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ADULT LEARNING STYLES - IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT EDUCATORS WORKING IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

W.J. McGrath

In the Northern Territory there are about 20 adult educators based in Aboriginal communities where the traditional life-style is still experienced to a great degree. These adult educators are required to identify the further education and training needs of the community and to implement programs to meet these needs. In this brief paper I shall examine ways in which the study of Aboriginal adult learning styles can be of use to these adult educators.

Before looking at specific Aboriginal learning styles it is necessary to look at those which are generally universally agreed upon as the basic learning styles applicable to adults. This is necessary in order to ensure that adult educators have a foundation on which to base some identifiably different learning styles inherent in Aboriginal culture.

Sexton (1980) summarizes the basic assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners put forward by Malcolm Knowles:

These assumptions are that as a person matures, his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality towards one of being a self-directing human being. Second, he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning. Third, his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to his social roles as a breadwinner, father (or mother). And finally his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application: his orientation of learning changes from subject to problem centredness.

Skertchly (1981) summarises some of the methodological principles of mature learning as outlined by Lippett. In essence, the

* Superintendent, Technical & Further Education, N.T. Department of Education.

assumptions given are the same as Knowles', but in each case an implication for methodology is given. For the sake of brevity the four implications only are listed:

- if adults help to plan and conduct their own learning experiences they will learn more than if they are passive recipients;
- those methods which build on, and make use of, the experience of learners will produce most learning;
- the appropriate organising principle for adult learning is developmental sequence primarily, and logical subject development secondarily;
- adults will see learning experiences organised around life problems as more relevant than those organised around subject topics. (Skertchly, 1981)

A study of the above assumptions and implications allows adult educators to devise learning strategies most suitable to adults and to the subject of the learning situation. Emphasis can be placed on self-directing learning; inter-learning to enable every learner to interact with his peers and others in various situations; guided learning in groups or individually depending on the wishes of the students; self-planning and organisation as suggested earlier to a greater or lesser degree; reality and relevance to learner needs; and the use of a wide variety of learning aids to ensure a wide variety of strategies be used in accord with individual needs. A knowledge and understanding of the above should be part of the professional background which an adult educator takes with him to an Aboriginal community. What he often lacks is a knowledge and understanding of traditional Aboriginal learning styles to enable him to decide whether these are applicable in whole, in part, or at all in an Aboriginal community.

In his definitive text on tradition and education in North-east Arnhem Land, Stephen Harris identifies five major traditional Aboriginal learning styles. These are:

Observation and observation versus verbal instruction; personal trial and error versus verbal instruction and demonstration; real-life performance by the learner versus practice in contrived settings; context specific (or particularistic) learning versus the learning of generalisable, context-free principles; and person-orientation versus information-orientation which is

closely associated with the absence in yolngu (Aboriginal) society of the institutionalised office of 'teacher'.

(Harris, 1980)

There are thus a number of implications for adult educators and these can be summarised as follows:

- . the initiative lies mostly with the learner, and Aborigines most often rely on visual memory rather than cause and effect thinking;
- . learning is by doing, and verbal explanation is difficult for those who have learned through non-formal means;
- . most Aboriginal learning activities are ends in themselves and necessarily means to future ends;
- . learning skills is related to a particular operation and not necessarily applied to new or different situations;
- . Aboriginal people assess, respect or ignore non-Aboriginal educators more on how they relate as persons than according to how they perform as educators, knowledge being valued because of their relationship with the person who imparts it. This is also an aspect important to all adult learners.

This last point is stressed by Shimpo when he says:

The relationship must be *personal* in the sense that Aborigines need to have rapport and mutual trust with those with whom they work. (Shimpo, 1978)

A comparison of the above implications with those provided by Skertchly and Sexton indicates that, while some of the universal assumptions are applicable to the Aboriginal situation, there are a number of special features of Aboriginal learning styles which appear to have no direct relevance to mainstream adult learning styles.

There can be little doubt that, if Aboriginal adults help to plan and conduct their own learning experiences and use their own experience as a starting point, they will learn more than if they are simply passive recipients. The adult educator, however, must not perceive as passivity the fact that Aborigines tend to make extensive use of observation, imitation and trial-and-error in their learning situations. Aborigines as well as other adults learn better when the learning experience is organised around real-life problems. The adult educator, however, needs to understand that contrived settings and context-free learning situations are largely foreign to

Aboriginal adults; real-life performances and particularistic situations are preferable.

While, for adults in general, the "authority of the teacher is determined by competence alone" (Lowe, 1975), to Aboriginal adults the main determinant of whether they will learn from (or with) a teacher is the personal relationship which has been established.

Many adult educators, part-time personnel in particular, are amateurs or trained primary or secondary teachers who, without specific study of adult learning styles, tend to employ teaching strategies which were used with them, or by them with children. A study of adult learning styles can do much to ensure that more appropriate learning strategies are applied in adult learning situations. As was mentioned earlier, adult educators working in Aboriginal communities need to have a knowledge and understanding of the universal adult learning styles as well as specific knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal learning styles to enable them to be effective in their jobs.

What, then, are specific ways a study of Aboriginal learning styles can be of use to the adult educator?

Firstly, the adult educator will come to realise that Aboriginal learning styles are not necessarily the same as those of adults of other cultures, and that teaching/learning strategies used elsewhere may not necessarily be successful with Aborigines.

Secondly, he will realise that he needs to develop a close rapport with his clients if he is to have any chance of success. In addition, he needs to be particularly careful in the selection of personnel to conduct education and training programs; he needs person-oriented personnel.

Thirdly, he will appreciate that programs need to be devised which allow an emphasis on doing, the use of real-life situations, and exploit a reliance on visual memory. Verbal explanations will need to be kept to a minimum.

Fourthly, he will understand that there is frequently little transfer of training, and that what has been taught in a previous context may not necessarily be usable in a new one.

References - see inside back cover.