

## BOOK REVIEWS/RECENSIONS

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### THE MAKING OF AN ADULT EDUCATOR

Malcolm Knowles. 1989. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

And there goes Channing  
With his bland, superior look,  
Cold as a moonbeam  
On a frozen brook.

This is the stereotype that adherents of Unitarianism like William Ellery Channing caused to be pinned on their fellow parishioners. Malcolm Knowles, a kinder, more gentle Unitarian, wants to be remembered as breaking that stereotype. In his autobiography, *The Making of an Adult Educator*, Knowles describes how he spent his life as a warm and human practitioner and exponent of adult education who made friends of his graduate students in institutions of higher education, institutions that frowned on such expressions of humanity. He also uses his autobiography to continue his long-standing advocacy of a prescribed adult education technology (andragogy) and his more recent promotion of an institutionalization of what has historically been a pluralistic adult education. In so doing, Knowles reverts to the colder Channing stereotype, pointing up the mixed legacy he will be bequeathing the field of adult education.

Malcolm Knowles wants people to remember him as an authentic person in his human relationships. This is probably the most important of his contributions to adult education everywhere, including academe. It is with some pride that he proclaims, "...I have not fallen off the authenticity wagon many times since" (p. 35) fighting off a backsliding early in his professional career. Clearly, his work with graduate students of adult education has been important. All things considered, Malcolm judges that:

...my most satisfying contribution has been in facilitating the development of several hundred students who worked

with me on their degrees in adult education at Boston University, North Carolina State University, Nova University, the Union Graduate School, and the Fielding Institute (p. 100).

These are the people who will want this book in their libraries. It will occupy a respected place next to the several other Knowlesian tomes they relied on during their post-graduate experience with the charismatic Malcolm. This will be another of his books published after mandatory retirement that these people will want on their shelves. The books written after retirement already outnumber those written before retirement. In this most recent effort, they will discover that Knowles, the former YMCA secretary, had to struggle to maintain his student-centeredness in the university.

### **Advice: Don't Be Yourself; Be a Professor**

When Knowles received his doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1960 and accepted an appointment to head the new graduate program at Boston University, he also received some advice on how to comport himself. One of his University of Chicago mentors urged him "to become dignified, formal, reserved, and authoritative" (p. 33) as a university professor and program administrator. "You can't go around with your arms around students and hugging them like YMCA secretaries and association executives do" (p. 18), Malcolm was told. Knowles confesses that:

...during my first year at Boston University I tried playing this role, and I was miserable. I felt phony. My self-concept was that of a warm, tender, loving, student-centered person rather than a stuffy professor. At the end of the year I toyed with the idea of resigning and going back into voluntary association administration, where I could be natural. But I decided to stay a second year and see what I could get away with by being myself (p. 33).

Knowles could have written much about what he was able to "get away with" and what he was not able to "get away with". But *he doesn't* consider angst and struggle, *Sturm und Drang*, as important. It's just too negative for a positive and loving fellow like Malcolm. So we hear nothing of his fight to remain at Boston University despite an administration that believed he was "getting away with" far too much.

Not a word about giving up that fight, deserting his supporters, and fleeing to what seemed like a more harmonious, more positive situation at North Carolina State University.

It could be helpful to prospective professors of adult education to hear his view of the cost of maintaining his authenticity in so alien and alienating an environment as a university where arrogance, bullying, and political gamesmanship are as indigenous as on the grade school playground. The only other institution so similar to the university as the playground, where fraternal collusion is provided the lackeys and mouse farts and eternal enmity is accorded the authentic independent, is organized crime.

But we hear nothing about politics, about struggle, about "the negative" from Malcolm. Except he admits, and this is remarkable for the positive thinking Malcolm Knowles, "...I am just not good at political action" (p. 146).

### **The Other Side of Malcolm Knowles**

Society should be grateful that he is not, for political action would be necessary to implement the ideas emanating from the cold, superior, moonbeam side of the dual-faceted Malcolm Knowles. Knowles the intellectual tends to negate Knowles the warm and human practitioner and advocate of adult education. Knowles the intellectual lacks the depth and sensitivity of Knowles the believer in good human relations.

Knowles looks forward with excitement, as is his wont in all areas, to "the not-too-distant future" when "we will have chemicals available to enhance memory, speed up the learning process, induce self-directedness, increase motivation, and heavens knows what else" (p. 129). He is positive and uncritical of this possibility, even apparently unsuspecting of any dangers in such thinking. He just rubs his hands in anticipation, seeing no contradiction in the concept of chemically-induced "self-directedness".

Malcolm joyously pronounces he has become convinced "that most educational services will be delivered electronically within another couple of decades." Of course, they will be "congruent with the andragogical model" (p. 129). How so? How can moonbeam distance education be congruent with warm and fuzzy andragogy? Not to worry. Think positively. It will work out in practice however intellectually

incompatible distance education may be with the kind of in-person adult education professed by Knowles.

These examples of intellectual superficiality are merely brief predictions he makes for the future, but they indicate the non-reflective nature of the man. How can he wax rhapsodic about potential for “chemicals for learning” in a drug abusing culture? How can he promote distance education without reflecting on the importance of direct person-to-person contact? How can he advocate either of these concepts without reflecting on who will control the situation? Who decides that self-directed learning will be “induced”? Who will control and provide access to knowledge through distance education? Will the potential for profits result in a phasing out of the public library, as that same potential has resulted in the phasing out of the small farmer in favor of big monopolistic enterprises? Not to worry. Be positive. It will all work out.

### **Exponent of the Gimmick**

Knowles is a pursuer and promoter of the gimmick. Drug-assisted learning, distance education, and competency-based adult education are among the latest fads, so Malcolm’s positive thinking salivates over them. Two gimmicks Knowles claims as his own, however, he promotes extensively in this autobiography. They are his technology of andragogy, for which his advocacy is well known, and a systematized structuring of adult education into something he terms a Lifelong Learning Resource System (LLRS).

Both his andragogy and his LLRS are gimmicks of considerable proportions. Elsewhere I have critiqued andragogy (see *Vitae Scholasticae*, 8(1) Spring 1989: 217-233). Suffice it to say that advocacy of a one-size-fits-all “technology of adult education” is a somewhat incongruous act for one claiming his place in history as a warm, human practitioner-theorist. Perhaps the ultimate irony is his positioning of himself as a proponent of replacing the rigidity of schools with a more systematized, thus more rigid, adult education. Knowles continues on, impervious to any recognition of intellectual inconsistency. His practice is like the hot springs, but his theory is reminiscent of Channing’s frozen brook.

Malcolm would have us charge forward into the 21st century like the Light Brigade of the 19th, trading lance and sabre for his andragogy and his Lifelong Learning Resource System. He sees them as weapons to

deal with what he calls the “accelerating pace of change” and the “quickenning rate of obsolescence of human beings” (p. 131). His technology of andragogy and his resource system are to be the means by which the person of the future will become competent to adjust to this change. And Malcolm clearly means for people to adjust to the change, not resist it or seek to redirect it.

### **Knowlesian or Orwellian?**

The Lifelong Learning Resource System, managed by professional adult educators steeped in andragogy, would provide satellite centers “within walking distance of every citizen...who would enter the satellite center nearest...home, starting perhaps at age four or five and returning periodically for the rest of...life” (p. 133). The life of Knowles’s lucky citizen of the future would be developed by the “educational diagnostician” who would help determine competencies needed at various stages of such life roles as learner, self, friend, global citizen, family member, worker, leisure time user, etc. (This from a person who doesn’t like to play roles because he wants to be authentic.) Then, it’s on to the “educational planning consultant” who will help work out plans for meeting the diagnosed needs for competencies. Once these competencies are achieved, it’s back to the diagnostician for determining the next level of required role competencies.

Knowles calls this a “spiral” of learning projects (p. 135). Analysts like Ivan Illich would interpret the logical outcome of Knowles’s vision as “Imprisoned in the Global Classroom”. But Knowles is unimpressed with Illich whom he considers, at best, negative. Knowles is so “positive” and upbeat that he can allow his advocacy to degenerate into Babbitt-like tub-thumping for a potentially dehumanizing form of adult education and be totally blind to what he is doing.

His autobiography reprises his current thinking and provides a 36 page chronological list with personal annotations of his 197 articles written over 60 years. A reading of a judiciously selected set of these articles, combined with a review of his books, could prove instructive to students of the history of adult education. Such a reading could show the level of quality of thought sufficient to propel one to the forefront of academic leadership in adult education in the latter half of the 20th century.

Knowles certainly reflected his times. He has been to adult education what the TV evangelists have been to Christianity during the same

period. Knowles is a marvellous enthusiast. His charisma can bring joy and understanding and a sense of purpose to people's lives. But when he tackles things intellectual and philosophical, he becomes as dangerous to adult education as the TV preachers are to Christianity. To the extent that he can convince people to adopt his over-simplifications, his gimmicks, and his uncritical recommendations for "improving" adult education, to that extent will he have negated all his committed work as a practitioner and tarnished the warm, humane image he seeks to portray for himself in his autobiography. Instead of accepting his vision of himself as the kinder, gentler Unitarian, it will have to be said:

And there went Knowles  
Being warm but promoting chill,  
Another moonbeam  
Cast from Beacon Hill.

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**FOSTERING CRITICAL REFLECTION  
IN ADULTHOOD: A GUIDE TO TRANSFORMATIVE  
AND EMANCIPATORY LEARNING**

Jack Mezirow. 1990. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

At the publishers' exhibit at a national adult education conference in 1990 (the year this book was published), a long-time Canadian adult educator told me this was the most worthwhile book there. When asked why, this adult educator agreed with several U.S. graduate students who are neophytes to the field of adult education: the book was both useful to them as practitioners interested in enlarging their repertoire of approaches to use with adults and conceptually provocative to them in its call for dialogue about the centrality of critical reflection and the need for transformative learning.

In the "Preface", Mezirow states the book was "meant to be a resource for educators, counselors, advisors, psychologists, and trainers who are interested in helping adults identify the frames of *reference and structures of assumptions* that influence the way they think, decide, feel, and act on their experience" (p. xiv). He adds that many chapters will be useful to "adult learners who want to gain greater insight into themselves" (p. xv).