A Philosophy for Teaching and Learning in Emerging Adulthood
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ABSTRACT

During the phase of emerging adulthood between the late secondary and early college years, students are in their greatest need of a teaching and learning philosophy that matches their development. Pedagogy is a philosophy of teaching children and andragogy addresses the teaching and learning that happens in adulthood. It is now time to discuss ephebagogy; the teaching and learning that happens for young people in late secondary and early tertiary settings. In this developmental phase students need environments that offer relevance, revelation, responsibility, and relationships. During emerging adulthood and budding citizenship the learners need experiences that are relevant to who they are and who they will become. They need the world revealed to them in ways that brings the outside into the classroom and takes them outside of the classroom. Responsibility for their own learning and the responsibility to choose how learning will happen and how it will be assessed are important to a group coming into their own citizenship. Last, relationships between students, teachers and the world of which they are a part are the social element to make learning stick.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents are a special group of people living in nearly adult bodies. They sometimes look like adults and very often demand adult privileges, but they aren’t always acting like adults ready for adult responsibilities. They are a group that requires a teaching and learning philosophy that differs from that of children and differs from that of adults. What psychologists are starting to call emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) is a phase of budding citizenship that can be used as a framework for a new philosophy: ephebagogy (Arnett, 2000; Logan, 2004). To differentiate the estuary between teaching children and teaching adults and to give it a different name stands to revolutionize education at secondary and early tertiary institutions. To neglect this opportunity is to ignore the situation of dropout rates in secondary education as well as students’ failure to thrive in secondary and tertiary education. Consider also the social problems of unemployable citizens that lack the higher order reasoning skills to participate in a democracy. Engaging in a discussion can lead to the creation of a philosophy of teaching and learning for emerging adult learners. It is as important to our current youth as it is to our future society and our ability to build a sustainable citizenry.

In 2009, Clifford Knapp, who is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Northern Illinois University, gave the Kurt Hahn Address. This address honors Hahn’s contributions to experiential learning and the creation of the Outward Bound program. Knapp tells an anecdote of the advice he sought when preparing this speech. He says past speakers told him to tell personal stories, give listeners something to do instead of just listening, be evocative and inspirational, speak from the heart and the head, have fun creating and giving the presentation and to talk less (Knapp, 2010). In essence, the advice he was given serves as spring board for a discussion of how to revolutionize teaching and learning as a
whole to incorporate this advice into how we do school.

In order to begin focusing on the age range of students to be discussed, it is important to explain why the ages of 16 through 20 are significant to the problem identified above. As the Director of Adult & Community Education and the District Dropout Prevention Committee Administrator, the context of my work is largely concerned with these students. In brief, the State of Maine allows a student to drop out at the age of 16 [20-A, MRSA §5001(2)(B)] at which time they also become eligible to attend adult education high school diploma completion programming [20-A, MRSA §8605(1)]. If dropout alternatives were to be offered to this population they cease to be eligible for traditional, publicly-funded secondary programs at the age of 20 [20-A, MRSA §5201(1)]. For these reasons the students between 16 and 20 years are important to address for their eligibility and propensity to leave school when school is not done well.

Pedagogy is the general term for education regardless of the students’ ages. When Malcolm Knowles defined the assumptions of andragogy (Knowles, 1975) educators had a way to differentiate between children and adults. Now it is time to talk about a construct for those students between these worlds. Dr. John Logan called this missing link “ephebagogy” (Logan, 2004). In recent research the emerging adult has become a topic for those concerned with psychology and human development (Arnett, 2000).

The current structure of a mainstream public high school programs enrolls 14-year olds and typically serves them until they are 18. At present the educational community still refers to this teaching methodology as pedagogy even though pedia- is the prefix that refers to children. The emerging adult is described as the young person who has reached the age of legal adulthood but still tends to be a student, unmarried, childless, and still largely relies on the support of adults (Arnett, 2000). Arnett argues that the term “young adulthood” is inappropriate as it suggests that adulthood has already manifested. For these purposes this phase is defined as the 18- to 25-year-old population as this is the typical age of the college student. The wisdom garnered from this work is useful to this argument for a new philosophy.

What is the issue?

It is important to start a conversation about what structures and approaches will address the unique needs of these learners and garner our best results for an effective citizenry. Emerging adulthood is a fairly new phrase being used in this decade to describe a phase of life for our young people where they are exiting childhood but are still not quite at the point of being adults. Their adulthood is still emerging. The word pedagogy (child leading) seemed problematic since we could not continue to believe that the process of learning functions the same for the adult. It is evident in the secondary and early tertiary setting that differences exist. Parents tend to be less involved. Students demand more autonomy. However, there is still a dire need for direction, boundaries and failsafe. The issue of defining a teaching philosophy for this budding citizen is imperative when we begin to face the reality that these are tomorrow’s citizens, tax-payers, voters, leaders and even politicians.

Why is this important?

High schools are held to a standard of reporting that seeks to know the enrollment
of freshman classes and the percentage of those completing a credential in the requisite four years. Have we constructed a system where students are repeatedly penalized for non-completion yet continually penalized for not being “college material?” Not addressing the problem of a sufficient philosophy of teaching to the emerging adult is harming our budding citizenry by neglecting the potential for exploring the possibilities and the cultivation of self. Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities and the age of inward focus (Arnett, 2000) and to abandon an opportunity to unearth the potential energies of young people will be a travesty. In current mainstream systems we find young people spending too much time with peers (Meier, 2000) and not nearly enough time seeing adults participating in the societies into which our young people will be thrust. There are a number of constructs for students to see this participation including volunteerism, community integration lessons, field studies and other class work that gets them out of doors. It is important to immerse the student in an environment full of robust experiences instead of conscribing them to a training regimen (Libresco, 2012). We need to treat the age of 16 to 20 in a tender and vigorous way that enlivens their interests and gives them safe places to make mistakes before consequences become calamitous (Arnett, 2000).

Why is andragogy a half measure for this group?

Many times a university is where one goes to school after turning 18 years old. However, adult education programs have blossomed into institutions that include all learning experiences, formal and informal, that shape the making of meaning for adults in all capacities (Lindeman, 1961). In the delicate phase of emerging adulthood we would be wise to nurture the qualities that compose the self without passing judgment on what will make for an adequate career or garner the student the most marketability in the professional world. If we consider this emerging adult to be somewhat of a stem cell in its plasticity for what it could become then we have the potential to foster a trajectory of development that encourages a love of learning. By the same virtue we have the potential to clip its wings when we communicate to this budding citizen that the things that come naturally to him are not valued by society.

The assumptions of andragogy (Knowles, 1975) are appropriate for this group with some variations taking into consideration some features of the emerging adult. Knowles asserts that adults need to know the reason for the new learning, they need to be responsible for making decisions in their education, adults seek relevance and ready use of the new learning, and they respond well to problem-centered strategies. The assumptions of andragogy ask us to consider meeting the adult where he or she is and capitalize on the various life experiences they bring to the learning situation (Knowles, 1975). Where the assumptions of andragogy become problematic for ephebagogy is in Knowles assertions that adults respond better to internal motivation and thrive when learning is couched in their experiences.

I suggest that we begin a discussion about how we will still meet the emerging adult but not just exclusively where they are; we need to meet them a little more on the side of where they need to be and not rely totally on those life experiences. This age group does not always have personal experience with things like work and homemaking but they do see it happen around them. This type of teaching would be a mix of introducing
experiences and scaffolding learning on prior life experiences and observations. Though a young person’s experiences are limited they are no less pertinent in learning.

**Introducing the term ephebagogy**

When Knowles (1975) gave rise to andragogy we began to talk about the leading of adults (gogy being Greek for “leading”). We need to consider the estuary between childhood and adulthood as it is a marked phase of life ripe with virtues and conflicts. I suggest that we take a look back to the times where young people were enlisted in a vigorous program of honoring their compatriots, recognizing the efforts of their forefathers, learning about their unique contributions to the world and valuing their gifts and talents. In ancient Greece young men between the ages of 18 and 20 were enrolled in an educational training corps that prepared them for induction into society and full democratic participation (Aristotle, 350 B.C.). These young men were called Ephebus as epheb- is the Greek prefix for this age. The important aspect of the prefix epheb- is this; these were young people learning how to be citizens in their world.

- It is important to ask certain questions about the link between ephebagogy and pedagogy. For example: Is ephebagogy the missing link between pedagogy and andragogy (Logan, 2004)?

- Can we begin a discussion about what it means to teach a young person who is electric with potential?

- Can we discuss what schools that foster this look like?

- What are the teaching methods and the best practices for drawing out the qualities in young people that will make them fully fledged contributing members of society?

These students will eventually be citizens that raise children, labor with their hands, vote for leaders, inform their neighbors, care for their environments and leave the world greater when their lives are over. Some of these citizens may even go to college. Specific democratic teaching and learning does happen in school but usually only for a small portion of people enrolled in courses on the topic. We need to find ways for these methodologies to cross curricula and permeate the lifestyles of students thereby influencing the classrooms (Thomas & Hartley, 2010). Let us have these discussions so we can start a movement that revolutionizes the secondary institution. Let us cultivate an expectation in our communities that reading, writing and arithmetic are essential to democratic participation while continuing to believe that humanism, creativity and vigor are equally as important to our survival.

**Focusing on the budding citizen**

The goal of education is, for many, to prepare our citizens for a life that contributes to a democracy (Meier, 2000). We need people in our midst who are not simply residents sojourning in our society. While the educated elite are a resolute force, the average citizen armed with voice and the ability to critically reflect on the human experience is the only force that promises progress. These citizens are the ones who will take an active role in making a difference in society. Defining the concept of ephebagogy stands to evolve our schools into training grounds for future society replacing academic rigor with educative vigor (Wraga, 2011). By this I suggest that the current status of teaching students that academics are predominant is excluding the students that will come into flower in the ways of the common man. We need to teach our young people to be wrong at times (Robinson 2007). The story of WD-40 lubricant is how #40 is the formula that
finally worked (WD-40, 2012). Our young people must be taught resilience even when they are wrong 39 times. We need to teach our young people that to sow a field is as dignified a task as to write a poem (Washington, 2003). We need to teach our students that to write a poem is to change the world as much as to study college chemistry (Greene, 1996). The age of students in this ephebagogical phase are begging to have these things cultivated within them. They are begging to be treated like adults, but they are begging to be lead in a way that treats them with tenderness. Teaching the emerging adult through the lens of budding citizenship affords them the opportunity to contribute in ways that are of the highest vibration of human interest. This spares us the attrition of excluding the participation of people that are considered less useful by today’s highly competitive standard of achievement.

What does it look like?

I believe the experiential democratic model is at its greatest importance to the ephebagogical philosophy. The principles of service learning, cooperative learning, adventure-based outdoor learning, problem-based learning, action learning, group projects, community research, share-out of achievements, field work, internships, employment and vocational education, laboratory simulation, public forums for issue framing, choosing their own assignments, organized public problem solving, study circles, world cafés, dialogues, democratic modeling by the institution, question lessons, experiencing before reading, sensing, emoting, remembering, field trips, demonstrations, and participation are among the many ways that some institutions have begun this work (Itin, 1999; Knapp, 2010; Thomas & Hartley, 2010).

I see these organized into four overarching categories:

- Bringing the world into the classroom (Relevance);
- Bringing the student into the world (Revelation);
- Onus on the learner (Responsibility); and
- Being together in learning (Relationships).

Relevant activities for the classroom can be a discussion of current politics, projects to remedy real problems they face or modeling situations from the working world. Revealing activities include visiting places that reinforce classroom teaching, taking jobs in fields that interest them or getting out of doors to see content in action. Giving students the responsibility of their own learning requires teachers to give students choices in what they learn, to ask the student questions instead of always giving answers and to elicit emotional responses in students. Equally, students should be responsible for choosing how they are assessed. What accomplishments, projects and products do they want evaluated? Finally, the relationships created by discussions, debates and cooperation allow students to operate in ways that mirror participation in adult, democratic life.

Conclusion

The phase between the ages of 16 and 20 is a phase that requires a different kind of teaching and a different kind of school (Arnett, 2000). We typically find these students in high schools, community colleges and four-year universities. For many, these institutions offer ways of learning that prove sufficient and success is measured by test scores, college entrance and accolades. However, for those that find these years a little less easily navigable there
needs to be a philosophy that posits college as an option that is just one of many options that are worthy of young adults. We must cultivate the individual contribution, foster understanding of democratic participation, cherish creativity, value aesthetics, and channel humanism. Knapp says in his 2009 address:

In order to benefit from what happens to me, I need to be ready to engage as many senses as possible, think about how the experience relates to my life, connect it to my past experiences, and eventually use what I learned to solve other related problems. If I don’t do this, I may soon forget the lesson. When I add deep experiences to my life and reflect upon them, I gain a more lasting understanding of a topic. (pg. 284)

It is devastating to our young people as we squander their talent. The problem we create when we do is an ill-prepared citizenry of the future. The term andragogy offered us a new way to look at educating the citizen, but this is a half measure when we discuss educating young people up into that citizenship. To educate the citizen we need to look at all aspects of what it means to contribute to society and begin to nurture these things in young people instead of attempting to supplant nature with narrow standards of success. By taking the oath the Athenian Ephebi promised to stand together, contribute to progress and leave society greater in their wake. Let us promote an environment where the preparation for this begins when the student needs it most. Let us create a philosophy where civic duty is as important as standardized test fodder.

Author Notes

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