

Andragogy—A Mantra for US/Iraqi Cross-Cultural Dialogue

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Abstract

Andragogical precepts provide rich opportunities for building cultural bridges, particularly among people in times of strife. Encouraging adults to share their experiences and insights in a learning community of unconditional positive regard can build understanding, hope, and peace among people experiencing conflict and marginalization. An accepting adult learning environment can offer political moderates a new mantra for understanding the Middle East and the West during the current global conflict. As an Iraqi from war-torn Baghdad and an American from the US Midwest, the two writers advocate for engagement of adults in addressing the realities and alternative visions of people.

Introduction

The American literature of adult education advocates for building a learning climate for dialogue to explore life's options and to establish policies which assure social justice. There is less such literature in the Arab Middle East. The voice of Iraqi moderate scholars needs to be heard. This paper explores how an Iraqi graduate student and her advisor see the potential of andragogy to bring better understanding to US/Iraqi relations.

Human suffering, injustice, poverty, and indifference are not new to the world. But, for citizens of Iraq today, these miseries are current and deeply painful. Scholarly reflections may be useful on what andragogy may have to offer for insight and social action. In the experiences, fears, and hopes of adults, the meaning of living with uncertainty may be examined. International conflict may challenge adult

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educators to apply their knowledge to maintain quality in teaching and advising with students from war zones.

A Coincidental Circumstance Leading to Significant Meaning

The writers were surprised and pleased by discovering that their friendship evolved unexpectedly. Neither person had expectations of becoming understood more than superficially by the other, given the global press on the Middle East and the US, as well as the wide distances assumed to be between the two worlds.

Then, there could have been the usual rural-urban split, since one person came from a city of over six million (Baghdad), and the other from a town of 10,000 (Vermillion). This difference was never apparent to either person. But, both people found confidence in their mutual knowledge of the value of basic interpersonal skills related to active listening and paraphrasing. They also found safety in their confidence in their common backgrounds of adult education theory. The discussion which unfolds will show the influence of theory on practice.

Applying Andragogy to Advising and Instruction

Andragogy considers the experiences of adult learners as valid and valuable. When differences in cultures complicate adult interaction, the need for returning to the basic principles of andragogy is even more important. Giving time to understanding human differences and similarities, taking time to increase tolerances for ambiguities, and valuing adult experiences—all basic to use of adult education theories—are important in building relationships across cultures.

The underlying principles of andragogical theorists emphasize the role that experience plays in adulthood. Knowles (1989) suggests that adults come into an educational activity with a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youths. Kolb (1984) emphasized that “learning is a continuous process grounded in experience. Knowledge is continuously derived and tested out in the experiences of the learner” (p. 27).

Mezirow stated: “Discourse is not a war or a debate; it is a conscientious effort to find agreement, to build a new understanding” (1996, p.170). Adult educators must be aware that helping adults learn

how to move from an argumentative mind set to an empathetic understanding of others' views is a priority (Mezirow, 2000).

Hoping to Learn from Time Commitments to Dialogue US/Iraq

These principles of andragogy provided the writers with mantra for dialogue. As people of Iraq and the US Midwest, the writers found themselves thrown together by the chance of being assigned advisee to advisor. It happened that both people caught each other at a time when each was willing to take the time to engage in dialogue and international student social activities. Having lunch and time for casual conversation should not be put off for later. Interaction on a reasonably regular basis can provide opportunity for understanding behavior and intentions.

The writers found themselves willing to suspend disbelief that they were different, even in the face of media stereotyping of US and Iraqi conflicts. The writers found fewer social differences to explore than there were similarities—shared hopes, positive experiences in teaching, and enthusiasm to find ways for professional contribution in the world. In instructional and advising contexts, both people found it extraordinary that they “stumbled across each other” in a world caught more in frenetic panic and competition than in finding time for dialogue and collaboration.

Hoping to better prepare herself for service in teaching English, the Iraqi writer found that the andragogical principles have broadened her knowledge base, but the relationships with an American who was more than an anticipated stereotype extended her self-awareness and her appreciation of the West. The American looked enthusiastically toward knowing more about the Arab Middle East.

Value of Time and Basic Interpersonal Skills in Cross-Cultural Communication

The significance of andragogy for building cultural bridges, particularly in times of strife, provides hope for enriching dialogue. Andragogical theory can offer hope for scholars from Iraq and the US who seek to bridge politically current barriers. In adult education in universities, faculty say they ascribe to the applications of andragogy, but they may not find the time to practice their craft with people assumed to

be in conflict with US policy. In best adult classes, there needs to be time for dialogue—reflection on the meaning of concepts, events, and dreams.

Busy faculty need to find time away from lecture to use their skills in communication to facilitate adult sharing of experiences and insights. Active listening, skillful paraphrasing, describing experiences and behavior without judgment, and engaging people with unconditional positive regard are essential to building trust and mutual mentoring for understanding comparative cultures. This kind of teaching is especially necessary in building learning community with students from Iraq.

Iraq is a culture steeped in traditions. Patience for customs of listening and greetings is needed. Americans who practice acceptance and active listening can be successful in building trust. American demand for quick and precise communication can alienate students who have been educated to respect traditions, rank, seniority, and eloquence in the use of language.

In a learning community based on unconditional positive regard, people can build understanding, hope, and peace—even among people experiencing conflict, marginalization, and persecution. However, it takes time, skill, and volition. Neither writers believe that this kind of positive environment happens frequently in either the US or Iraq. People seem to believe they are too busy to try to understand each other.

US Appreciation of Iraq in Times of Stress

When human beings are under the stress of war, fears of persecution, misunderstanding, and stereotyping abound. Adult educators can be empathetic people who offer their time, their insights, and their respect to people experiencing trauma. Americans can learn from Iraqis about the experience of living in a war zone. This knowledge cannot be underestimated. In interactive dialogue, there is the heart of andragogy, a means for finding the meaning of living and serving, and the purpose of life.

Adult educators continue to strive to find ways of engaging learners in seeking to make a more inclusive and safe world for human beings across all levels of differences. However, the world of social castes is not safe and inclusive. Students—as human beings—need to feel valued, respected, and treated with affection and love. The same holds true for professors. Mutual acceptance and understanding do not happen by coincidence or magic. They come from applying philosophy to practice.

For moments of spiritual learning to occur, there must be space in the learning environment which is safe, supportive, open and “sacred” (Merriam, 2007 et al., p. 205). Vella (2000) outlined three aspects of sacred space—dialogue, respect, and accountability. A sacred space allows for dialogue where one listens to others’ experiences without judgment. The teacher is accountable for designing a learning experience that both supports and challenges the learner (2000).

The writers have found that for their increased learning curve about each others’ cultures, stereotypes, and social behaviors, there had to be time, volition, and a love of both learning and people to sustain the initiative. Hellriegel and Slocum (2008) have conjectured that positive emotions such as trust, generosity, and gratitude can be contagious.

Love and appreciation for learning both personally and professionally are the most beneficial and valuable gifts teachers will give to their students. But, extreme pain of both people in the West and Middle East who feel hopeless to influence a terror-free world takes time to hear and to understand.

Practicing the Craft of Andragogy in Iraq and the US Midwest

There is a need for Middle Eastern scholars studying in the West to reflect on the nature and purposes of andragogy and its theory and research. Through providing a safe and accepting place for dialogue, people with multiple perspectives on the nature, purposes, and challenges of living may contribute to each other’s epistemological foundations, an essential need for contemporary peoples embroiled in strife. Much can be learned from people willing to share the meaning they place on their life experiences.

The writers have found that basic respect for people involves both listening and sharing, allowing ample time for narrative examples, paraphrasing, and responsiveness to both ideas and feelings. An adult education course at a university has potential to bring people together regularly, but courses focused primarily on one-way teacher talk have often been the norm across classrooms in the world. Building a climate for dialogue involves hearing people joys, challenges, and rages. This means that fully-functional adults come to relationships, knowing that too much talking or listening can interfere with the development of trust.

Responses to injustice, deceit, marginalization, and indifference have taken decided tolls on Iraqi adults who continue to struggle to find meaning and purpose in living—let alone the food and safety necessary for each day. However, after food and shelter demands, social needs emerge. An empowering relationship, which doesn't create dependency, requires a person with the time, opportunity, and volition to encourage other adults to share. The building of a mutually empowering relationship may be difficult for the sage on the stage who cannot let go easily taking most of class time for lecturing.

Being the Change We Want to See in the World

When language differences keep people apart, there is a need for finding interactions based on behavior, as much as verbal exchange. The writers found that visits to each others' families were as important as class time for dialogue. We need to see how people treat their family and friends to invest further in a trusting relationship. This suggests that adult learning needs to be extended beyond the classroom.

Sometimes both of the writers have been filled with sorrow regarding the status of Middle Eastern conflict. Getting in the way of each other's rage is never a good plan for engaging in insights. However, listening to feelings about persecution, stereotyping, and despair takes time. In life, time to share with others may be our most precious commodity, but finding friendship through empathizing brings undeniable reward.

The circumstances of both people's lives had given little opportunity beyond reading and the media for either person to actually know the other. There had been few opportunities for an Iraqi and a US Midwesterner with graduate degrees in education to *rub elbows*. The writers found much to discuss, but no impasses including topics of politics, religion, social class, or educational background.

This mutual friendship has happened at the University of South Dakota, and neither person's life will ever be the same. A cultural bridge has been established and other friendships of this kind are likely to travel this path. Occasionally in life, a person has the opportunity, as Gandhi wrote, *to be the change you wish to see in the world*. This kind of change can be part of making one friendship at a time. Andragogy may provide the mantra for rebuilding peace between the West and Iraq.

Conclusion

Becoming friends across cultures, particularly in times of world conflict between cultures, takes tolerance and acknowledgement that what is known may not be a whole truth. It takes courage, resolve, and volition to expand a person's view of the world. This kind of experience can result from sincere people who subscribe to the andragogical precept that adults have much experience and meaning to share, and who provide time to share stories and insights. Opportunities to expand world views need to be explored as part of the importance of life-long learning (Dewey, 1916). Adults who want to keep learning need to be open to experiences when they are possible. But, the basic principles of andragogy in teaching and advising need to be actively in the minds of adult educators.

Essentials for Advising and Instruction Across Cultures

1. Increasing Volition to Build Cultural Bridges
2. Commitment to Cultural Study
3. Practice in Basic Interpersonal Skills
4. Showing Respect for Experiences of People
5. Finding Time for Dialogue and Experiences

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