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Reflections on the Experiences of Learning with Malcolm Shepherd Knowles

by John A. Henschke

Reflection on my experiences of learning with Malcolm S. Knowles spans 40 years – 1967 to 2007. Through a series of fascinating, miraculous events I came into relationship with him and I knew he cared about me. Andragogy with him became a heightening, deepening and broadening experience in a new learning process.

I have been asked to reflect on experiences of learning with Malcolm S. Knowles. It is captivating that my experiences of learning with Malcolm started 40 years ago and have continued even to the present day.

However, before I get into all that, a look at what the dictionary and thesaurus includes on ‘reflection’ seems appropriate. Definitions: paying attention to what passes in the mind; attending to the facts or phenomena of consciousness; and, an image given back. Related Words: ponder, echo, meditate, remember, muse, reproduce, mull, and ruminate. Each of these definitions and related words will ‘come into play’ as I reach and dig deeply into reflections on my experience of learning with ‘Malcolm’ – he always liked everyone to call him ‘Malcolm’.

Beginnings

My initial experiences of learning with Malcolm were through Dr. Bob Ayling, one of his Boston University [BU] Doctoral Graduates, and Dr. Eugene DuBois, another professor of adult education at BU. Bob recommended that I apply to the Adult Education Program at BU. Gene called me on the phone and asked how he could help me through the application process. These ‘tasters’ showed the positive, caring influence Malcolm had on a graduate and a fellow professor

that was so responsive and reached out to me at a very early stage of inquiry about adult education. It made a very positive impression on me.

Immediately after arriving at BU for the beginning of the Fall Semester, Malcolm and Gene worked with me on outlining my doctoral program. Malcolm supported from the background and Gene did the outline. One night later, Malcolm invited all the Adult Education students [learners] to an informal 'get acquainted' gathering to talk and share. He asked each of us [about 25 people] to tell about her/his background, how s/he came to BU, what each hoped to gain from the program and anything else each wished to share. When it came my turn to share, I indicated that contrary to my being taught in my Christian upbringing, that the days of miracles passed away after Jesus Christ's and the Apostles' generation on earth, I experienced the miraculous through Malcolm's efforts that led to helping me begin as a doctoral student at BU that night. Here I was, not as yet in a formal class with Malcolm, and I had already experienced learning from him. The way that Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) found and explained this in their research, it is the personal relationship that teaches.

My learning relationship with Malcolm, that would blossom and come to flower over the years, started in the spring of 1967. During that summer, as I made preparations to move half way across the USA [from Jacksonville, IL, to Boston, with my pregnant wife, Carol, and two daughters in our automobile pulling a U-haul trailer], Malcolm convened, with other colleagues from BU, an impromptu Doctoral Admittance Committee Meeting and approved my application for officially starting in the program that Fall Semester. Here I was my first night at BU, the beneficiary of a series of actions by Malcolm and others around him who possessed the same caring attitude he expressed toward students. To me it was a miracle, and I was deeply touched, learning in the core of my being.

The two years of being a full time student [learner] at BU with Malcolm to finish all my courses, my residence work, comprehensive exams, and have my dissertation proposal approved, came and passed like a whirlwind. The formal course work with Malcolm became a heightening, deepening and broadening experience in learning, being introduced to a whole new process of learning, rather than just acquiring content.

Andragogy – Walking and Talking Congruence

Learning with Malcolm became a process of figuring out my best way as an adult learner [unique as I am] to acquire and internalize the content [making it my own] that I needed for successfully functioning in my world, present and future. The process Malcolm used (Knowles, 1996) was andragogical [the art and science of helping adults learn] and self-directed. He believed the process was important; trusted in the human organism's propensity toward growth; held a willing, experimental and innovative attitude toward helping learners learn from their mistakes; and provided learners opportunities to practice self-direction. He didn't just talk it, he also did it – he exemplified andragogy and self-direction in word and deed. His talk and walk were congruent. Malcolm's andragogy and self-direction were so infused with his whole being as a person, that he could be there and support me [and others] as learners. It was a body, mind and spirit thing, involving him and his relationship with learners. He exemplified the idea that learning is an internal process (Knowles, 1970).

As an Andragogue, he educated with his whole being. He touched my soul – he opened himself to me and thus opened me to the innermost depths of my being. He was there with me. Whether he believed what I was saying or not [he and I had different belief systems – he said he was a Unitarian, I am a Christian], he could reflect back to me just what I was feeling. He never

had to prove himself to anyone. Malcolm was Malcolm; he had come to terms with himself and was at peace.

The time arrived when I focused on a topic for my dissertation research. I was in a 'change strategies' seminar and we were interviewing a number of people we considered as 'change agents' in various fields of education. I then obtained permission from Malcolm to do my dissertation on him as a change agent (Henschke, 1973). He removed himself from being the chair and member of my dissertation committee and served as an 'information resource' to me during the process. I received an 'in-depth' view of Malcolm in writing my dissertation, every aspect of the person, and the consummate, caring professional he was. As Malcolm said to me after he read my completed dissertation, "I was confronted and I was supported." I sought to present a realistically, balanced and accurate portrait of him.

By the time I finished my dissertation in 1973, I was already implementing [testing and adapting] aspects of andragogy in my professional work setting as an adult educator. I continued refining and using my understanding of andragogy for a number of years, working with him in various situations, all the time feeling I was learning more with Malcolm. However, controversy swirled around his brand of andragogy – pro and con; and it still swirls at this writing. There are those who like and use Malcolm's andragogy; and there are those who not only wish it would disappear from adult education, but they expend much effort [including writing] to accomplish its demise. There are also those who thought it was all but gone in the 1990s, but are concerned that 15 years later it still remains, especially as it currently is very dynamically present in the literature and with practitioners.

Why and how Malcolm S. Knowles 'held sway' in my personal and professional life

Consequently, today in 2007 as I reflect on my experiences of learning with Malcolm for 40 years, I ask myself, “What is there about Malcolm and his influence that has ‘held sway’ in my life throughout all these years, instead of my going in the direction of someone else’s influence?” I hope the following anecdotes will shed some light on this question.

The opportunity to learn with Malcolm in person provided a connection with him in his ‘heart of hearts’. I got the impression that he cared very much about me. Also, as I read his writings, I carried the added dimension of experiencing the personal interchanges we had. In these interchanges, who Malcolm was and what he did conveyed so genuinely to me that I was the most important person in the world. Experiencing him in person gave special meaning to his written words. This combination made such an indelible impression on me and is burned into my memory. There is an ambience [of which Malcolm is an integral part] that is present as I have carried forward my professional career.

As the transformative literature began to emerge (Mezirow, 1991) this only described a small part of the transformation I had already experienced and have continued experiencing in learning with Malcolm. I had taken responsibility for my lifelong learning, I was deeply involved in andragogy, new vistas had appeared on the horizon of my personal and professional life, and I was excited knowing that things would never be the same for me and my family in the future.

Launching my work in University of Missouri Extension was affirming when I used the same process model that Malcolm used in starting the YMCA Adult Education Program in downtown Chicago. I went from door-to-door in small communities, told them I was starting an adult education program, inquired of their interests, and ask them to indicate who else in the community I should talk with about this. My program flourished for the 13 years I lived there.

Starting the program almost from scratch in 1983, the Masters and Doctoral Academic Program in Adult Education Program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis was a wonderful adventure. I remembered many of the things that Malcolm had done to support my learning with him in the Doctoral Program at Boston University. I was determined to emulate him in every way I was able – of course on a much smaller scale – to see if what worked with me would also work with my students. Lo and behold, it has worked well! I told Malcolm that I was going to St. Louis, and asked if he had any comments. Thanks to his abundantly encouraging and spontaneous response, he said, “I see in the next few years ‘ADULT EDUCATION’ in bold letters on the horizon at University of Missouri-St. Louis.” His comment inspired me to build and carry the program half-time for 16 years, and after that to obtain two new full-time professors and get three other professors in the university to join, support and help carry forward our program that already had an abundance of students. It was an exciting day when our program had bestowed on it the 2004 Malcolm S. Knowles Award for Excellence in Adult Education Program Leadership, from the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education [AAACE].

Malcolm’s program planning model (Knowles, 1970) had all the ingredients I needed to conduct a wide variety of adult education programs for the adult public and for my academic work. I have used various ‘bits and pieces’ from other adult educators, but his model has been so foundational and worked so well for me. I have learned to use it more competently over the years.

My last time to interview Malcolm was in 1996, when I delivered his citation for being inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame [IACEHOF]. I had just become the President of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education

[AAACE], and still learning with him, I asked, “Malcolm, what suggestions do you have for me as I preside over AAACE this year?” He quickly answered, “Recruit as many pioneers as you can, so that the movement of adult education continues to flourish, because the glory days are ahead” (Henschke, 1997, p. 4).

Malcolm’s family honored me by requesting my composing and delivering his professional eulogy at his Memorial Service, 12/14/97. It included many of the things he represented to me in learning with him. “As the first adult educator I studied with, he was to me all the things a father could be: originator, teacher, benefactor, guardian, master, advisor, progenitor, counselor, mentor, friend, and a human being” (Henschke, 1997, p. 2). After his death, the Commission of Professors of Adult Education [CPAE] established the Knowles’ Memorial Committee to honor his legacy. I have been a member of that committee ever since, and Malcolm’s presence is very much there with us so that I continue learning with him – there is so much more to learn than I have acquired and internalized thus far. In 2006, I had the privilege of helping a group adult educators from Italy establish the Knowles’ Club, because they have so much interest in his adult education work. The leader of that group has also joined the CPAE Knowles Memorial Committee. This was a broadening perspective for me on some more learning with Malcolm.

I also wanted to honor Malcolm’s legacy after his passing away. I had been interested in andragogy from the start, and I learned with Malcolm that he did exactly what he wanted to with it. I learned that there was more. I was inspired by his example that the best way I could honor his legacy was to launch some further investigation into andragogy, and extend it beyond what he did with it. I knew he would applaud that. I established a “Dialogues in Andragogy” Graduate Seminar at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, which is conducted once every three

semesters. Marcie Boucouvalas and I established a session on andragogy that is conducted annually at the Commission of Professors of Adult Education Conference. My colleague Mary Cooper and I have published numerous iterations of our findings on the international foundation of andragogy. Two later versions are cited here (Cooper and Henschke, 2006, 2007). Most of my publications and unpublished papers [posted on my andragogy website <http://www.umsl.edu/~henschke>] are infused with andragogy and they are mostly reflective of my learning with Malcolm.

When Marti Sopher (2003) decided her dissertation would focus on historical things that Malcolm left out of his autobiographical journey (Knowles, 1989), she asked me to serve as a member of her dissertation committee at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I was honored to accept and found, to my delight, once again I was learning with Malcolm. As a special ‘learning with Malcolm’ bonus, Sopher helped me publish a paper (Henschke, 2006) based on her dissertation.

Learning with Malcolm has been an exhilarating and fun adventure. In 2004, I paraphrased a poem by Frost (2003), which he delivered at the Kennedy Presidential Inauguration in 1960. My paraphrase depicts how andragogy has captivated me, and all because of my ‘learning with Malcolm’.

Andragogy thoroughly captivated me

Andragogy belonged to me before I belonged to Andragogy.

Andragogy was my longing desire in living, teaching and learning
for a few decades

Before I was her educator. Andragogy was mine

In undergraduate school, in graduate school, in theological

seminary, in clinical training, in parish ministry, in doctoral
studies, in university faculty, in consulting with various
organizations throughout society,

But I belonged to Pedagogy, still captive,
Possessing what I still was unpossessed by,
Possessed by what I now no more possessed.
Something I was withholding made me weak

Until I found it was myself,
I was withholding from the dynamic, vibrant idea of Andragogy,
And forthwith found new educational and living possibilities
in surrender.

Such as I was I gave myself outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of dialoguing with others about
Andragogy)

To Andragogy vaguely realizing a new idea embodying teaching,
learning, and living

But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as Andragogy was, such as she will become.

All of these are my reflections on learning with Malcolm Shepherd Knowles and why
andragogy captivated me. It has been my delight and esteemed privilege these 40 years. And by
the way, it is not over yet. I plan on continuing to learn with Malcolm for many years to come.

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