Journal of Distance Education
Revue de l'enseignement à distance
Fall/Automne 1988
Vol. III, No. 2, pp. 123–127

Andragogy, Learner-Centredness and the Educational Transaction at a Distance

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Today society is awaiting a much-desired marriage: the union of the adult and distance education. While the two have had a long engagement, going back to the days of William Rainey Harper and the Chautauqua University in the nineteenth century, the formal consummation of this relationship is inevitable given that the vast majority of distance education is for the adult learner. Clearly, such a marriage would be mutually beneficial, a view supported by the developments in communications technology and the concomitant recognition of the viability of distance education methods to reach out to adults.

In the last issue of the *Journal of Distance Education* (1988), Liz Burge explored the relationship between adults and distance education. She analyzed the concept of andragogy for distance learning and related it to the concept of learner-centredness. The expectation on her part was that andragogy and learner-centredness "should contribute to learning design development and research in distance education and to the convergence of classroom educators and distance educators" (p. 5). Burge first suggests that learner-centredness, as derived from the concept of andragogy, is relevant to distance education because the "widening use of two-way communications technologies is, in fact, helping distance educators develop their own kinds of interactive classrooms" (p. 6). A second reason is that through increased communication the quality of the educational transaction at a distance will improve. Her reasons for examining andragogy are important and have far-reaching implications for how we view distance education. I have, however, some reservations concerning her concept of learner-centredness.

Burge states "that distance educators need a sophisticated learner-centred view of learning and teaching...[and the] concept of andragogy, which leads to the broader understanding of an adult learner-centred orientation, needs to be part of that critical process" (p. 8). I believe, however, that we need to examine more closely what is meant by "andragogy" and "learner-centred," and what the implication of these concepts would be for the integrity of the educational transaction. Andragogy and learner-centredness have become powerful, emotional labels that may be subtly misleading.

My concern with andragogy is that it is open to interpretation and, notwithstanding its popularity, is suspect as a concept that adequately represents and reflects the field of adult education. According to Brookfield (1986), at "the conceptual core of andragogy is...the idea that the attainment of adulthood is concomitant of adults' coming to perceive themselves as self-directing individuals" (p. 92). While the connection between andragogy and learner-centredness is not made entirely clear by Burge, I believe it is largely associated with this assumed desire of adults to be self-directed. Brookfield (1988) has recently voiced his doubts concerning the validity of the concept of self-directedness as a goal for adult education and believes "that the over-identification of researchers and practitioners in adult education with the concept of self-directed learning is very dangerous for our field" (p. 12).

Pratt (1988) also believes we need to question "the line of descent from andragogy to learner control" (p. 161). As a result of this presumption, Pratt argues, "it is taken as axiomatic that self-directedness of adult learners necessitates their control over instructional functions" (p. 160). The point that needs to be made is that the educational transaction ideally is a collaborative process where dialogue and negotiation are possible and where the students may actively validate their knowledge. To state that the educational transaction is learner-centred is as misleading as to suggest that it is teacher-centred. We should be careful not to over-react to the excesses of teacher-centred approaches of the past. Learning and teaching are inseparable in a proper and holistic view of the educational transaction. To emphasize one over the other may distort the integrity of the process.

Knowles (1980) states that "the teacher's role is defined as that of a procedural technician, resource person, and co-inquirer; more a catalyst than an instructor; more a guide than a wizard" (p. 48). Such a view of andragogy seriously diminishes the role of the teacher. If diminishing the role of the teacher is the way to learner-centredness, then we have a serious problem of how we view adult education. Unfortunately, the self-directed assumption of andragogy suggests a high degree of independence that is often inappropriate from a support perspective and which also ignores issues of what is worthwhile or what qualifies as an educational experience. In this case, the independence of self-directed learning is not a good example of learner-centredness.

An emphasis on learner-centredness may result in a service or cafeteria-style approach to education. That is, learners are not challenged with regard to the value or appropriateness of their perceived needs and views but instead are assisted to acquire the knowledge that they alone consider important. Brookfield (1986) believes that the orthodoxy of andragogy is appealing and comforting to many educators "because it removes from the facilitator the

need to make difficult, value-based choices concerning curricula and appropriate educational programs" (p. 97). This balancing of the student's desires and the educator's view of what the student needs is at the heart of a worthwhile educational transaction. Again, to quote Brookfield:

> For a facilitator completely to ignore learner needs and expressions of preference is arrogant and unrealistic. But it is just as misguided for a facilitator to completely repress his or her own ideas concerning worthwhile curricula or effective methods and to allow learners complete control over these. (p. 97)

I believe that andragogy and learner-centredness have unfortunately spawned the belief that adults know what is best for them educationally and the teacher is only there to assist the learner in whatever she or he wants. As a result, the teacher is just another resource to be used at the discretion of the student. Such a view questions the very essence of an educational experience. Knowles (1980) does place andragogy in proper perspective when he states that pedagogical and andragogical models "are probably most useful when seen not as dichotomous but rather as two ends of a spectrum, with a realistic assumption in a given situation falling in between the two ends" (p. 43). In the same way, teacher-centred or learner-centred are extreme positions and may distort the interdependent and collaborative nature of adult education. Stated another way, Pratt (1988) believes that in the delicate balance of dependence and independence "lies the key to effective teacher-learner relationships, for it is here that the essence of good teaching embraces both andragogy and pedagogy" (p. 170).

We as distance educators must be particularly vigilant of this balance. In the past we have proudly argued that "independence" is a key concept of distance education. It has also been represented as one of the major areas of theoretical development. Again such a view distorts, at least in its best sense, the nature of the educational transaction. With recent developments in communications technology and the ability to communicate at a distance, such a view of the independent learner is anachronistic. If we do not begin to view education as a balanced transaction and begin to work toward this goal then we risk perpetuating the existing burden of many distance learners who study without adequate guidance from and dialogue with teachers and fellow students. The quality of an educational transaction is dependent upon collaboration and meaningful dialogue and negotiation.

Liz Burge (1988) does state that "authority and decision making are shared processes as far as possible" (p. 15). However, I question what exactly is meant by "a learner-centred view of learning-teaching interactions." To answer her question as to "which criteria will we use to measure improve-

ments in distance education," I would suggest that by providing the opportunity for teacher and student to communicate freely, we are able to establish an appropriate and sometimes delicate balance between dependence (teacher-centredness) and independence (student-centredness). Because of the inherent interdependence of teacher and student, the notions of teacher-centredness and student-centredness are simplistic and misleading. The educational transaction that we should be striving for is too complex a concept to be diminished by emotionally appealing and one-sided labels such as student-centredness.

I am not an apologist for a conventional or status quo view of education. Instead, I suggest that we must come to a clear understanding of the educational transaction. I believe and have argued elsewhere (Garrison, 1988) that many of our conceptual problems in distance education can be traced back to a lack of attention with the educational aspects of distance education. While a discussion of the meaning of education is beyond this paper, a view of education encompassing any learning activity causes the term to lose meaning. On the other hand, if the term is used too narrowly it simply becomes irrelevant. The organization of learning may vary (as between adult or distance education and conventional education) but surely there are elements that do not change when an adjective is added to the term "education" (i.e., adult education, distance education).

I have also argued that the most important distinguishing feature of any educational process is two-way communication. Therefore, distance educators must become less preoccupied with structural features and become more concerned with the transactional process. Burge, quite rightly, implies that the increased use of two-way communications technology will encourage a convergence of conventional and distance education methods resulting in an increase in the quality of the educational transaction. However, an uncritical view of andragogy and the adoption of learner-centredness may mask the true nature of the educational transaction. Education is a transactional dialogue involving a mutually respectful relationship between teacher and student who critically and collaboratively analyze worthwhile areas of interest such that new perspectives and a new consciousness emerge. Such a transaction will inherently respect and consider the learner's needs, whereas emotion-laden labels and catchy slogans such as learner-centredness can easily mislead. The real issue for distance educators is providing immediate and sustained two-way communication between teacher and student so that learner needs, values, and perspectives are balanced with those of the teacher and decisions are made collaboratively.

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