

Audio Transcript of Allan Quigley Recording Section 3: The Assumptions We Bring to the Classroom

Hi.

If you listened to my Voice-Over or read the narrative piece in the previous history landmarks Section, section two, did you happen to notice that something was missing? We met some of our heroes and heroines and we saw how they struggled against so many odds to teach adults literacy. We have an amazing history. But, did you notice that learners had no input? No voice? In times past, adult literacy learners were there to be taught, not heard. Not unlike the education systems for children in those early days.

I want to discuss this for a few minutes.

This is a learner-centred guide. In Section four, you will meet Malcolm Knowles, one of the most significant figures in adult education in the 20th century. He not only argued in his books for a learner-centred approach—what he called the method of andragogy—but, bottom line, Knowles was adamant that adult learners need to have a voice in their own learning. He, amongst others through the 1970's and on to today, have helped change the way mainstream adult education and our sub-field of adult literacy was once perceived. Perceived not only by the wider public but by our own field in years past.

BUT, Knowles and others realized we, as practitioners, might have a curriculum to teach. And, many educational institutions are not so keen on a learner-centred approach. Therefore, as we will see in the next section, Knowles says we should be ready to do some negotiating. That is, we often will need to find a balance between what the institution's or funding agency's purposes are, and, on the other hand, what the learner's felt needs and interests are.

Further, our field of adult literacy has inherited centuries of myths, stereotypes, and assumptions about adults with low, or no, literacy. It is not unusual to see the *deficit perspective*, as it is called today, in our teaching and tutoring surroundings.

Which I want to talk about briefly here.

For adults in those early days, being able to read was the accepted means towards gaining what were considered higher, more desirable, social goals. The purpose of teaching literacy was to “uplift,” even

save, those with low or no literacy by helping them read the Bible. As time went along, teaching adult literacy meant building morality among adult literacy learners. Learners of course had no voice.

The Bristol School movement was the archetype. As Dr. Pole made clear, the intent of the Bristol Schools was to enlighten those he called “the illiterate poor.” And make them “Christian-minded,”

Moving to the later era of the 19th century, The Port Royal Experiment for Freed Slaves was to build morality and develop citizens according to the norms of the dominant culture. Through to the 20th century, citizenship education became the major part of the curricula, The Moonlight School of Kentucky movement was a good example. At Hull House, citizenship education for new immigrants through literacy was key, as was building vocational skills. And, finally, citizenship education was at the very heart of Frontier College’s curriculum, at least in the early days.

All this to say, goals were set by the sponsor, the institution and/or the teachers. Not the learners. Reading skills were meant to fill the presumed deficits ascribed to low literate adults.

So why does all this ancient history matter? Why talk about this? All that was long ago and things are all different today. Aren’t they?

Well, not really.

Without a history, we risk repeating our history.

While things are definitely changing, today’s reality is that some institutions, sponsors, curricula, and by the way, book sellers, still perceive the needs of our learners in ways that are not the same as those of our learners.

Why is this an issue for us in our teaching?

It needs to be said that, if we as practitioners sometimes see our adult learners through the *deficit perspective*, meaning if we assume some or all adult learners are deficient not just in reading or numeracy, but also in various other areas of their lives and lifestyles, well, frankly it is understandable. We are surrounded by what we have inherited in our field and in our society.

To illustrate these points, I want to give you some examples from my own teaching experiences.

Let’s reflect on Dr. Thomas Pole’s 1816 *History of the Bristol Schools Movement* for a moment. You might remember that Pole was praising the Bristol School movement because, as he saw it, if adults were to learn to read using the Bible, this would uplift, using in his words, “our, poor, ignorant, and

neglected fellow-creatures” (p. 13). As he argued, the “illiterate poor,” should be encouraged to learn to read using the Bible because, using his words: “Education, the perusal of the sacred Scriptures and other religious books, have a tendency to moralize and Christianize the minds of men.”

So let’s focus on the point Pole made back in 1816 that: “Instead of idleness, profaneness and vice—[the Scriptures] will inculcate diligence, sobriety, frugality, piety and heavenly-mindedness” (p. 19). Five major virtues to be achieved by literacy education.

Sound a bit over the top? Kind of ridiculous today?

Well, here’s what happened to me.

In the 1970’s I taught using the social studies curriculum given to me in both northern Saskatchewan and Northern Alberta. In both cases, high on the list of the “to be taught items,” were the “dangers of alcohol.” Adults were improving their reading skills, yes, but both curricula in both provinces made a very clear point that the virtues of what Pole called sobriety needed to be taught to literacy learners. Nothing had changed much on that point.

In both Northern Saskatchewan and Fort McMurray—at least back in the early days of the 1970’s—alcohol was a way of life. In the early days of the oil boom, Fort McMurray was a hard drinking town.

Yet, no one, neither my immediate supervisor, nor Roy, as I will call him, who was my social studies predecessor and the Instructor who wrote the social studies curriculum, gave a second thought to the irony that after teaching the evils of alcohol to my adult learners, my wife and I were often invited to join in on some serious weekend drinking parties, or to just join in on some causal after-work drinks.

Did this mean my students had a drinking problem?

Nor did it occur to me that no other program at the AVC had a teaching unit on the evils of alcohol. Just the Voc Prep program. Why were my learners alone assumed to need to learn the virtues of “sobriety” as Pole called it?

Now we come to “frugality.” Pole told his readers, being frugal and careful with money was a necessity for the “illiterate poor.” But, hey, most of my fellow instructors, not to mention many in

the management itself, were in huge debt. Fort McMurray was a “make it and spend it” culture in those early oil rich days.

So, wanting to be a good teacher and not questioning the assumptions of my curriculum, I helped my class make a movie using campus film equipment called, “Why I am always broke.” This seemed to me to be a good way to teach this subject. And, not surprisingly, my Voc Prep colleagues thought it was a great hit. It fulfilled all the programmatic stereotypes. But, once again, no other of the trades or the business programs felt the need to teach learners about frugality. Apparently, just my learners needed to learn frugality.

So here’s my last example. I will never forget it, no matter how hard I try.

This one might come under Dr. Pole’s headings of “heavenly mindedness.”

One day, the AVC Registrar, whom I will call Mrs. Gregg, summoned me and my social studies predecessor, whom I am calling Roy, to her office. She told us in no uncertain terms: “There are too many girls getting pregnant around here!” She looked deep into our eyes and added: “Something has to be done!”

No one ever questioned Mrs. Gregg. No one.

It never occurred to me, or Roy, why the instructor of the secretarial class wasn’t invited. The secretarial -training course was entirely comprised of women. Where was Mrs. Franklin, their instructor?

Turned out, “Too many girls around here,” only meant the women in my Voc Prep class. No evidence of this was asked for nor offered. I guess girls who were literate, didn’t get pregnant, at least at that AVC.

Then, Roy announced, “I guess it is time to have sex education week again.”

This is exactly what Mrs. Gregg wanted to hear.

As we walked back to the classroom, I asked if we could ask a nurse from the local hospital to do this. Or maybe Mrs. Gregg herself? Not me!

Roy told me, “No way.” With a grin, he explained I had inherited Sex Education week along with the curriculum and, clearly, I had to accept all the deficit assumptions that came with the job.

So I did my best that week. Thankfully most of my learners were polite. Even though they were almost as uncomfortable as I was, they did ask a few questions about things like birth control. But basically there was nothing new in this for them.

But, and here's the awful part. Roy had told me after the meeting with Mrs. Gregg that the closing film for Sex Education week that he was willing to show would, as he put it, "Make them never want to have sex again."

The lights dimmed that last day and there was a documentary called: "Birth in a Taxi." It was so graphic that my student, little, quiet, shy, Jeannette actually fainted and fell out of her desk onto the floor. We got her up. She said she was okay. And with the lights back on, she staggered out of the room.

The next day, I called in sick. When my wife came into the bedroom and asked me what was wrong, I think I just said something like: "Could you please close the door? I'm trying to die."

There had to be a better way. And there is. Simply put: "Build your program on your learners, not on assumptions and deficit perspectives

I'll just close by adding, to the notion that things are *all different now*, in the 1990's a graduate student of mine and I published a peer reviewed article in the *Adult Education Quarterly* journal entitled, "Happy Consciousness: Ideology and hidden curricula in literacy education." You can find it listed in the bibliography at the end of the Guide if you want to look it up.

My graduate student, Ella Holsinger, and I reviewed a wide selection of the student readers sold by major publishers and as used in adult literacy programs across Canada and the U.S.

Our analysis showed how most of these readers had hidden curricula. They assumed adult literacy and basic education learners needed to learn about the importance of obeying the law.. the importance of not using drugs... the evils of alcohol and above all, the importance of conforming to the mores and rules of society.

Basically, the hidden curriculum was, "Don't be a trouble-maker."

What Dr. Pole might have called "piety" was what Ella and I called "happy consciousness." Learners needed to uncritically accept that society and educators know best.

So, you didn't have to go to Northern Alberta or Northern Saskatchewan to find the deficit perspective at work.

In closing, we have come a long ways in changing the way low-literacy is seen and how we teach, but we still have a long ways to go.

I can hope this guide helps us continue to think about what learner-centered education actually means as we build this profession into the future.

Thanks for listening.