Andragogy in the Appalachians: Myles Horton, the Highlander Folk School, and Education for Social and Economic Justice

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ABSTRACT

In the field of adult education, one of the better known concepts is that of the Six Assumptions of Malcolm Knowles. These assumptions, according to Knowles, divide the world of pedagogy, defined as the art and science of teaching children, from that of andragogy, conceived as the art and science of helping adults learn. In the realm of education for older learners, myriad schools and programs dot the educational landscape, but one particularly unorthodox institution of adult education, the Highlander Folk School, led by activist educator Myles Horton, stands out for its teaching roles in the Union Labor Movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This paper looks at Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School, his background, education and preparation for establishing his lifelong dream of using alternative education among the “common uncommon people” for learning how to solve social and economic justice problems, and this paper then focuses on the extent to which the philosophy and teaching actions of Horton correspond to the Six Assumption Framework of andragogy as delineated by Malcolm Knowles.

Keywords: Activist, Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm Knowles, Myles Horton, Social and Economic Justice, Union Labor Movement, Zen

INTRODUCTION

The field of adult education is indeed multifaceted, but in one sense can be divided into three broad categories: programs designed to help individuals; programs designed to further corporate or organizational aims; and programs set up to learn how to solve social problems. It is easy to find an abundant source of individually-oriented classes and programs: from accounting to zen, from tennis to genealogy; these and courses like them fill the extension programs of universities and the classrooms of community centers and other venues where adult education takes place. For the corporate world, Human Resource departments train employees to use cutting-edge methods and technologies to meet new business and competitive challenges domestically and internationally. But where do adults go to find programs or to sign up for courses in the field of social justice, for economic justice? Where do adults enroll in a class to Help End Racism,

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or to Meliorate the Abuses of Wall Street, or to Improve Job Security for All? It is hard for the moment to quickly think of a source for such social, community-oriented learning experiences. While subject-centered courses like history, psychology, sociology or even literature do give some insights into social justice problem-solving for the community, the country or the world, adults usually need direct and concrete solutions to their practical social problems whether it be fighting job discrimination or blocking dangerous transportation of flammable liquids through their towns and communities.

For the purposes of this paper, it will be useful to keep in mind that learning in the field of social justice can go beyond the boundaries of a traditional course or a well-constructed curriculum. For example, much of the learning that took place during the unionization periods in the United States, in the last half of the 19th Century, or during the Great Depression from 1929 to 1940, was the result of the active participation of workers in the factories, in union meetings, on the picket lines, and sometimes under the blows of the policeman’s club, or on the hard benches in county jails. It was a practical learning, a learning-by-doing, and perhaps an example of the expression, “The School of Hard Knocks”. However, there are also instances of attempts to make use of this experiential learning, in a more formal way. Not in the sense of a Labor Justice 101, or a Racial Integration 101, but rather the setting up of “courses” designed with a facilitator to lead discussions, to bring out ideas, to help students and attendees learn, and to use this information in the quest of social justice. It is in this broad sense of the meaning of the word course that the theme of adult learning for social justice will be approached in this paper.

THE HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL: REPUTATION AND LEGACY

A quest for practical courses for adults to work on solving their social problems was made some 90 years ago when a young man from Tennessee, Myles Horton, decided that he wanted to go into education for adults rather than for children, and that he wanted to build his own special school to promote social justice and economic democracy in the southern part of the Appalachian mountains of Tennessee. He called his school, co-founded with activist Don West, The Highlander Folk School, and, interestingly, he located it on property owned by Dr. Lillian Johnson, a former student of John Dewey. For those of us in adult education, the value of studying this small, unorthodox school is that it helps to understand education partly because “if our judgments about educational change were based only on conventional histories, our vision of alternative futures would be constrained (Adams, 1972, p. 497).

Starting in the early 1930s and continuing even today (with the name Highlander Research and Education Center), the Highlander Folk School has been developing courses for adults in social and economic justice, with themes dealing with the organization of workers, the addressing of civil rights issues, the fight against poverty in the Appalachians, and the resistance to corporate environmental degradation.

As we will see from a review of Highlander’s history, Myles Horton was an idealist who remained dedicated to the goal of a “new social order” based on political and social democracy. Like Dewey, he believed strongly that education is one of the instruments for bringing this new social order into being (Thayer-Bacon, 2004).

Many of the courses at Highlander have been residential; others have been in extension for neighboring towns and states; and yet others have been developed for the local community. While the school and its programs are not well known to the public, the results of their workshops are.
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