UNDERSTANDING AND FACILITATING ADULT LEARNING

The facilitation of learning — assisting adults to make sense of, and act upon, the personal, social, occupational, and political environment in which they live — is an important, exhilarating, and profound activity, both for facilitators and learners. It is also a highly complex psychosocial drama in which the personalities of the individuals involved, the contextual setting for the educational transaction, and the prevailing political climate, affect crucially the nature and form of learning. Yet among theorists and practitioners of adult learning this complexity is frequently ignored. Instead, a kind of folk wisdom has emerged in which the facilitation of adult learning is seen as a nondirective, warmly satisfying encounter through which learners’ needs are met. That such encounters might contain elements of conflicting purposes, contrasting personality styles, or challenges to learners to engage in anxiety producing re-examination of self or of previously unchallenged norms (organizational, behavioural, or moral), seems to go unacknowledged.

Those engaged in helping adults to learn in a variety of settings — colleges, universities, vocational training, business and industry, professional education, community action, literacy education, or in informal learning networks — know that facilitating learning is often not a wholly fulfilling and bountiful experience in self-realization. A major purpose of this book, then, is to examine critically the notion that facilitating learning is a smoothly flowing voyage along a storm-free river of increasing self-actualization, from which are excluded elements of conflict, anxiety, self-doubt, or challenge. Through numerous case studies of practice the joys, complexities, and difficulties of facilitating learning in a range of settings are explored.

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Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning

A Comprehensive Analysis of Principles and Effective Practices

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Preface

The facilitation of learning—assisting adults to make sense of and act upon the personal, social, occupational, and political environment in which they live—is an important, exhilarating, and profound activity, both for facilitators and for learners. It is also a highly complex psychosocial drama in which the personalities of the individuals involved, the contextual setting for the educational transaction, and the prevailing political climate crucially affect the nature and form of learning. Yet among theorists and practitioners of adult learning this complexity is frequently ignored. Instead, a kind of folk wisdom has emerged in which the facilitation of adult learning is seen as a nondirective, warmly satisfying encounter through which learners’ needs are met. It is generally unacknowledged that such encounters might contain elements of conflicting purposes, contrasting personality styles, or challenges to learners to engage in an anxiety-producing reexamination of self or of previously unchallenged norms (organizational, behavioral, or moral).

Those engaged in helping adults to learn know that facilitating learning is often not a wholly fulfilling and bountiful experience in self-realization. A major purpose of this book is to examine critically the notion that facilitating learning is a
smooth voyage along a storm-free river of increasing self-actualization that excludes elements of conflict, anxiety, self-doubt, or challenge.

*Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* explores the theory-practice disjunctions between theories-in-use (how practitioners attempt to assist adult learning in real life) and espoused theories (how the previously mentioned folk wisdom and clichés describe the process of facilitation). As a product of this exploration, I propose a new concept of facilitation that incorporates elements of challenge, confrontation, and critical analysis of self and society. This concept rejects the equation of facilitation with a nondirective attempt to serve as a resource person to learners who are essentially in total command of their learning activities. Instead it argues that facilitating learning is a transactional drama in which the personalities, philosophies, and priorities of the chief players (participants and facilitators) interact continuously to influence the nature, direction, and form of the subsequent learning.

The central goal of *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* is to review a range of practice settings in which educators and trainers of adults attempt to facilitate learning and to identify elements of effective practice that illustrate the concept of facilitation outlined above. To this end I consider case studies of practice in several distinctive areas: higher education for adult students in colleges and universities, training programs and vocational education in business and industry, continuing professional education for various groups (doctors, lawyers, architects), community activist initiatives, informal resource and learning networks, health education, labor or union education, adult basic education (particularly adult literacy work), and the diverse arena of self-directed learning. In each of these areas of practice, I identify a number of principles of effective facilitation, explore the theory-practice disjunctions between espoused theories and theories-in-use, and examine the crucial influence of contextual factors on practice. Throughout the book I warn against adopting formulaic responses to situations in which the personalities of learners and facilitators, conflicting purposes of administrators and facilitators, political climate
of the time, or budgetary constraints alter fundamentally what is appropriate practice. Practitioners should always be encour-
aged to be skeptical of "quick fix" solutions that involve applying a standard reaction to widely varying situations. For this reason, I report on the experiences of facilitators who have improvised creatively in response to contextual constraints and elaborate on the broader implications and replicable aspects of particular practice efforts.

The audience for whom this book will be useful includes all those engaged in facilitating adult learning, whatever the con-
text. In particular, the wide-ranging case studies of practice that are explored make the book useful for faculty, advisers, admin-
istrators, and counselors in colleges, polytechnics, and universi-
ties that include adults among their student body; organizers and teachers in adult and continuing education programs in schools, colleges, and universities; training directors and trainers in vocational, business, and industrial education; tutors and or-
ganizers in labor unions; teachers and administrators in the field of adult basic education; community workers in social and po-
itical action efforts; those engaged in continuing professional education for various occupational groups (lawyers, doctors, architects to name but three); health educators; and professors and students of adult learning. This is a very broad audience, and this breadth is reflected in the extensive and up-to-date bib-
liography of references to be found at the end of the book. The bibliography stands as the most complete and current collection of materials on facilitating learning in these diverse areas of practice available at the present time.

Overview of the Contents

The book opens with a review of effective practice in adult learning and an explanation of the concept of facilitation that informs the rest of the work. In this first chapter the focus is firmly on identifying elements of effective practice in facilitating learning. Six central principles are identified—voluntary participation, mutual respect, collaborative spirit, praxis, critical reflection, and self-direction—and the way these are implemented
in practice is discussed. Chapter Two reviews the general findings of the last twenty-five years concerning adults as learners. The works of writers such as Malcolm Knowles, Roby Kidd, Alan Knox, and Robert Smith are discussed in full here.

The nature and form of self-directed learning—often claimed to be the most distinctive of all learning styles in adulthood—is explored in Chapter Three. The research and theory in the field of self-directed learning is reviewed, some criticisms of the orthodox views are made, and a concept of self-directedness focusing on critical awareness among learners is proposed. How such self-directed learning might best be facilitated in various organizational settings and the problems frequently faced by facilitators in that effort are then explored in Chapter Four.

The concept of andragogy—currently the most influential concept in the education and training of adults for most practitioners—is critically examined in Chapter Five. Case studies of what is claimed as andragogical practice are reviewed, and some of the key features and problems of this mode of practice are highlighted. Chapter Six considers the role of the teacher of adults and discusses the interrelationship between the role of the teacher and that of the facilitator. Research concerning effective teaching practice is also presented in this chapter, and the use of the discussion method as the pedagogical approach most appropriate to adult learners is explored.

Chapters Seven and Eight are both concerned with understanding the range of settings in which adult learning occurs. In Chapter Seven the emphasis is on informal settings, such as self-directed learning, learning networks, and community action. More formal and structured environments for learning, such as business settings, colleges, and universities, are explored in Chapter Eight.

Chapter Nine reviews the development of education and training programs for adult learners that are based on the most common model of program development, the institutional model. A central concern of this chapter is to scrutinize carefully the theory-practice disjunctions between the tenets of this institutional model, which is frequently offered in textbooks of edu-
cational practice, and the real life experiences of program developers. The extent to which programmers develop creative, improvisational strategies to deal with contextually specific features of their programs is discussed, and the crucial distorting effect of context is emphasized. Some alternatives to this institutional model of program development are explored in Chapter Ten. Ideas from community education and self-directed learning are reviewed, and a model of flexible, participatory program development is presented. This chapter also discusses how practitioners set their priorities among differing claims on their resources, and how practitioners develop their own intuitively based theories of practice.

Chapter Eleven evaluates effective practice in facilitating learning and offers criteria by which good practice might be recognized. Chapter Twelve, the final chapter, proposes a philosophical rationale by which practitioners might judge whether or not they are exemplifying the model of critical facilitation suggested throughout this book.

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Two colleagues at Teachers College have been particularly important to the writing of this book. Over the past three years I have been fortunate enough to work with Jack Mezirow in developing curricula and methods for training the educators of adults. Only he will recognize the considerable extent to which ideas, issues, concepts, and questions raised in the following pages have originated in, or been refined by, our discussions. His critically analytic questioning has been invaluable in helping me clarify my ideas and in suggesting directions for further analysis. Kimerly Miller, past program assistant in the Adult Education through Guided Independent Study (AEGIS) program at the college and currently an independent consultant in intercultural education and training, read and critiqued the manuscript. To her must go the credit for whatever sensitivity to issues of intercultural education are contained in the final manuscript. Finally, David and Sybil Brookfield have encour-
aged me to journey, both geographically and intellectually, in the field of the education and training of adults. Their support has been crucial to all stages of this project, and I am forever grateful for their understanding and encouragement.

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Stephen D. Brookfield
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