Drago-Severson 's Becoming Adult Learners: Principles and Practice f or Effective Development

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Review: Drago-Severson's *Becoming Adult Learners: Principles and Practice for Effective Development*

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Becoming Adult Learners, written by Eleanor Drago-Severson, provides a vivid description of the academic experiences of several adult learners who worked at the Polaroid Corporation and earned their GEDs in a company-sponsored program aimed at improving skills related to employment. The information contained in this book is both timely and easy to read, and it provides an interesting perspective on the subject of adult learners as viewed through the lens of Kegan's Constructive-Developmental Theory of adult growth and learning (Kegan, 2000; Kegan, Broderick, Drago-Severson, Helsing, Popp, & Portnow, 2002). Drago-Severson, who has studied adult learning programs in the state of Massachusetts, writes, "As a team we were especially interested in how these people made sense of their learning processes, their motives, aspirations, and goals for learning; their expectation of teachers and of themselves in their social roles as students, parents, and/or workers" (p. 10).

Much of what Drago-Severson writes about is related to the concept of transformational learning—learning that has a profound influence on who the learner is based upon past experiences and who the learner might become as a result of his or her exposure to new experiences, particularly those new experiences that the learner comes to embrace. The author makes a good case for why this work may be significant—as research that yields practical and much needed information about adult learners—and how it contributes to previous research conducted on the topic.

The notion of transformational learning addressed by Drago-Severson in her text (pp. 18-22), is a powerful one that is important for all who work with adult learners to understand. A significant aspect of transformational learning is the opportunity it represents for educators to create a learning environment in which students are asked to engage in critical reflection, be open to diverse perspectives and ideas different from their own, and explore alternative options without being judgmental and defensive. Readers will, therefore, appreciate the insights of the author on the subject and how the lessons learned can be applied in a variety of adult learner settings.

This text is a good addition to an educator's library, given the background information provided on various adult learner theories that serves as a guide for tailoring instruction to match these students' ways of knowing. One does not have to come to the text with extensive knowledge of adult learner theories, but can leave with a good understanding of the various perspectives on this subject. Another strength of the text is its rich qualitative data, in which the author not only provides a way for the reader to *hear* students' voices concerning how they learn and perceptions about their role and that of their teachers, but also understand how the theoretical constructs about adult learners come alive through the occupational endeavors and other experiences of students in the study. This latter has significant potential for educators desirous of crafting the sort of academic environment in which adults with diverse experiences can be successful.

One of the significant facets of this book may well be its examination and discussion about the importance of cohorts, also called holding environments. This discussion provides some very useful information for all educators to consider, particularly curriculum designers, since cohorts tend to provide opportunities for students to create networking and supportive schemes that can potentially benefit everyone in a learning community. Cohorts may not be ideally suited for all adult learners (i.e., less so for those who prefer to work independently), and this is something which the author clearly addresses. However, the success of a cohort may well depend upon the extent to which it adequately meets the needs of its members (i.e., provides opportunities for peer teaching and learning, emotional support and encouragement, motivation, etc.). These issues should be addressed much earlier in the text, largely because of the pivotal role that cohorts

can have in the overall success of those in the community of learners. Equally important to mention is the role that the social process plays in all learning environments, particularly since students' sense of belonging is likely to impact their engagement with the content, with their peers, and with teachers.

Another significant aspect of adult education Drago-Severson mentions is the need for adult students to see relevance and connection in what they are asked to do; thus the need for context. The author addresses this issue—the need for context—in chapter fou,r but perhaps this should be mentioned much earlier given the role that context plays in the adult learner's need to know, his/her readiness to learn, and his/her motivation—key principles of adult learning proposed by Malcolm Knowles (1998). In addition, some mention of the role of incidental learning may be important to consider since a significant amount of what is learned, by both children and adults, takes place without our even trying and may be based upon our observation of what takes place around us.

Read this text if you wish to learn more about how cohorts could positively impact the learning environment, if you need background information to better understand Kegan's constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 2000) and other related work that addresses the subject of the adult learner and his/her ways of knowing, and if you wish to better understand the connection between theory and practice via the voices of adult learners. Additional information about the subject of adult learners obtained from this text would be enhanced by referring to any of the excellent sources provided by the author for those wishing to learn more.

References

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