy, experiential learning and/or cognitive learning. By examining Washington’s learning philosophies, a connection between his philosophy and the concepts of andragogy, cognitive learning and experiential learning, can be made.

Booker T. Washington’s Adult Education Philosophies

Booker T. Washington began providing adult education from the initiation of his presidency at Tuskegee. He very early on recognized that the learning needs of the adult African American population was different from the learning needs of the younger students that were

enrolled at Tuskegee. Campbell (1969) stated that Washington had two objectives: “first was securing of students” and second “going into the homes of the rural people was to get first hand information as to their needs” (P. 80). “Dr. Washington began his work of bettering conditions by holding monthly group meetings at the “Normal School” as the institution was then called. He invited the farmers and workers in other lines to come and talk over their problems” (Campbell, 1969, p. 81).

Washington believed that this group of people was the best source for defining their own problems and needs, and they also knew best what solutions would work for them (Washington, 1904). He concluded that Tuskegee could best serve in the facilitation of this process by providing learning opportunities for these adults. Two such opportunities that clearly demonstrate Washington’s adult education philosophies will be discussed. These are the annual Farmers’ Conference, and the “Moveable School on Wheels”.

Annual Farmers’ Conferences

The first farmers’ conference was held at the University on the 23rd of February, 1892. The purpose of the conference was “spend the day talking over their present conditions, their helps, and their hindrances, and to see if it was possible to suggest any means by which the rank and file of the people may help themselves” (Washington as cited in Goldenstein, 1989, p. 9). The objectives of the conference were: “to find out from the people themselves, the facts as to their conditions and to get their ideas as to the remedies for the present evils. Second, to get information as to how the young men and women now being educated can best use their education in helping the masses” (Campbell, 1969, p. 84).

During these conferences the participants were given the opportunity to have group sessions and individual consultations in order to discuss their circumstances. At the end of each conference the deliberations would lead to a set of recommendations. The farmers would return home and implement the recommendations and report the results at the next conference the following year (Zabawa & Warren, 1998). This cycle was repeated each year. Zabawa and Warren (1998) stated that the conference was “invaluable for two reason. First, it provided a forum by which farmers could share and receive information specific to their needs. Second, leaders from other states could take the idea, methods, and information provided at the conferences back home to be put into action” (p. 462). Washington recognized that the participants possessed a wealth of experiences; therefore, the conferences were scheduled in such a manner, which allowed the sharing of experiences to be key activity. Along with the group sessions, the participants were also provided with different types of demonstrations based on their interest (Campbell, 1969; Gyant, 1988).

The purpose and objectives of the conferences clearly demonstrate that Washington believed the participants were capable of conceptualizing and articulating their problems and/or needs. Based on his belief, Washington facilitated the process by allowing the participants to create feasible solutions by placing their problems in proper context. He served a role of a facilitator instead of a traditional teacher. Furthermore, by specifying his target audience, farmers, educators, ministers, parents and mechanics (Gyant, 1988), is evidence of his intent to provide education specifically for adults. Washington recognized that adults should not be forced to learn they must be motivated. Moreover, adults are more likely to participate in learning opportunities if they are allowed to partake in determining the direction of the learning.

“The Moveable School on Wheels”

The “Moveable School on Wheels” was another avenue that Washington used to incorporate his philosophy on education for adults. In spite of the successes of the farmers’ conferences, Washington felt that there was a large portion of farmers who really needed educational opportunities, but were not attending the programs at Tuskegee (Campbell, 1969). Many of these farmers did not attend the programs because they felt self-conscious being with “educated Negroes” (James, 1971). To provide a remedy for this situation, he instructed that a wagon be built to take the programs to the farmers (Mayberry, 1991).

The purpose of this wagon was to take the agricultural knowledge to the farmers and their families who did not come to Tuskegee (Campbell, 1969). The supplies and equipment of the wagon were to demonstrate to the African American farmers how to improve their production capabilities, so they would be able to grow their own produce instead of buying them, and how to improve the sanitary conditions in and around their homes (Campbell, 1969).

Thomas Monroe Campbell was hired to be the first demonstration agent of the wagon. Before Thomas Campbell embarked on his first trip, Booker T. Washington charged Campbell as an educator, “instead of telling the farmers what to do, show him how to do it and he will never forget”; and he (Campbell) should “use language so simply that the least educated and the youngest could understand it and profit by its uses” (Campbell 1969, p. 93). A particular type of equipment, supplies and breed of animal were demonstrated to a farmer only when the farmer was ready to utilize the knowledge from the demonstration (Campbell, 1969).

The Moveable School employed a structured teaching schedule based on the agricultural seasons (Campbell, 1969). The "Moveable School" had four main agents. These were the farm agent, the farm mechanic agent, the home demonstration agent and a nurse. The farm agent demonstrated general crop and animal husbandry. The farm mechanic agent demonstrated the uses of new farm implements and how to repair the old ones. The home demonstration agent showed the women how to prepare healthy meals and maintain sanitary surroundings. And the nurse taught the women how to take care of the sick and maintain a sanitary home environment (Campbell, 1969).

The creation and implementation of the “Moveable School on Wheels” was the result of Washington believed that some adults must be met where they are in order for them to be capable of receiving the knowledge they needed. He understood that the adult farmers were not a monolithic group and some were more ready to accept and utilize certain learning opportunities while others required other options based on their positionality in life. Furthermore, Washington believed that these farmers would be more accepting of information that could be readily implemented.

Andragogy, Experiential Learning and Cognitive Learning

The theories of andragogy, cognitive learning and experiential learning are very well known; therefore they will only be presented here in summary form. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) have in great details discussed the concepts of andragogy, cognitive learning and experiential learning; therefore, their work will be used to present the components of these theories. Andragogy is one of the most commonly used learning theories in adult education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). It was introduced by Malcolm Knowles in 1968 and revised by him in 1980 and 1984 (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). There are five assumptions associated with andragogy. Two of the five assumptions of androgogy are “the readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role. And 2) adults are motivated to

learn by internal factors rather than external factors ones” (Knowles as cited in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

Cognitive learning is the ability to process information mentally (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In this process the learner analyses a problem by thinking about all the parts of the problem (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Merriam and Caffarella (1999), goes on to state that the mental process of addressing a problem is enhanced by having evidence to examine during the analytical process. This evidence will help to place the problem in perspective and lead to a plausible solution. One of the most widely accepted beliefs is that human beings learn from our experiences, by our experiences and through our experiences.

Experiential learning in the field of adult education has been researched by many authors (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) outlined, from the work of Kolb, four of the key concepts of experiential learning. These are: “1) openness and willingness to involve oneself in new experiences (concrete experience); 2) observational and reflective skills so that these new experiences can be viewed from a variety of perspectives (reflective observation); 3) analytical abilities so integrative ideas and concepts can be created from their observation (abstract conceptualization); and 4) decision making and problem solving skills so these new ideas can be used in actual practice (active experimentation)” (p.224). This process is continuously repeated as the learner acquires new experiences.

Adult Learning Theories and Washington Philosophies - The Connection

Andragogy. The key concepts in andragogy are, becoming self directing human beings as we mature, adults have a vast degree of experiences, adult readiness to learn is linked to their social roles, “adults are more problem centered”, and internal factors motivated adults to learn. These five concepts make up Knowles’ basic premise that there are noticeable differences in how learning takes place in adulthood. Adults value and make use of information in different ways. Washington’s keen awareness of this difference is reflected in his philosophy towards adult learning.

Awareness of the learning needs of adults allowed Washington to create programs to meet these needs, such as the “Agricultural School on Wheels” (Campbell, 1969; James, 1971; Crosby, 1977). Washington often in his speeches, spoke of the need to recognize the their social role of his target group and the importance of providing them with education at a level that they were able to relate to (Mayberry, 1991). He encouraged his teachers to “use language so simply that the least educated and youngest could understand it and profit by it uses” (Campbell, 1969, p. 93)

Experiential Learning. One of the most obvious connections between Washington’s philosophies and adult learning theories is experiential learning. Washington’s educational messages, especially during the farmers’ conferences, frequently emphasized that sharing one’s experiences and gaining new experiences, was vital to the learning process. The four concepts, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation are all evident in the planning and execution of the farmers’ conferences.

These four concepts are evident in Washington’s philosophies of adult learning. He believed that in order for the farmers to learn they must first be willing to learn and open to learning the new techniques that were been put forward to them (Campbell, 1969). Moreover, he “preached” that the learners must be allowed to observe how the new skills will affect their lives and also they (the learners) should be encouraged to conceptualize how the new skills could be used to increase their well being (Mayberry, 1991). Furthermore, learning how to make decisions

for themselves (the learners) in order to continue improving their lives was also one of the ideals that Washington adhered to.

Washington believed that education was one of the most important resources former adult slaves could acquire in order to avail themselves of their poor economic status (Washington, 1904). Washington explicitly emphasized the importance of hands on experience, encouraging the adults to reflect on their present situation in order to be able to incorporate the education that they received; and, he believed that education should begin at the point where the learner was in his or her life (Campbell, 1969). Farmers were constantly encouraged to practice the techniques that were demonstrated to them (Mayberry, 1991). Washington recognized that educators needed to be overtly aware of the connection between a learners' readiness to learn and the type of information that was being presented to the learner, as they (the educators) interact with the learners (Campbell, 1969).

Cognitive Learning. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) stated that in cognitive learning, the mental process of addressing a problem is enhanced by having evidence to examine during the analytical process. Washington was aware of this fact when he encouraged his teachers that "instead of telling farmers what to do, show him to do it and he will never forget" (Campbell, 1969, p.93). He realized that it was more valuable to the learning process if the farmers were able to see the implements and equipments been used, while receiving information on their uses.

This would allow the learner to conceptualize the process taking place, and in turn use the results of the analysis to bring about solutions to their problems. By exposing the farmers to techniques of how to solve of their problems, they (the farmers) were able to process that information to increase their agricultural output. The activity of processing information is one of, if not, the key components of cognitive learning.

In conclusion, close examination of the reasons for the creation and implementation of the Farmers' Conference and the "Moveable School on Wheels" programs at Tuskegee, demonstrates that there is a connection between the adult learning philosophies of Booker T. Washington and dominant theories in the field of Adult Education. The purposes and goals of both programs, and their implementation processes, gave specific evidence to support the interpretation that Washington was consciously cognizant of the fact that adults had specific learning needs. Furthermore, he understood that adults have a wealth of experiences, which they could draw from and share, in order to help themselves and their colleagues learn. Moreover, Washington acknowledged that adult learners are not a monolithic group and therefore, they must be present with different learning opportunities. He also believed that learning can take place best if it is made available to the learners on their (the learners) level.

This research has shown that there is a connection between Booker T. Washington philosophies and three of the dominant adult learning theories, andragogy, experiential learning and cognitive learning. The information generated from this research may be used to:

- 1) facilitate additional studies which will determine the degree of connectivity of adult learning theories to the philosophies of Washington; and 2) to provide a basis for exploring how other African American adult educators' philosophies have influenced the field of adult education.

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