

Adult Education Philosophy Informs Practice

By Elizabeth J. Tisdell and Edward W. Taylor

Elizabeth J. Tisdell is an associate professor of Adult Education at National-Louis University in Chicago.
e-mail: ETisdell@nl.edu

So, what is “philosophy”? And what does it have to do with adult education? On the one hand, it *seems* like a subject for elite academics, far removed from the everyday practices of adult educators. On the other hand, ask any adult educator what the purpose of education is, or what they are trying to do in class, and therein lies something of their espoused educational philosophy. Look at their practice, and that tells you even more. One’s educational philosophy is imbedded both in what *one believes* about teaching and learning, and *what one actually does* in their practice. All adult educators have an educational philosophy; we may not be able to articulate it well, but we all have a belief about what we should be doing in the adult education classroom. Further, adult learners in our classrooms also have an educational philosophy—a belief about what we should be doing. Sometimes these philosophical beliefs clash and result in conflict. Knowing one’s educational philosophy and how it relates to our practice and to those beliefs of adult learners in our classrooms can help us better negotiate the everyday realities of life with adult learners.

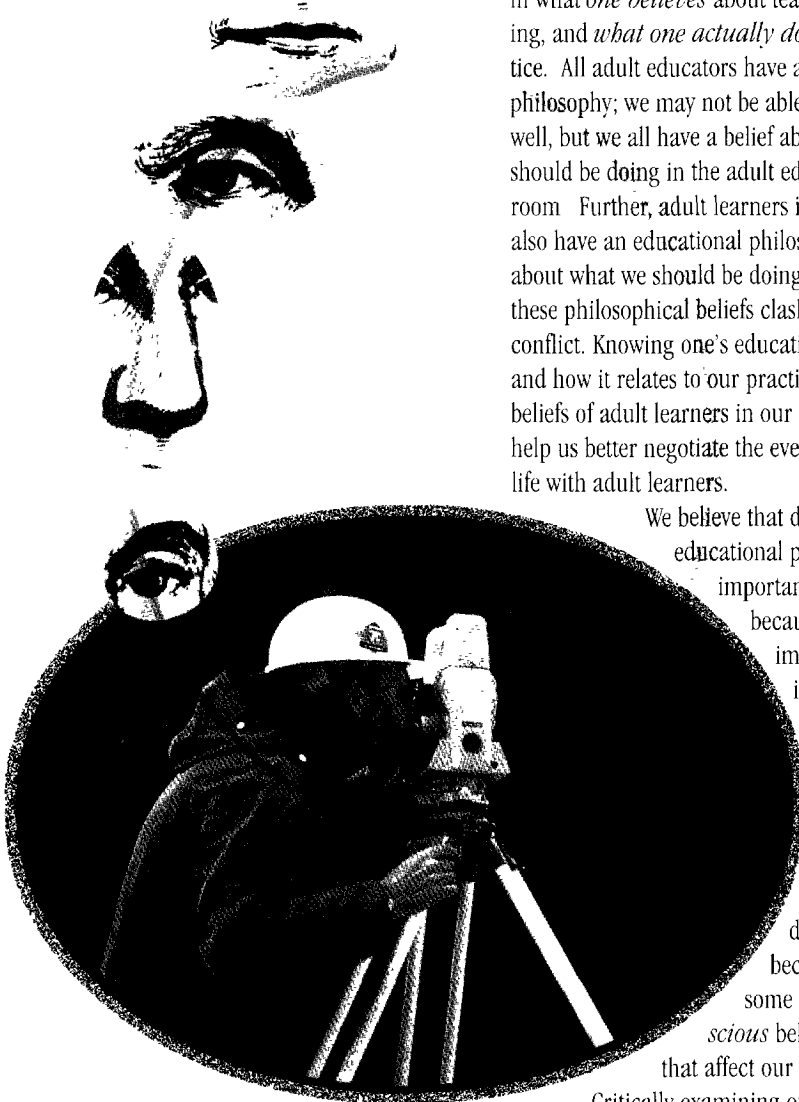
We believe that defining one’s educational philosophy is important—not only because our beliefs impact what we do in the classroom, but in defining our educational philosophy, we must examine our practice critically. In so doing, we often become conscious of some of our *unconscious* beliefs or behaviors that affect our practice.

Critically examining our practice makes

apparent some of the discrepancies between what we say we believe and what we actually do. For example, one colleague said that she believed in treating all students “equally” as part of her educational philosophy. But after a closer look at her practice, she found that she unconsciously gave more validation to some over others based partly on their gender, race and class. This became apparent by observing who she gave more attention, affirmation and mentoring to in the instructional setting (partly because some were more demanding than

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others), and by noting who was most often represented in her curriculum. After critically examining her practice and curriculum, she reasoned that if required authors and classroom examples were primarily whites and/or males, it perhaps sent a message about whose knowledge was really valued, it might appear that she believed some were “more equal” than others. As a result, she had to rethink the notion of what she really meant in regard to “treating all students equally.” Thus, she began to change some of her classroom practices and also began to redefine her educational philosophy. In short, as we have seen in this example, an examination of one’s educational practice and one’s beliefs about practice inform each other—our philosophy informs our practice, which in turn informs and helps develop our philosophy. And, so, the cycle continues. In



order for this cycle to be set in motion, we must make conscious our underlying educational philosophy and how it is reflected in our practice. Thus, our intent in this article is two-fold: to discuss some different adult educational philosophies, and to help readers explore their own educational philosophy in light of their adult education practice. In particular, we invite the reader to reflect on the following questions in relationship to their own thinking about their adult education practice:

1. What is the purpose of education?
2. What is the role of the adult educator?
3. What is the role of students or adult learners in the classroom?
4. What is your conceptualization of differences among adult learners?
5. What is your worldview, or the primary lens you use in analyzing human needs?

To be sure, not all adult educators have the same answers to these five questions, or the same philosophical orientation. Elias and Merriam (1995) discuss a number of philosophical orientations to adult education including liberalism, progressivism, humanism, behaviorism and radicalism. Each of these philosophies would have different answers to the five questions above. For example, the tradition of liberalism (not to be confused with a left-of-center political orientation) is rooted in enlightenment philosophy that emphasizes rationality. An educator rooted in liberalism would emphasize the acquisition of rational forms of knowledge, primarily from seeking it out from experts. The role of the educator in such a frame is to be the expert, and to deliver this rational knowledge in the most expeditious way possible, which has been primarily through the lecture method. The role of the learners in such an approach is to "soak up" and analyze this delivered form of knowledge, and to try not to let one's emotions cloud one's ability to rationally know. Such an approach is sometimes referred to as the "banking model of education" where knowledge is deposited into the heads of learners similar to how one deposits money in the bank. In this paradigm, differences among students are seen as related only to personality factors. All learners are seen as individuals with equal chances; i.e., liberalism would never account for the fact that there are structural factors of class, race and gender that situate people differently relative to the education system. The worldview or primary lens in this view is rationality. In essence, the American higher education system is still

largely informed by the tradition of liberalism. But, for the most part, adult educators would advocate other philosophies that focus less on the educator as knowledge expert, and that recognizes adult learners as co-constructors of knowledge, partially rooted in their own life experience. Thus, building on and re-framing Elias and Merriam's earlier work, we will discuss five of the adult education philosophies that are currently most prevalent in the field. These are depicted in the table that follows, relative to the five questions stated earlier. We call these the humanist; the critical-humanist, the critical-emancipatory, the feminist-humanist, and the feminist-emancipatory. While we do not discuss liberalism or progressivism per se, these five more current philosophical perspectives do build on these earlier traditions.

Current Philosophical Perspectives on Adult Education <small>(Erickson & Lube, <i>Adult Education: Philosophy Informs Practice</i>)</small>			
Autonomy-Driven Philosophies Worldview Goal of Education View of Difference Teacher's role Student's role	Humanist Knowles (1980) Psychological Personal Fulfillment Generic Technician Self-Teacher	Critical-Humanist Mezirow (1995) Rational/psychological Autonomy Personality Facilitator Rational Constructor	Critical-Emancipatory Friere (1971) Rational/sociological Social Change Class Liberator Modern Activist
Relationally-Driven Philosophies Worldview Goal of Education View of Difference Teacher's Role Student's Role		Feminist-Humanist Belenky, et al. (1986) Relational Personal Development Gender Midwife Relational Constructor	Feminist-Emancipatory books (1994) Cultural/Structural Social Transformation Positionality (Intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality) Mediator----Confronter Postmodern Activist
		← INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL →	

We actually developed this philosophical rubric as a result of a critical incident that occurred in one of our adult higher education classes (Ed's). In this particular situation students were to conduct a major teaching and learning project emphasizing how various learning theories inform practice and practice informs theory, and then conduct a class presentation about it. One female student, who we'll call Bernice, got upset with Ed's questions in response to her presentation. He had wanted her to give more attention to her understanding of teaching and learning supported by a rational and theoretical position, while, instead, she shared her interpretation rooted in personal experience and intuition. Through our discussion of the incident, both of us came to new insight about why the student and the teacher (Bernice and Ed) conflicted so. Part of the problem was due to their different educational worldviews, revealed in how Bernice and Ed approached teaching and learning, also reflected in a particular theoretical orientation and inter-

pretation of humankind. Our discussion of this incident led us to the many possible philosophical orientations students and teachers might have that could affect beliefs and behaviors in the classroom, and led ultimately to the rubric. Moreover, the process of developing it allowed us to examine whether our teaching was consistent with what we believe about the purpose of education and how it should be practiced. We hope that it helps others do the same and to further develop their own rationale for teaching and learning.

Our philosophical rubric is based on key authors related to the field, and reveals five current philosophical orientations. Each orientation is defined by the five guiding questions noted previously that focus on a clarification of one's worldview of humankind, the purpose of education, the view of difference or positionality (meaning the way one is "positioned" by one's gender, race, and class relative to the dominant culture) and the role of the educator and student in the classroom. Furthermore, the framework is split both horizontally and vertically. The horizontal split separates the philosophies that are driven a bit more by rationality and autonomy (we've labeled these "autonomy-driven philosophies") from those that center more on the relational aspects of learning that also take into account the role of affect in learning (we've labeled these the relationally-driven philosophies). The vertical split (noted by the bold line) separates those orientations that emphasize the centrality of the individual from a psychological perspective from those that emphasize the social context when understanding teaching and learning. It is important to note that this framework is a tool to stimulate understanding and reflection, not a typology with a bounded and rigid framework. There is much overlap between and among these frames, and the demarcation-lines between each of the cells on this grid should be seen as porous and overlapping. Additionally, all teaching is influenced by context, such that one's philosophical orientation could shift based on different teaching situations and conditions.

We begin our discussion of these philosophical orientations with the humanist frame of adult education, found in the work of Malcolm Knowles and his conception of andragogy (the practice of teaching adults as opposed to children). In this view, humankind is viewed through the lens of humanistic psychology, and the individual is seen as central; there is virtually no attention to the socio-cultural context. The emphasis of this orientation is on meeting the needs of the individual adult learner. Those who practice out of this frame see adult education as helping others reach personal fulfillment via self-directed learning. This psychological perspective is further revealed in this frame's generic view of difference. There is an emphasis on homogeneity, with difference determined by individual learning needs and only by differences in personality, not on positionality (culture, gender, or class). The humanist adult educator is seen as a technician, a skilled crafts person, adept at facilitating the practice of andragogy with an emphasis on mastering the

skill of teaching adults so as to better meet the individual needs of the adult learner. Concurrently, the adult student is seen as a "self-teacher" who knows best his or her own learning needs. With the help of the adult educator the adult learner can become an effective self-directed learner or self-teacher. This philosophical orientation does not reflect an educational perspective held by either Ed or Bernice in the example above. As an educator, Ed wanted Bernice to share a theoretical perspective based on her learning and was less exclusively interested in her personal fulfillment. In a similar vein, the humanist orientation does not adequately explain Bernice's perspective whose approach to teaching and learning, as will become obvious below, is more grounded in the feminist/humanist orientation.

The second frame is that of the critical/humanist found in the writings of Jack Mezirow. This frame has similar traits of the humanist, such as a psychological orientation with an emphasis on personal fulfillment. Differences arise in the nature of fulfillment and how it is achieved. Fulfillment is more about becoming an autonomous, critical and socially responsible thinker through an emphasis on rationality. Also, the critical humanist teacher thinks of difference in terms of student personalities, with an emphasis on finding ways to help students get

along and work effectively in a collaborative fashion. It is not that cultural and gender differences aren't appreciated, but they are not attended to directly in the teaching and learning classroom environment. The educator is seen as a facilitator striving for consensual understanding among students. Two essential practices of the critical/humanist teacher involve connecting the learner's experience to the topic under discussion and the use of critical reflection and rational discourse in the context of promoting a more democratic society. This approach by the teacher helps the student become a rational re-constructor. It is through this individual understanding that education leads to social change. This orientation

helps explain Ed's response to Bernice, the student in the vignette described above, since Ed was primarily concerned that Bernice express her understanding grounded in a rational and theoretical manner.

The third frame is that of the critical/emancipatory which is found in the writings of Paulo Freire and Ira Shor. This frame has similar traits to that of the critical/humanist, such as illuminating the political nature of education in a rational, learner-centered manner. Like the others above the bold horizontal line, it is autonomously-driven in the sense of helping each learner become an autonomous critical thinker. But the goal of this critical thinking is promoting collective social change through a process of fostering "conscientizacao" —that of helping the oppressed recognize the sociopolitical and economic contradictions of their world and how to take action against them. This purpose of education helps explain its perspective of difference, where more attention is given to class and economic marginalization, and less to oppression

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rooted in gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. A teacher in this frame is seen as a liberator, not as a facilitator of learning. As Freire once said, "When teachers call themselves facilitators and not teachers, they become involved in a distortion of reality . . . The facilitator refuses to convince his or her learners of what he or she thinks is just. This educator, then, ends up helping the power structure. To avoid reproducing the values of the power structure the educator must always combat a laissez-faire pedagogy, no matter how progressive it may appear to be." The liberating educator openly advocates for social justice through the use of problem-posing and dialogical means in a collective and horizontal relationship with students as subjects not objects. This approach helps the student become a modern activist, one who uses education as a liberating force. Modern activism is based on the idea that there is, more or less, a unified understanding of what liberation from oppression looks like relative to a particular group. If Ed had been operating out of this frame he might have asked questions of Bernice, that of problem-posing, which would have encouraged her to look beyond the personal to the political. For example, he might have asked her such questions as "What does your view of learning say about how you relate to the world? How does your approach to learning help others see the inequities that exist in the world?"

A difference between the frames from the upper part of the chart and those at the bottom is that those on the top focus more on the autonomous learner (the humanist, and the critical-humanist) and/or the role of critical reflection driven primarily by rational analysis (the critical-humanist and the critical-empiricist). Those frames on the bottom are driven by greater attention to the relational and affective dimension in learning. We have labeled these the feminist-humanist and the feminist-empiricist because it is feminist scholars that have called attention to these aspects of learning, they have also focused a bit more on women as learners. This is not to suggest that the relational aspects of learning are not also important to men, but the literature that specifically addresses the relational aspects of learning has been more specifically addressed by feminist scholars.

The first of the two relationally-driven philosophies is the feminist-humanist orientation, which is most reflected in the text by Belenky et al. (1986) *Women's Ways of Knowing*. This is somewhat similar to the humanist perspective in that the primary worldview is grounded in humanistic psychology, but with an emphasis on the significance of relationship and affectivity as learners construct new knowledge. Giving voice (a strong metaphor for this paradigm) to new knowledge in the context of a relational community of support is part of the purpose of education, as is the personal development of each learner. The role of the educator is to be a midwife in helping learners give voice to new knowledge. Difference in this paradigm is conceptualized as based on gender since Belenky, et al., were specifically discussing women as

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learners. However, we believe that those operating out of this paradigm emphasizing the relational and affective components along with the rational apply such a philosophical perspective to both female and male learners, yet gender differences are considered and dealt with in this philosophical perspective of adult learning. We believe that Bernice, from the above example, was most reflective of the feminist-humanist orientation, in that she conceptualized the assignment as giving voice to her own knowledge constructed through her relationship with the constituents involved in the learning activity. She did not particularly value the theorizing aspect of the assignment. What was important for her

was what she got out of it personally. While it is important to point out that Belenky, et al., discuss the importance of the critical and rational as well as the relational, many of the learners in their study emphasized the role of their own experience in learning. Similar to Bernice, they de-emphasized the realm of the rational or theoretical.

This brings us to our discussion of the last orientation, the feminist-empiricist, most reflective of the work of black feminist writer, bell hooks (1994). There are some similarities between the feminist-humanist, in that there is attention to the relational and affective components of learning. But those teaching with this orientation have a sociological view of the world

that examines how culture and power relations based on the social structures of gender, race, class, sexuality (and their intersections) shape learning. Difference is conceptualized not as personality differences but rather as positionality (where one is positioned based on the intersections of gender, race, and class relative to the dominant culture). Like the critical-empiricist orientation, the focus is on challenging social structures, but rather than a primarily class-based examination of privilege and oppression, this view examines the intersections of race, gender and class as multiple systems of privilege and oppression. The purpose of education in the feminist-empiricist paradigm is to critically engage learners through both relational dialogue and critical exchange in working for social change. The role of the educator is to encourage students to confront inequity and to engage with and mediate conflict in a relatively supportive environment in developing new models of social change. While this is similar to the critical-empiricist orientation, there is a greater recognition that there are conflicting views on what would facilitate emancipation and that definitions of what constitutes the "collective good" is in constant flux. If Ed were operating primarily from this paradigm in the above example, he might have constructed the assignment to be about engaging in an analysis of social structures around gender, race, class, in relationship to the learning activity, or raise a question about how this might change relative to a different context.

As is obvious by the above discussion, there is some overlap among these orientations. In reality, Ed, like many authors, (e.g., Brookfield,

1995) and practitioners in the field, actually straddles several orientations, each emerging to the fore as the teaching context shifts and changes. Further, what one does in a particular educational context might depend on the purpose of the adult education activity and the length of time a group has been together. A look at one's initial answers to the questions stated earlier would be quite telling about one's philosophical perspective, and might help one determine what one believes is important in the learning environment. A look at one's practice can help us clarify some of the initial answers, which might also let us know that we want to do something differently. This is how philosophy and practice influence each other; theory informs practice and practice informs theory. Indeed, it is a mutually informing relationship. ▲

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