

Teaching Philosophy: A Personal Statement

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### Abstract

This paper presents a personal statement of my own teaching philosophy that has been developed while taking the Organization, Learning, and Technology course *Principles of Adult Learning*. I begin this paper by going over my own learning experiences and how these experiences have helped shaped my teaching philosophy. My philosophy focuses on the importance of establishing relationships with learners and acting as a guide rather than as a uniformed classroom leader. I base this teaching philosophy on the perspective of andragogy and its six assumptions which closely relate to self-directed learning, experiential learning, and transformative learning. I then offer several examples of ways in which I would engage students, the types of work that would be assigned, and how I would grow as an educator.

### Teaching Philosophy: A Personal Statement

Education has been the primary focus of my life for nearly five years now as I have pursued completing my college degrees. Though my passion for education did not fully begin until I was several years into my college experience, looking back I realize that education has always been an important aspect of my life. We are constantly learning and adapting as children both in traditional school settings and in everyday experiences with our friends and family. I always enjoyed learning and completing assignments in school because I was motivated by my desire to grow personally and please the adults I looked up to. I was also fortunate enough to have supportive parents who encouraged me to explore personal interests such as creative writing, music, arts and crafts, and different forms of physical activities. As an adolescent, these activities were considered fun and were held separate from the more serious demands of schoolwork. However, I understand now that these various extra curriculars also exposed me to meaningful learning experiences which I rely on today as I consider my own teaching philosophy.

In addition to meaningful learning experiences in school settings and while pursuing hobbies, I have also experienced learning while working various jobs. My first job out of high school was as a Starbucks barista where I learned customer service skills and how to complete tasks thoroughly but quickly. I then went on to work for a pet sitting company, a memory care retirement home, and an animal hospital. I learned many different skills in these roles such as managing stress and handling difficult and often emotional clients.

My most recent and personally fulfilling job was working as a teacher in a Montessori. This role was the most rewarding because I was put in a position in which I was teaching daily. Obviously, I was teaching children as was required for the job position, but I was also

teaching and constantly learning from my fellow coworkers. Teaching young children is especially challenging and there are many aspects to be aware of. There is always an opportunity for learning how to better yourself as both an educator and a person. Being in a mindset that allows one to be open and receptive to constructive criticism is imperative in the role of a teacher because this is the only way to be attentive to each individual student's needs. If teachers are too set in their ways and are not willing to adapt to different situations and learn from others, their ability to reach students and help them learn will be hindered.

These insights I have gained from my experience as both a learner and teacher have led me to further my own understanding of adult education. Though I enjoyed my time teaching children, I discovered that I was most fascinated and motivated by my personal interactions with those children and how these experiences had taught me about my own learning processes. Learning from the adults I worked with allowed me to realize the complex skills and many aspects needed to effectively teach adults. I began my role as a Montessori teacher with little experience with children and no professional experience teaching. Yet, I was able to learn quickly and was praised for my ability to manage the classroom. This experience boosted my confidence and helped me to understand that, with the right mindset and proper support system, anyone can learn any job, subject, or skill they choose.

These learning experiences have assisted me in developing my own teaching philosophy that focuses on the importance of building relationships with students by guiding them when possible rather than only leading the classroom in the traditional style. This emphasis on establishing a relationship with students will help them to discover and maintain motivation, grow both personally and professionally, and draw upon their own experiences so they can make connections and better retain the information they have learned. Though I see

the benefit in all the theories and perspectives we have covered in this class, I am most drawn to andragogy because the six assumptions of andragogy seem to touch on other important theories and perspectives such as self-directed learning, experiential learning, and transformative learning. Though it is not always possible that one teacher is able to implement all six assumptions into their classroom at all times, it is important for educators to be aware of these components and pinpoint their own learning experiences that have involved these principles. Being aware of these assumptions of andragogy and why they are important will help teachers to be receptive and understanding of all students needs regardless of where these learners are in their education or professional careers.

In their book *Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice*, Sharan Merriam and Laura Bierema introduce andragogy by pointing out psychologist Cyril Houle's typology which claims that each individual learner is motivated differently. Houle identified the three types of learners as goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented (Merriam and Bierema, 2014). Goal-oriented learners find their motivation through specific goals that they set for themselves. They use these goals to fuel their learning and direct them to certain areas that they feel need to be improved upon to accomplish their goal. Activity-oriented learners are most motivated by interacting with others and benefit from learning activities that involve social interaction. Learning-oriented learners are internally motivated by their own desire to learn. Though the motivations of these learners often overlap with goal-oriented learners, learning-oriented learners are primarily driven by the quest for knowledge itself.

I believe that it is important for educators to be aware of their students' learning orientations. Determining which orientations a learner is partial to will give teachers insight into how to best reach their students and what types of assignments or activities should be

assigned that will help the learner realize their own orientation and gain the most from the class. Dr. Shikha Kapur, a professor of education at Jamia Millia Islami in India, asserts that adult learners are complex individuals who need to have their unique capabilities and perspectives recognized to engage in education and benefit from their learning experiences. He explains, “The teachers/facilitators in order not to hurt the self-image of adult learners have to treat them with utmost respect and equality. Any learning process construed for the adult learners has to be geared to meet the needs of the adult learners” (Kapur, 2015, p.111). Being sensitive to the experiences and personalities of each learner will allow teachers to establish relationships with their students. These relationships will create opportunities for the learner to fully engage in the curriculum, retain the information required, and may increase the chances of students experiencing transformative learning.

Being aware of students’ learning orientations and respecting the individuality of each student is an important component of andragogy as this principle is at the core of andragogy’s six assumptions. Merriam and Bierema list the six assumptions of andragogy as (1) the learner’s self-concept, (2) the learner’s experience, (3) the learner’s readiness to learn, (4) problem-centered orientation, (5) internal motivation, and (6) the learner’s need to know (2014). The learner’s self-concept and experience are important because adults enter learning experiences as grown individuals who have already established personal opinions, beliefs, and perspectives due to the life experiences they have accumulated. Though learning will often lead to either changing perspectives or deepening of understanding in the perspectives previously established, learners need to be recognized for their individuality and unique experiences to remain motivated and open to new learning experiences. Encouraging learners to draw on these life experiences and become clear on their own individuality by drawing attention to their beliefs and self-concepts

will create opportunities for learning which will help students to realize their own desires and motivations.

In addition to educators being aware of the significance of adult learners' self-concepts and previous experiences, it is also important for teachers to recognize the impact of social roles on learners' readiness to learn. Every individual adopts many different roles throughout life that lead to new learning experiences. Such roles often relate to career or family responsibilities such as manager, caregiver, parent, or friend. Other roles may have to do with hobbies such as artist or musician. These roles adopted by adults create opportunities for learning whether voluntary or involuntary. An aspiring musician will be motivated to learn how to play a new song while an expecting mother will be motivated to learn parenting techniques. This readiness to learn leads to a need for learners to acquire more experience which can often be implemented into curriculum through experiential learning.

Related to social roles affecting learners' readiness to learn is the problem-centered orientation that adult learners tend to take on. Because of the demands of adulthood and the many roles adults are required to adopt, a problem-centered orientation to learning is both natural and inevitable. For example, learners may be required to accept a new job position because it offers a higher salary which will help to support the adult learner's family. While this is an exciting time, problems in the new role are likely to arise as the learner begins adapting to new responsibilities. This creates an immediate need to learn new skills and strategies to succeed in the new role. Educators must be aware of this problem-centered orientation of adult learners so that they can design their courses to focus on the solving of problems instead of merely presenting subject information. Adult learners primarily desire quick results which will not only

help them achieve their goals but will motivate them to continue to improve themselves as individuals and further pursue their studies.

The last two assumptions of andragogy, the learner's internal motivation and need to know, are strongly rooted in the humanistic perspective in which the individual is the focus of the learning experience and the goal is for the learner to grow as a whole person and experience personal fulfillment (Merriam and Bierema, 2014). The internal motivation of the adult learner directly affects the learner's ability to focus and learn new information. While I have experienced the truth in each of andragogy's six assumptions in my own learning experiences, internal motivation is the most prominent principle as my ability to concentrate and push myself to learn new skills and information is reliant upon my personal goals. The importance of adult learners' need to know is also closely related to internal motivation because, as stated previously, new social roles that learners must adopt place learners in situations in which they are forced to learn new information. It is also significantly easier for learners to engage in their learning experiences and take away useful information when they understand why what they are learning is important. Having clarity in why they need to know certain information will also assist learners in engaging in self-directed learning activities both within and outside of course curriculum.

Perhaps the most important takeaway of andragogy is the relationship between the teacher and the learner. As mentioned previously, the six assumptions of andragogy are closely related to the humanistic perspective of learning. Andragogy emphasizes that the learner is a unique individual, and this individuality needs to be recognized and respected by the teacher for the learner to retain information and grow as a person and a professional. In order for andragogy to be implemented into curriculum, the teacher must surrender the role as the classroom or



course leader and instead present students with the information necessary, encourage them to understand themselves and their goals, facilitate problem solving and guide them in their learning experience. Stephen Forest and Tim Peterson phrase this essence of andragogy well when they write, “The andragogical teaching paradigm assumes the relationship between the teacher and the student is similar to that of a traveler and guide. The student knows the destination and has prior experiences in traveling. The teacher provides direction and allows students to make use of their experiences and seek new information” (2006, p.115-116). This relationship between teacher and learner is the foundation for my teaching philosophy which relies on the assumptions of andragogy while keeping in mind the importance of self-directed learning, experiential learning, and transformative learning.

To establish a meaningful relationship with students that will aid them in their learning journeys, I would begin my course by assigning students a writing assignment in which they would introduce themselves and explain why they are taking the course, their goals, concerns and what they hope to learn. I have taken many classes that began with similar introductory assignments and believe that it is helpful to both teachers and learners. This assignment helps learners become clear on their goals and forces them to analyze their previous experiences that relate to the course material. Many students take classes not simply because they are interested in the topic but because they are required to as part of their degree program or as part of their professional duties. Often students do not consider how their own personal interests align with their learning. When aligned interests are realized, students will become more passionate and motivated in their learning which will allow them to make deeper connections between new information learned and how it relates to their personal lives, career, society, or whatever problem they are confronted with.

Another benefit of beginning classes with this assignment is that by requiring students to talk about themselves, the teacher is communicating that the learner's personal experiences, opinions and insights are not only important to the instructor on a personal level but are important to the student's own learning. Realizing that one has more knowledge and resources within the self than they may have been previously aware of is a powerful tool that can aid in learning. Likewise, being treated with respect and having a teacher that truly values students' perspectives will encourage class participation and create a positive and supportive atmosphere that is conducive to learning.

This assignment also helps teachers to better know their students' backgrounds and life situations which can assist teachers in understanding why certain students display specific strengths and weaknesses. Understanding the student as a person will make it easier for teachers to guide learners in the right direction. Knowing what areas of interest the students have will also help teachers to introduce certain ideas, topics or assignments that would resonate with particular students. The more information the teacher has about each learner, the more prepared they will be to address problems that may arise and the more likely they will be to offer information and insights that are beneficial to learners.

Throughout the course, I would focus on helping students to learn how to integrate the information they have learned to real world problems that they are faced with. If I were conducting an online class, I would primarily do this by assigning formal writing assignments such as papers and discussions in which the students would research the topic at hand and present the information they have learned. I would then have students apply this information to an issue that they have either experienced themselves or are personally invested in. I would also utilize journaling and assign students partners that they would be grouped with throughout the

semester. In these partnerships, students should speak with each other at least once a week and share their thoughts, opinions, insights or concerns as it relates to the course material. At the end of the semester, students would be required to submit a short paper summarizing their interactions with their partner and reflecting on how this partnership affected their learning.

I find journaling and partnering to be especially beneficial to students because this keeps students engaged, encouraged, and reflecting throughout the semester. Constantly interacting with other students and being forced to analyze new information while applying that information to personal experiences will lead to deeper understanding. Explaining personal interpretations of the information learned and sharing experiences will also give students practice in presenting information in a clear way. When learners are forced to communicate their thoughts to another person who is also learning that same information, they will experience realizations, make new connections, and have access to a different perspective. Though I do value the incorporation of group work, group work can be difficult to coordinate for online students who have other obligations such as their career or family responsibilities. The stress of coordinating group work can hinder the positive effects that it is associated with. The group work is often seen as an inconvenience to students and the purpose of working together becomes solely to submit an assignment quickly rather than truly taking the time to learn from one another and share information and experiences in a meaningful way. For this reason, I would prefer students to be assigned to a partner with the goal of establishing an honest rapport as opposed to submitting an assignment as a group.

In addition to these goals I have for students, it is also important that I as a teacher have goals set for myself. One of the most important aspects I need to be aware of is knowing that I also have a lot to learn from my students. Even though I would be acting as the teacher and

presenting the students with new information, they also have important contributions to add. As a learner myself, I have had teachers who did not appear to take students' concerns or insights seriously. I have also had teachers who were overwhelmingly supportive and were genuinely interested in the experiences and opinions of students. My own experience as a learner with both these types of teachers has proven to me that a teacher's receptiveness to students' thoughts and concerns does impact a student's learning. Remembering that establishing a relationship with learners is not only about helping them learn but also about learning myself will make me more productive as an educator and more adaptive both personally and professionally.

A few ways in which I would ensure that I am being receptive to students' needs and am open to opportunities to learn from them are by having several one-on-one meetings with each student throughout the semester, reminding them that I am open to constructive criticism, responding to emails regularly, and posting weekly announcements on the online learning platform for the class. If I were to teach an in person class, I would also arrive to class early and stay a few minutes late so that students feel comfortable approaching me. I would periodically remind students of my availability and willingness to talk or help them with any problems they may be having. These efforts will not only help me as an educator to learn and adapt but will also help my students to feel supported and connected.

I believe my own exploration and development of a personal teaching philosophy will help me establish myself as an educator and assist me in my future career. Regardless of the specific subject I am teaching or specific job title I will have, being firm in my teaching philosophy will allow me to better help my students. Establishing relationships with students will allow me to better guide them in making connections to course material. Encouraging them to discover more about themselves will assist them in developing their own unique perspectives and

ideas. By being consistent and acting from within this teaching philosophy, I will hopefully be more successful in my attempts to integrate self-directed learning, experiential learning, and transformative learning into my classes.

## References

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