

Book Reviews

Malcolm Knowles.

THE ADULT LEARNER: A NEGLECTED SPECIES.

Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1973.

197 pp. \$15.50.

Malcolm Knowles is a well-known leader in the field of adult education. Because his publications are widely read, he has had a great deal of influence on adult education practice.

The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species is not meant for specialists in adult learning. It was written specifically for those high-level policy executives and consultants working in organizations who "have questions about the quality of Human Resources Development." The author warns in the preface that he has his "own tastes, values and prejudices," and that the reader should be prepared to make his own judgments regarding the selection and organization of the content of the book.

Knowles believes that a good understanding of the various theories will lead to better decisions regarding learning experiences and intended results. However, he concludes the first chapter on learning theory by stating that "learning is an elusive phenomenon" without giving criteria as to the characteristics of a good theory. The reader is left with the impression that all learning theories are equivalent, which is of course a gross oversimplification.

The presentation of learning theories based on studies of animals and children is very sketchy and could best be described as a series of flashes organized around the concepts of mechanistic and "organismic" (sic) models of development. There is unfortunately no indication as to their possible application to adult learning.

The theories of learning based on studies of adults are all subsumed under the “organismic” model of development and originate from the fields of psychotherapy and adult education. This is where we find the four assumptions of andragogy, namely the specific characteristics of the adult learner: changes in a) self-concept (from total dependency in childhood to increasing self-direction); b) the role of experience (a mature individual has accumulated a vast reservoir for learning); c) readiness to learn (mostly the product of an adult’s evolving social roles); d) orientation to learning (from subject-centered to problem-centered).

Concepts of teaching, derived from theories of learning of animals, children, and adults, are also introduced because “the learning theory subscribed to by a teacher will influence his theory of teaching.” The andragogical model of Human Resources Development appears at the end of the last chapter as Knowles’ own application of the theoretical principles he feels best correspond to the adult learning process. It is a process model where the adult learner is expected to participate in all the decisions concerning the organization of the learning activity, from the formulation of objectives to the evaluation of learning outcomes.

Although it has many shortcomings, this book can certainly be considered an adequate introduction to theoretical aspects of adult learning. The references are numerous, and for those adult educators who cannot find the time to consult the original sources the considerable number of quotations to be found throughout can serve as a starting point.

The use of secondary sources is sometimes annoying, as well as the typographical errors and the frequent lack of transition between sections; but for busy practitioners these may not be very important compared to the convenience of having such a book to refer to when planning learning experiences for adults.

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