Teachers, Never Stop Learning Journal Article for Academic Leadership

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Teachers, facilitators, and instructors must understand their students in order to affect learning. Understanding who learners are and how they develop cognitively, emotionally, and intellectually will help instructors create learning opportunities which will enhance student knowledge. The same is true when it is the teacher who becomes the student. Whether the readers of this article are teachers, administrators, or professional development providers, adults must understand how adults learn, and teachers should allow themselves the opportunity to remember what it is like to be a learner (Brookfield, 1995).

Understanding theories and models of adult learning and their practical applications can help instructors become better students as they pursue learning in order to become better teachers. These theories and models can answer the questions “How do I learn as an adult?” and “How can apply this to my own professional development and practices as a teacher?”

Lieb (1991) states that adults have different needs as learners than children and teens. Adults have experience to draw from when learning. They are more focused, self-directed, and autonomous learners. They need to be respected on more of a peer level than the student-teacher level they experienced as children. Adults are motivated in different ways and have different barriers to their motivation. According to Lieb, adults choose to learn based on internal and external factors. Intrinsically, they want to learn for the sake of learning, to improve themselves, and to serve others. Extrinsically, they may want to increase their status at work, to please someone in authority, or to make a better living for their family.

Brookfield (in press), in his article “Adult Cognition as a Dimension of Lifelong Learning” discusses distinctions of adult learning. He believes adults learn in a more “heightened form” than when they were teenagers (para. 4). One distinction is that adults exhibit “dialectical thinking” (para. 5). This means they are able to look at contradictions and discrepancies as learning opportunities and use them for professional development. An adolescent may not see the difference or struggle with it; whereas, it is a part of everyday thinking for adults. Adults think in more practical, logical terms because they see the big picture – the context in which thinking is necessary. An adult’s life experience helps him or her extract subtle cues from information and apply it in logical ways. Combining this principle with Knowles’ (as cited by Lieb, 1991) theory that adults need to understand what they are learning and why they are learning should help instructors better meet the learning needs of adults. It should help teachers understand themselves as learners and feel comfortable contributing their own experiences to learning opportunities.

Development is the result of maturation and the influences of society (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007). Compared to children and teens, adults learn fewer things on a deeper level rather than more things on surface level, and they construct knowledge through their actions in life. Knight and Sutton (2004, as cited by Merriam et al.) suggest that cognitive growth is somewhat dependent on support in terms of working with familiar resources, being given opportunities to learn, and being offered opportunities to work with others. The more support, the higher the adult’s level of
performance, the less support, the lower their level of performance. Seasoned teachers should take the opportunity, even if it is over coffee in the teacher’s lounge, to offer support to newer teachers who may feel overwhelmed and unsure of themselves. Learning does not have to take place in an institution; it can happen during daily activities when teachers are sensitive to learning, and teaching, moments.

Brookfield (1995) suggests teachers will make better instructors if they reflect on how they, themselves, learn. He believes that as teachers become more critically reflective of how they learn, they will have a better connection with how their students are learning or need to learn. He encourages teachers, as learners, to ask questions of themselves, such as, what inspires me to learn, what are my goals, what struggles do I have when I am trying to learn, and how can I address those struggles to become a better learner. Teachers who take the time to reflect on their own learning processes will be much more in tune with their students.

Both Western and Non-Western theories and models are discussed here for two reasons. First, to understand the differences in how students learn in Western ways of knowing compared to non-Western ways of knowing. Secondly, because teachers may have colleagues or students who are from different cultures and it will be important to recognize and respect the reason they approach learning from a different perspective. The following is a brief summary and should be further researched by teachers working with colleagues or students from non-Western countries.

Merriam et al. (2007) suggest four ways adults learn: Knowles’ model of assumptions, McClusky’s theory of margin, Illeris’ learning process in terms of cognition, emotion and society, and Jarvis’ model that “all learning begins with the five human sensations” (p. 100). Knowles’ model of assumptions includes the maturity of the learner, the readiness of the adult to learn, the self-directed nature of the adult, the internal motivation of the learner, and the fact that adults need to know why they are learning. Teachers as learners must analyze their reasons for learning and consider ways to apply what they learn to their personal development and classroom practices. McClusky’s theory of margin is also sensitive to the particular circumstances of adult learners (Merriam et al.). Adults are laden with life situations such as family, jobs, and societal pressures. For the best learning to happen, McClusky believes learners should have significant support from family, friends, society and even finances so a learner’s load is balanced by his support to succeed. Teachers need the support of their administrators, school board, and superintendent to seek and participate in further education and professional development. McClusky’s load and power margin can be contrasted with Illeris’ focus on the learning process (Merriam et al.). McClusky looks at how learning interacts with the adult learner’s life; however, Illeris considers one’s knowledge and skills (cognitive), feelings and motivation (emotional), and external influences of communication, interaction, and cooperation (societal). Teachers as learners will enhance their cognitive skills, feel inspired by learning, and be able to communicate better with students, parents and their community. Jarvis’s model is heavily dependent on learners’ experiences and how they learn from and through those experiences (Merriam et al.). He theorizes that all learners are made up of “the mind and the body” (p. 101), and learners interact daily from their own historical perspective and their life experiences which generate learning. Teachers as learners and collaborators can influence each other in positives ways as they learn from each other’s experiences.

Non-Western ways of knowing are more spiritual than cognitive and emphasize different aspects of learning than those of Western learning. In America, students are encouraged to become independent
learners and thinkers (Merriam et al., 2007). Confucianism, Islamic and Hindu education, Maori concepts of learning, and African indigenous education do not share this characteristic of learning. Confucianism considers independent learning immature and self-serving. The indigenous African perspective states that learning happens through relationships with others. Other cultures believe that learning should be communal as opposed to independent. Holistic learning is the focus of several non-Western educational experiences and includes the spirit, mind, body and emotions of the learner (Merriam et al.; Shah, 2006). Learning is about becoming a good person who uplifts the community using “story-telling, poetry, ceremonies, dreams, [and] meditation” (Merriam et al., p. 238). Also, the teacher-student relationship is revered in ways not experienced in Western societies. It would be quite improper to have an informal relationship with students or to ask a student a personal question. In Confucianism, it would be considered a sign of weakness to answer a personal question (Merriam et al.).

American teachers need to stay informed about the cultures of the students they teach. There is a plethora of literature available online which will help teachers understand what their non-Western students and their families expect from education. It will allow teachers to address any concerns with their colleagues and administration. Students will be looking to their teachers for how to treat these students with respect and dignity. Therefore, teachers need to pursue learning from a non-Western as well as a Western perspective so they may stay sensitive to the needs of students from other cultures as well as provide a model example to all students.

Adult learning is a choice. Adults are not students who are required to go to school by law. They are in a different situation than children and teenagers because they have chosen to continue, or return to, their education. Adults are more determined and focused on what they want to achieve (Billington, 1996). Philosophically, adult learners have more purpose and a mature individuality they bring to the course. They have prior knowledge that will affect how they learn and what they can contribute to the course. Unlike their younger counterparts, adults have experience which is reflected in their learning. Research indicates adults continue growing intellectually and cognitively as a result of life experiences with problems, family, work, and community life (Billington).

In his book Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, Brookfield (1995) provides a personal experience of what can happen when teachers do not take time to critically reflect on themselves as teachers. As he was doing research for another book, he asked questions of his own students. He states,

Up to that point, I had believed that the purity of my intentions as a teacher discounted and offset any unforeseen and unfortunate consequences that my actions might have. But talking to my own students made me realize that how I taught, why I taught that way, and how my teaching was perceived were far from being the straightforward matter I thought they were. My teaching was not necessarily bad or harmful, but it was problematic. By that, I mean that it was shot through with unacknowledged agendas, unpredictable consequences, and unrealized dimensions (p. xi).

Brookfield (1995) recommends that teachers not assume that what they are trying to get across to students is being understood in the way it was intended. He suggests instead that they critically reflect on their practices and beliefs as teachers. One activity Brookfield recommends is that teachers write their autobiography as learners. They should reflect on how they felt as students from elementary school through college and graduate school, if applicable. Teachers should evaluate the theories and
through college and graduate school, if applicable. Teachers should evaluate the theories and philosophies their own teachers emulated in their practices. Finally, they should state how reflecting on themselves as learners gives them insight into how they are as teachers.

Another aspect of critical reflection is inviting colleagues to observe teacher practices. Fellow teachers can offer encouragement for what seems to work, constructive criticism for improvement, and insight on issues he or she observes that the teacher may not be aware of (Brookfield, 1995). Brookfield recommends looking at teacher practices from the students’ perspective, from the colleague’s perspective and experiences, and from theoretical literature. Theoretical literature will help teachers “name” their practices (p. 36), understand student behaviors, and even share with teachers the stories of other teachers’ struggles. Critical reflection takes time and should be completed over several weeks so as much can be learned as possible. The benefit is that it does not cost anything, it can be completed in the normal course of the day at school and at home, and it has the potential to revolutionize and revitalize the teacher who chooses to participate.

Another inexpensive practice for teacher development and improvement is what Brookfield (1995) calls a Good Practices Audit (GPA). A GPA is a reflection that helps teachers find answers to common problems in their field by conferring with other teachers. It consists of three parts. Phase 1 describes the problem. Phase 2 discusses the best and worst experiences the teacher has had pertaining to the problem. Finally, Phase 3 provides possible solutions to the problem which teachers should consider and discuss with fellow teachers. The GPA should also reflect on the challenges teachers may face as they implement those solutions.

Can becoming a learner inspire teachers to improve their practices? Will understanding theories and methods of adult learning aid teachers in their own learning process or persuade school administrators and professional developers to encourage teachers to be life-long learners? The answers to these questions lie in the efforts of teachers to pursue knowledge in order to enhance their teaching, their motivation, their creativity, and their job satisfaction.

“A teacher affects eternity, he can never tell where his influence stops.”

Henry Brooks Adams


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