

Holistic Education:

An Answer?

Can the andragogy/pedagogy debate be resolved by getting rid of the "gogies" and understanding the teaching-learning process from a holistic perspective?

By WOLF J. RINKE

Controversy surrounding the andragogy vs. pedagogy issue is likely to continue as long as we perceive the process of education and training as rigidly defined activities. The labels—pedagogy vs. andragogy, teacher centered vs. learner centered, or self-directed vs. teacher-directed learning—matter little as long as we perceive these approaches as mutually exclusive. A more realistic adult education paradigm places the process of education and training on a continuum and recognizes the importance of varying the teaching-learning approach depending on the needs of the learner, the educator and the situation. Adult educators, trainers and facilitators would do well to move away from the "gogies," accepting instead a model that is relevant to all adult education endeavors. Holistic education is one such paradigm.

Holistic education?

"Holism," originally introduced by the South African philosopher Jan Christian Smuts, is defined as "a functional, integrated and generalized model of education that focuses on the whole teaching-learning situation, and varies the teaching-learning strategy to meet the needs of the learner, the teacher and the situation in an effort to attain educational outcomes greater than the sum of their parts."

This definition borrows from the situational or contingency approach to management and from the holistic medicine movement. The former maintains that a contingency approach, one in which managers vary their leadership or manage-

ment style in accordance with the situation, improves managerial effectiveness. Holistic medicine, on the other hand, focuses on the whole person, avoids the piecemeal treatment of one disease at a time and regards the patient as an active partner in the pursuit of his or her own health care.

Essential and implied characteristics

The first essential characteristic of holistic education is that holistic educators vary their strategies to meet the needs of the learner, the educator and the situation. The model assumes that the educator and the learner approach each teaching-learning encounter with unique personality traits, teaching-learning style preferences, brain-mind dominance and other social-psychological constructs. Only if all of these are assessed and taken into consideration can the effectiveness of the

environment where they often impinge on the effectiveness of the process.

Second, holistic educators assist learners to reach their unique potential, and they promote learning as a lifelong process. The purpose of holistic education is greater than the sum of its parts and is applicable to the wide variety of target audiences included under the broad umbrella of adult education. Holistic education helps learners actualize their potential and develop lifelong learning values by integrating these concepts:

- Adults' learning needs vary extensively, from learning basics to becoming self-actualized.
- Adult mental development may be at any given point on the development continuum, depending on environmental circumstances and inherent abilities. Adult education endeavors must assess the individual's current readiness to learn and help the learner progress from that point.
- Learners do not have to advance to the

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teaching-learning process be maximized. This characteristic also requires the holistic educator to vary his or her teaching-learning strategy in accordance with situational variables, including the learning environment and time constraints; competence and motivation of both the learner and the educator; type of knowledge, information or skills to be gained; budgeting factors, equipment and facility constraints; and other factors that can influence the teaching-learning process. Situational factors are particularly relevant in a nonacademic learning en-

vironment where they often impinge on the effectiveness of the process. extreme right of the continuum to reach their unique potential. Yet, an individual's potential can grow infinitely if the learner internalizes the "value of lifelong learning." Learners will move toward their full potential by valuing and, thus, engaging in lifelong learning.

- As adults move along the learning continuum, they also move along a change continuum, progressing from a coping stage to a higher level where they possess the skills and commitment necessary to effect change in themselves and in society.

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The following implied characteristics of holistic education may, if practiced, enhance the holistic educator's effectiveness.

Holistic educators structure learning environments to promote the creative and insightful potential of the human mind. The holistic educator is acquainted with and applies appropriate concepts derived from brain dominance and creativity literature. This body of knowledge suggests that some current education and training approaches overemphasize the development of the left hemisphere of the brain. This hemisphere is said to be the seat of the ability to reason sequentially, to speak, to do mathematics and other tasks which are linear in nature. Some investigators maintain that most education and training approaches minimize the development of the right hemisphere, the side that perceives a gestalt and provides us with the ability to be creative and intuitive. Instruments for assessing mental flexibility and brain dominance are thought by some to help structure appropriate learning environments. In addition, methods exist for helping learners enhance their creative thinking skills. Holistic educators weave such methods into their teaching-learning strategies to promote the goals of holistic learning.

Holistic educators accept that the learner retains ultimate responsibility for the learning process. This implies that the educator is responsible for diagnosing the learner's current knowledge base, level of competence, readiness to learn and degree of dependence, and for making every effort to move learners along the learning continuum. However, the holistic educator does not assume total responsibility for the actual learning process.

Education is both an art and a science, but to holistic educators it is first an art and secondly a science. They recognize that heuristic data, such as learner-perceived results or long-term follow-up studies, provide valuable data.

The fourth implied characteristic of holistic education is that evaluation strategies include all individuals involved in the teaching-learning process. For example, let learners evaluate me and the program whenever I evaluate them. Holistic educators also make it a point to vary the sophistication of the evaluation strategies in consonance with the impact on the learner. One way to do this is to use multiple evaluation strategies and evaluators to provide a mandatory evalua-

tion, such as a grade in a university course. Multiple strategies include standardized evaluation instruments, and evaluations of oral presentations, papers, case studies and role-playing exercises. The multiple approach acknowledges that not all learners perform equally well in all evaluation modes.

Last, holistic educators adhere to a growth metaphor. Not comfortable with a production orientation that emphasizes a systems approach, identical products, cost-benefit ratios, maximization of productivity, quantity not quality, and efficiency via various intervention strategies, holistic educators view the learning process as that of planting a "seed" which merely requires the proper environment, conditions and nurturing to grow to its fullest potential. Less concerned about curriculum sophistication, measurement accuracy and scientific precision, holistic educators are able to approach learners as individuals who are expected to obtain variable learning outcomes.

Holistic education incorporates both andragogical and pedagogical principles. Integrated, functional and general, this educational model is relevant for virtually all adult educators regardless of their area of specialization. It offers an appropriate, workable alternative for educators and trainers who are serious about improving their effectiveness and the overall learning capacity of those they serve.

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