

Adults Learning Freely:

Adult Learning Theory and Motivation within The Folkehojskole (Folk School) and Elderhostel Models of Adult Education

There are a number approaches for teaching leisure concepts to adults. Often these approaches are nothing more than lectures and some homework. If the goal of instruction is to impart some relevant knowledge or to obtain a skill, this goal is often unrealized when using the “sink or swim” method with a class of adult learners. Whether this is due to a lack of knowledge about educational theory by the ill-prepared instructor or because of any possible preconceived notions of participants is hard to say and, at the end of the day, doesn't matter. All that matters is whether or not the participant gained the knowledge or skill they enrolled in the class to get AND whether or not they *enjoyed* the learning process.

If there is no enjoyment to be gained from an activity it loses much of its leisure potential. Csikszentmihalyi tells us that “...enjoyment is like happiness in action...leading to greater skills...and a triumph over entropy” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Further, Kleiber tells us that “Enjoyment and relaxation...reflect what might be described as common, prototypical leisure experiences” (Kleiber, 1999). Without enjoyment, there is very little (if any) leisure benefit. If teaching methods cause the prevention of enjoyment then those methods must change if the goal of the program is to promote leisure based involvement.

Adult Learning Theory:

Adults learn much differently than children. The child education model (pedagogy) places the ultimate responsibility for learning on the teacher. The teacher determines what the students should learn, how lessons are delivered, and has the final say on whether learning has occurred. The pedagogical model is based on the assumption that the teacher is an expert and, *mostly*, that students have little to offer to the learning environment. While there are many educators who teach child-centered learning utilizing hands-on approaches, many classroom teachers do not. Integrated curriculums and lab classes are becoming more prevalent within the traditional schools in America. The results of including these concepts within the classroom can be seen in a dramatic rise in standardized test scores among participating schools.

Adult learning theory (andragogy) recognizes that adults bring many experiences to the learning environment. In *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (1980), Malcolm Knowles introduces us to the principles of adult learning. These four principles are helpful for teaching an adult population:

1. “Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction”

In most situations, adults are autonomous and self-directed. They need to be free to direct themselves. In order to capitalize on this self-direction, instructors should actively involve adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them. They must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and let them work on projects that reflect their interests. An effective approach is allowing the participants to assume responsibility for presentations

and group leadership. Instructors should be sure to act as facilitators, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts or formulated opinions which are presented as facts. Finally, they must show participants how the class will help them reach their goals.

2. “Experiences (including mistakes) provide the basis for learning activities”

Simply by being alive, adults accumulate a strong foundation of life experiences and knowledge that can include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. The adult learner needs to connect this new knowledge to the existing experience base. To help them do so, the instructor attempts to draw out participants' experience and knowledge which is relevant to the topic. The teacher of adults should relate proposed theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of prior experience within the learning process.

3. “Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life”

Typically, adults are goal-oriented and relevancy-oriented individuals. Upon enrolling in a course, they usually know what goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Learning should be applicable to their interests or other responsibilities to be easily seen as valuable to them. Therefore, instructors must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins. This means, also, that theories and concepts should be related to a setting familiar to participants. This need can be fulfilled by letting participants choose projects that reflect their own interests. Instructors must show participants how this class will

help them attain their goals. In order to achieve maximum effectiveness, this classification of goals and course objectives should be done early in the course.

4. “The Adult Learner should be treated as an Equal”

Like all learners, adults need to be shown respect. In order to gain the trust and cooperation of the students, instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class.

In Experiential Learning (1984), adult education specialist David Kolb has described Knowles’ theory as a “...four-phase cycle in which the learner does something concrete or has a specific experience which provides a basis for the learner’s observation and reflection on the experience and their own response to it. These observations are then assimilated into a conceptual framework or related to other concepts in the learner’s past experience and knowledge from which implications for action can be derived; and, finally, tested and applied in different situations.”

Kolb has created a visual model of this experience:



Source: David A. Kolb. Experiential Learning. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1984.

Adult Learning Motivation:

Motivation (as related to the learning styles of adults) is varied and complex. In Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn (1993), Wlodkowski tells of six factors that serve as sources of motivation for adult learning:

- 1. Social relationships:** to make new friends; to meet a need for associations and friendships.
- 2. External expectations:** to comply with instructions from someone else; to fulfill the expectations or recommendations of someone with formal authority.
- 3. Social welfare:** to improve ability to serve mankind, prepare for service to the community, and improve ability to participate in community work.
- 4. Personal advancement:** to achieve higher status in a job, secure professional advancement, and stay abreast of competitors.
- 5. Escape/Stimulation:** to relieve boredom, provide a break in the routine of home or work, and provide a contrast to other exacting details of life.
- 6. Cognitive interest:** to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, and to satisfy an inquiring mind (Wlodkowski, 1993).

Numbers two and four in the list above do not pertain to leisure; rather they seem purely focused on one's professional life. The others, however, have immediate implications relating to leisure. As leisure providers, we must assume what we are attempting to provide is important. In order to provide, one must motivate the student not only to enroll in the class, but to remain in the class until it is complete.

The best way to motivate adult learners is simply to enhance their reasons for enrolling and decrease the barriers. Instructors must learn why their students are enrolled (motivations); they have to discover what is keeping them from

learning (barriers). Then the instructors must plan their motivating strategies. A successful strategy includes showing adult learners the relationship between training and an expected promotion—cause: effect. In the field of leisure services a strategy could be showing participants the relationship between practicing tai chi or yoga and being more relaxed and meditative within a hectic, stressful environment or the relationship between walking and a lower rate of high blood sugar.

In order to remove barriers to learning, we must understand what motivates people to learn. Knowles (1980) states that people will learn faster and better when they:

- 1) **Want to learn**
- 2) **Know why it is important for them to learn**
- 3) **Believe that what they will learn will help them in real ways**
- 4) **Are in a supportive environment and are free from threat**
- 5) **Feel good about themselves and feel able to learn what is expected of them**
- 6) **Are provided the information they are to learn in several different ways**
- 7) **Learn by doing the task**
- 8) **Have a chance to practice what they have learned**
- 9) **Are given feedback on their performance**
- 10) **Are praised when doing things well**

Instead of designing a leisure program that prescribes books on how to cast a fishing pole, or telling someone how to cast it, show them with your pole while you are talking about it. Then, let the class discuss past experiences...the

fish that got away would be a great jumping off point for a discussion. After the class has finished, demonstrate how new techniques in casting can achieve better results. Then pair up advanced students with beginning students and let them work on techniques together.

By attempting to encompass the principals of the adult learning theory and by using proper teaching techniques for an adult population, positive results of the class will present themselves. Now let us look at two models of adult education: The Danish Folkehojskole (Folk School) and the Elderhostel program in America. Each model is different, however both methods have many aspects of the adult learning theory built into them, and both have a focus on leisure pursuits.

When Grundtvig, a 19th century Danish philosopher came up with the idea of the Danish Folk High School, he was interested in creating an atmosphere of learning similar to the one he experienced while studying in England. Grundtvig envisioned a place where the common man could go to learn. But learning was only part of the intent. Grundtvig wanted to create a place where the participant could become one with the knowledge...a place where knowledge was an all-consuming pursuit. Grundtvig felt that certain parameters were necessary to create such an atmosphere of learning. These tenants have become the cornerstone for the Danish Folk School model of education.

After 1828, following Grundtvig's resignation from church office, he began to put his ideas into print, and they gained acceptance among a group of people who became active in his behalf. Persons applied the name "Grundtvigian" to these ideas and the theology that accompanied them, and the name became

common in Denmark. Grundtvigians valued self-expression and regarded conversation as recreation. They possessed strong egos and had few doubts about their own country and their role in building it. They did not fear innovation and believed in showing people what they could do. On the other hand, they were also dependent on one another, cooperated in common endeavors, and compromised to make the situation work for others. Grundtvigians developed several mechanisms for implanting these ideas: singing, the "meeting," the church, grammar schools, and the folk schools. Of these several mechanisms, the folk school has been linked to the establishment of cooperatives, which resulted in Danish farm prosperity. Credit, as Michelson (1969) cautions, does not belong to the folk schools. The folk schools could not have existed during that period of Danish history except as part of a wider Grundtvigian community, and they were only one of several mechanisms by which the Grundtvigian idea system was disseminated and internalized. The folk schools did not teach economics nor advocate cooperation. Yet, the Grundtvigian ideas predisposed people for structural change, which did involve cooperation.

A Danish *Folkehojskole*, in contrast to an American secondary school, is:

- (a) Open to all those above eighteen years of age;**
- (b) NOT competence-giving;**
- (c) Not academically competitive, with no grades or marks; and**
- (d) Outside of the mainstream educational system.**

Steven Borish (1991), a folk school historian, tells us that all kinds of people come to a folk school, and they come for many reasons. One of the main reasons for the successes of the folk school model is the diversity of backgrounds found among participants *and* the insistence that those backgrounds take a place of importance within the class structure.

The folk school model of adult education incorporates many areas of Knowles' adult learning theory within its framework. Classes are set up in subject areas and rely on the experiences of the participants to solve problems that arise through group discussions. Inherent in the model is an "instructor" who serves as a guide toward knowledge. The students enroll voluntarily, seeking only knowledge, since neither diplomas nor any type of grades are given. Through discussions with others, the students are shown ways that this knowledge will help them in the "real" world. The environment is very supportive and successes are felt immediately. Experiential learning is the educational method that is combined with discussions that lead to a thorough understanding of the subject.

Folk School Adaptations within the U.S.

The Highlander Folk School is a purely American version of the Danish Folk High School. In 1932, Miles Horton created an avenue for social change in the South. Horton decided he would open a school and let the institutional form develop as the mountain people and factory workers evolved an educational program. In some respects the early development of Highlander resembled the Danish folk school. Horton and other staff provided educational and recreational programs for the community, initiated a residential school, and organized co-operatives. There was a difference between Highlander and other

types of “schools” that existed....Highlander supported the emerging Southern labor movement and Horton shaped Highlander's education program to support his social philosophy of economic democracy.

“The goal of Highlander was (and is) to provide education and support To poor and working people fighting economic injustice, poverty, Prejudice, and environmental destruction.” (www.highlandercenter.org)

Horton believed that political and economic power had to be challenged to release the common people from domination. That belief was certainly not unique in the Depression years or in other periods of American history. But there was a difference in Horton's approach: the people with the problems would have to work out their own solutions, not the “experts” who had unsuccessfully attempted to solve the problems of the Southern Highlands. Instead of giving solutions, Highlander helped common people acquire an educational base to gain control of their own lives. In the evolution of the Highlander idea, Horton called his year's experience in Denmark "an organic part of Highlander" (Horton, 1978), particularly the spirit and radical ideas of the folk school, but he did not repeat the mistake of others by replicating its structure or method.

A more “traditional” outlet of leisure is located in western, North Carolina. The John C. Campbell Folk School holds (primarily) week-long workshops focusing on handicrafts, music, nature-studies and Appalachian culture on a year-round basis.

The Campbell Folk School uses the model of the Danish Folk High Schools in an effort to educate and sustain the local native population. Established in 1925, the school has always been non-competitive; there are no grades, no

credits, no pitting one student against another. This method of teaching is what the Danes called "The Living Word". Discussion and conversation, rather than reading and writing, are emphasized—and most instruction is hands-on. In addition to workshops, the school holds community dances and concerts, serves as a gathering place for the community—many of whom played on the grounds as children. Full time staff can enroll in the workshops at no charge, and community residents may enroll at greatly reduced rates. The Campbell Folk School is an active, integrated part of its community.

The Folk Schools provide many resources to the participant, one of the most important being an emphasis on getting to know your fellow participants and utilizing each other's experiences to solve common problems. The folk school model is an excellent model for programming within the Adult population, especially a population comprised of older participants. The lack of stressors (grades, diplomas, etc...) helps a student who might be nervous about re-entering the classroom after many years. The ability to make a valuable contribution to the class (usually in the form of past experiences through discussion) causes the participant to have some emotional response to the class and allows for intensified meaning within the individual. The student becomes an active participant in his own education as opposed to the more traditional "passive" style where knowledge is hurled at the unsuspecting student and the student attempts to catch as much as possible.

Elderhostel Programs

The Elderhostel program was started in 1975 on the campuses of five colleges and universities in the state of New Hampshire; 220 people enrolled in the first programs. Last year, 170,000 older learners participated in Elderhostel workshops. Elderhostel collaborates with more than 600 independent educational and cultural institutions to develop and sponsor programs. Examples include colleges, universities, museums, performing arts centers, scientific research institutes, national and state parks, and many others. Each institution has its own unique focus and resources, which makes each program distinctive.

Elderhostel was founded as a not-for-profit organization by Marty Knowlton and David Bianco. Knowlton had recently returned from a four-year walking tour of Europe where he carried only minimal items and stayed in youth hostels. He was impressed by the youth hostel concept, with its safe, inexpensive lodgings and opportunities to meet fellow travelers. Knowlton was also taken with institutions in Scandinavia, called folk schools. There, he saw older adults handing down age-old traditions - folk art, music, lore and dance - to younger generations.

Seeing Europeans in their 60's, 70's and 80's playing an active and positive role in their communities caused Knowlton to wonder why their American counterparts didn't have a similar opportunity to remain active after retirement. Knowlton shared stories of his travels with Bianco, then director of residential life at the University of New Hampshire. Knowlton asked:

“Why should older Americans be expected to disappear quietly into a mundane retirement?”

This question has been asked by many in the fields of Leisure and Gerontology. In 1975 when Knowlton asked his question, Disengagement Theory was the leading theory to describe “successful aging”. The disengagement theory of successful aging sees the process of later life as a “...graceful acceptance of the gradual loss of friendships, social relationships, and previously enjoyed activities. ...Death is the only remaining frontier” (Lamdin, pg. 22, 1997). While this theory might explain the rationale, available programming has not always answered Knowles’ question. Bianco, after hearing about Knowlton's experiences, agreed that there was indeed a need. Discussions followed, and a learning program was conceived that combined educationally stimulating not-for-credit classes on a wide variety of subjects with comfortable, inexpensive lodgings. Last year about 170,000 older learners participated in more than 10,000 Elderhostel programs in American and abroad.

According to the Elderhostel website, there are 6 general types of programs:

Traditional Programs: Based on Elderhostel's early offerings, these programs are in nearly every corner of the globe. Examining many subjects, Traditional Programs provide Elderhostelers with opportunities to study different cultures, ancient histories, literature and art, and learn about modern peoples and issues.

Exploring North America: This type of itinerary-based program traces themes through designated areas of the United States and Canada. Themes range from historical themes (Civil War Battlefields) to Social Perspectives (The Trail of Tears).

Active Outdoor: These programs add the physical aspect to the Elderhostel experience. At least a third of the total program time is spent engaged in outdoor activities. Study the poetry of Robert Frost in Vermont while *literally* “walking the road less traveled”.

Service Programs: For those interested in volunteerism, these programs involve both learning and hands-on doing to serve the needs of a community. Service programs afford Elderhostelers the chance to give something back to society while experiencing a new culture or a new location.

Adventures Afloat Programs: Shipboard programs that explore the world's most fascinating waters are available to those participants who seek a less land-based version of geography and history. The Aegean Sea, Mississippi River, Antarctic waters, and the canals of France and Italy are explored. Study history, art, ecology, and culture aboard a floating classroom.

Intergenerational: A series of programs for Elderhostelers and their age-eligible grandchildren or young companions explores subjects that appeal to the young and old. Subjects range from dinosaurs to hot-air ballooning, Yellowstone's wildlife to space travel. The most recent program is based in Oxford, England and focuses on the Harry Potter adventures by J.K. Rowling. These programs offer actual castles to explore as well as fictional exploits to capture the imaginations of the young learner.



Many types of people enroll in an Elderhostel program. The following review is particularly informative:

“Marilyn Brady, 69, has long been fascinated by Inuit culture and life within the Arctic Circle. “The Arctic was especially mysterious to me, as I grew up in South Carolina,” says the retired owner of a curtain shop. “The thought of people living in almost year-round snow and ice – not to mention 24-hour summer sun and winter darkness – was unfathomable.” After a childhood spent avidly reading National Geographic, the biographies of Sir Martin Frobisher and Robert Peary, and books of Inuit folktales, Brady was hungry for a firsthand experience. “I didn’t want to just go on a photo safari or group tour,” she says. “I wanted to find out what the Arctic was like from people who lived there and had their roots there. I wanted it to be an internal experience, not just a physical adventure.”

Brady chose an Elderhostel program in Kotzebue, Alaska and another at Prudhoe Bay, spending more than two weeks immersing herself in hands-on studies of Arctic ecology, Inuit culture and contemporary life, and traditional methods for catching, curing and smoking fish at an Inuit summer fish camp. “It was the satisfying culmination of six decades of fantasizing about what the Arctic and Inuit life are like,” says Brady.” (Elderhostel website: www.elderhostel.org, 2004).

The following chart compares the Folk School, Elderhostel, and Classroom Lecture types of educational environments within a framework of Knowles’ theories of Adult Learning and Motivation:

	Tenets of Adult Education							Motivations for Learning					
	<i>Learning by Doing (Hands On)</i>	<i>Learners treated as Peers of Instructor</i>	<i>Supportive Environment Free from Threat</i>	<i>Utilizes Participant Experience within Learning Structure</i>	<i>Curriculum is Relevant to Personal/Professional Life</i>	<i>Curriculum Presented in Several Ways (Ind. Learning Styles)</i>	<i>Participants are involved in Curriculum Planning/Instruction</i>	<i>Provides Stimulation/Escape</i>	<i>Focuses on External Expectations</i>	<i>Encourages Forming Social Relationships</i>	<i>Focuses on Professional Advancement</i>	<i>Learning for Learning's Sake (cognitive interest)</i>	<i>Focuses on/Prepares for Volunteerism (Social Welfare)</i>
Lectures/ Traditional College Coursework	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Folk Schools	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Elderhostels	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	

 Is always included within learning environment
 Could be included within learning environment

The purpose of the previous chart is not intended to draw conclusions about effectiveness in any of the three methods of instruction. The purpose is to show how formatting changes within an educational system can affect participants. If we assume Knowles is correct - *that adults learn better when adult learning theory is applied to a class setting*- then utilizing alternate methods of teaching will lead to a higher levels of subject understanding among students.

Two distinctions are made in the chart. The green pushpins represent concepts that are inherent to the particular educational structure. The black circles represent concepts that could be included within the educational structure at the instructor's preference. There are many instances of "hands-on" learning within a traditional university atmosphere; however, these are usually reserved for classes in educational theory, science laboratories, or physical education. While it is possible to teach history in many different ways (debates, tours, interviews, etc...) it is more likely that it will be taught (in the University setting) by an instructor lecturing on the pieces that he or she feels are worth studying.

Why do so many educational programs follow the traditional framework for instruction? Perhaps it is easier to do things the way one was taught. Indeed, the university system of teaching is much the same as the elementary school system of teaching. Certainly there are differences, but walk into many university classrooms today and you will find one instructor, imparting his/her wealth of knowledge to a classroom full of students attempting (sometimes unsuccessfully) to catch what information they can *and* to somehow make it relevant to their lives. In order to effectively teach adults one must utilize the methods contained

in the adult learning theory to do so. This is even more critical in a leisure environment where participants are often enrolled voluntarily and are seeking pleasure and joy as a result. If we, as leisure professionals, will utilize the tenants of the Adult Learning Theory we will have more successes teaching those enrolled in our programs, and those enrolled will gain more as a result.

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