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Human Flourishing and Adult Education

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Abstract

Human flourishing, a goal of adult education, is grounded in a capabilities approach and focuses on community and justice based endeavors that generate meaning and contribute to well-being.

Keywords: human flourishing, capabilities, relationship building

Human flourishing is a significant goal of adult education. Grounded in the Greek term *eudaimonia*, it draws on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and, as we appropriate it, has evolved into a capabilities-based approach to adult education that draws on those philosophical roots. Outlining dispositions that lead to human flourishing and providing educational methods for developing these competencies in adult learners is important to the field. Adopting a human-flourishing-based approach to adult education has the potential to foreground the discussion of values, contextually informed practices, and shared symbolic universes in the interest of social progress. We describe ways that instruction can develop the capacity for flourishing in adult learners.

Context and community, central to human flourishing, influence how people perceive truth and provide the natural resources for effective adult education. Communal resources, such as families, cultural institutions, and religious communities are keys to constructing a life of virtue oriented towards human flourishing and social progress. Human experience is grounded in people, communities, places, and histories. These intersubjective lived realities reveal aspects of human relations, social structures, and mutual recognition that facilitate emancipatory knowledge, critical to adult education.

Perspectives on Human Flourishing

Human flourishing should be an outcome of adult education. Human flourishing focuses on well-being through the pursuit of virtues and practices that move us closer to values and approaches in adult education that have proven worthwhile over time. The ethical requirements of human flourishing include coming to know and then to build the qualities that advance human well-being.

Here we adopt Kleinig and Evans' (2012) definition of human flourishing as "an illuminating aspirational framework for thinking about human development and obligations" (p. 539). It is an ancient metaphor suggestive of the processual and substantive components of a human life lived well. "Human flourishing is not confined primarily to matters of physical development," as it would be in plants, "but embraces intentionality, experience, and culture..." (Kleinig & Evans, p. 542) to help us conceptualize what living well can mean. As such, human flourishing is individualized and varied, while also social, historical, and evolving. It is a fact of human existence that there is "more than one way as well as successive ways in which we can

flourish” (Kleinig and Evans, pg. 543). It is our contention that communities and traditions have developed rich and powerful approaches to human flourishing, and that adult education practitioners have much to learn from both the notion of human flourishing and the approaches these traditions have developed over millennia. There is existing research within related fields that addresses well-being and human flourishing (Henderson & Hursh, 2014; Hinchliffe, 2004; Grant, 2012), but we are introducing it to the realm of adult education.

The concept of human flourishing is ancient, but it has been rejuvenated through relatively recent approaches to social and economic development. In particular, Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher grounded in the Aristotelean tradition, and Amartya Sen, a Nobel prize-winning economist, have developed and elaborated a capabilities approach to development. They argue that one’s well-being relies on their capability to perform certain essential functions rather than by an end-result such as wealth or leisure. The product-based view is often defined by people who have more opportunities for those outcomes than others. The goals of this product-based approach to well-being are too often defined by those not directly affected and too abstracted from the specific context. The capabilities criteria are much closer to the ground, culturally informed, and justice oriented than the product-based extrinsic outcomes view of flourishing and success. At the heart of the capabilities approach is a more robust, generative notion of human flourishing. There are many lessons to be learned from the capabilities approach. One of the most important lessons is the central role of community and context for the generation of meaning and well-being. These communities, whether religious, cultural, geographical or something else, offer some of the best educational opportunities for reinvigorating our shared symbolic universes, confronting the loss of meaning with values and practices that have proven robust across time and orienting ourselves towards consistent human flourishing in the essential endeavor of living well.

An Aristotelian Approach

Drawing on Aristotle and the capabilities approach, human flourishing focuses on well-being and the pursuit of virtues and practices that move us closer to fulfilling our purposes as human beings. Adult education should lead to human flourishing; it promotes a life lived well. In the spirit of Aristotle, the capabilities approach to human flourishing begins with the foundational question “what are people for?” This question is grounded in a clear anthropology, ontology, and epistemology, seeking answers to these questions: 1) The central anthropological questions include what does it mean to be human and what is/are our purposes?; 2) The central anthropological question – what is the nature of reality that structures and contextualizes that purpose; 3) The central epistemological question – how can we come to know and understand that reality in order to fulfill our purposes? Engaging these questions can help orient learners toward increased human flourishing.

A Capabilities Approach

While there are many ways for an individual to flourish, Nussbaum (2001) and Sen (year?) have developed an approach that connects human flourishing to adult education. They have elaborated a capabilities approach to development in which one’s well-being is defined, not by an end-result such as wealth or leisure. Focused primarily on self-determination, Nussbaum and Sen’s criteria are expressed best through the goals of treating every human being as an end and prioritizing pluralism in values. More specifically, Nussbaum's list of central capabilities includes (2001, pp. 78-80):

1. Life – Able to live to the end of a normal length human life, and to not have one's life reduced to not worth living.
2. Bodily Health – Able to have a good life which includes (but is not limited to) reproductive health, nourishment and shelter.
3. Bodily Integrity – Able to change locations freely, in addition to, having sovereignty over one's body which includes being secure against assault (for example, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, domestic violence and the opportunity for sexual satisfaction).
4. Senses, Imagination and Thought – Able to use one's senses to imagine, think and reason in a 'truly human way'—informed by an adequate education. Furthermore, the ability to produce self-expressive works and engage in religious rituals without fear of political ramifications. The ability to have pleasurable experiences and avoid unnecessary pain. Finally, the ability to seek the meaning of life.
5. Emotions – Able to have attachments to things outside of ourselves; this includes being able to love others, grieve at the loss of loved ones and be angry when it is justified.
6. Practical Reason – Able to form a conception of the good and critically reflect on it.
7. Affiliation
 - A. Able to live with and show concern for others, empathize with (and show compassion for) others and the capability of justice and friendship. Institutions help develop and protect forms of affiliation.
 - B. Able to have self-respect and not be humiliated by others, that is, being treated with dignity and equal worth. This entails (at the very least) protections of being discriminated on the basis of race, sex, sexuality, religion, caste, ethnicity and nationality. In work, this means entering relationships of mutual recognition.
8. Other Species – Able to have concern for and live with other animals, plants and the environment at large.
9. Play – Able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities.
10. Control over One's Environment
 - A. Political – Able to effectively participate in the political life which includes having the right to free speech and association.
 - B. Material – Able to own property, not just formally, but materially (that is, as a real opportunity). Furthermore, having the ability to seek employment on an equal basis as others, and the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. (cite)

Human dignity is highlighted by capabilities that are grounded in the fundamental anthropological, ontological, and epistemological questions; they answer the questions by providing clear guidance about human purposes, the nature of reality that structures and contextualizes those purposes, and how we come to know that reality in order to best fulfill those purposes.

There are many lessons to be learned from the capabilities approach. One of the most important lessons is the central role of community and context for the generation of meaning and well-being, especially as expressed in adult education practices and disciplines.

Promoting Human Flourishing through Adult Education

Flourishing involves specific practices and disciplines that are less compliance-focused and concerned with institutional control, and more liberatory, transcendent, and metaphysical.

Adult Education Practices and Disciplines

Adult education practices and disciplines can lead to human flourishing. Adult educators need to examine their own teaching philosophy and instructional experiences to learn ways to strengthen opportunities for adult learners to flourish in work and life. The practices, disciplines, and virtues that enhance human flourishing through adult education provide a necessary balance to established doctrine and dogma while resisting unhealthy social forces. Adult education practices can deepen contemplative learning, strengthen communities, and value relationships.

The Role of Community

A thriving community can offer some of the best educational opportunities for reinvigorating our shared symbolic universes, providing values and practices that have proven robust across time, and orienting ourselves towards consistent human flourishing in the essential endeavor of living well. Context and community, central to human flourishing, influence how people perceive truth. Communal resources, such as families, cultural institutions, and religious communities, are keys to constructing a life of virtue that is oriented towards human flourishing and social progress. This approach recognizes that human experience is grounded in people, communities, places, and histories. These intersubjective, lived realities reveal aspects of human relations, social structures, and mutual recognition that facilitate emancipatory knowledge, critical to adult education.

Valuing Relationships

Adult education for human flourishing assists adults in getting better at what they do, offers adults opportunities to find more satisfaction in life, and helps adults solve problems. By concentrating on human flourishing within adult education, educators can shift the focus away from result-driven pursuits to more community and justice based endeavors that generate meaning and contribute to well-being. In a practical way, human flourishing orients adult education toward human encounters valuing mutual recognition, reconciliation, healing, belonging, dialogue, and critical reflection.

Mutual Recognition

Among the practices to bring into deeper connection with adult education, mutual recognition as grounded in Hegel and Honneth, is foundational to growth-oriented relationships. Mutual recognition that my partners in any given situation are human beings deserving of respect and dignity simply by virtue of being human. For Honneth, this recognition is not simply a matter of dignity or etiquette, it is fundamental to our development as human beings, in other words, development can't happen without mutual recognition.

Dialogue

As an outgrowth of mutual recognition, and part and parcel of many of Nussbaum's 10 capabilities, dialogue represents the enactment of recognition in which two or more people engage each other in a mutual exploration. Perhaps finding its best expression in Habermas's communicative rationality and Bohm's guidelines for dialogue, adult education practices can only benefit from a deeper engagement with these ideas.

Conclusion

A focus on flourishing has the potential to move the discussion of values, contextually informed practices, and shared symbolic universes to a higher priority in the interest of social progress. There are various ways that learning environments can develop the capacity for flourishing in adult learners. Potential new directions for future research in human flourishing are also significant.

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