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Revisiting the Assumptions of Adult Learning

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Abstract

This roundtable suggests expanding adult education principles would benefit practitioners and lessen generational divides created by the assumptions of “adult” education as a process distinct from learning in younger individuals.

Keywords: educational systems, generational equity, science of learning, andragogy

The intent of this roundtable proposal is to suggest an expansion of the principles of “adult learning” and to acknowledge that the assumptions about adult learners could, and should, be applied to youth as well. While recognizing developmental processes, this expansion of the assumptions would support and recognize that youth learn much more like adults than the systems of formal education might indicate. Adult education can, as a concept, be used to promote a more humanistic approach to education in general.

The assumptions made about adult learning can be found in research, theory, and practice about the education of youth (Montessori, 2004; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2014). When we speak of learning we are talking about human learning, and the separation of the discussion into adult learning and pedagogy does not benefit anyone, though it may indirectly describe formal systems of education. We believe learning is learning, for all of us.

The expansion of Knowles’ assumptions gives educators several takeaways. But the goal of this roundtable is to see that these principles should be what all educators strive to do, no matter the age of their learners. In order to provide meaningful experiences educators should: help learners understand the why behind what they are learning; provide autonomy, independence, and self-direction for learners; avoid imposing education but create self-direction opportunities; respect lived experiences and help learners recognize and reflect on those experiences in developmentally appropriate ways; help connect learning to personal goals and life-related tasks rather than something imposed upon them; give agency in setting learning goals; tap into natural human desires to learn and grow; help develop confidence in tasks for greater motivation

Expanding rather than discounting Knowles’ assumptions not only provides a deeper look at how educators can better engage all learners it removes a false dichotomy between how adults learn and how children learn. Rather than discarding Knowles’ assumptions, we believe they could serve as an important bridge between what has traditionally been defined as “adult” educators and “children’s” educators. We suggest that these assumptions are applicable to all human beings, and that we can begin to learn from each other. Higher education and K-12 could teach each other about quality education. Training and development specialist could collaborate with elementary educators. We believe expanding these assumptions expands the possibilities to engage in higher quality educational experiences.

Expanding the assumptions also creates a more inclusive adult educational field. We see some of the negative consequences of separating children and adults in learning but reframing the assumptions as “good learning” also reduces the potential of “adult

educators” from excluding learners who might not fit a narrow conception of the word “adult.” For those of us whose learners are primarily adults, it is an act of social justice to honor the learning of youth and the work of those who teach them. By each honoring the other we will better serve the learners. We would hope that the assumptions attributed to adult learning might be extended to all learners so that an appreciation of life experience, the need for autonomy and agency, and tapping into natural curiosity could be applied to all learners.

References

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- Tokuhama-Espinosa, T. (2014). *Making classrooms better*. W.W. Norton and Company.