

Chapter Ten

Adult Learning Theory in Practice

Martha McKenna, EdD

Lesley's Adult Baccalaureate Program gained a reputation as the place that would nurture an adult who had experience, who had places to go and things to do. Barbara Vacarr, Class of 1986

Respect for what adult learners bring to the learning process has long been the foundation of Lesley's constructivist teaching and learning approach in the Adult Baccalaureate Program (ABP). The growth in the 1970s and 1980s of entrepreneurial graduate programs at the University paved the way for the development of a baccalaureate degree completion program for adults seeking preparation for graduate study. Created in 1980 in the Graduate School, the Adult Baccalaureate Program was a reflection of its time and place.

The original ABP model was a course-based evening program where adult learners pursued degrees, primarily in education and human services, through coursework in the Graduate School. This early model, called Continuing Career Development for Adults, soon grew to include options for self-designed degree programs pursued in the weekend (Weekend Learning Community) and intensive residency (Adult Degree Option) formats. All three models were student-centered, with students working with faculty to design degree programs that met their personal and professional goals. Students and faculty created collaborative learning communities, where members brought their unique knowledge and experiences to the learning process. Students were encouraged to complete their degrees through transferring course credits from previous college-level study and earning credits for prior learning experiences through a portfolio review process. A critical component of the program was the requirement that students direct their work toward a final thesis or integrative project, constructed to integrate prior knowledge and skills with new learning, which would serve as the foundation for their professional careers.

In April, 2010 I met with Barbara Vacarr, Director of the PhD in Adult Learning and the Learning Community Bachelor programs to discuss the growth and development of the Adult Baccalaureate Program. The following is a synopsis history of the dialogue, with my text in standard Times New Roman font and Barbara's in *italics*.

ABP's Beginnings

When I joined the program in the mid-1980s there were three distinct models of the ABP, each led by a faculty director. I directed the Continuing Career Development for Adults model, which was a degree completion program drawing on coursework in the Graduate School that was offered on campus in the evenings and off-campus throughout Massachusetts on the weekends in a monthly cohort model. Anita Landa directed the Adult Degree Option, which was an intensive residency model where faculty and students met twice a year for a 10-day residency. Each residency consisted of intensive instruction to construct students' degree plans followed by one-on-one study for the next six months through correspondence. The third model, the Weekend Learning Community, was created in 1984 through a U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant to provide adult students with a unique

interdisciplinary, theme-based, cohort model that met conveniently on the weekends. Its director was Jill Tarule, who in 1986 brought recognition to the program through her work as part of a research collaborative that published the seminal text *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). The work created quite a stir when published for it provided a very different perspective on female development, which was in stark contrast to William Perry's research at Harvard on male development. Proposing a different paradigm for women's ways of knowing, the authors suggested that women moved from a place where they were silent knowers, to received knowers, and finally to constructed knowers, when provided the opportunity through education. While building on the work of Carol Gilligan at Harvard and Mary Belenky at Wellesley, *Women's Ways of Knowing* also reflected what we were doing at Lesley in the 1980s. Supporting all three models, Luke Baldwin, who was a graduate of the Harvard doctoral program in adult literacy, was in charge of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). Based in John Dewey's educational philosophy and David Kolb's model of experiential learning, Baldwin brought an understanding of how adults, if able to document their learning outside of the formal university setting, are empowered to build a degree and reclaim a sense of knowledge they acquired through their experiences in their work and with their families.

Nineteen eighty-six was a defining year for ABP. The program was growing significantly on campus and regionally, so we needed a faculty to provide academic advising and oversee all of the coursework in the liberal arts disciplines to support the professional majors drawn from the Graduate School. We hired Sharlene Cochrane to oversee history and the humanities, Marjorie Farrell led literature and psychology, Sharon Simone was our scientist, Luke Baldwin was the writing faculty, in addition to coordinating PLA, and I led the arts and humanities. In 1988 we created the position of academic advisor and Barbara Vacarr, who had just graduated from the program, was hired to oversee this area.

Defining Characteristics of the ABP

The program flourished because of its faculty, its philosophy, its focus on adult pedagogy or andragogy, and its design. The faculty were all products of the 1960s, interdisciplinary scholars who had pursued self-designed doctoral programs at progressive institutions. We had earned our degrees the hard way, with all the pressures of career and family, so we had a clear understanding of what it was like to earn a degree as an adult. While we were not students of adult learning theory, we none-the-less had practiced it in designing interdisciplinary doctoral programs that met our life goals. We all believed in crossing disciplines and in centering the learning in the students' personal and professional goals. Fortunately, we had arrived at an institution that allowed us to carry this on with our students.

Recognizing the need to connect theory with practice in adult learning, the faculty created our own learning community, the Collaborative on Adult Research and Practice (CARP), to share reflections and analyses of developmental theory on our teaching practice. Strongly influenced by the writings of John Dewey (1938) and David Kolb (1984), the faculty of CARP published an article for the *Journal of Museum Education*, "Passionate and Purposeful: Adult Learning Communities," which perhaps best captures the philosophy of the program.

Our understanding of adult development and our experience in successfully educating adult students have led us to understand our work as a three-step process: purposeful engagement in the content of the experience; reflection, evaluation, and analysis (as

individuals and as a group); and the application of new learning to concrete situations....Throughout these processes, adults are both passionate and purposeful. And that blend enlivens learning communities and contributes to the building of personal and intellectual support systems. (Baldwin, Cochrane, Counts, Dolamore, McKenna, & Vacarr, 1992).

These processes enabled learners to integrate new learning with past experiences, creating meaning for the present and questions for future study.

The program made theory explicit. Experience was the ground upon which learners were invited to observe, to reflect and to generate meaningful and relevant questions to guide their own learning. The objective was for adult learners to conceptualize about the world of ideas or theory in connection to their own experiences and then to actively experiment with theoretical understandings in new situations; always asking in what new ways or in what new arenas can I now use this knowledge? In this model student's experiences were truly at the center and the curriculum shaped itself around the individual, instead of the learner abandoning experiential knowing to accommodate curriculum that remains at an intellectual distance.

As an adult learner who chose to complete my degree in ABP, I was most attracted by the valuing of my lived experience, what I already knew. Lesley, in its adult programs, knew how to balance the tension of learning situated at the center of individual experience and community as the dialogic container for learning.

Another defining characteristic of ABP is our collaborative learning approach both inside and outside of the classroom. Collaboration is at the heart of what we do, collaboration between faculty and students, students and students, and faculty and faculty who are all participating in the learning process. In the late 1980s Lesley participated in a second FIPSE funded project to document collaborative learning models and share our approach with other adult educators. We believe that collaborating with others in the learning process makes it all the more powerful. For example, in teaching we would often start a class with a faculty member's thoughts or reflections on a reading, and then move to small groups so that students could collaborate in analyzing what they read and capture their insights. When the groups would report back, it was not what the faculty taught the students but what the faculty and students taught one another that marked the learning experience. In the end it was a much richer experience, because everyone was engaged in the dialogue and responsible for the learning. This model was central to both teaching and advising, as faculty and students co-constructed degree plans, designed internships and individually guided studies, and developed these proposals.

What is central is that people do not learn in isolation, people learn in dialogue, in collaboration with faculty and peers. I think Marjorie Farrell says it best, we're not covering a curriculum we're helping people to un-cover the curriculum. There is an ethos that we're uncovering this together and while I come to this endeavor with disciplinary knowledge and experience and while I can help others uncover ways of knowing in that discipline, we create an environment in which together we explore and interrogate the terrain. The philosophy is that the curriculum is open for all to explore and discover, and that happens in a shared dialogue where everybody's voice is heard and the result is the co-construction of knowledge.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of ABP was its location in the Graduate School. Adults had the opportunity to study with other adults. Students were able to say to their families and friends, "I'm studying in the Graduate School at Lesley."

That meant so much to me. It was the tangible evidence that my experience mattered.

No one asked what degree they were pursuing in the Graduate School. Adult baccalaureate students sat in graduate level courses because they brought experiences that equipped them to be graduate students. We would often say the difference between graduate students and the adult undergraduate students was that graduate students came in theory rich but experience poor. Often they would have just completed undergraduate school and be knowledgeable of critical theory of the disciplines of their field, but they didn't have a lot of experience. The adult baccalaureate students, on the other hand, were often experience rich and theory poor. They would bring rich experiences from the field, but not the benefit of four years of formal education. The adult baccalaureate students had to do the same assignments, carry out the same research, meet the same requirements, and were graded exactly the same as the graduate students in their courses. If an adult baccalaureate student was not ready for graduate work, they would not move into these courses. But once the students were ready, we encouraged them to pursue graduate courses so that they could be challenged by this advanced work. We eventually built dual-degree program based on this philosophy. We created Bachelor of Science/Master of Arts dual-degree programs for students, like Barbara, who came in well prepared to do graduate work and accelerate their professional training.

Student-Centered Learning

The student is at the center of their learning and all learning grows out of the questions and the experiences that the student brings. Student centered advising dynamically attempts to understand the student, the experience they bring and what it is that they most want to know.

The central component of this program has always been strong academic advising, empowering students to be aware of all the options, so that they can construct the best degree plan. Faculty advisors were all trained in adult pedagogy and practice by Deborah Sherman, the Assistant Dean of the Outreach and Alternative Education Division. She believed that we needed to empower students to be able to become agents of their own learning, helping them integrate personal goals and professional aspirations. Through advising sessions we created something together that linked personal and professional goals. Students were never told, "You need to do this series of courses because this is the degree," rather we would begin advising sessions with "What do you know? What do you want to do? How do you want to do it?" I found myself in a world where I was no longer telling students what they needed to do; rather I was supporting students in determining what they wanted to do. The faculty had to be trained in this model, so Sharlene, Marjorie, Sharon, Luke, Barbara, and I were constantly at one another's doors during the first few years learning from one another how to support students in designing their degrees.

We understood that advising was really teaching and that it was central to the learning experience for all students. We recognized that adults brought in a wealth of experience, and that experience sat at the center of their learning, as opposed to the curriculum sitting at the center of their learning. This was true in all of the models for there was a place in all of the degree programs where students individualized their study around their experience, their interests and their aspirations.

Our goal has always been to be able to move adults to finish a degree; to understand where they want to go and help them get there with knowledgeable advisors. From the day that the student first arrives, expressing an interest in Lesley, we work with the student to understand what it is she or he wants to study and how the student can accomplish this in a variety of baccalaureate options, whether it's the intensive residency program, courses offered on campus evenings and weekends, joining a cohort of learners in one of our off-campus sites, or online. In

addition to sharing with the student the variety of options for pursuing a degree, we also outline the many ways of earning credit to complete the program, including transferring courses credits and earning credit through prior learning assessment. Finally, we begin the process of degree planning to meet the student's personal and professional goals. I think we are unique in co-creating with our students self-designed programs that weave prior learning with new learning at the University into an integrated whole, providing them with the foundation for a career or graduate study. The advisor serves as a mentor, in the sense of Daniel Levinson (1978), where the student forms a significant relationship with the faculty member to facilitate his/her dream.

Lives in Context

Central to the programs was the introductory course "Lives in Context," designed and taught by the core faculty, in which students read biographies and autobiographies to examine the choices individuals make in the context of their lives. The work of Jack Mezirow (1991) on transformative adult learning theory, published the same year as this course was created, informed our design for we sought to engage students in critical reflections on their experiences leading to perspective transformation.

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectations to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167).

We read the life stories of famous, and not so famous, individuals to think about the themes in their lives and the choices they made in the context of their place, class, gender, economic reality and political/social times that shaped their lives. We read wonderful works, always with the intent to reflect on the subjects' life choices and how they might relate to the students own lives. As the course's final project students had to write a chapter of their own autobiography or another's biography, focusing on a period of time in their life to describe, reflect, and interpret major life choices that presented themselves. It provided students with an opportunity to go back and reflect on their lives within the context of the choices available to them.

The development of "Lives in Context" grew out of faculty discussions in which we reflected on our teaching practice. We were noticing that when adults returned to school they had a story to tell. The stories were compelling and inevitably personal narratives would find their way into all writing, including the kinds of writing, like research that necessitated a more public voice. We recognized that adults needed a place where they could tell their stories, where they could move from a personal to a more public voice. I remember the conversations, in which we discussed adult development and learning theory and how we could use it to construct learning experiences that would support developmental movement from embeddedness in personal story to a stance of reflective observation of experience. So we considered context as the organizing principle to engage people in looking at how our narratives are shaped by the contexts in which we live. In this sense the focus is not just about a person telling their story, it is about a window into understanding how lives are shaped by cultural, political, and geographic contexts and how, in turn, individuals shape those very contexts. In this sense adults were able to

see both the impact of these contexts on their own lives and themselves as active agents in shaping the world around them. They were also, often for the first time, cognizant that all knowledge is contextual.

I never ceased to be amazed at the transformation in voice of the students in “Lives in Context.” While the students often entered seeking “truths” from the faculty experts, they quickly learned that they had much to share, and in so doing developed a greater understanding of their own competence and achievements. The faculty witnessed the students moving from a reliance on authority, through recognition that truth is relative, to an understanding that knowledge is constructed. Students gained a more informed and powerful voice. Robert Kegan (1982) defines this movement from an “interpersonal” stance to an “institutional” stance as the central transformation in adult development.

We focused on teaching people how to think, not what to think, and I believe that really defines Lesley’s adult learning approach. It is about helping students become critical thinkers, reflecting on experiences and the world in which they live. The understanding is that when learners know how to think more deeply about one or two things, they become lifelong learners applying this skill and strategy in all subsequent learning. So we worked with students to develop their questions so that they could approach thinking about their lives and work in new ways.

Transforming Students Lives

Two stories of students whose lives have been changed by this program will always stand out for me. The first is Carol Ann, a friend and neighbor, who did not have the chance to complete her degree at Lesley while a student in the 1960s. Marriage and children prevented her from finishing, so her dream was to complete her degree before her last child finished college. A bright woman, extremely well read, she felt that a part of her was unfinished. I worked with the Admissions Office to create an Adult Baccalaureate program in American Studies (her love was history) in Shrewsbury, and she, along with another neighbor, recruited the group. Carol Ann was diagnosed with cancer during the process of completing her degree, and the cohort of Lesley students became her greatest support in both fighting the cancer and completing her degree. She graduated with a transcript filled with A’s and enjoyed her graduation more than anyone I can recall. Carol Ann died two years later from the cancer that ravaged her body—but her mind was liberated through the education that Lesley had provided, an education that was created especially for her!

The second student is one of the leading artists or *santeros* (makers of saints) in New Mexico. While teaching the Traditions and Cultures Institute in Santa Fe, I came to know Marie, and discovered that this talented and accomplished artist did not have an undergraduate degree. She was pursuing coursework at a local community college, for without a degree she was finding it difficult to publish her texts on the art of the *santeros* of New Mexico. I encouraged her to pursue her bachelor’s degree with Lesley through our Intensive Residency Option program. The program would provide the opportunity for her to complete the requirements of her degree while focusing her research and writing in the field that she loved. The problem for Marie was the high cost of study and travel to Lesley; however, I was able to help her with this by identifying financial aid funds. Marie, in gratitude, gave Lesley one of her priceless works of art. During the course of her studies at Lesley Marie produced several papers that became published articles, and her thesis that is now a published work, *Tortilla Chronicles: Growing Up in Santa Fe* (Cash, 2007). Upon graduation I nominated Marie for a Javits Fellowship for doctoral study at the

University of New Mexico, a fellowship that she was in fact offered. Marie's fame as an artist and writer continues to grow and she credits Lesley with playing a major role in her success. Carol Ann and Marie are just two examples of how the Adult Learning programs responds to students needs, adding true meaning and value to their lives.

So often adults came in to the Programs, women in particular, who had remarkable experiences. When asked in advising sessions to talk about what they had done in their lives in order to think about how they might earn credit for prior life experience they responded... "Well I haven't really done anything." Upon the advisor's further probing we discovered amazing things. I remember a woman who had worked with Mother Theresa, and when asked about her life experiences she started by saying "Well I haven't really done anything." So many accomplished adults began their responses with "well it's just been my experience..." as though the fact that it was "just something they did" lessened the power of the experience and its impact. It was profound to observe the transformation of experience into owned knowledge as students reflected and wrote about their experiences.

We encourage students to become agents of their own learning, and one example of a student's agency stands out for me. A faculty member teaching an introductory psychology course asked her students to look into what opportunities in Cambridge might be available during the semester to hear lectures of the renowned psychologists in the area. This is a normal occurrence, since learning experiences outside the classroom have always been central to our work. One of the students called the office of Dr. B. F. Skinner at Harvard, and was surprised when he answered the phone. She explained that she was a student in a psychology class at Lesley and asked Dr. Skinner if would be lecturing in the area in the fall semester. He was not giving a talk, but he responded that since he appreciated what Lesley was doing for adult learners and we were just across the street from his office, he would be glad to come and talk to the students in her class. So this celebrated behavioral psychologist met with the woman's class for an hour one Friday morning and talked about his latest research on a more humanistic approach to behaviorism. I remember vividly the experience of these students sitting in a circle engaged in a dialogue with B. F. Skinner about behavioral psychology. It was a life changing experience for us all. It was amazing that all it took was a call from one of our adult baccalaureate students to make it happen, or perhaps, it was only such a call that could have made it happen.

I realize that so much of what's important about the way we work with students is engaged learning, discussion and peer interaction. Central to what we do is the belief that knowledge and self gets constructed in relationship and in dialogue. It is this approach that leads to the kinds of transformation, personal development and evolution that we've observed in our students. Education at this level is really something that is healing, in the Jungian sense, that it creates a wholeness of the parts of us that have not been integrated. The whole educational process is a process of creating wholeness of oneself and of the world.

Examining their life choices leads students, especially women, to accept their choice of family and careers over completion of a degree earlier in their life. Carol Gilligan (1982) in her groundbreaking study, *In a Different Voice*, identifies "women's embeddedness in lives of relationship, their orientation to interdependence, their subordination of achievement to care, and their conflicts over competitive success" (p. 171) as characteristics of human development. Applying this theory to their life choices liberates students to honor their past and integrate it in their learning.

For most adults returning to complete an undergraduate education is an emotional experience around competence and self-esteem. Learning is both an emotional and a cognitive

experience. The realization for adults that they've lived on the margins in society without a first degree is a painful experience. Recently, one of our brightest students graduated from LCB. She stood at the degree completion ceremony and full of pride she said, "I would like to thank all of those people who over the years when I did not have a degree looked down their noses at me. They were the ones that motivated me to finally do it." I think that we hear this narrative over and over again.

This kind of transformation was documented in a research project that I worked on with Luke Baldwin and Joan Dolamore. We were interested in how our students developed voice during their time in the Program. We examined writing at three distinct periods of their degree programs. We read their admissions applications, their prior learning assessment portfolios, and their final projects or theses. We discovered that most adults entered our program with a very personal subjectivist voice and most left with a more public procedural voice.

Perhaps the most amazing story of student transformation, Barbara, is yours. It is fitting that I'm sitting with you today to reflect on the program that we both entered in 1986. I was the Director of the program and you were coming to finish your degree. I admitted you and was pleased to serve as your advisor. I hired you to be our first academic advisor when you entered the Master's Degree program in Counseling Psychology. Upon completion of the doctoral program at Union, we hired you to be a faculty member in ABP. Soon after you would go on to direct the Learning Community Bachelor's (formerly Adult Degree Option) program in ABP, bringing your skills in interdisciplinary learning and adult pedagogy to bear. It is no surprise, therefore, when our PhD Task Force recommended the creation of a new doctoral program that would build on our expertise in adult learning and intensive residency delivery, that you would take the lead. The Educational Studies PhD Program in Adult Learning, which you now direct, is in large part the result of your leadership. Focusing on the theories and practices of adult learning that Lesley has developed over three decades, you are now integrating what we've learned into a doctoral program to share with others. How ironic, even as we speak about our history in adult learning, you are preparing to move to the next position in your career, the presidency of Goddard College. How fitting that you will lead Goddard, a college that was founded on the principles of adult learning that are practiced here at Lesley. The transformation learning that we described above is illustrated in your personal and professional success.

ABP Today

Three decades have passed since the founding of ABP, and while much has changed, the program remains consistent with its origins in constructivist pedagogy and transformative learning. There have been changes in the administration of the program, which is now housed in the Center for the Adult Learner in Lesley College, providing students with access to all of the faculty, curriculum and resources the undergraduate school offers. Students now pursue coursework in the Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences, School of Education and Art Institute of Boston through the Lesley Passport program, which is designed to make the resources of all schools accessible to ABP students. The Lesley online learning environment, myLesley, now avails students in the Adult Bachelor's Residency program (formerly Adult Degree Option) greater contact between the residencies and with their faculty and peers through discussion boards and threaded conversations. In addition, online degree programs have been launched in the past two years in Business Management and Psychology, popular programs for today's adult learners.

The underlying philosophy of the programs continues to value and respect what the adult learner brings to the learning process and remains as the foundation of all curriculum and instruction. The central role of academic advising, provided by professional and faculty advisers, ensures that students are able to design degrees that meet their personal and professional goals. Through the Prior Learning Assessment process, students have the opportunity to identify the knowledge and skills that they bring with them, and earn academic credit that moves them forward in meeting degree requirements. The faculty, many of whom have taught in ABP for over two decades, continue to develop scholarship that reflects their growth in adult learning theory and practice. It is these same faculty who now serve in the PhD program in Adult Learning where they shape the next generation of scholars in the constructivist approach to mentoring adults. The historical position of transformative learning for adults in undergraduate programs at Lesley continues to evolve.

Reference List

- Baldwin, L., Cochrane, S., Counts, C., Dolamore, J., McKenna, M., & Vacarr, B., (1992). "Passionate and purposeful: Adult learning communities" in *Patterns in Practice: Selections from the Journal of Museum Education*. Washington, DC: Museum Education Roundtable, pp. 162-167.
- Belenky, M.F., Clinchy, B.M., Goldberger, N.R., & Tarule, J.M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Cash, M. R. (2007). *Tortilla chronicle: Growing up in Santa Fe*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938/1997). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishers.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Levinson, D. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Perry, W. G. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.