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Reflections on Experiences of Learning with Malcolm Shepherd Knowles

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CONTENTS

Click on an article title to start reading

EDITORIAL

Modeling Curiosity

Thomas G. Reio, Jr.....3

ARTICLES

Analysis of Participants' Perceptions of REFLECT Approach in Their Lives and Work:
The Case of Botswana

Tonic Maruatona.....6

Exploring Emotional Intelligence, Learner Autonomy, and Retention in an Accelerated
Undergraduate Degree Completion Program

Katie A. Buvoltz, Freda J. Powell, Ann M. Solan, and Gail J. Longbotham.....26

PERSPECTIVES ON PEOPLE

Reflections on the Experiences of Learning with Dr. Malcolm Shepherd Knowles

John A. Henschke.....44

PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING

The Potential and Uniqueness of Virtual Environments for Education

Leslie A. Bennett.....53

WRITERS' FORUM

Writing Across Power Lines: Authorship in Scholarly Collaborations

Glenda Droogsma Musoba.....60

BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

The Handbook of Experiential Learning, by Melvin L. Silberman (Ed.)

Anja Whittington68

PERSPECTIVES ON PEOPLE

Reflections on the Experiences of Learning with Dr. Malcolm Shepherd Knowles

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Malcolm S. Knowles stands as a giant catalyst at the juncture—past, present, and future—of andragogy (the art and science of helping adults learn) within the field of Adult Education and Human Resource Development. For more than 50 years until his death in 1997, Malcolm devoted his personal and professional life to exemplifying the theory and practice of andragogy: as a speaker to audiences of 10,000 or less; as a university professor with a multiplicity of adult learners (his students); as a consultant to numerous institutions and corporations in countries around the world; as a writer of 19 books and 225 articles; and, as a very caring human being for any person with whom he happened to be meeting. I observed him being sought out at national conferences, studied with him in my doctoral program, and worked with him in various educational settings. Malcolm was just Malcolm through and through. I believe Dusan Savicevic (from whom Malcolm got the concept of andragogy) is right when he said that the world-wide history of andragogy will put Knowles on a meritorious place in the development of this scientific discipline.

I remain captivated by my experiences of learning with Malcolm S. Knowles. I began learning with Malcolm more than 40 years ago and in many ways have continued even to the present day. However, I want to begin with a look at what the dictionary and thesaurus say about reflection. Among the definitions of reflection are: “paying attention to what passes in the mind” (Webster, 1828, p. REF [*sic*]); “attending to the facts or phenomena of consciousness” (Devlin, 1939, p. 1391); “to show an image” (Webster’s, 1996, p. 1620); and, “an image given back” (Block, 1968, p. 1017; Guralnik, 1983, p. 502). Related words include: “ponder, echo, meditate, muse, reproduce, ruminant” (Morehead, 1978, p. 409), “mull” (Morehead, 1978, p. 314). Each of these definitions and related words will come into play as I dig deeply into my reflections on learning with Malcolm. (He always liked everyone to call him Malcolm.)

Beginnings

My initial experiences of learning with Malcolm were through Dr. Bob Ayling, one of Malcolm’s Boston University (BU) doctoral graduates, and Dr. Eugene DuBois, another professor of adult education at BU. Bob recommended that I apply to the Adult Education Program at BU. Gene called me on the phone and asked how he could help me through the application process. These two people demonstrated the positive, caring influence Malcolm had

on a graduate and a fellow professor. Their responsiveness and willingness to reach out to me at a very early stage of inquiry about adult education made a very positive impression on me.

Immediately after arriving at BU at the beginning of the 1967 fall semester, Malcolm and Gene worked with me on outlining my doctoral program. One night later, Malcolm invited all the adult education students to an informal gathering to talk and share. He asked each of the approximately 25 people present to tell about his/her background, how he/she came to BU, what each hoped to gain from the program and anything else each wished to share. When it was my turn to share, I indicated that I was taught in my Christian upbringing that the days of miracles had passed immediately after the generation that Jesus Christ and the Apostles lived on earth. Nevertheless, I experienced the miraculous when Malcolm's efforts led to my becoming a doctoral student at BU. Here I was, not as yet in a formal class with Malcolm, and I had already experienced learning from him. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) explained this in their research suggesting it is the personal relationship that teaches.

My learning relationship with Malcolm that blossomed and came to flower over the years started in the spring of 1967. During that summer, I made preparations to move half way across the USA from Jacksonville, Illinois, to Boston, Massachusetts with my pregnant wife, Carol, and two daughters in our automobile pulling a U-haul trailer. At the same time, Malcolm convened an impromptu doctoral admittance committee meeting and approved my application for officially starting in the program that fall semester. Here I was my first night at BU, the beneficiary of a series of actions by Malcolm and his like-minded colleagues who expressed a caring attitude toward students. Such caring was a miracle to me and I was deeply touched. I was learning in the core of my being.

My 2 years as a full time learner at BU with Malcolm passed like a whirlwind. In the two years, I had to finish all my courses, my residence work, comprehensive exams, and have my dissertation proposal approved. The formal course work with Malcolm became a heightening, deepening, and broadening experience in learning, because I was introduced to a whole new process of learning which was more than just acquiring content.

Andragogy: Walking and Talking Congruence

Learning with Malcolm to become a professional adult educator (adding this to my professional clergy experience) called upon me to figure out the best way for me as an adult learner (a unique person) to acquire and internalize the content and process of adult education. I would need this to successfully function in my new world of adult education, present and future. The process Malcolm used was andragogical (the art and science of helping adults learn) and self-directed (Knowles, 1996). He believed the process was important; trusted in the human organism's propensity toward growth; held a willing, experimental and innovative attitude toward helping learners learn from their mistakes; and provided learners with opportunities to practice self-direction. He exemplified andragogy and self-direction in word and deed. As an andragogue, Malcolm's talk and walk were congruent. Malcolm's andragogy and self-direction were infused throughout his whole being—body, mind as well as spirit. He exemplified the idea that learning is an internal process (Knowles, 1970).

Malcolm touched my soul—he opened himself to me and thus opened me to the innermost depths of my being. He was very much present as a person with me in the educational process. He was empathetic, attentive in listening, and deeply understanding in all of our conversations. Whether he believed what I was saying about my faith or not (Malcolm and I had different religious belief systems – he said to me that he was a Unitarian, I am a Baptist Christian) he could reflect back to me just what I was expressing and feeling. He never had to prove himself to anyone. Malcolm was Malcolm; he had come to terms with himself and was at peace.

About the time I was to focus on my dissertation topic, I was enrolled in a change strategies seminar, and we were interviewing a number of people we considered as change agents in various fields of education. I then obtained permission from Malcolm to do my dissertation on him as a change agent (Henschke, 1973). He removed himself from the role of chair and member of my dissertation committee and served as an information resource to me during the process. I received an in-depth view of Malcolm in writing my dissertation, every aspect of the person, and the consummate, caring professional he was. As Malcolm said to me about his experience after he read my completed dissertation, “I was confronted and I was supported.” I had sought to present a realistically, balanced, and accurate portrait of him.

By the time I finished my dissertation in 1973, I was already testing and adapting aspects of andragogy in my professional work as an adult educator. I continued refining and using my understanding of andragogy for a number of years, working with him in various situations, all the time feeling I was learning more because I was working with Malcolm. However, controversy swirled around his brand of andragogy and it still swirls at this writing. It is not possible to present a full range of views on the pro and con of the controversy, but to give a flavor of it, two of the most articulate and prominent con sources will be included, and likewise, two of the most articulate and prominent pro sources will be included.

From the con perspective, Welton (1995) vigorously leveled the assertion that, “the ‘andragogical consensus’ (anchoring the study of adult education in methods of teaching and understanding the individual adult learner), formulated by the custodians of orthodoxy in the American Commission of Professors in the 1950s and solidified by Malcolm Knowles and others in the 1960s and 1970s, has unraveled at the seams” (p. 5).

The fundamental accusations expressed by Welton (1995) are that because of this perspective, adult education has abandoned its once vital role in fostering democratic social action, is on a shaky foundation, works to the advantage of large-scale organizations, and is conceptually inadequate to serve the interests of the disenfranchised in North American society.

A bit later, Grace (2001) considered that Knowles’ theory of andragogy (hence the Knowlesian American theory of andragogy) as a theory of how adults learn, ascended to prominence in the U.S. after the 1970 publication of his book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy*. By 1990 it was losing much of its punch as a result of the discussion and controversy surrounding it. He felt that Knowles’ perspective was too much caught up with individualization, institutionalization, professionalization, techno-scientization, self-directed learning, the politics of exclusion, maintenance, and conformity. Grace also

believes andragogy ignores resistance and transformation and sees mainstream U.S. and Canadian adult education as having been complicit in sidelining cultural and social concerns, thus depoliticizing and de-contextualizing adult learning. Although he saw Knowles' andragogy as having been effectively dismantled in the 1980s and 1990s, Grace presents a vigorous case for its needing more of the same to neutralize its continued prominence and influence.

With Welton (1995) thinking that andragogy had unraveled at the seams and Grace (2001) convinced that in the 1980s and 1990s andragogy had been effectively dismantled, it appears rather curious that numerous years later Grace thought Knowles' andragogy still needed to have its continued prominence and influence neutralized.

Turning now to the pro perspective of Knowles' andragogy, there are interesting expressions mixed into the andragogy controversy. Houle (1996) emphasizes the practice, and Savicevic provides his prediction of what he considers will be Knowles' place in the history of andragogy as a scientific discipline of study.

Houle (1996), in talking about Knowles' work in andragogy, said that it remains the most learner centered of all patterns of adult educational programming. He also added a number of other things. Knowles kept evolving, enlarging, and revising his point of view and therefore became something of a moving target, particularly because he was intimately involved with numerous projects at every level of magnitude in both customary and unusual settings all over the world. He could bring to discussions and debates a wealth of experience that his opponents could not match. In addition, some of his followers developed variant conceptions of andragogy, thereby enlarging the discourse. Knowles' idea on andragogy had application to a wide variety of settings. Houle concluded by saying,

Those who wish to do so can wholly contain their practice in the ideas expressed by Knowles and others, establishing appropriate physical and psychological climates for learning and carrying forward all of its processes collaboratively. Far more significantly, andragogy influences every other system. Even leaders who guide learning chiefly in terms of the mastery of subject matter, the acquisition of skills, the facing of a social problem, or some other goal know that they should involve learners in as many aspects of their education as possible and in the creation of a climate in which they can most fruitfully learn. (p. 30)

Savicevic (1999a; 1999b) had misgivings about Knowles' seeming inconsistency in determining andragogy that had generated some confusion and misunderstanding. Nonetheless, Savicevic (2006) garnered a long range view and reflects below about his perception of Knowles' position in sustaining andragogy over the long range of its history into the future.

Forty years in development of a science is not a long nor ignorable period. I met professor Knowles four decades ago and argued on term and on concept of andragogy. Since then, the term and the concept of andragogy enlarged and rooted in the American professional literature. There is no doubt that Knowles contributed to it, not only by his texts, but with his spoken word and lectures. He was a 'masovik', i.e. a lecturer on mass events. He told me that he lectured on 10,000 visitor stadiums. As if he was inspired by

an ancient agonistic spirituality! His contribution to the dissemination of andragogical ideas throughout the USA is huge. The history of andragogy will put him on a meritorious place in the development of this scientific discipline. (Savicevic, 2006, p. 20)

With citations by Houle and Savicevic, it is clear that Knowles' theory of andragogy remains, especially as it currently is, very dynamically present in the literature and with practitioners. Much more extensive research on the broad concept of andragogy is documented and presented by Henschke (2008). This and other iterations on my continuing research on andragogy may be found on my website: <http://www.umsl.edu/~henschke>

Malcolm's Influence on My Personal and Professional Life

Today, in 2008, as I reflect on my learning experiences with Malcolm across more than 4 decades, I ask myself, "What is there about Malcolm and his influence that has held sway in my life throughout all these years?" I hope the following anecdotes will shed some light on this question.

My opportunity to learn with Malcolm in person provided a connection to his "heart of hearts." I felt he cared very much about me. Also, as I read his writings, I had the added bounty of personal exchanges with him, which I believe deepened my understanding of his writings. In these exchanges, his behavior and expression conveyed so genuinely to me that I was the most important person in the world. Experiencing him in person gave special meaning to his written words. This combination made an indelible impression on me; it is seared in my memory. Lessons I learned from Malcolm have thoroughly permeated my professional career.

The transformative literature (Mezirow, 1991) only describes a small part of the transformation I had already experienced since 1967 and continue to experience in learning with Malcolm. I had taken responsibility for my lifelong learning, I was deeply involved in andragogy, new vistas had appeared on the horizon of my personal and professional life, and I was excited knowing that things would never be the same for me and my family in the future.

Launching my work at the University of Missouri Extension was affirming when I used the same process model that Malcolm used in starting the YMCA Adult Education Program in downtown Chicago. I went from door-to-door in small communities, told them I was starting an adult education program, inquired of their interests, and asked them to indicate who else in the community I should talk with about this. My program flourished for the 13 years I lived there.

Starting the Adult Education masters and doctoral programs at the University of Missouri-St. Louis almost from scratch in 1983, was a wonderful adventure. I remembered many of the things that Malcolm had done to support my learning with him in the doctoral program at Boston University. I was determined to emulate him in every way I was able – of course on a much smaller scale – to see if what worked with me would also work with my students. Lo and behold, it has worked well! I told Malcolm that I was going to St. Louis, and asked if he had any comments. His response was encouraging and spontaneous. He said, "I see in the next few years 'ADULT EDUCATION' in bold letters on the horizon at University of Missouri-St. Louis." His

comment inspired me to build and carry the program half-time for 16 years and after that to obtain two new full-time professors and get three other professors in the university to join, support, and help carry forward our program that already had an abundance of students. It was an exciting day when our program had bestowed on it the 2004 Malcolm S. Knowles Award for Excellence in Adult Education Program Leadership, from the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE).

Malcolm's program planning model (Knowles, 1970) had all the ingredients I needed to conduct a wide variety of adult education programs for the adult public and for my academic work. I have used various bits and pieces from other adult educators, but his model has been foundational and worked well for me. I have learned to use it more competently over the years.

My last interview with Malcolm was in 1996, when I delivered his citation for being inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. I had just become the President of the AAACE, and still learning with him, I asked, "Malcolm, what suggestions do you have for me as I preside over AAACE this year?" He quickly answered, "Recruit as many pioneers as you can, so that the movement of adult education continues to flourish, because the glory days are ahead" (Henschke, 1997, p. 4).

Honoring Malcolm's Legacy

Malcolm's family honored me when they requested me to compose and deliver his professional eulogy at his memorial service, December 14, 1997. My eulogy included many of the things he represented to me in learning with him. Here is part of what I said: "As the first adult educator I studied with, he was to me all the things a father could be: originator, teacher, benefactor, guardian, master, advisor, progenitor, counselor, mentor, friend, and a human being" (Henschke, 1997, p. 2). After his death, the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) established the Knowles' Memorial Committee to honor his legacy. I have been a member of that committee ever since, and Malcolm's presence is very much there with us so that I continue learning with him – there is so much more to learn than I have acquired and internalized thus far. In 2006, I had the privilege of helping a group of Italian adult educators establish the Knowles' Club because they have so much interest in his adult education work. The leader of that group has also joined the CPAE Knowles Memorial Committee. This was a broadening perspective for me and some more learning with Malcolm.

I also wanted to honor Malcolm's legacy after his passing. I had been interested in andragogy from the start, and I learned with Malcolm that he did exactly what he wanted to with it. I was inspired by Malcolm's example, and I thought the best way to honor his legacy was to launch some further investigation into andragogy. I knew he would applaud that. I established a Dialogues in Andragogy graduate seminar at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, which is conducted once every three semesters. Marcie Boucouvalas and I established a Special Interest Group on andragogy that is held annually at the CPAE Conference. My colleague Mary Cooper and I have published numerous iterations of our findings on the international foundation of andragogy. Two of the latest versions are Cooper and Henschke (2007) and Henschke and Cooper (2007). Most of my publications and unpublished papers (posted on my andragogy

website <http://www.umsl.edu/~henschke>) are infused with andragogy and they are mostly reflective of my learning with Malcolm.

When Marti Sopher (2003) decided her dissertation would focus on historical items that Malcolm left out of his autobiographical journey (Knowles, 1989), she asked me to serve as a member of her dissertation committee at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I was honored to accept and found, to my delight, once again I was learning with Malcolm. As a special learning with Malcolm bonus, Sopher helped me publish a paper (Henschke, 2006) based on her dissertation.

Learning with Malcolm has been an exhilarating adventure. In 2004, I paraphrased a poem Frost (1995) delivered at the Kennedy Presidential Inauguration in 1960. My paraphrase depicts how andragogy has captivated me, and all because of my learning with Malcolm.

Andragogy Thoroughly Captivated Me
 Andragogy belonged to me before I belonged to Andragogy.
 Andragogy was my longing desire in living, teaching and learning
 for a few decades
 Before I was her educator. Andragogy was mine
 In undergraduate school, in graduate school, in theological
 seminary, in clinical training, in parish ministry, in doctoral
 studies, in university faculty, in consulting with various
 organizations throughout society,
 But I belonged to Pedagogy, still captive,
 Possessing what I still was unpossessed by,
 Possessed by what I now no more possessed.
 Something I was withholding made me weak
 Until I found it was myself
 I was withholding from the dynamic, vibrant idea of Andragogy,
 And forthwith found new educational and living possibilities
 in surrender.
 Such as I was I gave myself outright
 (The deed of gift was many deeds of dialoguing with others about
 Andragogy)
 To Andragogy vaguely realizing a new idea embodying teaching,
 learning, and living
 But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
 Such as Andragogy was, such as she will become.

All of these are my reflections on my experiences of learning with Malcolm Shepherd Knowles and why andragogy captivated me. Andragogy has been my delight and esteemed privilege for more than 4 decades. And by the way, it is not over yet. I plan on continuing to learn with Malcolm for many years to come.

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