

EXISTENTIALISM AND ITS UNDERPINNINGS FOR ANDRAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

Instructional practices are rooted in the philosophies of education. Educators, those in the practice of education, must turn to educational philosophers for guidance to questions relating to educating society. Educators must make the connection between learning practices and the philosophies of education that underlies the methods of learning. The purpose of this paper was to examine specifically the literature to determine if there is a relationship between the philosophy of existentialism and the assumptions of the practice of andragogy. This examination is important to higher education for improving the education of adults. A review of the literature suggests that existentialism provides the philosophical underpinnings for andragogy. It should be recognized that a number of philosophies may also have principles that align with the assumptions of the practice of andragogy. Existentialism predates andragogy and emphasizes authenticity of self, freedom, choice and responsibility. Andragogy emphasizes self-directed learning and participation in one's own learning and evaluation of the learning experience.

Keywords: Andragogy, existentialism, philosophy of education, and philosophy of adult education.

INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of education predates the broader study of philosophy. The philosophy of education began once preliterate civilizations noticed that education was a common pursuit of mankind. This pursuit of education was originally a means for survival.

The evolution of various theories of education progressed as the practice of education progressed. Educators, those in the practice of education, must turn to educational philosophers for guidance to questions relating to educating society. Much of what educators practice mirrors some aspect of the philosophy of education. According to Ozmon (2012), educators must understand and utilize the philosophies of education to improve the practice of education.

If one then accepts the premise that instructional practices are rooted in the philosophies of education, it is important for educators to make the connection between learning practices and the philosophies of education that underlies the methods of learning. Malcolm Knowles, "The Father of Adult Education" (Henschke, Winter 97-98) and a professor of education at Boston University, for example, did not intend andragogy to be a theory of the field of adult learning.

The andragogical model is more a practice for personal growth and change than it is a theory of the discipline of adult education (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Andragogy and existentialism both encourage learning how to learn rather than a learning how to be taught (Knowles, 1984; Ormon, 2012).

The purpose of this paper was to examine the literature to determine if there is a relationship between the philosophy of existentialism and the assumptions of the practice of andragogy. This examination is important to higher education for improving the education of adults. A review of the literature presents a compilation of research, peer-reviewed journals, non-peer reviewed journals, and books on existentialism and andragogy. The academic databases used were from the online library of Texas A&M University-Commerce and included, but were not limited to, Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, Education Research Complete, Eric, ProQuest, and Sage Publications. The key descriptive terms used for this research were andragogy, existentialism, philosophy of education, and philosophy of adult education.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The study of the philosophy of education is essential today, according to Ozmon (2012). The world is in an accelerated rate of constant change and evolution like never before and confronting this era of transition requires critical thinking. As society elects to accept continual change or attempts to resist change in order to retain established traditions it does so with little or no thought to the potential threats or consequences of either decision. Ozmon cautioned that this lack of thought is ill advised. Philosophers of education suggest that resolutions to potential threats or consequences about change or stability can be achieved most effectively through deliberate reflection. The same holds for existentialism. Existentialists believe that individuals are in a constant state of change. Once individuals think they understand themselves it is precisely at that point in time they need to start the deliberate and reflective process of self-discovery again.

AN EXAMINATION OF EXISTENTIALISM

The philosophy of existentialism, which can be traced to the Sophists (Ozmon, 2012), is difficult to define because the fundamental nature of existentialism conflicts with what defining it requires (Kohn, 1982). Existentialism may be described as a philosophy of contemplating the reasons for one's existence. "Human subjectivity, paradox and anxiety" (Emery, 1971, p. 5) are three areas of focus for existentialism. Human subjectivity, or understanding the world through one's self, is the basis for reflection. Paradox, the holding of two conflicting viewpoints, is thinking one is of value because of one's individuality (subjectivity) or thinking one is of no value simply because one can be replaced (reason). In other words, to understand one's existence one is also compelled to understand one's non-existence. Anxiety comes into play when people realizes how insignificant their existence (or non-existence) is or that they could vanish without notice.

To live life responsibly, "positive existentialism" (Emery, 1971, p. 5), is to make one's life worthy by adding value to one's existence. The choice one makes to live life responsibly instills a sense of freedom. To exist in a world where there are no choices is to live without free will. One must be aware that free will lies in one's ability to choose; without choices there can be no freedom. For that reason, with existentialism, humans are uncontrolled and without limits to choose to think, act, and believe as they decide. In other words, an individual is constantly free to choose in every area or aspect of life.

Positive existentialism dates back to philosopher and psychologist William James. According to James, man decides for himself regarding what to think, act, or to be committed to. American psychologist Abraham Maslow claimed that positive existentialism requires a progressive idea of concern, daring, and autonomy (Emery, 1971). Existentialists believe that one's choices in the search for the meaning of life are primary and not a secondary instinct. It is suggested by Viktor Frankl, an existential psychiatrist and developer of Logotherapy, that people with a sense of self and value (choices and freedom) were the ones who survived the Nazi concentration camps (Alfried & Britt-Mari, 2006) as did Frankl himself. Van Cleve Morris, author of *Existentialism in Education: What It Means*, advises society to allow education to teach personal responsibility. With the freedom of choice comes the responsibility associated with making choices. In existentialism, one is free to choose one's direction in life but one is also responsible for the choices one makes (Emery, 1971).

In the existentialist classroom the teacher assists the learner in the search for real self-awareness or the meaning of life. In the classroom the existential instructor is most concerned with the thought processes and internal growth of the students inasmuch as one's actions are a direct result of what one experiences psychologically.

Therefore, by encouraging an atmosphere in the classroom of experimentation, openness, individuality, communication, problem-solving, cooperation, trust, choices, acceptance, fun, and play students most likely will achieve what existentialists describe as authentic growth and the realization of self. Classroom instructors will be able to see this development in the form of outward behaviors. Emery (1971) postulated that:

There are usually several characteristics present when the student has reached a high functioning level: he usually thinks well of himself and others; he sees himself as part of a world in movement and in the process of becoming; he sees the value of mistakes as well as successes, and he develops and holds to significant human values necessary to group processes; he is creative and acts in harmony with his values (p. 8).

In other words, the student has chosen to live life responsibly. Thus providing freedom for the student and adding value to the student's existence produces positive existentialism.

Learning Philosophies and Theories

Many professionals in the field of adult learning are focused on differentiating between the process of how adults learn and the process of how children learn. It is insufficient for educators to consider the pedagogical methods for teaching children adequate for teaching adult learners (Knowles et al., 2011). In other words, how can teachers better understand how adult learners learn? This can be accomplished by teachers, in the quest for understanding, to become more aware of their own teaching styles and educational philosophies because authentic educators comprehend what they are doing and why they are doing what they are doing. Also, being effective in the classroom is more than experience. Being effective in the classroom is having the ability to think critically about those experiences. Consequently, educators' philosophies of teaching and learning establish the foundation for the learning experiences in the classrooms (Conti, 2007).

According to Tisdell and Taylor (2001), asking an educator about the purpose of education should provide insight into the educator's philosophy of education.

Observing educators in the classroom should provide even more information about the educator's philosophy of education. To observe an educator in action should demonstrate the beliefs of that educator. Whether or not they are aware of it, research indicates that all educators have a philosophy of education which forms the basis for the actions they take. Moreover, all learners also have a philosophy of education and a belief concerning what should be done in the classroom. It stands to reason then, that the two philosophies of the educator and the learner, if different, will come into conflict.

Thus it is crucial that an educator know and fully understand his or her own philosophy of education and to the extent possible, the philosophies of the students. Such knowledge should have a positive effect on the degree of learning that takes place. Learning occurs, according to existentialists, as the learner realizes the learner's activities, selects the ends and defines the means for achieving the activities, and projects him- or herself into the future. Learning is based on not knowing, uncertainty, and a vacuum. Learning is dependent on a separation of self from the learner into the unknown and uncertainty and not knowing what the learner will become. This produces anxiety and emphasis on self for the learner. Burstow (1984) asserts that this process of learning is ongoing and continuous leaving the learner separated from or external of self. Burstow also asserts that learning is both unending and involved in all parts of life. The relationship between the learner and the educator produces self-directed learning and creates a situation of respect for the learner. The role of the educator, in existential methodology, is challenged by critical thought associated with philosophical approaches (Collins, 1986).

The study of phenomenology analyzes phenomena as presented to the observer, the conscious first-person point of view. Phenomenology aligns well with existentialism because it focuses on the individual (Ozmon, 2012) and may offer adult educators an opportunity to investigate the learning process with a fresh approach. That is, to put aside what could be naturally taken for granted about the observable event or fact. Rather than study adult learning with any preconceived notion of age or aging this study process tends to eliminate judgments, assumptions, evaluations, and opinions focusing on the context of adult learning (Collins, 1986). It seems important therefore, to approach adult learning with an open mind. The role of the educator is further challenged by the field of hermeneutics, the explanation of written works or any representational work such as art or music. Interpretations can vary and this can be problematic for the adult educator. It is evident that educators should be cautious about accepting texts in an underestimated manner (Collins, 1986). "The hermeneutic act of interpretation involves, in its most elemental articulation, making sense of what has been observed in a way that communicates understanding" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 311). Hermeneutics suggests that educators must be attuned to the interpretations of texts or other material used in adult learning.

According to Stucky (1990), human resource development (HRD), the training of adults in the workplace, is concerned with some of the same components of the philosophies of education. These components include the Aims of HRD--enhance job performance, the Methods of HRD--consider past experiences as plentiful resources for learning; the Curriculum--training on job skills and abilities, supervision and leadership; and the Teacher/Learner Relationship-- defined as employer understands the problem, the employee is taught how to resolve the problem, and together they work through problems to reach desired outcomes.

DEVELOPING A PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ADULT EDUCATION

The importance of frameworks is underscored when Apps (1973) maintained that frameworks are essential for structuring thoughts. Frameworks provide the means for organizing thoughts, relationships, and questions. The author recommended the following adult education philosophical framework as one possible option. This framework possesses four categories and asks four questions of the educator involved in the adult learning process.

The first category is the learner and poses the question "What do we believe about the learner?" (p. 11), the second category is the overall purpose of adult education and poses the question "What do we believe are the goals and objectives of adult education?" (p. 11), the third category is the content or subject matter and poses the question "What is to be learned?" (p. 12), and the fourth category is the learning process and poses the question "What do we believe about how adults learn?" (p. 12). This framework may be used for developing a working philosophy for adult educators. In developing a working philosophy, an adult educator's structure of thinking, philosophers in general have dealt with the following three questions:

- What is real? (Metaphysics);
- How do we know? (Epistemology); and
- What is of value? (Axiology).

These three questions serve as a guide for determining what may be the appropriate working philosophy for adult education. Apps (1973) maintained that the role of adult educators is to facilitate learning rather than control learning. Students should be what they are meant to be and not what the teachers or institutions believe the students should be.

PHILOSOPHIES AND THE PURPOSES OF ADULT EDUCATION

There are opposing views as to the overall purpose of adult education. For example, the essential and perennial philosophies suggest that the purpose of adult education is to assist students by providing them with what is needed to be able to make the necessary adjustments for their reality. The essential and perennial philosophies believe that knowledge from former cultures still apply in today's world. In other words, societies pass on knowledge from generation to generation to help future societies adjust to changing conditions (Apps, 1973). Another purpose of adult education is to supply adult learners with what is needed to recognize and solve problems that they are likely to encounter with the focus on the abilities for resolving problems rather than focusing on the topic. This is an example of the progressivist philosophy which deals with the concept that knowledge is based on experience. The learner learns to identify problems through problem-solving (Apps, 1973).

According to Apps (1973), the philosophy of reconstructionism suggests that the purpose of adult education is to assist society with social change. This philosophy of education focuses on changing society and is often problematic for adult educators whose views are more inclined toward increase and progress rather than toward changing humanity. Apps (1973) further alleged that the existentialist philosophy suggests that the purpose of adult education is to assist adults with becoming independent. That is, the purpose is toward self fulfillment and independence.

Some view this freedom as total and ultimate freedom for choice to decide what to learn. Others view this as freedom to be internal and responsible to society.

There are five commonly identified philosophies of education to wit idealism, realism, pragmatism, Existentialism, and Reconstructionism (Ozmon & Craver as cited by Conti, 2007, p. 21). Likewise, there are five commonly held philosophies for adult education. These philosophies include liberalism, behaviorism, progressivism, humanism, and radicalism. Elias and Merriam (as cited by Conti, 2007, p. 21) claimed that the five philosophies of adult education have "withstood the test of time and continue to serve us well" (Price, 1999, p. 3).

It has been suggested that the five philosophies of education of idealism, realism, pragmatism, existentialism, and reconstructionism can be compared to the five philosophies of adult education of liberalism, behaviorism, progressivism, humanism, and radicalism respectively. For example, much attention is devoted to Knowles' debt to the humanistic philosophy of adult education. Humanism focuses on independence from others, belief in others, and collaboration with others while existentialism focuses on the person and how he or she deals effectively with his or her own desires and requirements (Conti, 2007).

ANDRAGOGY

In his exhaustive study of andragogy, Dutch adult educator Ger van Enckevort traced the origins of the term andragogy back to 1833 and the work of Alexander Kapp, a German grammar school teacher. Kapp claimed that Plato used the concept of andragogy in his teaching. although, Plato himself never used the term. Around the same period of time that Kapp claimed that Plato used the concept of andragogy, Johan Friedrich Herbart, a well-known German philosopher, opposed the use of andragogy and because of his influence the term disappeared from the scene for a century (Knowles et al., 2011).

Contemporary attempts to define adult education began around 1949 (Knowles et al., 2011). These early attempts, however, were more in the nature of outlining ideas and values rather than a framework providing a combination and differentiation with which to work.

A theoretical construct of adult learning labeled andragogy separating it from childhood learning was beginning to develop in Europe. A Yugoslavian educator, Dusan Savicevic, was the first to present andragogy to America in 1967 and Knowles' article titled "Androgogy, Not Pedagogy" appeared in *Adult Leadership* the following year. (The spelling of andragogy was later corrected.)

In order to understand andragogy one must first examine the meaning of pedagogy which is derived from the Greek word paid meaning "child" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 61) and agogus meaning "leader of" (p. 62). In pedagogy the teacher has full responsibility for all learning decisions: what is to be taught, how it is to be taught, when it will be taught, how learning is to be measured, etc.

Research (Knowles et al., 2011) has suggested that as people mature they rely on past experience, desire to determine when it is time to learn, want to direct their own learning, and to schedule learning as they see the need for it. Hence, proponents of the study of andragogy claim that adult learning is different from how children learn (the study of pedagogy). Adults therefore, must be taught differently from children if learning is to be effective. Knowles has had considerable influence in this area (Hartree, 1984; Laird, 1985; Noe, 1999).

Knowles et al. (2011) elaborated by stating that it is insufficient to interpret the principles of educational theory used for teaching children to the teaching of adults.

It is important to note that in andragogy there is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity between learner and instructor.

Both are involved in designing the learning experience and both are involved in evaluating the learning experience (Noe, 1999). There is truly a give and take situation between learner and instructor.

Knowles et al. (2011) proposed six assumptions for the "Andragogy In Practice" (p. 181) model. These six assumptions are based on the learner's:

- **need to know,**
- **self-concept,**
- **prior experience,**
- **readiness, (e) orientation, and**
- **motivation**

All six assumptions are defined by the learner which is more than just a respect for the learner. It includes the adult learner as part of the process for determining learning. The "Andragogy In Practice" model is flexible and can be modified as necessary. There are five universal principles about adult learners.

These five principles include, as one ages one has a need to be more self-directed, has more past experiences to bring to the learning process, has a need to know why one needs to learn something or to determine if learning is necessary, becomes more problem-centered, and becomes more internally motivated (Merriman & Caferella, 2011; Noe, 1999).

Moreover, the andragogical learning practice model recognizes the learner as an adult. Features of the model as delineated by Laird (1985) include, it encourages:

- problem-centered rather than content-centered learning,
- active participation on the part of the adult learner,
- past experiences to be integrated into the new learning experiences,
- a cooperative learner-instructor relationship,
- mutual planning between learner and instructor,
- mutual evaluation between learner and instructor,
- evaluation of needs necessary for redesigning learning activities, and
- activities that are experiential rather than activities that are transmitted and absorbed as with pedagogy.

ANDRAGOGY AND EXISTENTIALISM

According to Hartree (1984) it is easy to see how Knowles' practice of andragogy aligns with the main beliefs of existentialism, which predates andragogy. The author stated that both existentialism and Knowles' andragogy share several principles in common. For example, both existentialism and andragogy begin from the adult, man, or the subject rather than the process, nature, or the object. In existentialism the individual defines himself or herself and in andragogy the individual defines his or her own learning needs. Existentialism emphasizes choices and freedom as does andragogy.

Meanings come from the individual and are not externally imposed by society. Both are centered in the individual. The learner is the focus not the subject matter or the learning activity. Existentialism and andragogy are "individualistic" (Hartree, p. 207). The needs of the individual are self-determined and self-molded. Individuals respond to their own needs rather than the needs of society. Both existentialism and andragogy have been criticized for setting the stage for lawlessness. With all needs centered on the needs of the individual and thus individualistic in nature, one could easily arrive at this conclusion. Existentialism and andragogy could result in disharmony or chaos in society. In practice, this does not seem to be the case however (Hartree). Both existentialism and andragogy emphasize autonomy and the self-directed nature of the adult. They both assume that individuals have a certain level of maturity and can effectively take charge of their affairs, either in life or in learning.

Both existentialism and andragogy stress the need for the individual to participate actively in his or her learning. Both, in addition, assume that individuals can determine their own life needs as well as learning needs and should have control of these things. Both theorize that the individual has the freedom to choose (Hartree, 1984).

While existentialism emphasizes authenticity of self, freedom, choice, and responsibility andragogy emphasizes self-directed learning and participation in one's own learning and evaluation of the learning experience. Furthermore, the learning experience can be related to existentialist philosophy through the learner-instructor relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, the uniqueness of the individual learning experience, and the design of the learning experience that presents authentication of both learner and teacher. Personal authenticity is closely aligned with Maslow's concept of the "self-actualizing person" or Roger's idea of the "full functioning" person (Hartree, 1984).

In summary, educators are encouraged to refer to educational philosophies for answers to questions and to understand and utilize the philosophies to improve the practice of education (Ozmon, 2012).

The importance of constructing a philosophical framework for educators is essential for structuring thoughts. Frameworks provide the means for organizing thoughts, relationships, and questions. The role of adult educators is to facilitate learning rather than control learning. Students should be what they are meant to be and not what the teachers or institutions believe the students should be (Apps, 1973).

All educators have a philosophy of education which forms the basis for the actions they take in the classroom. An educator's philosophy of education can be determined by asking an educator about the purpose of education or by observing an educator in the classroom. Observing an educator in action should reveal the beliefs of that educator (Tisdell and Taylor, 2001).

Also, all learners have a philosophy of education and belief concerning what should be done in the classroom. It is fundamental for educators to understand their own philosophy of education and the philosophies of the students because they may conflict (Tisdell and Taylor).

While all philosophies have specific purposes for learning, the existentialist philosophy suggests that the purpose of adult education is to assist adults in becoming independent. That is, the purpose is self fulfillment and independence (Apps, 1973). Existentialists believe that man is free to choose what to think, act, or to be committed to; is autonomous; and personally responsible for choices made.

While man is free to choose his or her own direction he or she is responsible for those choices. Existentialists encourage an atmosphere in the classroom of experimentation, openness, individuality, communication, problem-solving, cooperation, trust, choices, acceptance, fun, and play. Students in this environment are expected to achieve authentic growth and self realization (Emery, 1971).

Research has suggested that as people mature they rely on past experience, desire to determine when it is time to learn, want to direct their own learning, and to schedule learning as they see the need for it. Adults must be taught differently from children if learning is to be effective. Knowles proposed six assumptions for the "Andragogy In Practice" (p. 181) model.

These six assumptions are based on the learner's need to know, self-concept, prior experience, readiness, orientation, and motivation. All six assumptions are defined by the learner which is more than just a respect for the learner; it is a relationship of mutuality (Knowles et al., 2011).

The five philosophies of education can be compared to the five philosophies of adult education. Existentialism focuses on the person and how he or she deals effectively with his or her own desires and requirements and humanism focuses on independence from others, belief in others, and collaboration with others (Conti, 2007).

Knowles' practice of andragogy aligns with the main beliefs of existentialism, which predates andragogy. Both existentialism and Knowles' andragogy share several principles, both:

- **start with the individual or learner rather than the process or learning activity.**
- **define self or learning needs.**
- **emphasize choices and freedom.**
- **are centered in the individual or learner not the process or activity.**
- **are "individualistic" (Hartree, 1984, p. 207) where individuals respond to their own needs rather than the needs of society.**
- **have been criticized for setting the stage for lawlessness because needs are centered on the needs of the individual rather than the needs of society.**
- **emphasize autonomy and the self-directing nature of the adult**
- **assume that individuals have a certain level of maturity and are able take charge of their affairs, either in life or in learning.**
- **stress the need for the individual to participate actively in learning (Hartree, 1984).**

Existentialism emphasizes authenticity of self, freedom, choice and responsibility and andragogy emphasizes self-directed learning and participation in one's own learning and evaluation of the learning experience. Learning can be related to existentialist philosophy through the learner-instructor relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, the uniqueness of the individual learning experience, and the design of the learning experience that presents authentication of both learner and teacher (Hartree, 1984).

CONCLUSION

Existentialism provides the philosophical underpinnings for andragogy. It should be recognized that a number of philosophies may also have principles that align with the assumptions of the practice of andragogy. The philosophy of existentialism, which predates andragogy, has nine similar principles (Hartree, 1984). Moreover, a number of principles of andragogy mirror the principles of existentialism, such as: individual choice, individual responsibility, individual determinations of meaning, relationship between learner and educator, uniqueness of the individual, recognition of where the learner is at the present moment, different learning styles, respect for learner, self-directed learning, etc.

In addition, Knowles was a known humanist (a philosophy of adult education) and the philosophy of existentialism is congruent with the philosophy of humanism (Conti, 2007).

Implications

The implications of this research for education are numerous. To begin with, educators are encouraged to look to educational philosophies for answers to questions, educators are encouraged to understand and utilize educational philosophies to improve the practice of education (Ozmon, 2012), and educators are encouraged to construct a philosophical framework to establish a working philosophy for structuring thoughts (Apps, 1973) about the educational practice. All educators have a philosophy of education as do all learners. Therefore, educators are also encouraged to understand their own philosophy of education and the philosophies of the students for improving the quality of education (Tisdell and Taylor, 2001).

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that additional research be conducted to explore the relationship between the philosophy of existentialism in education and the practice of andragogy to determine if similar findings are revealed. It is further recommended that research be conducted on how the philosophy of existentialism applies specifically to the field of human resource development and training in order to enhance educational experiences in business and industry.

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