

## *The Self-Education of Malcolm X*

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### ABSTRACT

In Alex Haley's Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965), Haley recounts the life of an historical personage of enduring controversy. Whether one reveres or reviles Malcolm, "X", Little, his is a fascinating story of lifelong learning. Rather than conforming to one theory, Malcolm's learning is well explained by certain theorists at certain times in Malcolm's life, but better explained by other theorists at other times in his life. Like most Americans, Malcolm Little's learning developed over his life. His early education as a child was based largely on teaching methods and learning styles that differed as he aged and became an adult. Knowles' (1999) theory of andragogy generally explains Malcolm's adult learning as being different from his learning as a child. Malcolm X, therefore, informed and educated Malcolm Knowles later theoretical framework for adult learning known as "andragogy."

**KEYWORDS:** Malcolm X, Malcolm Knowles, Andragogy, Adult Education, Experiential Learning, Adult Cognitive Development, Transformative Learning, Self-Actualization.

## Malcolm Leaves Edward's Cats, Burrhus' Rats, and Ivan's Dog

### For Self-Actualization and Transformation

In Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), Haley recounts the life of an historical personage of enduring controversy. Whether one reveres or reviles Malcolm, "X", Little, his is a fascinating story of lifelong learning. Rather than conforming to one theory, Malcolm's learning is well explained by certain theorists at certain times in Malcolm's life, but better explained by other theorists at other times in his life.

### Malcolm's Pedagogues

Thorndike (1927) observed cats, Skinner (1938, 1953) rats, and Pavlov (1927, 1941) his dog in developing their behaviorist theories of psychology and learning. In his youth, Malcolm learns mostly consistent with the theories of Thorndike, Skinner, and Pavlov in Malcolm's responses to success, failure, stimuli, and reward and consequence in public schools. Malcolm responded to the degradation of his junior high school teacher repeatedly calling Malcolm "Nigger," by dropping out of school and moving out of town (Haley, 1965, p. 37).

### Malcolm's Andragogues

True to Knowles' (2005) theory of andragogy, Malcolm's learning changes as he becomes an adult. As an adult, Malcolm's learning is more self-actualized, especially while in prison, and transformational, especially after visiting Mecca (Haley, 1965). As Malcolm grows and develops, his learning grows and develops. This is often the case for the heterogeneous group of us known as adult learners.

### *Self-Actualization*

While serving a seven year prison term for burglary in Massachusetts, Malcolm takes the opportunity to re-educate himself (Haley, 1965). Consistent with Carl Roger's (1951, 1961) "nondirective therapy" built on Maslow's concept of self-actualization, Malcolm read voraciously from the Parkhurst donated collection at the Norfolk Prison Colony. Malcolm demonstrated Rogers' concept of organism valuing by answering his own questions he had on race in American history, politics, and society. Malcolm also improved his psychological state by interacting with jail mate named "Bimbi" in a relationship that was consistent with what Rogers referred to as unconditional positive regard. As such, Malcolm and "Bimbi" routinely demonstrated positive and accepting feelings toward each other, even when debating. Although Malcolm originally saw "Bimbi" as something of what Daloz (1999) would define as a mentor, the two later became more equals.

The second phase of Malcolm's prison time "homemade education" (Haley, 1965, p. 172) was debating other prisoners and clergy on topics of history, philosophy, politics, and science as inspired by Malcolm's extensive readings. Malcolm continued to hone his oratorical skills after leaving prison and officially joining the Nation of Islam. It is interesting to note that Malcolm had been elected president of his seventh grade class. One wonders if Malcolm's early election was due to some innate speaking skills that Malcolm later developed to mastery in adult life.

Malcolm also improved his writing skills while in prison by corresponding initially with his sister Hilda, later with Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, and still later with the President of the United States (Haley 1964). Malcolm commented that "It was because of my letters that I happened to stumble upon starting to acquire some kind of homemade education" (p. 172). Mezirow would seem to agree, "even partial autonomy requires communicative

competence and transformative learning" (2000, p. 25). In *Teaching Malcolm X*, Perry (1996) would refer to this as literacy to liberation.

### *Transformation*

After his transfer from Charleston State Prison to Norfolk Prison Colony in Massachusetts in 1947, Malcolm converted from the religion of his father to the religion of Islam. This transformation came about largely due to Malcolm's self-education and self-development. Mezirow (2003) opined that "critical-dialectical discourse" was conducive to transformative learning. For adult learners "to participate freely and fully in critical-dialectical discourse" they do well to be "Individuals at the final stage of reflective judgment [so they] can offer a perspective about their own perspective, an essential condition for transformative learning" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 61). It is during his years with the Nation of Islam when Malcolm is at his most reflective and transformative. Malcolm reflects on his early life and his prison self-education to gain new perspectives on his earlier perspectives. Malcolm developed his ministry of Black pride after the mentoring of Elijah Muhammad, but ultimately departs from the whites as devils theme when Malcolm visits Mecca and meets "men with white complexions [who] were more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had been" (Haley, 1964, p. 338). Thus, after Mezirow's (1991) premise reflection, Malcolm questioned the unquestionable: "The critique of premises or presuppositions pertains to problem *posing* as distinct from problem *solving*. Problem posing involves making a taken-for-granted situation problematic, raising questions regarding its validity" (p. 105). Here Malcolm dares to question his leader and his religion in an act of highly reflective and transformative thinking and learning.

Malcolm's transformation built upon reflection on earlier perspectives eventually led to a schism in the Nation of Islam, and some say Malcolm's assassination. It was, nevertheless,

evidence of a development of Malcolm's cognition. In a nod to Piaget (1972), Mezirow (1991) himself suggested the developmental stage nature of transformative learning: "The transformations likely to produce developmentally advanced meaning perspectives usually appear to occur after the age of thirty" (p.193).

### Conclusion

Like most Americans, Malcolm Little's learning developed over his life. His early education as a child was based largely on teaching methods and learning styles that differed as he aged and became an adult. Knowles' (1999) theory of andragogy generally explains Malcolm's adult learning as being different from his learning as a child. By comparison, however, Rogers' (1951, 1961) theory of self-actualization better explains Malcolm's learning during his prison years, and Mezirow's (1991, 2000, 2003) theory of transformative learning best explain Malcolm's learning during his years with the Nation of Islam.

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