

MAKING SENSE OF ADULT LEARNING

Dorothy MacKeracher (1996). Toronto, ON: Culture Concepts Inc.

Moving into the field of adult education is fraught with questions wide-eyed newcomers will ask their more established counterparts. Where do I begin to understand the field of adult education? While the newcomers know intuitively that the theory and practices of the field are helpful in their educational endeavors, they are unsure where to begin the journey. Often, their next question is, Who do I read first? The answer is not so simple when the plethora of theorists and practitioners that abound in the literature is laid out to them. However, Dorothy MacKeracher's book *Making Sense of Adult Learning* may provide answers to these two questions.

Making Sense of Adult Learning has its roots in the Ontario Ministry of Education report *Adult Learning Principles and The Application to Program Planning* (1979). During the development of the early version of the report Dorothy MacKeracher served as co-editor and research assistant with Donald H. Brundage who directed the project. In the early 1990s with the discontinuation of the report for public consumption MacKeracher found herself, with encouragement of the original author, reworking the content of the report. Combining her studies of adult education, her work as an adult education faculty member at University of New Brunswick, and her personal experience she has made major revisions, updated references, and added new sections in reframing the report. The intended audiences for *Making Sense of Adult Learning* are students who are preparing to become adult educators.

The book is organized into ten chapters. Each contains helpful prompts that focus meaning on ideas found in and around the prompt. Sometimes these prompts contain quotes from other authors. Similar to a lecturer using overhead slides to summarize points around which the student is to take notes, these prompts, if collected, afford students guides to move more adeptly into the adult education field. Also, MacKeracher provides her interpretation of "Learning and Facilitating Principles" in each chapter. Again, the student can transcribe these principles to frame a personal treatise from which to start their journey. She encourages the reader to adopt and/or adapt these principles because the context in which they work will demand variations on the content.

Chapter One serves as MacKeracher's introduction to her assumptions and an examination of some background issues. Her assumptions include (a) learning is a natural, evolving process; (b) learning is a dialectical process; (c) learning is non-normative; (d) learning process is cyclical; (e) learning involves learning to learn; (f) all adults can and do learn; and (g) adults are not mature children nor are children immature adults. Ever thoughtful, MacKeracher assists the reader in suggesting a kaleidoscope metaphor to frame her learner centred assumptions. She believes the learning process is "when all colors [of the kaleidoscope] are brought together to see the wonder of the rainbow connection" (p. 2). This metaphor is carried forward implicitly and explicitly throughout the remainder of the book.

In Chapter Two she outlines five characteristics of adult learners: physiological perspective, past experience, time perspectives, the self and self direction. Chapters Three through Seven explain and describe five aspects of learning—the emotional, cognitive, social, physical and spiritual aspects. Her treatment of the emotional, cognitive, social, and physical aspects are consistent with the intent of the book, while her explanation of the spiritual aspects still needs more clarity and content. Although MacKeracher admits to shortcomings in this chapter, her presentation provides the starting point from which to explore this esoteric aspect of learning. With the inclusion of her “story about one of [her] experiences with the spiritual aspects of learning” (p. 165) she provides a personal narrative for reflection and a source of inspiration. Her challenge is not unlike what many other adult educators encounter when students develop their theory and practice with ideas taken from the recent influx of books and articles on spirituality.

For chapters Three through Seven a diagrammatic presentation of the five aspects of learning would be helpful. While MacKeracher includes models throughout the text, she does not present a connective diagram for her presentation of the five aspects of learning. With the inclusion of such a diagram it would remind the novice adult educator that the five aspects of learning are not separate, they are interrelated. Such a model would contribute to the kaleidoscope metaphor mentioned earlier and referenced again later in the book.

Chapters Eight and Nine summarize models of learning cycles and learning styles, and methods and models for facilitating adult learning. MacKeracher introduces several theorists with David Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle and Learning Style Model serving as primary references. She begins her discussion of methods and models for facilitating adult learning by outlining how she regards facilitation “as a responsive activity adapting to the learner’s activities and the natural learning process” (p. 217). While she provides a fair representation of facilitation that will serve the student well, it is also misleading to the student new to the field. It would be helpful to distinguish clearly between key process terms such as teaching, training, and facilitating. The discussion would need to identify the schools of thought surrounding similar terms; place the terms in relationship to each other; reduce confusion in their application that is frequently the concern of the student adult educator; and situate the content of this book in relationship to other books written about these terms.

In Chapter 10 MacKeracher outlines how to pull all of the terms, concepts and practices she has outlined together. She revisits the metaphor of the kaleidoscope to suggest how the previous nine chapters provide many colorful interpretations of the theory and practices of adult education. Like a gift to the reader, MacKeracher offers practical advice of two lists of ten themes useful to learners and facilitators. *Making Sense of Adult Learning* can serve well-established educators with an introductory text they might use to assist newcomers in charting a course in the adult education field.

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