

In memory

MALCOLM KNOWLES, 1913-1997.

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When Malcolm Knowles taught at the University of British Columbia in 1978 he declined opportunities to go to lunch. Instead he and his wife Hulda took brisk walks to the university gates and back. It was the same in Hamburg in 1983 when he helped design a curriculum for lifelong education for UNESCO. In adult life as in childhood Knowles was a good scout, well organized, apt to make plans and generous in thought and deed. He endured the rigours of frequent travel and was largely unable to decline invitations. But, with characteristic thoroughness, he planned to stay around and, in the end, with the help of long walks and an upbeat attitude, he tricked his body into lasting 84 years.

As a youth Malcolm designed a large chart detailing what was needed to assemble 50 Boy Scout merit badges that would win him a free trip to England. He won the contest. Two years later he would enter Harvard and, later still, complete a Masters (1950) and Doctoral (1960) degree at the University of Chicago. Malcolm's scouting background stood him in good stead as an adult educator at the Boston YMCA where he worked to get learners in an astronomy class out of lectures and onto the roof to peer through telescopes (Carlson, 1985).

He had a lifelong commitment to self-directed learning. This was refined when working with the YMCA in Chicago (1946-1951) and during an eight-year sojourn as Executive Director of the American Adult Education Association (1951-1959). Later, as a professor of Adult Education at Boston, and then at the University of North Carolina, Malcolm ruffled feathers but worked assiduously, and was generous with his time and expertise.

His work on learner characteristics owes a considerable debt to Eduard Lindeman and the term "andragogy" was acquired from Dusan Savicevic, a Yugoslav educator. At first he was committed to Harry Overstreet's notion of the "mature mind" but later he felt it was "self-directed learning" that was needed to secure the sagging bulwarks of American democracy. In recent years it became fashionable to claim his preoccupation with individual learning and his work with corporations diverted adult education from its historic preoccupations with social structures and inequity. If so, this is an astonishing testament to his energies, influence, populist appeal and pragmatism. But Malcolm did what he did and cannot be condemned for not doing what he never set out to do. He'd listen patiently to critics and then say "You seem to have tons of energy and a lot of good ideas—why don't you do it?"

He was very much a man of his time, shaped by early encounters with the Boy Scouts, later contacts with the group dynamics movement (including the work of Carl Rogers) and the social gospel of the YMCA. Whether constructed as Scout or

missionary Knowles was an enthusiast and populist, and willing to preach in as many places as he could visit in the shortest possible time.

Unlike some rivals in the academy, Malcolm had a generous spirit. He found time for everyone, and when solidarity was needed to buttress adult education he did what was needed. He liked working with media and willingly gave interviews (e.g. Boshier, 1977). At the same time his letters testifying to the quality of Ph.D. dissertations sounded like Nobel Prize nominations and were apt to be ignored. It was this and his proclivity to have 60 or 70 advisees that upset guardians of academic rigour in more than one university.

In the last half of his life he backed away from false binary oppositions in his work (e.g. pedagogy versus andragogy, self- versus teacher-directed learning) and, unlike other illuminaries who say one thing and do another, practiced what he preached. The way Malcolm conducted himself was congruent with what he espoused and his ability to continue learning and revise earlier positions is something the rest of us might heed. This guy was an out-and-out "over-the-top" enthusiast for adult education. Malcolm in full flight was a joy to behold. Even if assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners appear shaky in a postmodern context, implications for practice that sprang from his theorising have considerable merit in their own right. It is entirely possible that his theorising was facile but his suggestions for practice are correct.

Malcolm Knowles (1960) edited what is still one of the best Handbooks of Adult Education (given free to delegates at the 1960 Second UNESCO World Conference on Adult Education), influenced vast armies of students and supported most of his colleagues. His work is known all over the world and he kept on truckin' right to the end. As a life lived, his was long and productive. Malcolm Knowles, Adult Educator, died November 27, 1997.

References:

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- Knowles, M.S. (Ed.) *Handbook of Adult Education*. Chicago: Adult Education Association of the USA.