

Influences Along the Journey: An Invited Commentary for Schole

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It is one of those gorgeous days in the Great Northwest where spring has come just a little bit earlier than it was supposed to and everybody knows that it is a gift. The sky is blue and the sun warms both the air and the soul after a winter season of a record breaking 100 plus inches of chilly rainfall in the valley. You would know it as that kind of day when you want to begin your spring planting, but you feel you should wait. At this very moment I would really like to be outside poking around in the yard, working the soil a little, and planting a few sweet peas. But because I have fallen behind in an important piece of my work, I must remain inside and glued to the powerbook in order to write now. Of course it is well known that no writer, fiction, non-fiction, or academician can be forced to write any more than an individual can be forced to realize leisure. So once again in my life's journey, I am reminded that some things come early, at the same time that some things are late, and what they share in common is that very same point in time.

The opportunity to write this commentary came to me after the immense professional and personal honor of receiving the Excellence in Teaching Award given by the Society of Park and Recreation Educators. Accepting the award was even more rewarding for me because I have often felt that we in parks and recreation are among the best teachers in the academy. We have the advantage of teaching with clear and constant interest, involvement, and commitment to our body of knowledge from professionals in the field. Thus we share the advantage of demonstrating the relevance of what we teach in the real world and I think that makes us better teachers. I know it makes what we teach more relevant to our students. So to be singled out in any given year by those whom I consider to be the best was an exceptional honor which continues to bring a smile to my face.

In light of this honor, it is my intent to share those influences which have defined and guided my teaching approaches and methods. This, as one might imagine, has been a challenge. Take over twenty years of teaching in higher education and some 50 years of life experience, then tell your colleagues what you have found is important; hmm, not an easy task. It was much easier to stand before you at the SPRE Banquet in Kansas City and accept your accolades. However, I shall proceed on three accounts, with honor and humility; the narrow focus of one person's journey and values; and the realization that my thoughts are not universal, thus likely transferable only to those with whom I share a common ground.

Teachers, Authors, and Experiences

It was important to review my life's journey in order to identify those primary influences which have contributed to my teaching beliefs and approaches. In doing so, I found that they were clustered around teachers, authors, and experiences.

Teachers

Teachers who counted and still count for me include a handful of teachers who were immediate colleagues and graduate students at various universities where I taught, and leisure educators with whom I interacted through SPRE and NRPA.

If I had to single out the one teacher in particular who made a difference in my thinking it would have to be little Jonny Gray's father. Jonny was one of the one hundred plus kids in the summer YMCA Day Camp program that I directed. One evening after the campfire program was over, his daddy, David Gray suggested I look into recreation education at Long Beach State where he taught. This kid's father got my attention with respect to the direction of my education, an act that I have since learned was repeated over and over with a lot of California's young adults in the mid-60's. Jonny's father not only would greatly influence my thinking, but I would also learn about the major impact he had upon our philosophical understanding of leisure and the importance of leisure in learning through my studies.

Prior to this time, my plans were to become an elementary school teacher and only because it was a good career for a woman. However, there existed a huge gap in my thinking at the time associated with where learning took place. You see, I sat under a lot of trees with a lot of kids for several summers and absolutely knew that kids were learning all kinds of important lessons in recreation settings. I could see that these settings were also far less judgmental than the traditional classroom settings I'd previously experienced and was now being trained to perpetuate. I could see that learning could be fun. I experienced that learning could be fun.

The first full time teaching position I had was at Temple University. Prior to that, I had a couple of part-time positions in California. These part-time positions showed me that teaching in higher education was a career path in which I had an interest to pursue. While at Temple I was afforded the opportunity to pursue my doctorate at a college other than the one in which I was teaching at the time. In that I had decided to pursue higher education and it was adults who attended colleges and universities, I decided to major in Adult Education. I pursued this major partly because it focused on educating adults, an act that was basic to my career choice, and partly because the major would enable me to incorporate my interest in adult leisure into my doctoral studies. Looking back, these were two solid reasons in my decision making, but little did I know then, how much else I would gain in the process. Philosophically I gained perspectives which I would bring to my teaching endeavors, my learning, and even my leisure research.

Selecting this major put me in contact with a number of teachers who approached their classes far differently than I had previously experienced. Using the theory and practices of andragogy (discussed later), they set up the classroom as an operational learning environment. Students were essentially in charge of how they best learned. Teachers were facilitators who assisted students in seeing what they would need to know to be successful and what various learning strategies would be helpful to them in pursuing that knowledge. What happened was that some students felt they learned best by being tested, others by writing papers, others through in-class presentations or discussions, others through dialog with instructors or practitioners, and still others using various media or technology resources.

Through this approach, the learner was enabled to learn, rather than told what and how to learn. Learners' life experiences were valued by the teacher and used as the basis upon which learning tasks and evidences for learning were documented. Students were held accountable, but in the accountability process, were personally empowered and allowed to demonstrate their knowledge using a variety of formats.

The adult propensity toward self-directedness was honored, thus students had a major responsibility in determining the means by which they would document their learning. Individual difference was applauded and usually shared with other learners because in the sharing, learners gained insight and knowledge of individual difference.

Knowledge and truth was held in part by all learners, rather than being the primary responsibility and privilege of the teacher. In fact, the teachers viewed themselves as co-learners. They still were responsible for assuring that conventional wisdom was conveyed, but not that all would have consensus of thought. This stance seemed to enable the evolution of thought to occur, thus taking conventional wisdom into an arena where it could be examined by learners with different life experiences and life perspectives.

What an influence in my journey! I was acquiring new awarenesses. I had never heard a teacher talk or act like this. My previous experiences were that the classroom was a place where my thoughts, papers, and tests were judged in terms of what was wrong, rather than what was right. There existed a heavy cloud which emphasized intellectual conformity or similarity in thought with your classmates and especially the teacher. The environment was one of competitiveness, that is, who knew how much and how much better or faster and then could demonstrate it better or faster than I could. And in all instances, the teacher always knew the truth; it was unfathomable that a student would know something that the teacher did not already know.

But now in graduate school I was learning and I was enjoying learning (i.e. having fun) and I was in a classroom of all places, and not under a tree. I did more reading, more writing, more presenting, more thinking, more discussing; in general, more learning than I had ever done in my life. What was remarkably different, however, was that I set the assignments up for myself, the teacher approved those assignments, then facilitated me in every way possible to help me reach my learning goals. This was in direct contrast

with the teacher requiring the student to meet the teacher's learning goals. Note that requiring student conformity according to the teacher's way would have saved these teachers of mine a fair amount of extra time. But I realized even then that as the learner, I would have learned far less than I did.

Authors

Two authors have been particularly influential for me. In "Freedom to Learn" Carl Rogers (1969) wrote of several learning concepts associated with the role of the teacher. He believed that the teacher should take the stance of facilitator and create an environment conducive for self-discovery and self-appropriated learning. His writing stressed the importance of learning that influenced behavior stemming from and related to personal experience.

The role of the teacher as facilitator was also viewed as key to Malcolm Knowles, who incidentally began his professional career working with adults in the leisure field. In his first job he found himself teaching English and the ways of America to new immigrants to the United States in an educational program sponsored by the Chicago YMCA in the early 1950's. Knowles realized that his adult students brought years of life into a classroom situation, and at that time in his life, most had more life experience than he did because they were older. He found them to possess a tendency toward increasing self-directedness, a readiness to learn something associated with what they perceived to be a life task, an increasing reservoir of experience to which they attached their learning to, and a desire to apply whatever knowledge and skill they had. As Knowles proceeded in his career, he always found evidence which reinforced these early perceptions of how adults learned. He would become well-known as the "father of andragogy" and he defined it as the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1984). Practices in andragogy are based upon these assumptions about how adults learn (bringing their life experience to the classroom, increasing self-directedness, readiness to learn, interest in applying learning to life tasks).

What Knowles contributed to my thinking, other than my agreement with his assumptions about how adults learn, was a teaching model that would help classroom facilitators create and maintain learning environments consistent with the assumptions of andragogy. The tenets of Knowles' educational process include establishing a climate for learning and a structure which emphasizes mutual planning; identifying learners' needs, interests, and values; developing a means by which learners form learning objectives, designing ways to meet those objectives (a learning plan), implementing learning plans; and finally evaluating learning plan outcomes, which inevitably leads to a reassessment of learning needs.

Both Rogers and Knowles works reflected my values, thus my teaching philosophy was clarified within the context of their writings. I have applied the principles of andragogy often, usually at the graduate level (Carpenter, 1988), and in facilitating adult leisure behavior (Carpenter, Halberg, & Mayfield, 1988; Carpenter, Patterson, & Pritchard, 1990; Howe & Carpenter, 1985).

The best application of andragogy that I have been a part of either as a student or facilitator (remember, both the student and facilitator are co-learners) was meeting the responsibility I had for teaching the graduate course in Philosophy of Leisure at the University of Oregon. Had I used a different approach, all of us would have learned less. Had I taught only from the textbook and my own experience, we would have lost unique knowledge and perceptions possessed by the learners in the classroom. Both the topic of the course and the backgrounds of the students enrolled provided the main ingredients for successful learning.

The stated and approved purpose of the course defined its content and included historical, philosophical, and conceptual theories of play, leisure, and recreation. Enrolled in this class were students from fourteen different countries. There were four women and six men from the U.S. Other women were from Canada, Germany, France, Japan, (at that time) the Soviet Union, and Taiwan; and other men were from Australia, Chile, France, Greece, Japan, South Africa, South Korea, and the People's Republic of China. The resources that students brought to the classroom based upon their life experiences alone were amazingly rich for a course looking at beliefs and values and philosophies associated with leisure.

Creating a learning environment which enabled students to bring their life experience to the classroom provided multicultural content, discussion, analyses, and comparison of leisure philosophy. As students developed their learning objectives in consultation with others and me, it was clear that the philosophic content of the course would take an enriching turn away from the traditional Euro-centric focus. Co-learners listened intently when the man from Chile talked about his experience with concepts associated with the integration of work and leisure; when the woman from the Soviet Union spoke of the lack of leisure opportunity in her country; when the Greek spoke of historic Greece and concepts of *scholē* as he had learned growing up there; or when the Australian described the ethic which emphasized a less stressful lifestyle and more vacation days than North Americans experience. Co-learners found themselves learning far more than the course required because of the number of resources in the learning environment available to them in the form of each other.

As the facilitator, I did not know nearly enough myself to have duplicated that learning experience, and had I felt that it was my job to be the authority, covet rather than share information, appear to know more than I knew, then all of us would have learned less. My task as facilitator was to empower students to trust and use their life experience in identifying their learning goals. I was responsible for creating a learning environment where students were willing to share their emerging knowledge with others from their unique perspectives. As facilitator, my job included honoring and emphasizing truth as students were identifying it, rather than being the only one who knew it. As facilitators we must care more about having truth and knowledge come out, be stated, and not be concerned with being the one and only who knows and says; this requires patience.

Experiences

Educators bring to the classroom individual life experiences that both prepare and challenge them as teachers. My early learning experiences certainly set that context for me. Prior to graduate school, classroom learning was not particularly rewarding for me. My most positive learning experiences occurred outside of the classroom. In fact, it is not entirely clear even today why I went on to college. With no clear goal in mind, I was the only one in my family cohort grouping of siblings and cousins to ever finish college. We were not a formally educated lot, but we learned all the time and in our own ways. I have tried to come to an understanding of those ways in that how I have learned seems an essential element in defining my philosophical approaches to education; my work, in fact, why I work.

My dad would often say, “I don’t understand everything I know about it”, referring to one thing or another. These words remain in my repertoire, their essence in my soul. He modeled both wonderment and humility. There was a lot that he wanted to know and he was honest in admitting that he didn’t understand everything and in doing so, allowed others to know. He was a natural facilitator.

I have remained inquisitive by nature. Growing up, I was always full of questions, and if the truth be known, I still am today but have been socialized to ask less frequently. In my doctoral studies, I came to realize that people (me included) learn best when learning naturally. If I can figure out how a student learns naturally, then I can help that student apply those abilities to acquiring higher education. We do not all learn the same; not by pace or content. If it is our intent to facilitate learning in students, then we need to be flexible in our expectations. I never tested well, so if I only allow students to take tests in my classes to demonstrate their knowledge and they too do not test well, then I am positioning them away from successful learning experiences.

To exercise this kind of flexibility takes more time and energy on the part of educators. My mom was the one who modeled flexibility for me. Throughout growing up and growing older, I shared delight in her ability to take something and make it something else. And she would even make something from scratch, that is, create something new that wasn’t there before.

This sense of creative application feels as inherent as does my inquisitive nature to how I learn. When enabling students to determine their own preferences for demonstrating that they have accomplished their learning goals, the facilitator must be open to alternative ways of documentation. As facilitator, it is also essential that equity in assignments be maintained. It is not unusual for me to have to tone students down given their excitement to complete more assignments within the context of a class than is fair to expect them to accomplish in light of the course itself.

There are a couple of important values that I have long held and that I recognize have made it easier for me to accept the theory and practices of andragogy. I am by nature, cooperative. My competitiveness is underdeveloped at best and this enables me

to take time with students in anticipation they too will see the enjoyment that comes from working together to produce synergistic outcomes; in this case, group learning means more and better learning. I also believe in the worth of the individual. I enjoy individual differences and I have learned firsthand that the more differences there are in the classroom, the more students will learn if the facilitator sets up a learning environment which places importance on individual difference, expression, and contribution. In honoring cooperation and individual difference as essential values, I experience a predisposition for engaging in strategies which are aligned with the theory and practices of andragogy.

In conclusion, the influences along my journey have been formed by values, perceptions, and approaches to teaching recreation and leisure studies in the academy. Previous teachers, authors, and experiential role models defined and shaped what feels right to me as a person who is an educator. Being afforded this opportunity to share my perceptions and approaches is quite an honor and quite an exercise in self-disclosure.

What I have written here is only my way and should not be viewed as a prescription to be followed by all. Nobody has all the answers for everyone else. We only have the answers that work for us. If we are willing to share our journeys with one another, perhaps we will gain insight in seeing a better way to travel the road. We may also see what we consider to be a worse way to travel the road, and that too is fine because what we do not like is also a way to form our understanding of and commitment to what we do like.

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