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Contemporary Historical Research in 21st Century Adult Education

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Abstract: This paper presents contemporary historical research on one leader in adult education, and the value of similar research using this methodology. This report is a call to action for the field of adult education.

Leaders are vital to the development and continuation of any discipline or field of social practice. The study focuses on a scholar and leader in one such field of social practice, that of adult education; his name is John A. Henschke. The specific aim of this study is to explore the congruency between Henschke's practice and scholarship. This study does not aim to study any other components in adult education. Presently, only eight other doctoral dissertations of a similar nature within the field of adult education exist. The first eight study's focus on one leader in adult education, Malcolm S. Knowles, known as the "father of American andragogy" as the title of Cooke's (1994) dissertation indicates. Interestingly enough, Henschke was the first person to undertake and complete a doctoral dissertation study on Knowles.

Purpose

To date, there are no studies providing visual evidence of what congruency between practice and scholarship "look like" in the adult education classroom, nor does any visual documentation exist of the use of andragogy in the adult education classroom. This study (Risley, 2012), is the first to provide visual evidence of the principles of andragogy in action, thus demonstrating the practice theory connection, through more than 28 hours of video recording during one of Henschke's spring 2012 courses. In addition, this study presents the experience of students in this course.

During the early part of the 20th century, Dewey asserted that education, experience, and life should be intertwined – that to study education is to study experience, and to study experience is to study education (1938). In the middle of the 20th century, Beach (1969) claimed that educational researchers were neglecting the study of adult education and adult educators. Now, in the second decade of the 21st century, Beach's concerns are as valid as they were over 40 years ago. Only limited literature is available on the lives and practice of adult educators. The available literature includes autobiographies, a video collection of interviews with leaders in adult education, and eight dissertations. All eight dissertations focus on the same adult educator, Knowles. Dissertations on Knowles span 40 years, the first completed in 1973 by Henschke himself at Boston University and the most recent completed in 2009 by George William Henry at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane Austral. Knowles was fundamental in popularizing the American version of andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1990, p. 54). While Knowles certainly contributed to the field of adult education, he is by no means the only leader whose contributions are worthy of in-depth investigation.

Though scholars have studied many areas of adult education since Beach's 1969 call to action, they have mostly neglected the lives and work of leading adult educators. Like extraordinary leaders in other disciplines, such as physics (Albert Einstein), political science (Franklin Delano Roosevelt), literature (Mark Twain), and technology (Steve Jobs), adult education may learn from the study of its extraordinary leaders. In each case, these famous figures embodied their life's work because their persona was consistent with their great

contributions to their fields. They modeled what they taught and did what they said they would do, characteristics considered by some to represent credibility and authenticity (Kouzes & Posner, 1993).

Henschke is a national and international leader in andragogy, bringing credibility to the field of adult education during his 43 years of experience and research in his practice. Henschke (1989) proposed, “Andragogy is more than mere method; it is an attitude of mind and heart, and it becomes a transforming power and positive influence in modeling the preparation of adult educators” (p. 12). Modeling and authenticity can be interpreted as important aspects of leadership, no matter what the field (Young, 2008; McLagan & Nel, 1997). Kouzes and Posner (1993) asserted, “credibility is mostly about consistency between words and deeds. People listen to the words and look at the deeds. Then they measure the congruence” (p. 47). Henschke himself asserted, “As adult educators, we are models. Students learn more from our actions than our words. They want to see if our actions match our words” (Henschke, 1989, p. 12). This study’s purpose was just that: to compare Henschke’s classroom practice with his published writings. This matching of actions and words represents the theory–practice connection. An exploration of Henschke’s practice and scholarship can offer potent examples of andragogy in practice.

In order to truly understand a person, one must know that person. Knowing transcends discoverable facts; thus, to understand a person, one must look beyond facts. There is a woeful lack of knowledge about educators in general, but particularly about adult educators and their contributions to the field of adult education. Adult educators impart their philosophies, theories, and research to inquiring minds in the field and therefore can influence the views that society holds as truths. In order to “know” John A. Henschke, I have undertaken an exploration of his practice and scholarship to evaluate the congruency between the two.

This study aimed to explore how John A. Henschke’s practice mirrors the andragogical theory espoused in his scholarship. The research question is best addressed through an empirical analysis of the surveys completed by students and Henschke and by interpretive, qualitative research. In an attempt to reflect Henschke’s practices this study refers to Henschke as John.

Theoretical Framework

John’s espoused theory is andragogy. This study utilized the evolution of Knowles concept of andragogy to establish a theoretical frame for John’s espoused theory in congruence with John’s introduction to andragogy during doctoral studies at Boston University with Knowles. Andragogy consist of six assumptions and eight process elements (Knowles, 1990). Following are the six assumptions of andragogy: a) Concept of the learner, b) Role of the learner’s experience, c) Readiness to learn, d) Orientation to learning, e) Motivation to learn in adults and f) Relevance of learning. The eight process elements of andragogy are: a) Preparing the learners for the program, b) Setting the climate, c) Involving learners in mutual planning, d) Diagnosing their own learning needs, e) Translating the learning needs into objectives, f) Designing a pattern of learning experiences, g) Helping adult learners manage and carry out their learning plans and h) Evaluating the extent to which learners have achieved their objectives.

Research design

This qualitative study employed a contemporary historical narrative inquiry methodology. Because this study explores past experiences, I utilized a modified historical method using narrative inquiry. The modification involves the recognition that this study represents a contemporary history because the subject is currently living, the researcher is alive, and the research focuses on events currently taking place. This approach offers added dimensions, not the least of which is the *felt texture of events* as they are happening. John is a

human being and as such has the ability to share his stories with others; he is also an educator in the field of adult education. The methods used to explore his life and his lived approach to learning should be congruent with his status as both human being and educator. Narrative inquiry is one way of translating, into practical methods of educational research, Dewey's conception that education is a form of social life (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 2).

Observations, audio/video recordings, field notes, journal reflections, autobiographical work, storytelling, and interview transcripts of discussions are all examples of methods used in narrative inquiry. I used these methods, as well as a survey administered to John in his role as facilitator and to graduate students pre/post in one of his courses.

The course from which students were invited to participate in this study was called Building Blocks for Adult Learners, a foundation/entry level course in the andragogy emphasis specialty at Lindenwood University. This course was selected because it typically is the first course taken in the andragogy specialty; thus, students have previously had no or limited experience with John. The survey data were analyzed for congruency between facilitator and learner perspectives on facilitator trust.

This study offered interpretations held by three distinct groups of individuals: colleagues, students, and John, utilizing 10 data sets. Data sets include: a) Focus group-current students, b) Modified Instructors Perspectives Inventory for Students pre/ post course surveys, c) Section of the Instructors Perspectives Inventory, d) Course evaluations, e) Video recordings of John facilitating, f) Interviews; colleagues, students, and John, g) Observations, and h) Selection of scholarship.

Each contained interpretations and perceptions that, when held up to the mirror of John's scholarship, reflected an image of John addressing the research question, "How does John A. Henschke's practice mirror the andragogical theory espoused in his scholarship?"

This study utilized a version of an instrument developed by John, the Instructional Perspectives Inventory (IPI), which was modified for student use. It was determined that if learners and John did not have congruent perceptions of John's practice as evaluated by an instrument that John himself developed, then not only would the instrument be in question, but so would John's practice. The study design was informed by biography; resulting data were analyzed through the lens of the factors/characteristics identified in John's 1989 assessment instrument, the IPI, which was designed to identify the beliefs, feelings, and behaviors of adult educators. This study used these characteristics as pre-selected themes. The study identified three additional themes for a total of 10 themes. This study placed emphasis on teacher trust of learners. Themes, in no particular order of significance, are as follows: a) Planning and Delivery of Instruction, b) Learner-Centered Learning Processes, c) Teacher-Centered Learning Process, d) Teacher Empathy with Learners, e) Teacher Insensitivity Towards Learners, f) Accommodating Learner Uniqueness, g) Teacher Trust of Learners, h) Relationship with God, i) Relationship builder, and j) Uninterested in anything unandragogical in higher education.

Findings

Teacher Trust of Learners is the primary factor of concern in this study. Trust is the subject of many of John's recent publications, and one that often is overlooked in our society and our education system. This research confirmed the value of **Teacher Trust of Learners** in the identification of this characteristic as a strong component of John's practice. Several interviewees shared stories about John's trust of learners. Ellie [a colleague] stated, "I've never heard him say anything negative about a student. He's always positive about students. He always gives them the benefit of the doubt more than I do, I would say, and he's been doing it much longer than me."

Additionally, this research identified John as a **Relationship Builder**; the relationship is central and fundamental to the theory of andragogy, thus, continuing to demonstrate the practice theory connection between John's practice and his scholarship espousing andragogical theory. This congruency is visible in interview comments such as when Ellie [colleague] found comfort and perhaps a model in John:

He forms a relationship but it's not... he doesn't go chasing after students. He's available, he's accessible, and he makes it clear to the students that he's accessible. Not only does he know everyone's dissertation that he ever chaired, but he knows their life story, he could probably tell you. I guess he just reassured me that that was okay, again I'd always been told, "You don't want to get too personally involved with your students." And maybe some of that's my age, but, you don't need to be their friend, you're their professor, maybe you don't need to know all that other stuff about their life, but he did, so it wasn't a bad thing, that was part of who they were, they weren't just a student to him. I started thinking about things a little differently.

Some people change the world just by their presence, and colleagues from a previous university commented on the atmosphere John promoted. Patty felt that the atmosphere of the division was different after John retired. Ted elaborated on this thread:

John was the father of our (University of Missouri-St. Louis) adult education program. He was the guts of our adult ed program. Our culture of practice basically grew up around John. He came here, and there was basically no adult education program. He basically wasn't full-time with us, but he was full-time with us and he became our adult education program. When people talked about adult education here, they talked about John. And so, in terms of, has he influenced the culture? Has he influenced a group of people by his practice, by his philosophy, by the way he has done things? Oh yeah, absolutely. John just does his job the best way he can, and he's nice to people while he's doing it. I mean, look at the students; they love him. That's a good indicator of what kind of individual you are, and how you do your life's work.

An unexpected theme emerged from the study, that of John being **Uninterested in Anything Unandragogical in Higher Education**. In Ellie's role at the university, she interacted with a wide range of students and faculty from the school of education as well as other departments. She related stories of incidents in which John was not always interpreted in a positive light:

He wants to do the comps [comprehensive exams for doctoral students] this way, and maybe he wants to do it different every semester. He doesn't want to have to write a proposal, and take that to CEL, he wants to just do it. He thinks probably he knows what he's doing, trust him to run the comps, and he'll say whether people passed or not, and we don't have to make that a big thing where there's forms and paperwork and all of that. If he could do that for many things he would. Maybe registering for classes, if he could just figure out what class you (the student) want to take, sign up for it, done, instead of all of this signature, and a policy exemption.

Andy and Jack [both colleagues] shared similar experiences. Andy believed that John "listens and takes what he needs and leaves what he doesn't, not many meetings where people don't have divergent views doesn't bother John if they disagree".

This research produced an instrument, the Visible Elements of Trust Inventory (VETI), which demonstrates the behavioral embodiment of the beliefs and feelings of teacher's trust of learners. The VETI was used to evaluate video recordings of John facilitating adult education. A few excerpts follow:

- **Communicates to learners that they are each uniquely important?** John demonstrated this element when he engaged individual learners in a conversation about what they do in their individual practice.

- **Works towards developing a supportive relationship with individual learners?** John developed a supportive relationship every night that he shared a personal experience or story. Each time he engaged the students before class started or he encouraged them to share personal experiences from the past week. He encouraged students to share, and this mutual openness formed the foundation of strong, supportive relationships. This example is further support of John as a relationship builder, one of the identified study themes.
- **Exemplifies unconditional positive regard for learners?** John typically sits and lets the learners in the class discuss the topic first. He does not tell them what the answer according to “John” is; he leans back and lets the discussion develop. John does not demonstrate that he is the only resource or even expert in the room. He regards his students positively as co-learners, setting a climate filled with trust and acceptance, which allows them to feel supported.
- The final example is the eleventh element on the VETI, **Demonstrates respect of learners’ dignity and integrity.** The dictionary defines dignity as worthiness and integrity as soundness of moral character. John demonstrates respect for the learner’s dignity and integrity in multiple ways. He addresses them as equals, acknowledging them as facilitators of learning in their own right. He sits and talks with them; he does not stand in the front of the class and talk at them. He encourages everyone in the class to contribute to the discussion before he adds his thoughts. These are simply a few examples of the findings of this study. The findings of this study are situated, as a mirror. The image reflected of John’s practice and scholarship was congruent.

Implications

This study originated from the perceived need for evidence of congruency between practice and scholarship in adult education, as well as visual documentation of andragogy in the adult classroom. John is not the topic of this study, he is the subject; the topic is congruency between practice and theory. This study could and should be conducted with all practitioners and leaders in disciplines valuing credibility and authenticity.

During the early part of 2012, the adult education community lost Allen Tough and Phyllis Cunningham, both passionate individuals who made lasting contributions to this field. Before additional foundational members of the field of adult education pass on, explorations into their contributions should be conducted. The unique perspectives held by these leaders would only expand the field’s knowledge base. As researchers, we seek primary sources of data; therefore, why would we settle for secondary sources when primary sources are available. Foundational leaders in the adult education field will not be available to share their unique stories and lasting contributions forever. Before these opportunities are lost, examination of contemporary leaders must be conducted.

Values of This Type of Research

The values found in this type of research are many and varied. I found that the richness of the data was unparalleled when exploration was undertaken while events unfolded. Observing the interactions of John and the students illuminated the importance of the practice theory connection. Research of this nature provides richness to the context, background, and thinking of the person(s) making contributions to the growth of the field of social practice. This type of research can provide an understanding and knowledge of personal events and influences of persons important to the emergence of the field of adult education. Understanding the *why* allows for complete understanding verses vagueness or assumptions.

Such research could be considered a movement in qualitative research that, if engaged in, could aid the growth of the field of adult education. The added value to studying contemporary history is that the process can be acquired rather than simply the result. I have incorporated many of the methods and techniques I observed John utilize and demonstrate over the course of this study, in my own practice. Thus, the process and findings of this research have both shaped and influenced my adult education practice. Additionally, studies completed on other leaders in the field of adult education could add credibility to the field while continuing to add to the knowledge base of a growing field of social practice. Finally, by encouraging and supporting critical “outside the box” research such as this, programs demonstrate that with great risk comes the possibility of great reward, thereby demonstrating that leaders of tomorrow must be willing to take great risk if the field is to flourish.

Conclusion

At the 1974, Adult Education Research Conference, John himself presented the first contemporary historical research on an adult educator and leader in the field. At that time John, encouraged others to explore the rich resources that were available, the founders and pioneers of adult education. To date that encouragement has yielded limited results. Until this study, dissertations were limited to Knowles, with this study, *Exploring congruency between John A. Henschke’s practice and scholarship*, being the only additional research available using contemporary historical methodology.

The field of adult education continues to grow; however, each year valuable resources, primary data if you will, fades from existence. Today I add my voice to John’s and encourage the field to study our own. Other fields learn from their leaders, that knowledge and wisdom shape their future; it is time adult education move into the 21st century and learns from our founders while they are still our contemporaries.

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