My Philosophical Beliefs Related to Adult Teaching and Learning

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Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, my formal learning experiences were first influenced by the liberal philosophy of education. My teachers were subject experts who used the lecture method to impart their knowledge to me. In the classroom, the emphasis was on producing a love of learning coupled with a love of God. As a student in a liberal system, I was being prepared to assume a position of leadership in society. Three outcomes of the liberal philosophy have had a positive impact on my life. First, I appreciate the influence of liberal education on Benjamin Franklin who encouraged the founding of public libraries. The efforts of Franklin and others brought books to people who would not have otherwise been able to obtain them. Second, at colleges and universities, early extension programs incorporated liberal as well as utilitarian education. Extension programs flourished at land-grant universities where they helped these institutions fulfill their mission of outreach to the public. Finally, I appreciate the aim of liberal education to foster an aesthetic sense in people. With the work of organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, funding was provided for orchestras, ballet companies, museums, opera companies, and many other organizations that allowed many people to learn about and experience beauty in art and nature.

Yet, even at a young age, I sensed that the liberal philosophy was marked by elitism and class bias. As I matured, I rebelled against this philosophy of education.

As a young person during the “space race,” my personal education was definitely affected by the progressive philosophy of education. Influenced by Herbert Spencer (1877), many educators believed that an emphasis on science would lead to an improved human condition.
During the Civil Rights Movement, the primary focus of the progressives was to educate people for democracy. The progressive movement emphasized the learning goals of both individuals and societies. A new focus on pragmatism emphasized the importance of human experience, rather than an authoritarian means of acquiring knowledge. Pragmatism also called attention to the consequences of our actions as well as to social reform. The writings of John Dewey reflect these different aspects of the progressive philosophy. In university extension programs, the influence of the liberal philosophy was overshadowed by the progressive movement. The educational emphasis shifted to more practical life issues, such as agriculture and local government. The progressive educators moved away from the lecture and Socratic method of education and toward the scientific method, which included using activities that are founded on problem-solving or are project-based. The progressives view the teacher as a facilitator and co-learner and whose responsibilities do not completely rely on being a subject expert. Finally, the progressives believe that education can be an instrument of social change. In fact, the humanist, behaviorist, and radical philosophies can each trace their roots to the progressive movement.

Although I was certainly influenced by the behaviorist philosophy, I use only a few elements from it in my personal teaching. While I was aware that my teachers used behavioral or instructional objectives in their lesson plans, I did not think much about what that meant. As a music major, I had my first extensive experience with programmed instruction while participating in two years of ear-training labs. In the ear-training lab, certain competencies in aural identification were identified. Criteria for meeting these competencies were provided in the form of a pre-test. Daily lessons provided drill and individual feedback for me. Weekly assessments measured the progress that I was making. Later, I experienced and created some instructional modules using computer-based or computer-assisted instruction. In the workplace, I
complete an annual performance review that is designed to make me more accountable in completing work projects. Outgrowths of behaviorism are evident within the field of Human Resource Development and Continuing Professional Education. Licensed professionals have mandatory continuing education requirements to maintain and improve their subject knowledge. While I do not consider myself a behaviorist, I do ascribe to the use of learning contracts in self-directed learning. I have found that learning contracts allow the individual learner to identify her objectives, activities, resources, and criteria for evaluation. Thus, the learner can set her goals, determine the means and resources needed to achieve these goals, and determine whether the goals have successfully been met.

Humanism is the philosophy which most appeals to me. Perhaps this attraction is based upon humanism’s protest against behaviorism. Humanism occurs in many forms, including: Scientific Humanism, Christian Humanism, and Existential Humanism. I identify most closely with Existential Humanism and its concern with the “freedom and integrity of the individual in the face of increased bureaucratization in society and its institutions, as well as the whole gamut of human relations” (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p.113). Growing up during the 1960s, I was definitely impacted by the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Feminist Movement. I have also been influenced by religious existentialists who propose that humans are basically good because they reflect the nature and character of God. Elias and Merriam (2005) describe the religious existentialists as believing that humans are God’s creation and work with God to improve the human condition. While humanists have been criticized for placing too much emphasis on the individual, the humanist philosophy promotes improving the human condition and society through our individual responsiveness to the needs of others. The role of the teacher is one of facilitator, helper, or partner in the educational process. Although learning is self-
directed and occurring within the individual, group learning is helpful in developing a spirit of cooperation. Within cooperative groups, there is less competition among individuals, which leads to a decrease in resistance to learning. The writings of Maslow and Knowles illustrate the inherent need of the individual to reach her full potential. More recently, the work of Mezirow relates to personal meaning making and transformational learning, which encourages the learner to construct new meanings for her experiences. Brookfield began his professional career in the humanist tradition and moved to principles of critical reflection that fit more closely with radical adult education. Like Brookfield and others, I find myself beginning with a humanist philosophy, yet moving towards radical or critical adult education.

The social and political unrest of the 1960s sparked my interest in the radical and critical philosophy of education. In the 1990s, the anarchist tradition influenced me to home-school my own children. At that time, I believed that current public school education often conditioned students for obedience and compliance. It was my wish to allow my children to become creative people, capable of choosing their own learning goals. As an adult educator, I have been influenced by the Frankfort School of Social Research, particularly in my rejection of domination, colonialism, cultural imperialism, and hegemony. I have certainly been influenced by the philosophy of Freire, particularly with investigating the cultural background of learners. Although Freire’s work was primarily in the area of adult literacy, it is also applicable to oppressed people. According to Elias and Merriam (2005), Freire questioned two educational assumptions: the neutrality of education and the relative status between the teacher and the student. Freire stated that education is value-laden rather than neutral. Freire also recognized the power of knowledge and pointed out that the teacher, having the knowledge, exercises power and control over the learners. It was his concern that education not be domesticating. Feminist theory
has been influenced by Freire and many others although feminists often criticize Freire because he did not attend to oppressions based on gender and race. Frances Maher (1987) describes two models of feminist pedagogy: the liberation model and the gender model. While I recognize the importance of the gender model, which stresses the value of women’s voices and ways of knowing, I have been more deeply influenced by the liberation model. The liberation model deals with structured power relations and oppression based on gender, as well as race and class. Radicalism appears more in scholarly articles than in the practice of adult educators. As a philosophy of adult education, radical and critical philosophy has had a lasting effect on me.

Therefore, the teaching process that I use calls for the teacher to serve as facilitator and for students to assume responsibility of their own learning. The facilitator begins with a critical awareness of the cultural background of the learners. Roger Hiemstra (1988) has devised a worksheet to aid his graduate students in determining their own educational philosophies. I have used the worksheet below to assist me in concisely describing my philosophical system and professional practice values.

PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEFS

**My Philosophical System**: Because my philosophical system is based on a conglomerate of several education systems, it can best be described as eclectic. Rather than having a strong emphasis on one particular system, I draw primarily from the humanistic, radical, and progressive philosophies. This blended philosophical system applies not only to my professional role but also to my personal roles as spouse, parent, child, friend, and community member.
**Meaning:** I believe that humans create meaning, history, and culture for themselves. I also believe that humans are distinguished from animals by their intellect and their ability to create culture and history, as well as other factors.

**What is Reality?:** I believe that humans have both free choice and the potential for goodness. I also believe that humans are part of the environment. Within our environment, there are some natural laws and facts, as well as divine or absolute truths. Humans have the ability to reason and make their own decisions regarding reality. While external forces may influence human behavior, free choice means that external forces do not control human behavior.

**Nature of Being Human:** Because humans are part of the environment they have the capacity to change their environment. Humans are endowed with basic dignity, freedom, and autonomy and these rights should be respected.

**PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE VALUES**

**Educational Aims:** I believe that educational aims should allow each individual to achieve their highest potential. By means of education and improved knowledge, people can also work together to create change and improvements to their environments.

**Educational Methods:** I believe that a variety of educational methods are necessary to assist people in achieving their personal and community goals. Individuals are best served with self-direction, teamwork, and facilitation. Communities learn best through dialog and problem-solving.
Educational Content: The educational content can use any vehicle for meeting individual needs, but should begin with an awareness of the cultural situation of the learners.
References


