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Andragogy and the accreditation of prior learning: points on a continuum or uneasy bedfellows?

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The current move towards outcomes or competence-based qualifications within the education and training arenas begs many questions about the processes of learning as well as the measurable results. This paper explores how far the principles embedded in the andragogic approach to adult learning through the accreditation of prior learning are at odds with a qualification system predicated on the measurement of performance. It proposes a model of student-controlled reflection that can lead to the identification of a range of prior achievements which may then form the basis for claiming credit, thus creating a bridge between two apparently opposed frameworks.

Introduction

The implementation of the 1991 Further and Higher Education Act has served to highlight issues surrounding adult learners in the post-compulsory sector of education. Figures for the academic year 1992/93 show that some 50% of participants in further and higher education were over the age of 21. Yet changes required to meet the needs of mature learners have often been piecemeal or at the margins of institutional developments, while the majority of the curriculum and the teaching methods employed within the institutions in which these mature learners are studying, have remained largely those developed to meet the needs of learners in the 16 to 21 age range. At the same time as this change in learners' age profile has been taking place, there have also been great changes in the structure of qualifications available to learners both within further and higher education and in the workplace. Key features in this reframing have been National Vocational Qualifications and General National Vocational Qualifications.

This paper will try to identify how the post-compulsory education system may be able to meet the needs of its mature learners by drawing on the principles of andragogy as a learning strategy, whilst marrying this with the outcome-based processes involved in the accreditation of prior learning – two approaches to recognising and identifying adult learning that may initially appear contradictory, but which may be found to have common ground.

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Background

The education and training of adults is currently in a state of enormous change, as the result of an apparent clash of cultures. Government legislation has effectively defined a division between 'learning for leisure' (funded by local education authorities) and 'learning for work' (funded by either the Further or Higher Education Funding Council (FEFC and HEFC) or the Department of Employment, via Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). Many have seen this as a wholly artificial divide, as there is evidence that many adults return to education or training through non-vocational adult education provision and thereby gain the confidence to progress into the vocational domain. Adult educators made this point at all stages in the consultation process prior to the passing of the FHE Act, and may have, to some degree, influenced some of the final content of the Act.

However, during the debate on numbers and funding mechanisms and the redefinition of the boundaries of non-vocational and vocational education, there appears to have been less concern expressed for the process in which learners are engaged during their journey through the educational jungle.

There are two major movements within the educational system – andragogy and the accreditation of prior learning – which could form the basis for such discussion. Both came originally from the United States, and both have been adapted to meet the particular needs of the British system. Andragogy has been defined generally as 'the art and science of helping adults learn' (Knowles 1970) as distinct from pedagogy – broadly, the art and science of teaching children. More specifically, Mezirow (1981) has defined it as 'an organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners'. Andragogy is process-driven and often relies on the existence of a group for mutual learning and support.

The Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) involves the learner in an individualised, structured process of identification and recognition of areas of learning, in order to prove competence in a given area of skill or knowledge. Demonstrated competence against specific, pre-determined standards, may give exemption from taught elements of programmes, advanced standing, or credit within one of the current credit frameworks (for example Higher Education Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, National Vocational Qualifications, Open College Networks). APL is assessment driven and relies on the presence of an outcomes-based framework within which assessment can be carried out.

Both systems arise from acknowledgement of the fact that learning is a continuous process throughout life and should be capable of expression and possibly quantification. Given this underpinning theme of adult learning, how can the two concepts, one born of a concern for process and one concerned only with outcomes, be brought together to cater for the needs of adult learners?

Andragogy

Andragogy is based on a theory of adult development that suggests that the development of formal logical thinking is not the end of psychological development, as posited by Piaget (1967). Riegel (1973) has introduced the hypothesis that mature adult thought, or at least that which mature adults have the capacity to develop, is qualitatively

different from that of adolescents or young adults, and is potentially more complex. Riegel's theory draws on a system of dialectical logic, based on a principle of contradiction, arising from the ability to identify problems or pose questions. He also contends that, whilst formal operational thinking indicates an ability to undertake abstract thought, and therefore to separate thought from reality, an outstanding feature of adult thought is the ability to reunite the abstract and the concrete and thus explore complex problems.

If this is indeed the case, then the pedagogic, teacher-led approach to education and learning for adults will deny them the opportunity to use their full potential as adults, by presenting a version of reality, rather than allowing and encouraging learners to explore and develop their own reality. Knowles (1970) indicates that characteristics of adult learners differ from those of children in at least four critical areas: as a person matures, there is a movement away from a self-concept of a dependent personality towards that of a self-directed human being; accumulated experience becomes a resource for learning; readiness to learn becomes increasingly orientated towards the developmental tasks of social roles; and time perspectives change from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application – learning shifts from subject-centred to problem-centred.

Knowles goes on to describe the implications of these characteristics in terms of the learning climate, diagnosis of needs, the planning process, conducting learning experiences and evaluation of learning. Central to each of these is the fact that adults enter into any undertaking with a background of experience and experiential learning. Teaching techniques that build on experiential learning will be an extension of everyday life. It is recognised that for many there will also be the need to see applications for this learning and to recognise that learning from experience is as valid as other forms of learning.

Kolb (1982) has suggested that the basis of all adult learning may be described as a cycle that explicitly relies on experiential learning. He describes the way in which adult learners engage in a process that takes them from a concrete experience to reflection on that experience, drawing inferences and conceptualising on the basis of that experience, and testing that conceptualisation through engagement in a new experience. However, in order to engage in this learning cycle, learners may well have to unlearn much of their previous learning style, often gained during pedagogic learning in their youth. Mezirow has created a Charter for Andragogy which sets out some ground rules that will release the potential of adult learners to develop into independent, self-directed individuals. The charter suggests that this may be achieved by progressively decreasing dependency on the educator, using a range of learning resources and engaging in individual goal setting, problem posing and problem solving.

Building on Mezirow's charter, the Nottingham Andragogy Group (1983) have located andragogic principles firmly in the context of the work and writings of Paolo Freire (1972), and in particular his notion of 'concientisation'. The group have defined the salient features of andragogy applied to group learning as:

- a non-prescriptive attitude that is accepted and worked towards by all group members;
- issue-centred, problem-based learning;
- problem-posing and knowledge creation and the exploration of these in their own right as well as the exploration of any answers that are formulated as a result of the process;

- praxis – the unity of reflection and action, underpinned by the willingness to alter personal ways of thinking;
- continuous negotiation of content and process;
- shared individual and group responsibility for learning, that includes both the peer learning group and the group leader;
- valuing process as a part of learning, in addition to content;
- dialogue which, through the process of listening to and hearing others' views, and developing a questioning attitude to existing knowledge, can create new knowledge.
- equality among group members so that power is shared within the group;
- openness, trust, care, commitment and mutual respect amongst all group members;
- integrated thinking and learning, so that learners are in control of their own thinking and learning, rather than being controlled by or adapted to the authority or expertise of others.

The principles outlined above have been espoused by many adult educators in their attempts to help learners take control of their learning and begin to set their own agendas for progression. Andragogic principles have been employed not only in institutional adult education programmes, but also with parent and toddler groups, tenants associations, community groups – indeed anywhere the process of learning to learn independently is at least as important as the content of the learning.

This emphasis on process as well as content poses some challenges to educational institutions. Certainly current declared intentions to move towards student-centred learning provides a vocabulary that can describe educational provision and outcomes based on students' own experience, but other restraints may operate to curb their development in practice. Financial cut-backs reduce tutor-led programmes in that they lead almost inevitably to a reduction in the amount of time given to students by tutors. However, this is often not replaced by active student-directed input, but is more frequently replaced by individual or group project work supported by open-learning materials.

Under these circumstances, there is an opportunity to use the group creatively to generate and explore problems; in some subjects, particularly in the arts, this is encouraged. Often, however, this opportunity is not taken up because of a perceived need to 'cover the syllabus' or, in more recent parlance 'meet the outcomes'. For many reasons – from custom and practice to external pressure from accrediting bodies to health and safety – areas to be assessed are still frequently based on course content or academic knowledge and understanding. Where there is room for personal experience to play an overt part, and where this is often developed, is in the 'value added' aspects of a programme, for example in study skills or 'core skills' (NCVQ 1991a).

This tendency to concentrate on outcomes rather than process has almost certainly been exacerbated by the competence movement, focusing learning programmes on pre-determined outcomes based on occupational standards.

The competence-based movement

In recent years, government and industrial leaders in the UK have expressed the need for a qualified and adaptable workforce (HMSO 1991). This has placed new pressures on the education and training of adults. The acceptance that the existing array of vocational

qualifications was too varied and confusing led to the establishment in 1986 of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). This body had the brief to rationalise and coordinate vocational awards in a framework of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) within five levels of competence. Qualifications at Level 1 describe competence in work roles that are routine and generally carried out under supervision, while Level 5 relates to roles that require professional or post-graduate qualifications and incorporate such facets as planning, working autonomously and managing others (NCVQ 1991).

The qualifications are based on occupational standards derived through the process of functional analysis. Ability to perform to these standards is deemed to demonstrate 'the ability to carry out to an acceptable standard a specified activity which is required in the occupational role'. Knowledge and understanding within NVQs are to support and underpin competent performance, thus marking a shift away from assessment in many traditional qualifications (particularly in higher education) where knowledge is tested and the ability to apply that knowledge in a work context is implied and inferred.

National Vocational Qualifications are assessment driven, rather than process driven. The standards are fixed for a set period of time and provide a rigid framework describing a minimum level of competence to be demonstrated. The amount of control left to the individual learner lies not in the creation of knowledge, nor in the setting of learning objectives, but only in how best to present evidence of learning to the required standards. In other words, the process of learning is effectively irrelevant when it comes to assessment within competence-based qualifications. The fact that the standards are pre-defined, means that there is no room for negotiation about what will be assessed in order for the qualification to be awarded, although the process of assessment is negotiable. As we have seen, negotiation and the learning process itself are fundamental features of the andragogic process; they are used naturally by adult learners in their further development.

The principle of NVQ assessment on demand, preferably at the work-place, makes it almost inevitable that candidates will forge a lone furrow towards their goal. Certainly they can choose an appropriate qualification and define their goal within the structure of their chosen qualification, but the possibility of establishing a group identity or achieving mutual support in the learning process is likely to be very limited. NVQs are also highly prescriptive, outcome-centred, and based on a predetermined definition of ability. In most cases they effectively preclude demonstrating learning through problem-solving and knowledge creation.

Increasingly, however, there is a need being identified for the assessment of skills and knowledge to go beyond the description of a basic level of occupational competence. Revised standards, as well as GNVQs, now place greater emphasis on underpinning skills and knowledge, while further and higher education institutions are moving towards courses designed around a wide range of learning outcomes that include development of self and other 'core' skills (Otter 1992).

Accreditation of prior learning

One area in which competence-based qualifications may be seen to come closer to some of the underpinning principles of andragogy is through the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). Embedded within the principles of NVQs and other competence-based

qualifications is the possibility for individuals to have their prior learning taken into account and accredited towards their target qualification. This has been made possible by the definition of national standards within industrial sectors, and the development of unit-based qualifications which relate directly to these standards. Anyone who can demonstrate competence in any or all of these units, according to prescribed performance criteria, may claim credit without having to undertake training. This represents a departure from the old 'time-serving' that was – and remains – a feature of many traditional qualifications.

Assessment of competence claimed through APL is often by means of a portfolio of evidence gathered by the candidate, which may contain written work, artefacts, testimonials, audio or video tapes, or any other proof of the candidate's ability to perform to the prescribed standards. Other means of assessment, such as direct observation, oral questioning or project work may also be used in the assessment of prior learning as they may in the assessment of NVQs generally. The process of building a portfolio of evidence can be very arduous and is one that will ultimately be faced alone. No two people will have the same range of experience, nor will they necessarily wish to use their experience towards the same goals. The whole process is geared towards achieving a particular end point, with pre-determined criteria for achievement.

However, referring back to Mezirow's Charter, it can be seen that APL may, despite its being assessment-driven rather than process-driven, display many of his criteria:

- APL certainly decreases dependency on the educator by making contact with an educator an additional feature rather than an inevitable starting point.
- A candidate cannot proceed with APL unless learning needs have been defined, as 'gaps' in knowledge or skill will be identified during the reflection process.
- Candidates will have to assume responsibility for defining objectives prior to making a claim against the standards.
- Equally, the ability to organise learning and demonstrate existing competence must be part of the candidate's toolkit.

In the light of this, it can be argued that there are similarities between the outcomes of andragogy and the outcomes of APL. Both andragogy and APL rest on the principle that adults learn from experience, and indeed it is this accumulation of experience that makes their learning needs different from those of younger learners. The major difference between APL and andragogy lies in the process of achieving their outcomes. APL does not in any way focus on the learning process itself, only on its application as a means to acquiring a target qualification. Therefore, despite demonstrating partially similar outcomes in terms of learner achievement, the two systems may be still be seen to be worlds apart.

Points of contact

Further examination of the processes in which learners are involved in APL and andragogy indicates that there may be one point at which the two may be seen to come together. This is when an individual's skills and abilities are initially identified through a process of reflection. It is during this phase of APL that adult learners come to recognise the significance of learning from experience, through identifying key events or functions of their lives, and analysing the learning that has resulted from these – the reflection and conceptualising stages of Kolb's learning cycle. The process is not easy. It requires a

range of skills from analysis to assertiveness and can only be achieved through a process of disaggregation of the experience itself and the learning that results from it. These same skills are those that are used in andragogy, where learners are weaned from a concept of knowledge that is imposed upon them and replace this with knowledge of their own making.

Many adult educators have taken this concept of identifying personal skills and abilities and used it in a way that enables learners to use the process as a learning experience in its own right. This process has been called the Accreditation (or Recognition) of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL or RPEL). Often, mutually supportive groups are formed of learners who are involved in the process of creating a 'generic' portfolio of experience. Such a portfolio differs from an APL portfolio for the purposes of NVQ accreditation because it is concerned with the exploration of all aspects of an individual's life and major life events, not merely those aspects that may be suitable for accreditation towards a vocational qualification. The agenda is open to negotiation by the whole group, as individuals bring their own perceptions and experiences to the group for discussion and exploration in an attempt to identify learning that has arisen from these experiences.

Under some circumstances, the generic portfolio enables the learner to identify skills and abilities that can be taken forward for presentation in a portfolio seeking accreditation within a competence-based framework. At other times, the portfolio enables the learner to focus on skills that can be highlighted in applying for a college course or for a job or promotion. Still other learners find the process of compiling the portfolio of such personal value that they do not actually use the content at all, but benefit from the deeper understanding of themselves that they have gained from the process.

If we look back to the salient features of andragogy identified by the Nottingham group, we can seen that the APEL process may act as a bridge between pure andragogy as a means of helping adults to learn how to learn, and APL as accreditation of demonstrated competence, regardless of the place, time or process whereby the learning has taken place. In order to function, an APEL group must adopt a non-prescriptive attitude and dwell on issue-centred, problem-based learning, with the knowledge of learning being created by and owned by the group members both individually and collectively. Content and process must be under continuous negotiation as the experiences of the group members form the basis of the dialogue through which learning is identified and knowledge created. Such learning cannot take place without the underlying principle of mutual trust and respect amongst group members, whilst members remain in control of their own learning. The unity of reflection and action – in identifying and quantifying learning and building future plans upon the outcome – is an inevitable part of the APEL process.

The challenge for educational institutions is how to harness and use the potential for learning generated by the APEL process. Challis (1993) describes how APEL has benefited learners from all walks of life, from Somali refugees to individuals wishing to change from one profession to another. Its strength lies in allowing links between apparently disparate experiences to be identified and given recognition within another frame of reference. Thus, institutions working with NVQs may use group based APEL to help adult learners in the initial stages of an APL claim. Higher education institutions may use APEL to accredit work-based learning towards a degree. Adult education institutions may use the process for learners returning to a formal education context. In other words, APEL groups may have a number of functions:

- to generate APL portfolios, for either NVQ or academic credit
- to provide evidence to support claims for access to a range of educational programmes
- as a means of training needs analysis or route planning
- as a means of building confidence and increasing motivation.

However, in order to exploit these possibilities, APEL needs to be built into a flexible institutional structure, with access to a range of progression routes and support and guidance systems that encourage and value learning based on group and individual experiential processes. In order to achieve this, institutions will have to change. As Field (1993) notes 'The introduction of the accreditation of prior learning into a college cuts across most of the existing systems of resource allocation and control, most of which were designed to cater for a more "steady state".' The result of introducing such changes, however, will be a responsive, flexible provision, where tutor input is used appropriately and valued for what it can offer, but student input is equally recognised as valuable to individual learners, learner groups and indeed to staff and institutional development.

In short, then, in could be said that APEL is a model of good adult education practice. In a world of chickens and eggs, it is hard to say whether good practice will perforce embrace APEL or whether a commitment to APEL will bring about good practice. What may be stated with some degree of certainty is that one of the most valuable resources invested in our educational system is that of learner time. It is incumbent upon us, as educators, to use this investment as appropriately and efficiently as possible. Bringing together the philosophy of andragogy, the assessment of prior learning and the process of identifying learning from experience may be one of the most effective ways of achieving this efficiency for individual learners.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to identify the salient features of two systems of recognising the distinct nature of adult learning: andragogy, which is based on theories of adult development and thereby addresses the process of learning; and APL, which is essentially outcome-driven and looks for results, disregarding the learning process. Although the two share a basic concern to recognise the value of learning from experience, they appear to be at opposite ends of a continuum that values adult learning. However, through the process of reflection and identification of learning arising from both paid and unpaid experiences, from formal and informal educational contexts, the learning process itself can be addressed, either as an individual exercise or in a group.

I would suggest that it is at this point that the two cultures meet, and that through this process adult educators may usefully help adult learners to prepare for future employment, education and training opportunities.

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