**Paulo Freire and Dialogue Education**

Key propositions:

- Dialogue liberates; monologue oppresses.
- The best way to start learning is as part of a dialogue-rich group.
- The richest learning begins with action, is shaped by reflection and leads to further action.

The influence of the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire in Latin America and Africa has been enormous. Working originally in the state education system, Freire conceived and developed adult literacy programmes whose purpose was to assist the poorest people to learn to read and write through helping them to respect their own everyday language. Freire insisted that the function of education was to build on the language, experiences and skills of the ‘educatees’, rather than imposing on them the culture of the ‘educators’.

Freire took education out of the classroom and created ‘the culture circle’, where learners used their own ways of speaking to articulate their shared understanding of how their world came to be like it was and how to act to change their future. From being a monologue process, education became a process of dialogue in which educatees and educators engaged in mutually respectful learning. …

In 1979 Freire became directly involved in politics and helped to build the Brazilian Workers’ Party into the highly effective political movement it is today. His emphasis on the crucial connection between theory and practice …. From the very poorest to the richest of citizens, they are engaged in a group learning process that will transform their understanding of themselves, each other, their community and the world around them.

A core component of Freirian theory is that learning begins with action, is then shaped by reflection, which gives rise to further action. Learning is thus a continuous process, directed at enhancing the learners’ capacity to act in the world and change it. For Freire, whether it is called literacy or learning, this is the principal political task of any society committed to people-power.

In Freire’s terms, learning based on group dialogues is liberating for everyone involved in the process. By contrast, teaching based on individual monologues in an imposed language leads to silence and apathy, and is the ultimate form of oppression.

Extracted from *Gaian Democracies* by Roy Madron and John Jopling.

“Monologue is clearly the metaphor of all oppression. Freire’s book argued that [it’s through] dialogue [that we can create] an effective future together. It’s the best method for building and sustaining healthy schools and communities,” (Paterson in *Augusto Boal and the People’s Theater*, by Steve Eskew).

Adapted by Roland Walker from
Malcolm Knowles, Father of Adult Education in America (1913-1997)

Knowles began as a practitioner of adult education in his thirties and spent his career developing a 'coherent and comprehensive theory of adult learning'. His thinking and philosophy of theorizing were influenced by Kurt Lewin, who said, “There’s nothing so practical as a good theory”. So, his writings -- more than 230 articles and 18 books -- focused on applying his research to the practice of adult education. The concept of andragogy, self-directed learning and learning contracts are some of his contributions to adult education. Knowles said of himself, at the end of his career, “My strength lies in creating opportunities for helping individuals become more proficient practitioners” (Knowles 1989: 146).

Born at the YMCA: Malcolm Knowles and the Birth of Andragogy
by Kevin Kruse

The birth of the modern theory of adult learning, known as andragogy, occurred in 1946 at a Boston YMCA. A young director of adult education organized a course on astronomy and arranged for a local university professor to teach the class. Although initially enthusiastic, the students quickly became bored with the passive lecture experience and attendance dwindled until the course was finally canceled.

Trying again, the YMCA director rescheduled the course and this time invited a member of the amateur astronomers' club to lead the group of students. As soon as the students arrived for their first class, the new teacher escorted them to the roof of the YMCA and asked them to gaze into the night sky. While they looked up, the teacher asked them what it was they noticed most and what they wanted to learn. Their questions formed the basis for the rest of the course and the teacher led discussions with a telescope on hand for ready use. This experiential method based on the learners’ desires was popular with the students and the class enrollment swelled.

The young YMCA director, named Malcolm Knowles, took note of the different teaching styles and their dramatically different outcomes. The method of teaching to adult learners' interests and actively engaging the students in their own discovery became the structure Knowles would use for all of the YMCA courses. The astronomy class also marked the beginning of Knowles' lifelong exploration towards understanding adult learning.

Knowles would not adopt the term andragogy until 1970 with the release of his book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy vs Pedagogy*. Pedagogy, defined as the art and science of teaching, has its word origin in Greek and traditionally has applied to the teaching of children. Knowles' seminal work clearly drew a new distinction between classic methods of pedagogic instruction and adult learning principles.

Knowles' theories of adult learning are complex, but his conclusions can be summarized into four main points:

1. Adults need to know why they are learning something. They should be told how it effects them directly.
2. Adults have a repository of lifetime experiences that should be tapped as a resource for ongoing learning. Similarly, adult learners bring various levels of prior exposure to any topic and that fact should be acknowledged.
3. Adults use a hands-on problem-solving approach to learning. Rote memorization of facts and figures should be avoided.
4. Adults want to apply new knowledge and skills immediately. Retention decreases if the learning is applied only at some future point in time.

For more, see …
http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/resources/malcolmknowles.cfm
**Kurt Lewin's Contribution to Adult Education**

Kurt Lewin articulated three essential ideas in the late 1930s and early 1940s: (1) the significance of learners playing an active role in discovering knowledge for themselves; (2) the importance of a cohesive approach to instruction that includes cognitive, affective, and psychomotor activities to support permanent changes in attitudes, ideas, and behaviors; and (3) the powerful impact that the social environment of the learner has in supporting change.

**Active Learning**

Most instructors agree that learners place more belief in knowledge they have discovered on their own than in knowledge presented by others; yet all too often instructors have no confidence that learners can discover meaning for themselves; instead, instructors perceive that lecturing is essential to ensure that students "get it." If it is true that it takes more than the mere transfer of information for attitudes, ideas, and behaviors to change, then the instructor who relies on lectures may be failing to support the very learning that leads to long-term change.

Instruction must be planned with a clear vision of what the students will do with the content presented. It is critical that students interact with the instructional content and that activities be developed to promote and support open-ended, self-directed learning. Content should never be delivered for memorization, but instead for use as a tool in planned and sequenced activities. This requires carefully planned design, respectful feedback and dialogue, and (for the instructor new to this model of instruction) a leap of faith to believe that students will come to appropriate conclusions over time. In turn, the students' learning may take the form of changed attitudes, development of new skills, and different beliefs as to the likely consequences of a given action; all of these influence the learners' daily decision-making in future endeavors.

**A Cohesive Approach**

Lewin wrote that a piecemeal approach to guiding learners to accept new ideas, attitudes, and behaviors is ineffective. Instead, a cohesive approach must be utilized to support changes in cognition, affect, and behavior. Instructional designers must plan cognitively challenging tasks, address the affective issues that stimulate learner recognition of the need for change, and provide opportunities for action. Moreover, motivational aspects must be included in instruction. Failure to address all three of these areas (cognitive, affective, and physical) in every lesson plan results in less than maximal learning outcomes.

**The Impact of the Social Environment**

Lewin theorized that before changes in ideas, attitudes, and behavior will occur, modifications in a learner's perception of self and his/her social environment are essential. He also argued that it is easier to create change in a social context than individually. These principles challenge the instructor to create among learners a social environment that supports self-confidence and the perception that change is occurring and accepted within the learning environment. This requires both time and planned interaction among participants.

A preliminary step to creating a community of learners is establishing the foundation for a respectful, accepting, and caring environment (Vella, 1995). With preparation, instructors can create conditions that give students the freedom to experiment with new behaviors, ideas, and attitudes in a social environment.

[Editor's Note: Kurt Lewin, born in Prussia in 1890, is recognized as the founder of modern social psychology [and the father of ‘Group Dynamics’ - rww]. He immigrated to the United States in 1933 and established the Research Center on Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.). Lewin was a pioneer...]
of experimental social psychology and conducted numerous studies in areas including cognitive dissonance, group cooperation and competition, and group dynamics. He authored over 80 articles and published 8 books before he died in 1947.

Steven Stahl "Bringing Old Ideas to New Times: Learning Principles of Kurt Lewin Applied to Distance Education" *The Technology Source*, March 1999. (Abridged by R. Walker.)