

Chapter 1

The Role of Information Communication Technologies in Enriching Adult Education Theory Building

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ABSTRACT

Communication technology has influenced every aspect of our personal and professional lives. Yet, much of the literature on this influence focuses on the impact it has had on our actions and on the practice of teaching and learning. Little has addressed the impact of communication technology on the theory building in the field of adult education. How has it influenced the movement forward of the field itself? How has it changed the communication among professionals and between professionals and students? It has been almost 100 years since Adult Education made its entry into the arena of professions and fields of study. In recent decades, Malcolm Knowles is credited with popularizing adult learning theory, yet Stephen Brookfield, Jack Mezirow, Maxine Greene and Knud Illeris are among those who have moved the field forward. Along with this progression in theory, the utilization and sophistication of communication technology has escalated. This chapter will focus on the influence of communication technology throughout this history of adult education, particularly its influence on communities of learning and communities of practice for the experienced and the emerging adult educational professional and how it might enrich the future of the profession.

INTRODUCTION

Adult education traces its history to philosophical roots in ancient civilizations yet its emergence as an academic field is considered to have begun with the establishment of the American Association

of Adult Education in the early 20th century. This chapter will begin by exploring the major theories and theorists in the field of adult education. While Malcolm Knowles is credited with popularizing adult learning theory in the 1970's, Stephen Brookfield, Jack Mezirow, Victoria Marsick and Knud Illeris are among those who have moved the field forward over the recent decades.

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Along with this progression in theory, the use of technology has escalated in popularity creating a need to frame its application in the foundational principles of adult education; an “Andragogy 2.0” focus is required. Technology has played an important part in the development and direction of the field. The Gutenberg printing press is often credited with being the beginning of the influence of technology on education and communication, however all early advances in transportation and communication have had an influence on the field of adult education. Any technology before and since Gutenberg that has facilitated the coming together of individuals and knowledge whether by transporting the individuals to a common place to share knowledge or by communicating the information to the individuals at remote locations has influenced adult learning. Today, wiki’s and blogs are the norm. Some universities offer space behind password-protected firewalls, while others advocate the use of public spaces for these online collaborations. What impact does this have on confidentiality and intellectual property issues? A plethora of questions begin to emerge and answers are only beginning to follow.

BACKGROUND

This chapter explores the role of information communication technology in the development of the field of adult education and suggests how today’s Web 2.0 technology can enhance the field’s future growth. To understand the background of this influence, each of these two components will be explored individually.

The Development of the Field of Adult Education

It has been nearly a century since adult education made its entry into the arena of professions and fields of study. But the roots of the field extend through millennia. Malcolm Knowles (1989)

describes himself as being “part of a long and significant historical movement” (p. 72) and assigns the role of adult educators to great teachers of ancient China, Rome and Greece. However, he suggests that “ancient teachers were following their intuitions rather than some prescribed doctrine such as pedagogy” (p. 61). He continues that because of their experience with adults, they “perceived learning to be a process of active inquiry, not passive reception of transmitted content” and therefore “invented techniques for engaging learners in active inquiry” (p. 61). He credits the Chinese and Hebrews with methodologies such as the “case method or critical incident”. Wang and King (2010) note that one of the hallmarks of adult learning, critical reflection, was advanced by Confucius over 2,500 years ago. They add that ancient cultures in India included the “development of intuition, aesthetics, and a futuristic and ecological perspective” (p. 14) in their view of learning. The “Socratic dialogue” which Knowles (1989) attributes to the Greeks consisted of posing a dilemma to the group who would then pool their knowledge and experience to develop a solution. The Romans were credited with the methodology that involved forcing the students to state positions and to defend them.

While Knowles (1989) notes a gap in the literature on adult education between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance he also indicates that the “institutionalization of education for children” (p. 62) developed during that same period. The Renaissance is also credited with an abundance of new scientific discoveries and the development of a new approach to scientific inquiry. Galileo first pointed the newly invented telescope to the sky in 1609 beginning the use of optical technology in the investigation of our universe. During this period, Francis Bacon formulated the scientific method, a disciplined approach to searching for new knowledge that has influenced the advancement of every academic research project since and therefore will be investigated further in the next section of this chapter. As we consider the field of

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