

PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY AS APPLIED TO ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract.

The paper explores the philosophical history as Applied to Adult Education through the intersection of philosophical inquiry and historical context in shaping the foundations, aims, and practices of adult education. It argues that adult education, often viewed through pragmatic or policy-driven lenses, requires a deeper philosophical grounding to address questions of purpose, agency, and human development. By tracing key philosophical traditions from enlightenment thought to critical theory: The paper demonstrates how historical shifts in philosophy have influenced adult education's role in the society, including concepts of lifelong learning, emancipation, and democratic participation. The paper also emphasizes the importance of reflective thinking and contextual understanding in adult learning, drawing on figures such as Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire to illustrate how educational ideals have evolved in response to changing social and political landscapes. It concludes that a historically informed philosophical approach enables educators and policymakers to critically assess contemporary practices and resist purely instrumental models of education. Ultimately, the paper advocates for the integration of philosophical history into adult education discourse as a means to foster more holistic, ethical, and socially responsive learning environments. This approach not only enriches theoretical understanding but also empowers adult learners as active, reflective participants in their own educational journeys.

Keywords: Adult Education, Philosophical History, Lifelong Learning, Critical Theory, Reflective Thinking

Introduction

Philosophy has long played a foundational role in the development and evolution of education. The philosophical underpinnings of education not only shape the principles and methodologies of pedagogy but also provide a lens through which we can examine and understand different educational approaches and their relevance in contemporary contexts. In the field of adult education, the

interplay of philosophical ideas takes on particular significance, as it informs the principles and practices that cater to the unique needs and aspirations of adult learners. This discussion explores the impact of various philosophical traditions, ranging from ancient wisdom to modern critical theory, on adult education. By examining these philosophical foundations, one can gain valuable insights into how adult education has evolved, how it is

structured, and how it continues to adapt to the changing demands of a dynamic world. Each philosophical perspective offers distinct insights and principles that contribute to the rich tapestry of adult education, shaping its goals, methods, and outcomes. In this exploration, we will delve into the philosophical foundations that have informed and continue to shape the landscape of adult education, drawing connections between theory and practice.

Ancient Philosophical Foundations

Ancient philosophical foundations, as exemplified by the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, have had a profound influence on the field of education, including adult education. In "The Republic," Plato articulated a vision of education that was deeply entwined with the creation of an ideal society. He believed that individuals' moral and intellectual development was pivotal to the overall well-being of the state. Education, according to Plato, was the means by which a just and harmonious society could be achieved. He advocated for a system that started in early childhood but extended throughout a person's life, emphasizing the importance of continuous learning.

Aristotle, on the other hand, focused on the practical aspects of education. He recognized the significance of knowledge that could be applied in real-life situations. Aristotle's philosophy stressed the development of practical wisdom or *phronesis*, which involved making sound judgments in the complex realities of life. This pragmatic approach to education underscores the idea that learning should serve a purpose beyond mere theoretical knowledge.

The philosophical ideas of Plato and Aristotle can be applied to the

realm of adult education in several ways. First and foremost, they underscore the importance of lifelong learning. Plato's emphasis on continuous education, even into adulthood, highlights the notion that learning is not confined to the early years of one's life but should be a lifelong endeavor. This concept is particularly relevant in today's rapidly changing world, where adults frequently need to adapt to new challenges and opportunities.

Additionally, both philosophers' teachings stress the development of critical thinking skills. Plato, in his dialectical method, and Aristotle, through his emphasis on logical reasoning, encourage individuals to think critically and engage in meaningful intellectual discourse. In adult education, cultivating these critical thinking skills is essential to empower learners to make informed decisions, evaluate information, and participate actively in their communities.

Furthermore, the role of education in personal and societal development, a central theme in ancient philosophical thought, remains pertinent to adult education. Just as Plato believed that the individual's moral and intellectual development contributed to the well-being of the state, adult education can be seen as a means to foster personal growth and social progress. Adult learners can apply their knowledge and skills to contribute to their communities and societies, thereby fulfilling a larger social purpose.

In summary, the ancient philosophical foundations of Plato and Aristotle have left an enduring legacy on the field of education, with their ideas still holding relevance for adult education. Concepts of lifelong learning, critical thinking, and education's role in personal and

societal development continue to guide contemporary educational practices. As adults pursue education and personal growth throughout their lives, they draw upon the enduring wisdom of these ancient philosophers to enrich their educational experiences

Enlightenment and Rationalism

The Enlightenment era, marked by a surge of intellectual and philosophical thought in the 17th and 18th centuries, introduced a profound shift in how people viewed education and rationalism. Enlightenment philosophers, such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, played pivotal roles in advancing the ideals of reason, individual rights, and education as a means to foster rationality.

John Locke, in his influential work "Some Thoughts Concerning Education", asserted that the primary goal of education was the cultivation of reason. He believed that individuals are born as blank slates, and education's purpose is to mold them into rational beings capable of making informed decisions. Locke's emphasis on the development of rationality laid the foundation for modern educational principles that prioritize critical thinking.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his work "Emile, or On Education," offered a contrasting perspective to Locke. Rousseau believed in the innate goodness of human beings and proposed an educational philosophy that encouraged individual agency. He argued that education should be tailored to the child's natural development and interests, fostering self-directed learning and autonomous decision-making.

These Enlightenment ideas can be directly related to the field of adult education, contributing to a contemporary understanding of how adults learn and develop. First and

foremost, the focus on individual agency aligns with the principles of adult education, emphasizing that adults should have the freedom to direct their own learning. Adults are driven by personal goals and interests, and they should be empowered to make choices regarding what, when, and how they learn.

Self-directed learning, a concept rooted in Rousseau's philosophy, becomes a fundamental component of adult education. Adults are best served when they are active participants in their learning process, deciding what knowledge and skills are most relevant to their lives and careers. This form of self-directed learning not only increases motivation but also promotes lifelong learning.

The development of critical thinking skills, a central theme in Locke's philosophy, remains crucial in adult education. Adults need to think critically, assess information, and make informed decisions in various aspects of their lives, including career choices, financial decisions, and civic engagement. Education should empower adults to question, analyze, and synthesize information, ultimately enhancing their capacity for rational decision-making.

In conclusion, Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau have left an indelible mark on the principles of adult education. Their emphasis on individual agency, self-directed learning, and the cultivation of rationality remains highly relevant. Adult education programs that draw from these Enlightenment ideas recognize the importance of respecting adults as autonomous learners, supporting self-directed exploration, and enhancing critical thinking skills, all of which contribute to effective and meaningful adult learning experiences.

Pragmatism and Progressivism

The philosophical movements of pragmatism and progressivism, with their emphasis on experiential learning and practical education, have had a profound impact on the field of adult education. One of the central figures associated with these movements is John Dewey, whose ideas remain influential in contemporary educational practices.

John Dewey, a leading pragmatist philosopher, advocated for a progressive approach to education, emphasizing the importance of learning through experience and problem-solving. He believed that education should not be a passive, knowledge-accumulation process but an active and dynamic endeavor where learners engage with real-world challenges and draw meaning from their experiences.

Progressivism, inspired by Dewey's philosophy, promoted an educational approach that encouraged active learning, adaptability, and the cultivation of critical thinking skills. It called for a departure from traditional, teacher-centered methods and sought to create a more learner-centered and participatory educational experience.

These ideas from pragmatism and progressivism have significant relevance to adult education. Adults often have specific needs and goals related to their personal and professional development. Experiential learning, as promoted by Dewey, can be a powerful tool in adult education, as it allows learners to apply their knowledge in practical settings. By engaging in hands-on experiences and problem-solving, adult learners can acquire skills that are immediately applicable to their lives, careers, and communities.

Furthermore, progressivism's emphasis on active learning and adaptability aligns with the realities of

adult education. Adult learners come with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and motivations, and their educational journeys may require a flexible and responsive approach. Progressivist principles encourage educators to tailor programs to the unique needs and interests of adult learners, allowing them to take an active role in shaping their educational experiences.

Adult education programs that incorporate these principles often focus on practical skills that adults can use in their everyday lives or careers. This approach ensures that learning is relevant and immediately applicable, enhancing the overall effectiveness of adult education initiatives. Whether it's workforce development, community engagement, or personal enrichment, adult learners can benefit from educational experiences that prioritize problem-solving and experiential learning.

In summary, the philosophical foundations of pragmatism and progressivism, with their emphasis on experiential learning, active participation, and practical skills, offer a valuable framework for adult education. By incorporating these principles, adult education programs can better address the specific needs and goals of adult learners, fostering a dynamic and engaging learning environment that equips individuals with the skills and knowledge they require for personal and professional success.

Existentialism and Self-Directed Learning

Existentialism, a philosophical movement exemplified by thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, places a profound emphasis on individual freedom and the quest for meaning in life. In existentialist philosophy, individuals are seen as autonomous agents who must confront

the inherent uncertainty and absurdity of existence. This philosophy advocates personal responsibility and the idea that individuals shape their own lives through their choices.

Existentialism's focus on individual freedom and self-determination can be readily applied to the field of adult education. In adult education, recognizing the importance of self-directed learning is paramount. Adult learners, who are often highly motivated and have specific learning objectives, can benefit significantly from having the autonomy to shape their educational experiences. This aligns with the existentialist notion of individual freedom, allowing adult learners to choose their learning paths, explore their interests, and direct their own growth.

Moreover, existentialism's emphasis on personal growth and the exploration of one's values and purpose aligns with the personal and transformative nature of adult education. Adult learners, with their diverse life experiences and backgrounds, often come to education with a profound desire for self-discovery and the exploration of their own values and life goals. In this context, adult education can be a platform for individuals to reflect on their lives, make choices that are meaningful to them, and explore the existential questions of who they are and what their life's purpose might be.

This approach is consistent with the idea of self-directed learning, which encourages individuals to take charge of their own educational journeys, identify their learning needs, and set their objectives. Self-directed learning is not just about acquiring knowledge but also about self-discovery and personal development. Adult education programs that embrace existentialist principles can create environments where adult learners have the freedom

to delve into their personal philosophies, values, and existential concerns while acquiring practical skills and knowledge.

In summary, existentialist philosophy's core tenets of individual freedom, the search for meaning, and personal growth have direct implications for adult education. By recognizing the importance of self-directed learning and fostering an environment that encourages the exploration of one's values and purpose, adult education can provide a deeply enriching and meaningful educational experience that aligns with the existentialist emphasis on personal agency and self-discovery.

Critical Theory and Adult Education

Critical theory, a school of thought associated with philosophers such as Paulo Freire, is characterized by its focus on analyzing and challenging oppressive systems, as well as advocating for social justice. In the context of adult education, the principles of critical theory offer a powerful framework for addressing issues of power, inequality, and social transformation.

Paulo Freire, a prominent figure in critical pedagogy, asserted that education should be a tool for liberation, enabling individuals to critically analyze and challenge the oppressive structures that constrain them. He famously introduced the concept of "conscientization", which refers to the process of developing critical awareness and consciousness of one's social and political context. This awareness is the first step in dismantling oppressive systems.

The principles of critical theory can be readily applied to adult education by recognizing the importance of addressing power dynamics in the learning process. In

many adult education settings, learners come from diverse backgrounds and may face various forms of inequality and discrimination. Adult education, informed by critical theory, can become a platform for these learners to explore the structures of power and oppression that affect their lives.

Moreover, the application of critical theory principles in adult education can foster social transformation. This transformation occurs when adult learners not only understand the oppressive systems that shape their world but also take concrete actions to challenge and change them. Adult education programs that emphasize critical thinking, dialogue, and social awareness can empower individuals to become advocates for social justice in their communities.

Incorporating critical theory in adult education can involve reimagining curriculum and teaching methods. For example, curricula may include topics related to social justice, diversity, and human rights. Teaching methods can encourage dialogue, critical reflection, and collaborative problem-solving, enabling adult learners to grapple with complex societal issues.

By addressing issues of power, inequality, and social transformation through adult education, we contribute to a more equitable and just society. Adult learners can become active participants in the fight against oppression, fostering positive social change. Critical theory serves as a potent framework to guide adult education's mission of empowering learners to understand, question, and ultimately challenge the oppressive systems that perpetuate social inequalities.

Postmodernism and Pluralism

Postmodernism is a philosophical and cultural movement

that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century. It challenges traditional systems and structures and is characterized by an emphasis on multiple perspectives, diverse narratives, and the deconstruction of grand metanarratives. In the realm of adult education, embracing postmodernist thought can lead to a more inclusive and dynamic approach that values diverse experiences and knowledge sources.

Postmodernism's critique of traditional educational structures is rooted in its skepticism toward fixed, universal truths and a recognition of the subjectivity of knowledge. It calls for a departure from hierarchical and authoritarian teaching methods and the acknowledgment that there are multiple valid perspectives and narratives.

In the context of adult education, a postmodern approach can promote inclusivity and recognize the significance of diverse experiences. Adult learners often bring a rich tapestry of life experiences, cultures, and backgrounds to the learning environment.

Embracing postmodernism acknowledges the importance of these unique perspectives and values the diversity of knowledge sources.

Furthermore, postmodernism encourages a shift from an authoritative, top-down approach to education to a more collaborative and learner-centered model. Adult learners can actively participate in constructing their own knowledge and meaning, with the educator serving as a facilitator rather than an authority figure. This collaborative approach respects the autonomy and agency of adult learners and recognizes that they are active contributors to the learning process.

Postmodernism also calls for a reevaluation of the traditional concept of expertise. In adult education, it

implies that educators and learners can co-create knowledge, and the authority of educators is no longer the sole source of knowledge. This aligns with the pluralistic approach, acknowledging the multiplicity of valid perspectives and experiences that adult learners bring to the table.

A postmodern and pluralistic approach in adult education offers the opportunity to create an environment where the diverse experiences and voices of adult learners are not only respected but celebrated. It encourages open dialogue, critical thinking, and a willingness to engage with different worldviews. This approach fosters an atmosphere of inclusivity, where adult learners feel that their experiences and perspectives are valued and validated.

In summary, postmodernism and pluralism in adult education challenge traditional educational paradigms by emphasizing diverse narratives and perspectives. This approach allows adult education to be more inclusive, recognizing the importance of the unique experiences and knowledge sources that adult learners bring to the learning environment. It encourages a more collaborative and learner-centered model that respects the autonomy and agency of adult learners, ultimately enriching the educational experience.

Contemporary Contributions to Philosophical History as Applied to Adult Education

The application of philosophical history to adult education continues to evolve in the 21st century. Contemporary scholars build on classical foundations while adapting philosophical approaches to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global context. These developments reveal how historical ideas ranging from Enlightenment humanism to critical theory are reshaped to inform adult

education practice, policy, and research.

1. Philosophical Foundations and Humanism in Adult Learning

One of the most significant historical philosophical influences on adult education is humanism, originating from Renaissance thought and Enlightenment philosophy. Malcolm Knowles (1980), regarded as the father of andragogy, draws extensively from humanist thinkers like Rousseau and Comenius, emphasizing learner autonomy, self-direction, and personal growth. His contemporary relevance is seen in lifelong learning models and the learner-centered approaches dominant in adult education today.

More recently, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) argue that philosophical history remains essential for grounding adult education in ethical and pedagogical principles. They link Socratic inquiry to reflective learning, positioning historical philosophy as a continuing guide in helping adults examine their values and assumptions critically.

2. Critical Theory and Social Justice in Adult Education

Another major contemporary application of philosophical history comes from the Frankfurt School and critical theory, especially through the works of Jürgen Habermas. His concept of communicative action (Habermas, 1984) has inspired adult educators to design learning experiences that promote democratic discourse and social transformation.

Paulo Freire (1970), drawing on both Marxist and existentialist traditions, applies philosophical history through his pedagogy of the oppressed. Though not a recent figure, his ideas have been revived in the 21st century by scholars such as Antonia Darder (2015) and

Peter Mayo (1999), who advocate for critical adult education that addresses systemic inequality and empowers marginalized communities.

3. Postmodern and Feminist Contributions

Philosophical history has also been revisited through postmodern and feminist lenses, challenging the dominant, often Eurocentric narratives in adult education. Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) critiques the "banking model" of education and the traditional view of knowledge transmission, promoting a more dialogic, situated approach rooted in poststructuralist thought.

Bell hooks (1994) incorporates historical feminist philosophy into adult education by blending the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Audre Lorde, and others into her concept of engaged pedagogy. This approach insists that teaching must be a performative, relational, and emancipatory act.

Similarly, Martha Nussbaum (2010) brings classical philosophy into contemporary discussions of adult learning by advocating for liberal education that cultivates critical thinking, empathy, and civic responsibility.

4. Pragmatism and Experiential Learning

Contemporary scholars also draw from American pragmatism, especially the work of John Dewey (1938), to frame adult learning as an experiential, reflective process. Dewey's idea that education arises from the interaction of experience and reflection informs adult learning theory and practice in community development and workplace training.

This has been carried forward by Stephen Brookfield (2012), who combines Deweyan pragmatism with critical theory. Brookfield's work stresses the importance of critical

reflection in adult education, helping learners question ideologies, assumptions, and power structures in everyday life.

5. Indigenous and Decolonial Perspectives

In recent years, philosophical history as applied to adult education has been enriched by indigenous and decolonial philosophies. Scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argue for the inclusion of indigenous ways of knowing, rooted in oral tradition and communal learning, challenging the Western historical monopoly on adult education philosophy.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) also emphasizes learning through story, land, and relationship elements rooted in indigenous historical philosophies offering a radical rethinking of adult education that values lived experience over abstract reasoning.

6. Lifelong Learning and Global Citizenship

Philosophical contributions have also addressed global challenges such as climate change, migration, and digital transformation. UNESCO (2015), drawing from philosophical traditions of cosmopolitanism (e.g., Immanuel Kant), promotes education for global citizenship, emphasizing ethical responsibility and intercultural dialogue. This framework influences adult education programs globally by rooting them in historical ethical philosophy while addressing contemporary global issues.

Conclusion

Contemporary contributions to philosophical history as applied to adult education demonstrate a dynamic interplay between historical thought and modern educational needs. From humanism and critical theory to indigenous knowledge and feminist

epistemology, philosophical history is not just a relic of the past but a living resource that continues to inform and transform adult education.

Philosophy of Education

The philosophy of education is a specialized field within philosophy that is concerned with the fundamental questions surrounding education, such as its nature, purpose, and the methods used to achieve its aims. It delves into the philosophical underpinnings of the educational process and serves as a framework for analyzing and understanding the principles that guide various forms of education, including adult education.

The philosophy of education addresses questions regarding the nature of knowledge and learning. It explores the fundamental inquiry of what it means to be educated and how knowledge is acquired. These questions have significant implications for adult education, as they help define the goals and content of educational programs designed for adult learners. Understanding the nature of knowledge and learning is essential for tailoring educational experiences that are meaningful and effective for adults who come to the learning process with distinct backgrounds and experiences.

Additionally, the philosophy of education delves into the aims of education. This area of inquiry examines what education is intended to achieve and how it contributes to personal and societal development. In the context of adult education, understanding the aims of education is crucial for designing programs that align with the goals of adult learners. For many adults, education serves specific purposes, such as career advancement, personal enrichment, or social engagement. Adult education programs must reflect these varied aims to be relevant and meaningful.

Furthermore, the philosophy of education explores the methods and approaches employed in the educational process. This examination includes discussions on pedagogy, curriculum design, and the role of educators. Adult education, which caters to a diverse population with distinct learning needs, must consider these philosophical discussions to create effective teaching strategies and curricula that engage and empower adult learners.

By drawing on the philosophy of education, adult educators can develop a clear and principled understanding of the goals, content, and methodologies of adult education programs. This philosophy provides a foundational framework that encourages reflective and thoughtful practices in adult education, enabling educators to align their programs with the needs and aspirations of adult learners.

In conclusion, the philosophy of education plays a vital role in shaping the principles and practices of adult education. It provides a rich foundation for examining the underlying philosophical aspects of education, including the nature of knowledge, the aims of education, and the methods of teaching. By integrating these philosophical discussions into adult education, educators can create more meaningful and effective learning experiences for adults who seek to fulfill their unique educational goals.

Conclusion

The philosophical foundations of education have a significant and enduring influence on the field of adult education. Drawing from ancient philosophical insights, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, we recognize the importance of lifelong learning, critical thinking, and the role of education in personal and societal development. Enlightenment and rationalist

philosophies, exemplified by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, inform adult education by emphasizing individual agency, self-directed learning, and the cultivation of critical thinking skills. Pragmatism and progressivism, inspired by John Dewey, promote experiential learning, practical wisdom, and adaptability in adult education. Existentialist philosophy, as championed by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, underscores individual freedom, self-directed learning, and the exploration of one's values and purpose in adult education. Critical theory, as advocated by Paulo Freire, empowers adult education to challenge oppressive systems, address issues of power and inequality, and promote social justice. Lastly, postmodernism and pluralism encourage a more inclusive approach to adult education, valuing diverse experiences and knowledge sources.

These philosophical underpinnings provide a comprehensive framework for adult education, guiding the design of programs that recognize the unique needs, goals, and experiences of adult learners. By integrating these philosophical perspectives, adult education can be enriched and made more meaningful, empowering learners to explore their individual and collective potential in a rapidly changing world. In essence, philosophy serves as a guiding beacon, illuminating the path towards more effective and relevant adult education experiences, rooted in a deep understanding of the human condition and the pursuit of knowledge and personal growth.

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