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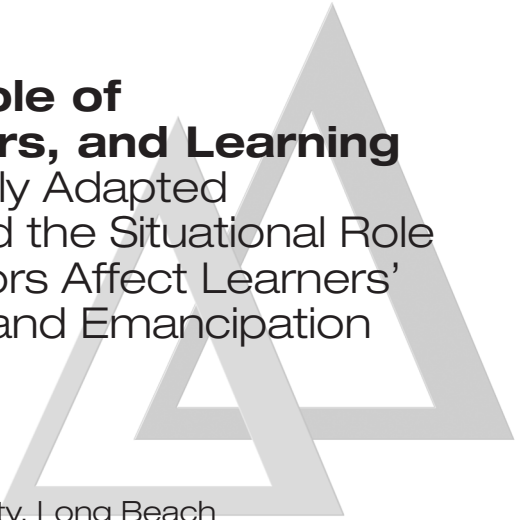
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# Philosophy, Role of Adult Educators, and Learning

## How Contextually Adapted Philosophies and the Situational Role of Adult Educators Affect Learners' Transformation and Emancipation

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*This article argues that adult educators need to adapt their philosophy and roles to facilitate adult learners' transformative learning and proposes a model that illustrates this process. The most common purposes of adult education reflect six underlying philosophies as fully discussed by Elias and Merriam. Adult learners possess different needs, interests, and experiences. As teachers modify their roles and methods in response to their students' diverse individual characteristics, they must also adapt their underlying philosophical perspective. The authors maintain that in this context, the role of adult educators as facilitators of transformational learning must be redefined and their prevalent humanistic and progressive philosophies must be reexamined.*

*Keywords: contextually adapted philosophy; transformative learning; progressive; humanistic*

### Introduction

Although current theories of transformative learning generally rest on humanistic and progressive philosophies, this article proposes a model that illustrates how adult educators adapt both their beliefs and their roles to accommodate adult learners' needs, interests, and experiences. With the help of this model, adult-learning professionals will gain a better understanding of how their beliefs (i.e., their contextually adapted philosophies), associated learning objectives, and learners' needs interact to impact the process of student transformation and emancipation, particularly in the practice of andragogy (the art and science of helping adults to learn).

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Although widely criticized for focusing too narrowly on individual transformation, Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning, which explains how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences, has been widely applied to various groups of adult learners. Mezirow's transformative learning theory draws from Freire's interpretation of Marxist socialism and is based on Habermasian critical theory; because of its critique of power structures and its emphasis on transformation and emancipation, transformative learning theory is classified as *radical* in Elias and Merriam's (1995) research (S. B. Merriam, personal communication, November 17, 2003).

Although the roots of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory can be traced to an important strand of radical theory, little has been written on how adult educators may adapt these underlying beliefs and their situational roles to enhance students' transformation and emancipation. In other words, current transformational learning theory does not account for the possibility that other contextually adapted philosophies may contribute to learners' transformation and emancipation as well. If Mezirow's radical theory of transformational learning is meant to transform adult learners, then adult educators may need to adapt their philosophy and roles as adult educators in light of this new understanding.

In theory, a radical ideology prompts adult educators to use only one method in helping adult learners to learn. In practice however, adult-learning professionals may assume different roles and use different methods (Grow, 1991). In fact, a contextually adapted teaching philosophy plays a major role in determining what adult educators do to help adult learners achieve transformation and emancipation. Although philosophies of adult education, situational roles of adult educators, and transformational learning theory differ, both the belief systems adult educators embrace and the situational roles they adopt either facilitate or inhibit critical reflection of adult learners. Inherently, a contextually adapted philosophy places adult educators in situational roles. The process by which these two factors contribute to critical reflection in transformative learning is illustrated in the model presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic interaction of factors that contribute to a determination of how adult-learning professionals help adult learners achieve transformative learning. However, this simple illustration reflects a multitude of significant points.

1. Philosophies of adult education define the purpose for educating and training adults. They provide the guiding principles for teachers of adult learners. These philosophies are internal and aid action.
2. To teachers of adults, learner needs, learner styles, learner experience, and learner motivation may be external. Together with teachers' philosophies, they are the "what" factors that determine how teachers of adults will go about helping adults learn and hence assume their roles and select their methods for teaching.
3. The roles of adult teachers and their methods of teaching refer specifically to how teachers of adults help adults learn. Without the "what" factors, the process

of “how” cannot be realized in helping adults learn. Therefore, change in learners cannot be achieved.

4. For learners to shift to a more inclusive, integrative perspective or to “liberate” them in Freirian terms (S. B. Merriam, personal communication, November 17, 2003), learners’ critical reflection is key to transformational learning. Without learners’ critical reflection process, this model would not be a model of contextual philosophy.
5. Although from time to time the roles of adult teachers and their methods may be determined by factors other than those proposed in the model (W. McWhinney, personal communication, February 12, 2004), this model illustrates the essential roles contextually adapted philosophies play in determining the roles of teachers and their methods. The role of teachers and their subsequent methods determine the way they interact with learners. Therefore, learners’ critical reflection is greatly impacted by these factors.

### The Role of Philosophy in Educational Theory

Various learning theorists have conceptualized adult education in terms of purpose, learner, teacher, and methods or best practices that enhance the active learning process of adult learners. Adult educators’ underlying beliefs are impacted by learners’ needs, styles, experiences, and motivation. A contextually adapted philosophy simply means adult educators need to adapt their underlying belief systems in response to different contexts to assume the most appropriate roles for helping adult learners achieve transformation and emancipation. Furthermore, a contextually adapted philosophy will influence curriculum content, methods of delivery, and modes of communicating with adult learners who have different learning styles and personalities. A contextually adapted philosophy may provide guidelines for making decisions and setting policy (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Above all, a contextually adapted philosophy helps define the role of adult educators by providing a conceptual framework for incorporation into their teaching methodologies. Understanding this complex, interactive process, which is illustrated in Figure 1, helps teachers maximize their effectiveness.

Often, educators may consistently embrace one particular philosophy or belief system, as is the case in the field of adult education. Leading adult educators (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Rogers, 1969) argue that adult learning professionals should be humanistic and progressive in their approach. To conform to this approach, adult educators must assume the role of learning facilitators. However, what adult educators do in practice may conflict with these ideologies. This conflict arises because adult educators may fail to understand the relationship between a teacher’s contextually adapted philosophy and a student’s transformation and emancipation. Learning does not take place in isolation. Rather, it takes place in relationship to adult educators’ contextually adapted philosophy, situational roles, and many other factors.

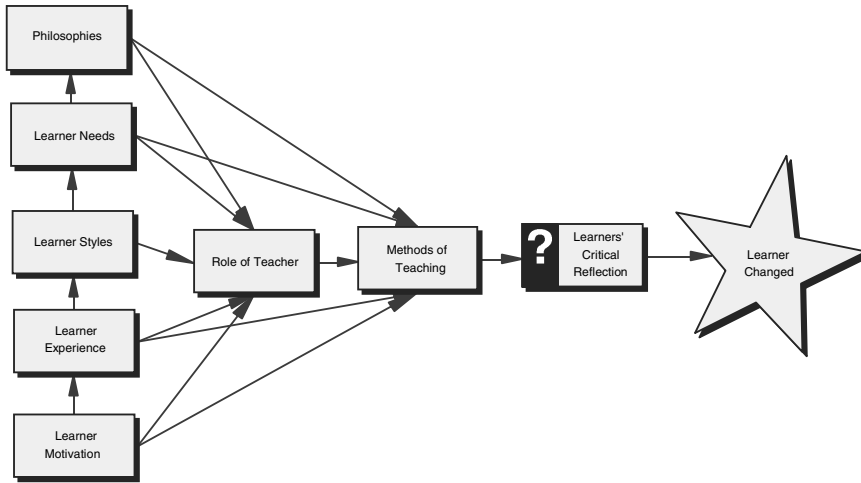


Figure 1: Model of Contextual Philosophy

### Educational Purpose

Adult educators' roles are directly influenced by their philosophical perspectives and related educational purposes. For example, if the objective of adult education is to develop the intellectual powers of the mind (i.e., the liberal perspective), the role of adult educators is to make adult learners literate in the broadest sense—intellectually, morally, and spiritually. If the objective of adult education is to bring about behavior that will ensure survival of the human species, societies, and individuals (i.e., the behaviorist perspective), the role of adult educators is to promote behavior change. If the objective of adult education is to transmit culture and social structure to promote social change (i.e., the progressive perspective), the role of adult educators is to give adult learners the practical knowledge and problem-solving skills necessary to reform society. If the objective of adult education is to develop individuals open to change and continued learning (i.e., the humanistic perspective), the role of adult educators is to enhance personal growth and development, facilitate self-actualization, and reform society. If the objective of adult education is to build a solid philosophical foundation through careful analysis and argumentation of educational concepts, slogans, and policy statements, the role of adult educators is to eliminate language confusion (Elias & Merriam, 1995). If the objective of adult education is to bring about fundamental social, political, and economic changes in society through education (i.e., the radical perspective), the role of adult educators is to change culture and its social structures. Finally, if the objective of adult education is to promote the adult learner's transformation and emancipation, then the role of adult educators is to enhance the critical reflection process, which is embedded in the transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991).

These varied philosophical perspectives derive from distinct sources. Bott, Slapar, and Wang (2003) argued that the following two fundamental educational concepts emerged during the 14th and 15th centuries: (a) Sense impressions are the basis for thought and consequently of knowledge, and (b) training is supported by the notion of learning by doing. The concept of learning by doing (i.e., the progressive approach to adult education) was introduced and popularized in U.S. adult education by John Dewey in the early 1900s.

The roots of humanism go back to classical China, Greece, and Rome. Through the work of Maslow and Rogers in the 1950s and 1960s, a humanistic approach to adult education was introduced to America. Later, Knowles popularized humanistic theory in adult education through his principles of andragogy. Andragogy, according to Nuckles (2000), is a concept in adult education that flows directly from humanistic educational philosophy.

Throughout the literature of adult education, the influence of a progressive philosophy is evident, particularly as it is associated with transformative learning theory. Transformational learning occurs when it is integrated with experience. The whole notion of transformative learning is to make sense of experience. Therefore to some extent, the purpose of adult education is to give adult learners an opportunity to engage in the problem-solving process, which is squarely in line with Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of problem-posing education. Transformative learning can be maximized when self-direction is encouraged among adult learners. The end results of critical reflection in transformational learning are transformation and emancipation (radical philosophy). Experience is key to critical reflection. Hence, a progressive approach to adult education complements radical theory in transformational learning among adult learners.

If the objective of adult education is only to transmit culture and social structure to promote social change and to develop individuals open to change and continued learning, then it is appropriate for adult educators to be humanistic and progressive. With these two ideologies in mind, they can serve as learning facilitators because they assume that adult learners tend to be self-directed. In reality however, the educational purpose of adult education encompasses all objectives of adult education.

## The Adult Learner

Pedagogical education is designed in response to the needs of preadults who may consider learning as an imposed or contrived institution with no immediate practical application or personal benefit. In this context, teachers are responsible for identifying motivational techniques to engage and retain young learners. On the other hand, adult learners actively seek what a teacher has to offer, provided it is readily applicable to their vocations or life situations. Knowles et al. (1998) pointed out that

as individuals mature, their need and capacity to be self-directing, to use their experience in learning, to identify their own readiness to learn, and to organize their learning around life problems increases steadily from infancy to preadolescence, and then increases rapidly during adolescence. (p. 62)

Not surprisingly, adult learners are a heterogeneous group, and consequently, adult learning is complex. Depending on their beliefs and perspectives, adult educators may adopt different conceptions of adult learners. Educators who prefer a humanistic approach tend to view adult learners as highly motivated and self-directed. In the context of a humanistic perspective, adult learners assume responsibility for learning and self-development. In contrast, from a progressive philosophical perspective, educators may view adult learners as having unlimited potential for development through education. These progressive educators consider learner needs, interests, and experiences as key elements in learning.

On the other hand, educators who have adopted a behaviorist philosophy seek to provide a strong learning environment where learners take an active role in learning, practicing new behavior and receiving feedback. Educators influenced by liberal philosophies of education may maintain that adult learners seek knowledge rather than information, whereas those who represent a radical perspective emphasize students' equality with their teacher in the learning process.

Teachers' understanding of the complexity of the adult learner's profile is as important as their knowledge of the subject matter they teach (Wang, 2003). In contemporary adult education, understanding the diversity and variability of adult learners may help adult educators identify the kinds of philosophies they need to adopt and adapt. An inappropriate philosophy without question will fail to serve the needs of adult learners.

## The Adult Learning Professional

It is true that our mission as adult educators is to help our students develop a positive attitude toward lifelong learning, acquire skills to be self-directed, and achieve self-actualization by taking responsibility for their own learning. For learners' transformation to occur, adult educators must place adult learners at the center of the educational activity and situate accommodation at the apex of their guiding principles. Although the conception of adult educators as facilitators is relatively new (Brookfield, 1986), it has a number of strong proponents. The reality is that the roles that adult educators play in transforming individual learners vary depending on the educators' philosophical perspectives and their conceptions of adult learners.

For example, humanistic teachers of adult education see themselves as facilitators, helpers, and partners in the learning process. They establish a context for learning and serve as a flexible resource for adult learners. Humanistic teachers

**Table 1: Grow's (1991) Stages in Learning Autonomy**

Stage	Learner	Educator	Methods/Styles
Stage 1	Dependent	Coach	Coaching with immediate feedback, drill; informational lecture
Stage 2	Interested	Motivator	Inspiring lecture plus guided discussion; goal setting
Stage 3	Involved	Facilitator	Discussion facilitated by teacher who participates as equal
Stage 4	Self-directed	Consultant	Internship, dissertation, self-study

must trust students to assume responsibility for their learning (Elias & Merriam, 1995). Progressive adult educators tend to regard themselves as organizers. They guide the learning process through experiences that are educative, presenting stimuli and instigating and evaluating learning. In doing so, the progressive teachers also become learners because the relationships between teachers and learners are reciprocal. Both should plan and learn from each other (Elias & Merriam, 1995). Behaviorist teachers predict, direct learning outcomes, and design a learning environment that elicits desired behavior. Teachers influenced by a behavioral philosophy, according to Elias and Merriam (1995), become contingency managers, environmental controllers, or behavioral engineers who plan in detail the conditions necessary to bring about desired behavior. Liberal teachers of adults consider themselves as experts, transmitters of knowledge, and authoritative, and they clearly direct the learning process. Liberal teachers develop the intellect through reading, reflection, and production (Elias & Merriam, 1995). Analytic teachers do not construct explanations about reality but seek to eliminate language confusions (Elias & Merriam, 1995). Radical teachers in adult education suggest but do not determine the direction of learning. Elias and Merriam maintained that radical teachers need to be open to clarifications and modifications. They emphasized equality between adult educators and learners and rejected the view of education as education from above.

Obviously, a contextually adapted philosophy determines what teachers do in terms of how they can approach helping adult learners to learn. Learner needs, learner experience, learner styles, and other factors all create strains on the predominantly humanistic and progressive assumptions of adult educators as shown in the adult education literature. To illustrate the situational roles of adult educators, Grow (1991) suggested the four stages and corresponding teaching methods/styles presented in Table 1. Grow's stages in learning autonomy indicate that learners' stages of learning determine the situational roles of adult educators in addition to the educator's contextually adapted philosophy.

It must be noted that the order of learners' stages of learning may not be sequential as some adult learners may not necessarily go through Stage 1 and Stage 2 before they reach Stage 4 (W. McWhinney, personal communication, February

12, 2004). Grow's (1991) stages in learning autonomy and adult educators' contextually adapted philosophy illustrate the situational roles of adult educators from two different perspectives. Together with the contextually adapted philosophy adult educators may hold, these situational roles affect the teaching methods adult educators may use to help adult learners promote individual transformation and emancipation.

## Methods

Philosophical perspectives also influence adult educators' methodological preferences. For those who espouse a liberal philosophy of adult education, dialectic lecture and critical reading may be the preferred approach for teaching adult learners. Programmed instruction and computer-assisted instruction are commonly preferred by those who have adopted a behaviorist philosophy of adult education. Proponents of a progressive philosophy practice problem solving and the scientific method when teaching adult learners. Educators who support a humanistic approach to adult education emphasize experiential learning in their teaching of adult learners. For radical educators of adults, the preferred teaching method may be dialogue.

Kinney (1953), who defined six roles of the teacher, suggested that adapting one's methods in teaching adult learners is necessary.

As finally organized they defined six roles of the teacher: a director of learning, a counselor and guidance worker, a mediator of the culture, an effective member of the school community, a liaison between school and community, and a member of the profession. (p. 8)

In his description of andragogy, Knowles strongly emphasized the helping role of adult educators on the basis of his humanistic philosophy of adult education. Knowles, in *The Adult Learner* (Knowles et al., 1998), expressed the following view:

Finally, I found myself performing a different set of functions that required a different set of skills. Instead of performing the function of content planner and transmitter, which required primarily presentation skills, I was performing the function of process designer and manager, which required relationship building, needs assessment, involvement of students in planning, linking students to learning resources, and encouraging student initiative. (p. 201)

Because Knowles is considered one of the most influential figures in adult education, his humanistic philosophy has generated a wide following in the field. Inherently, followers of Knowles view themselves as learning facilitators instead of information disseminators to show that their practice is driven by their deeply held humanistic philosophy.

## Reflections

In this era of transformative learning, because of leading adult educators' overemphasis of humanistic and progressive philosophies, adult learners' initial reaction to an adult educator in the role of content transmitter may be negative. Rogers (1969) argued that the aim of education must be the facilitation of learning, and he defined the role of the teacher as that of a facilitator of learning. The notion of an adult educator as a facilitator was fully developed by Rogers (1951) in his five "basic hypotheses," the first of which was we cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning. This hypothesis is an extension of the basic tenets of Rogers's personality theory that "every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he is the center" and "the organism reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived" (Rogers, 1951, p. 1441).

This facilitative approach requires a shift in focus from what the teacher does to what is happening in the student. Because Tough's (1971) studies were concerned with the self-directed learning projects of adults, he focused on the "helping role" of the teacher or other resource person. Knowles (1989) described andragogy as a theory that emphasized the role of an adult educator as a facilitator. Jarvis (2002), an international leader in adult education, explained andragogy analogically, saying that teachers are not the "fount of all wisdom" (p. 20). According to Jarvis, teachers no longer

- have a monopoly on transmitting knowledge;
- determine or legislate on matters of knowledge, but they may be interpreters of different systems of knowledge;
- deal with truth, but they certainly teach truths;
- teach with unchanging knowledge, but now they deal with scientific knowledge that is transient;
- are confined to the classroom, but like the ancient teachers, they may have to function where their learners are;
- teach only theoretical knowledge, but now they also help learners acquire practical knowledge;
- can assume that their learners know nothing about the subjects that they teach but must learn to build on knowledge acquired by their learners from a wide variety of sources.

These leaders in adult education suggest that facilitation of adult learning represents the best way to teach adults, especially when adult education is compared to youth education. However, Pratt (1998) pointed out that there are many people engaged in adult education who do not see themselves as andragogical facilitators. For some, this resistance is due to their own personality and their preferences for teaching in a more directive style. Others have no choice due to the nature of the content they teach. Knowles et al. (1998) further explained that whether adult educators need to provide andragogical facilitation or traditional

instruction depends on adult learners' personal autonomy and their experience with the subject matter.

Adult educators are faced with the complex task of adjusting teaching to learning, often with little knowledge of teaching philosophies. Brookfield (1990) posited that flexibility could facilitate learning by better meeting the needs of the adult learners. Flexibility in adapting different philosophies could further facilitate learning by best meeting the needs of the adult learners.

With different philosophies in the adult education field as guiding principles, the role of adult educators as facilitators of self-directed learning must be redefined in this age of transformative learning. If educators of adults seek to transform adult learners, then humanistic and progressive adult educators themselves need to first adapt their individual philosophical perspectives. One's philosophy needs to be adapted because it is determined by a plethora of factors. No single philosophy of adult education should dominate the field. Factors such as learner needs, learner styles, learner experience, and learner motivation all contribute to a working philosophy of adult education. Understanding the complex interaction of their students' characteristics and their own personal philosophical perspectives will facilitate this transformative process.

As a result of this contextual philosophy, the role of adult educators can be defined. Perhaps it is safe to say that the role of adult educators is situational, depending on their contextually adapted philosophies in light of transformational learning theory. Although there may be other transformative learning cycles, the proposed model effectively illustrates how a learner's transformation is impacted by a dynamic array of factors, including the educator's adapted philosophical perspectives, situational roles of educators, and the learners' needs, styles, experience, and motivation. The model supports a fresh look at the prevalent humanistic and progressive philosophies, the role of adult educators as learning facilitators, and their relationship to transformative learning in the adult education field through the lens of a model of contextual philosophy.

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