Chapter 5
Co–Constructed Curricula:
An Adult Learning Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes an adult learning perspective toward effective co-constructed curriculum, beginning with an overview of three distinct models, theories, or concepts felt to be seminal in the field of adult and continuing education. Following the presentation of these constructs, the chapter continues with a discussion of implications for learning involvement and then moves to an explanation of how curricula can be co-constructed. Detailed in this application section are the involvement of learners in the process of co-construction, the ways in which content and design are derived with learners' involvement, and the various roles of co-constructed assessment. The chapter concludes with three case studies as practical examples of co-constructed curriculum initiatives and a closing summary.

INTRODUCTION

One strategic approach to curriculum development is to derive programs, courses, and syllabi from adult learners themselves. Whether for formal or informal education, for credit or leisure learning, traditional curriculum development can be adapted to support significant learner involvement in a wide variety of learning contexts and environments.

Today's learners, in particular, respond positively to having input into their learning opportunities, and embrace assisting in design, development, and evaluation phases as well. This chapter considers not just the models and theories that support stronger learner involvement in the

curriculum development process but also provides the rationale for doing so and suggests ways to enrich and ensure success in these endeavors.

There are numerous concepts, models, and theories common to the field of adult and continuing education that support the involvement of learners in co-constructing curricula. This chapter begins with an overview of three prominent adult learning concepts: andragogy, transformative learning, and social learning. Affiliated with each of these concepts is a practice that connects to adults learning in an environment with a co-constructed curricula. These practices include self-directed learning, reflection, and collaboration. These constructs and their associated practices are then recast and

summarized in three categories of implications for learner involvement: (a) tapping into and sharing experience; (b) relevancy, practicality, and goal orientation; and, (c) self-direction, internal motivation, and control.

The second part of this chapter describes the various aspects that support a co-constructed curriculum including involvement by students (curriculum co-constructors), curriculum content and design, and curriculum assessment. The chapter then presents three case studies as exemplars and concludes with a summary and implications for more significant learner involvement in co-construction of curriculum of adult and continuing education.

Models, Concepts, and Related Practices

Do adults learn differently than children? In 1968, Malcolm Knowles, a central figure in the history of adult education, claimed they did, and during the second half of the twenty-first century, wrote and taught extensively on the concept, practice, and implications of andragogy. Knowles' model of andragogy is described below along with several other concepts that have shaped the models/concepts and practice of adult education.

Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning

Nearly half a century ago, Malcolm Knowles proposed the concept of andragogy to explain how teaching adults could – and should be – differentiated from teaching children. While Knowles (1990) did not actually coin the term *andragogy*, meaning the "art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43), he is responsible for the popularization of the concept in North America. Knowles told of first using the term *andragogy* "in an article in *Adult Leadership* in 1968" (p. 42), after learning of the concept from a Yugoslavian adult educator.

Knowles described assumptions about adult learners that originally included four distinct adult characteristics or predispositions; a fifth and sixth characteristic were later added. These six assumptions that follow are key to the practice of adult and continuing education:

1. **Self-Directedness:** Adults approach their learning in a more independent and self-directed manner as opposed to being dependent on a teacher for one's learning, resources, strategies, and evaluation of outcomes. Knowles went on to explain that self-directedness is always present on a continuum – that all learners, children and adults alike, are more or less self-directed depending on maturity, preexisting knowledge, motivation, and risk involved in the learning experience.

2. **Rich Reservoir of Experience:** As adults mature, "they accumulate an increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning" (Knowles, 1990, p. 45). According to Knowles, our experience is important not only as a basis for more meaningful learning, but in providing links and connections teachers can use in instruction.

3. **Readiness to Learn:** Learning in adulthood is often prompted by some real-life need, such as a life transition, developmental change, personal challenge, crisis, or opportunity. So, adults most frequently pursue their learning on a need-to-know basis rather than being ready to learn based on age or developmental stage (as with children), or advancement in a standard or prescribed school curriculum.

4. **Problem or Performance-Centered Orientation:** For adults, learning is a process or endeavor aimed at enhancing competencies or skills needed for a job, life stage, or encountered challenge. Therefore, adults want their learning to have immediate appli-

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