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Beyond The Inquiring Mind: Cyril Houle's Connection to Self-Directed Learning

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Abstract: *This paper examines the early development of self-directed learning as an area of study and practice using Cyril Houle as the point of departure. Through a variety of sources, a perspective is offered on how self-directed learning gained a foothold as a viable area of inquiry in adult education.*

Over the past four decades, self-directed learning (SDL) has emerged as one of the most influential areas of study and practice in adult education. However, little has been written about how this line of scholarship has evolved (Donaghy, 2005). Hiemstra (as cited in Donaghy, 2005) has suggested it is important to trace the evolution of scholarship in SDL through inquiry into the early writings in this area, focusing on when and from whom these early ideas emerged.

Cyril Houle is frequently credited as having played a pivotal role in bringing self-directed learning to the forefront of the adult education field. Although he is not generally identified as a primary contributor to the area of self-directed learning, it can be argued that Houle influenced this line of inquiry in at least two ways: (a) through some of his own writings, especially the publication of *The Inquiring Mind* (1961/1993) and (b) through the work of two of his former students: Allen Tough and Malcolm Knowles. The purpose of this paper will be to examine the early development of self-directed learning as an area of study and practice using Houle as a point of departure. Through primary literature sources, secondary critiques and analyses, archival resources, and insights gained from interview data collected as part of a larger study (Donaghy, 2005), we hope to offer a perspective on how SDL gained a foothold as a viable area of inquiry in adult education. This paper is an expansion of an earlier presentation by the first author (Brockett, 2003), with subsequent research by both authors in the Syracuse University archives, and interview data collected by the second author (Donaghy, 2005) as part of a study on the evolution of scholarship in SDL.

Houle's Contributions to the Literature of Self-Directed Learning

Cyril Houle most likely did not set out to influence the study and practice of self-directed learning. Yet, in looking at his various writings, it is clear that Houle's contributions to this area were substantial. For instance, three decades ago in the first edition of *The Design of Education*, Houle (1972) defined adult education as follows:

Adult education is the process by which men and women (alone, in groups, or in institutional settings) seek to improve themselves or their society by increasing their skill, knowledge, or sensitiveness; or it is any process by which individuals, groups, or institutions try to help men and women improve in these ways. (p. 32)

By including "individuals" and learning "alone" in his definition, Houle implied that self-directed learning should be considered a viable aspect of adult education. This definition stands in stark contrast to others from that time, most notably Verner (1964) who described adult education as a "relationship between an educational agent and a learner in which the agent

selects, arranges, and continuously directs” (p. 32) the learning experience. Through his definition, Houle helped to create space for self-directed learning, as a legitimate form of adult education, although his actual use of the term “self-directed learning” was limited.

Another way in which Houle contributed to self-directed learning was in his examination of external degree efforts (Houle, 1973). In this work, Houle addressed issues relative to increasing access to adult learning opportunities by trying to reach potential learners beyond a traditional higher education setting. Although he does not specifically address self-directed learning in this book, the notion of serving adult learners beyond higher education degree programs is similar to the argument that expanding the definition of an adult learner beyond the walls of traditional institutions recognizes a broader, more inclusive view of adult learning, which is borne out in later research by Allen Tough (1971; 1979) and the many scholars who followed in his line of inquiry.

Still another contribution can be found in Houle’s (1984) book, *Patterns of Learning*. In this book, which Houle (1992) later referred to as “a series of essays describing how individuals devise patterns of learning for themselves that change as they grow older” (p. 300), he uses biographical sketches to illustrate how adults adapt different patterns of learning. Examples of self-directed learning are found in the stories of Michel de Montaigne and Henry David Thoreau, as well as in a discussion of educational travel, using Florence, Italy as the illustration.

But Houle’s greatest influence on self-directed learning was actually earlier than any of these works. In *The Inquiring Mind*, Houle (1961/1993) described the results of a study he conducted through interviews with 22 active adult learners. He categorized these learners in three different ways based how they viewed the “purposes and values of continuing education” (p. 15): goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented. It was the latter of these groups that was of particular interest relative to self-directed learning. The learning-oriented adult was described as an adult who engages in learning purely for “the desire to know” (p. 25). Here, Houle draws parallels to self-directed learning. In the afterward to the 1988 reprinted edition of *The Inquiring Mind*, Houle noted that at the time of the book’s publication, “the idea that men and women should assume responsibility for their own learning was tacitly accepted by most people”, although the idea of studying this phenomenon was “greeted with apathy or scorn” (1961/1993, p. 89). The idea of self-directed learning, if not the actual term, was in Houle’s mind when he conducted his seminal study and this research seems to have helped to “legitimize” self-direction as an area of research inquiry.

Contrary to the belief that Houle (1961/1993) did not use actually use the term “self-directed learning” at the time of his original research reported in *The Inquiring Mind*, there is evidence to the contrary. During separate visits to the Adult Education Collection at the Syracuse University Library, we uncovered information that may show a more direct connection of Houle’s work than was previously suggested (for example, Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Guglielmino, 2002; Guglielmino, Long, & Hiemstra, 2004). Contained among Houle’s papers in the Syracuse University manuscripts collection are notes that were utilized for thematizing the transcripts of the participants in *The Inquiring Mind* study. Many of the field notes are typed, while others contain hand-written notes. Because it is difficult to determine who wrote the field notes and when the hand-written comments were added to the typed notes, R. Hiemstra (personal communication with R.C. Donaghy, May 21, 2003) sent a copy of the information to Houle’s son, David, for comment. This correspondence, according to Hiemstra, validated that the notes were actually in Houle’s handwriting. However, since it is not possible to determine when these notes were added, it is important to interpret these hand-written comments with some degree of

caution. Though we do not have reason to believe otherwise, it is possible that these comments were added at a later date from when Houle originally completed the research for *The Inquiring Mind*.

These notes indicate several points. First, Houle's (n.d.a) index for the audiotapes entitles the research as a "study of self-educating people" (p.1). Second, on some of the coding sheets for the study (Houle, n.d.b), the comment "how does the subject view himself as a self-directed learner" is typed at the top of each page. Furthermore, in quotes extracted from the field notes of the interviews, Houle ascertains, "Mrs. N rather clearly views herself as a self-directed learner" (p. 15). In another example, Houle says "Mr. O does not . . . have a fully mature conception of himself as a self-directed learner." Last, Houle says, "Mr. R has a very mature conception of himself as a self-directed learner." It is noteworthy that these comments provide evidence that connects the evolution of scholarship on SDL more directly to Houle's *The Inquiring Mind*, than was previously believed.

From Learning-Oriented to Self-Planned Learning

As was mentioned earlier, the second way in which Houle can be linked to SDL is through two of his doctoral graduates from the University of Chicago: Allen Tough and Malcolm Knowles. Allen Tough's involvement with self-directed learning was directly influenced by his study with Houle. During a recent interview conducted by Donaghy (2005), Tough stated that he was first introduced to the notion of self-directed learning in a program planning class he took with Houle. According to Tough, this class introduced him to "the concept of a 'learner learning something on his . . . [or] her own'" (Donaghy, 2005, p. 127). Tough acknowledged that this class with Houle was what initially gave him the idea for his dissertation. In describing his view of how Tough came to be involved with self-directed learning, Houle (1961/1993) reported that Tough read *The Inquiring Mind* and some of the 22 transcripts from the study and this reinforced "his conviction that an investigator could precisely analyze the self-directed learning actions of an individual" (p. 92). At the same time, however, Tough said that the actual inspiration behind his research on "self-planned learning" (Donaghy, 2005, p. 129) came from another of his professors, Phillip Jackson, who strongly encouraged him to pursue this study. The point here is that there is clear evidence of Houle's influence on Tough's thinking; but there were other sources of inspiration that may have been at least as strong as Houle's.

Tough subsequently completed his doctoral dissertation on adult "self-teachers" (Tough, 1966) and, a few years later, his learning projects study (1971; 1979). Kasworm (1992), in offering an assessment of *The Adult's Learning Projects*, noted the shift Tough made from "self-teaching" to "self-planning" actually "incorporates a broader perspective of the adult learner's action and the learner's use of other resources" (p. 57). Numerous replications have generally supported Tough's major findings relative to *Adult's Learning Projects* and, to a large degree, set in motion a major line of scholarly inquiry in adult education.

Like Tough, Malcolm Knowles was a student of Houle at the University of Chicago. Unlike Tough, however, Knowles had been considering issues, questions, and practices related to self-directed learning before Houle conducted his *Inquiring Mind* study. As early as 1950, Knowles made reference to self-direction. In his book, *Informal Adult Education*, Knowles described several assumptions underlying group-centered leadership. The second assumption reads as follows: "*Each individual has a fundamental urge to grow – to achieve greater maturity and self-direction*" (italics in original) (Knowles, 1950, p. 62). He continues by saying it is assumed "that individual growth will take place best in a group that is free from authoritarian

control and maturely accepts responsibility for its own direction” (p. 62). While Knowles is writing specifically about group dynamics here, the notion of individual growth through self-direction is central to the assumption.

During the late 1950s, further signs of Knowles’ interest in self-directed learning can be found. In an article published in the periodical, *The Church School*, Knowles (1959) stated that an adult is one who has matured “from dependency toward autonomy to the point that at least he makes his own decisions and faces their consequences” (p. 9) and that adults “are more capable [than children] of taking responsibility for planning their own learning experiences and they have more resources from which to contribute to the learning process itself” (p. 10). Knowles goes on to suggest this implies church programs for adults must be “person-centered rather than subject-centered” (p. 10). Also, in a speech given in 1960 to the Council of Liberal Churches, Knowles (1960) discussed the movement from dependency to autonomy in the following way: “One of the central quests of [a person’s] life is for increasing self-direction - - recognizing that the opposite of dependence in our complicated world may not be independence so much as self-directing interdependence” (p. 5).

Although Knowles was at the University of Chicago several years earlier than Tough, and their time at Chicago did not overlap, the two educators seem to have held each other in high regard relative to their contributions to SDL. For example, during his interview with Tough, Donaghy (2005) reported that Tough gave credit to Knowles for his important contributions to SDL. Similarly, it appears that Tough’s learning projects research had an influence on later writing by Knowles on self-direction. In a letter to Tough dated July 27, 1972, Knowles (1972) stated,

I had received a very pleasant sensation from my previous scanning of it [*The Adult’s Learning Projects*], but when I really got into it today I found myself feeling really thrilled. It is a magnificent piece of work, and so well written. It greatly deepened my own insights into the nature of self-directed learning and made it more operational for me.

Three years later, Knowles’ (1975) own book, *Self-Directed Learning* was published.

The Houle Connection: Its Place in the Literature of Self-Directed Learning

One way to assess the contributions of Houle, Knowles, and Tough is to look at how their works have been utilized by subsequent scholars in the area. Confessore and Confessore (1992) conducted a Delphi survey to determine “the most important published works that, in the panel’s judgment, should be read at the outset of one’s introduction to the field of adult self-directed learning” (p. 17). They found that the two highest ranked works were *The Adult’s Learning Projects* and *The Inquiring Mind*. Knowles’ *Self-Directed Learning* ranked fifth while Tough’s (1978) article in *Adult Education* ranked eighth.

More recently, we along with several colleagues conducted a content analysis of literature on self-directed learning appearing in 18 periodicals between 1980 and 1999 (Brockett et al., 2001). Building on this study, we subsequently conducted a citation analysis of the identified articles to determine which authors and which publications were most frequently cited in this literature (Donaghy, Robinson, Wallace, Walker, & Brockett, 2002). In this citation analysis, we found that Tough’s *The Adult’s Learning Projects* (1971; 1979) was the most frequently cited source on self-directed learning while Knowles’ *Self-Directed Learning* (1975) and *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (1970; 1980) were the 3rd and 4th most frequently cited sources, respectively. *The Inquiring Mind* was tied for 10th on the same list. Further analysis found that Tough and Knowles were the 3rd and 4th most frequently cited authors on self-direction, while

Houle was 8th overall. This provides some evidence to support the impact that Houle, Knowles, and Tough had on subsequent scholarship in SDL.

Some Next Steps

This paper has served as a starting point for looking at the evolution of scholarship in self-directed learning, by examining the contributions of one of the seminal figures in this line of inquiry. Future research could broaden this understanding. For example, it would be informative to complete a content analysis of adult education literature from 1900 to 1950, to determine the contributions of other scholars in the area of SDL (Hiemstra, as cited in Donaghy, 2005). Another idea is to “look at the work of Houle [and] Knowles . . . to determine their sources of information” (Donaghy, 2005, p. 186).

In conclusion, it was our intention to show that Cyril Houle, Allen Tough, and Malcolm Knowles each played an important role in the development of self-directed learning research and practice by tracing the intellectual development of these individuals’ work. Four and one-half decades after the publication of *The Inquiring Mind*, much more is known about self-directed learning and self-directed learners while research in this area continues on several fronts today. From the evidence we have presented, it is clear that Cyril Houle played a pivotal role in the establishment of this line of inquiry.

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