

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM THROUGH NEW APPROACHES TO ADULT JEWISH EDUCATION

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Adult Jewish education can be an important means of enhancing the self-esteem and self-concept of the adult learner if the methodology of andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn, is used. To respond to the unique needs of the adult learner, the teacher must play a nontraditional role in the classroom, utilizing skills and techniques drawn from individual and group counseling.

Those of us who have taught adult learners and have had the opportunity to read student evaluations may have noticed that students often comment not only on what they had learned in class but also on how the class affected them in terms of their personal growth and change. Consider these gratifying responses: "This class was a wonderful growth experience for me," and "the enthusiasm and interest of a teacher enabled me to view myself in a totally different perspective." Such comments indicate that some classes not only impart concepts and skills but also influence students' perceptions about themselves so that they see themselves as growing and changing.

The impact that self-concept has on achievement, behavior, attitude, and one's general approach to life is well known. How much more important an experience in academia or adult education can be when it not only imparts course content and builds basic knowledge but also has a positive impact on a student's self-concept and self-esteem.

This article presents an overview of the theory and methodology of adult learning, which can result in increased personal

growth and self-esteem, as well as heightened integration of course content. Such an environment may be considered a "therapeutic classroom milieu" for the adult learner.¹

ADULT LEARNING THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

In 1968, Malcolm Knowles, the father of adult learning theory, coined the term "andragogy" and defined it as the art and science of helping adults learn. His proposed theory and methodology of adult education were in marked contrast to pedagogy, the art and science of teaching children.

Adult learners bring a wealth of life experience to the classroom, have a readiness to learn in accordance with their specific personal goals, and are problem oriented. They have four unique needs (Knowles, 1980):

1. A need to be self-directing, rather than dependent
2. A need to utilize life experience as a resource for learning

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Table 1.
ROLE OF THE TEACHER

<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Nontraditional or Andragogic</i>
Teaching is telling; the teacher is a lecturer. The climate is authority-oriented, formal, and stresses competition between student-teacher and student-student.	Instructional climate is mutually respectful, informal, and collaborative.
Instructor is totally responsible for planning and implementation of course content.	Planning is a mutual process between teacher and student
Students learn through lectures, assigned readings, and audiovisual materials.	Experiential techniques are used to augment and enhance learning, actively involving the learner. Group discussion is emphasized, as well as role playing, skill practice, and lab methods.

3. A need to obtain learning that is specifically related to one's goals, interests, and personal needs
4. A need to move toward increasing competence

To respond to these unique needs, the teacher must play a nontraditional or andragogical role, which differs greatly from the traditional method of teaching children (Table 1).

The andragogical methods described in Table 1 focus on the adult student's need to be a self-directed rather than a dependent learner and to learn through experience, rather than through lectures (Knowles, 1980). The andragogically oriented teacher must ask some very basic questions to assess his or her effectiveness. Does the teaching and learning process contribute to the student's personal development? Is the learning encounter a person-to-person interaction or an authority-subordinate interaction? Is it a dialogue or a monologue? Does it "create a climate where willing learners realize more and memorize less?" (Knowles, 1980).

One of the most effective and powerful learning experiences for the adult learner is one that results in a change in thoughts, feelings, or behavior. This change will more likely occur through an educational experience that involves a combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes (Ammons & Giordano, 1982).

New information and ideas, when applied to a student's personal experience, become infused with an affective component. When these new concepts are then used in an experiential task or activity, thus involving the behavioral dimension as well, the total learning experience can be a most significant one. The therapeutic classroom milieu can therefore be considered a holistic learning experience.

SELF-CONCEPT, SELF-ESTEEM, AND THE ADULT LEARNER

The literature describes a distinct relationship between self-esteem and levels of achievement (Hoffman, 1972; Lasky, 1982). The lower the self-esteem, the lower the aspirations; the lower the aspirations, the lesser the achievements, which then reinforce the low self-image. Research has also indicated that educational success is a major factor in raising self-esteem for the nontraditional student who may be returning to the classroom after many years of absence (Weilert & Dusseldorp, 1983). This is most striking in the area of adult Jewish education where, more often than not, the student has long since forgotten his or her meager preadolescent program of Jewish studies.

Research conducted in the early 1980s with women returning to school in different college settings found that a gain in self-esteem was rated as the greatest

change resulting from their educational experience (Weilert & Dusseldorp, 1983). A supportive, affirming academic environment increases the chances of promoting a successful educational experience, particularly for the person returning to school after a long absence.

Because self-concept and self-esteem are such significant forces in our lives, how exciting that we as educators have the opportunity to influence these forces in a positive way. Our self-concept develops as a result of our life experiences, particularly those relating to significant others in our lives. A teacher can be a significant figure in the adult student's life. When the instructor values and acknowledges the students and their ideas, they are enabled to see themselves in a new and more positive light.

A participatory, collaborative class structure, rather than one that is authority oriented and competitive, provides ample opportunity for reinforcement from the teacher, as well as from other students. The teacher can be a model for an affirming, noncritical approach, setting a climate of support and affirmation that affects positively each individual student.

TRANSFERRING COUNSELING SKILLS TO THE CLASSROOM

Skills and techniques drawn from the practice of individual and group counseling can be utilized with great benefit in the adult classroom. The application of adult learning methodology, together with the unique skills of counseling, enhances and enriches the learning experience and promotes a more positive self-concept and heightened self-esteem for the individual student. This is the basic thrust of the therapeutic classroom milieu for the adult learner.

One of the most important counseling skills is, in Carl Rogers' terminology, being fully present as an affirming, non-threatening figure (Rogers, 1958). In an interview just before his death, Rogers stated

that a teacher must "learn to be present as a person, which is the last thing most academics want" (Heppner et al., 1984).

Can we as individuals be "present" in our classes of 15 or more adult students? Being present may result in a personally intense classroom experience. It entails being aware of the various feeling states in the class and understanding that each student comes with his or her own personal "baggage" to the classroom. Being present involves reflecting on what is happening in class that may relate to this baggage and make it heavier or lighter. In this way the teacher utilizes therapeutic skills of intense awareness and sensitivity.

Second, a set of skills that is most effectively transferred into the classroom are the listening skills. The sensitive teacher listens not just to hear a specific answer but to become enlightened by a student's perceptions of a particular issue, experience, or concept. He or she listens to ascertain how the student's experience and perception relate to and augment the subject at hand. The teacher listens also for the underlying meaning that the student may not be articulating in a clear way. The teacher can then reframe or paraphrase the student's responses so that the meaning becomes more focused and clear.

Paraphrasing is a technique that can be used often in class. It is a most valuable way of affirming and acknowledging the student's contribution to discussion. The students' words take on an added impact when the teacher reflects the content or rephrases the essence of their comments and applies these comments to the material being studied.

A third basic counseling skill that promotes a stimulating, vital, and affirming classroom milieu is the use of the open question to initiate a discussion of course content. This is a particularly potent method when the question is tied to the reservoir of life experience and personal perceptions that the more mature student so amply possesses. Such questions as what are your personal reactions to. . . ? or

what are your speculations about. . . ? will usually elicit a host of varied replies that can then be processed and applied to course content.

The fourth counseling skill that is highly effective in a classroom setting is the skill of empathy. Empathy entails being sensitive to where the student is at—both verbally and nonverbally. Is the student interested, stimulated, preoccupied, confused, involved, or withdrawn? Is he or she tuned in to other students and responding accordingly?

Adult students come to class bearing both the many burdens and the satisfactions of their life situations: financial problems, handicapped or ill children, rocky marriages or recent divorces, aging parents, and problems in family relationships or in work relationships. All of these are the other parts of their life that exist concurrently with their life as a student. We as teachers need to be sensitive to the multiple roles that each student plays and how they may affect the learning process.

Asking the students about their feelings, impressions, thoughts, and ideas related to their experience in class will acknowledge and affirm them, as well as enlighten the teacher. The instructor can begin the class session by asking if the students had any reactions, feelings, or thoughts about the last class session or the assignment. Doing so provides the student with the permission to articulate unanswered questions, reactions, or feelings related to the class process, which may not otherwise have been expressed.

In a counseling session, the relationship between client and counselor begins to develop in the first session, and that first session is extremely important in establishing the foundation for what is to come. Too, in the classroom, the climate is also set in the first session, particularly in terms of the relationship of teacher-to-student and student-to-student.

The climate of a therapeutic classroom milieu is one of respect for the adult learner and the broad base of life experi-

ence he or she brings to the classroom; a climate of mutual discovery and learning resulting from the combination of teacher knowledge and experience and student knowledge and experience; and a climate of respect for individual differences, whether they are cultural, philosophical, or intellectual or differences in values, abilities, and lifestyle.

Just as the group facilitator or therapist serves a modeling role for attitudes of respect, support, acknowledgment, and validation of each group participant, so the teacher of adult learners must also play this modeling role. A critical and devaluing stance has no place in the classroom, just as it has no place in the counseling or group therapy session. This validation and valuing of the individual student are transmitted to and will affect student-to-student relationships and interactions and will encourage the substantive integration of course content as well.

Because our self-concept plays a major role in determining our personal and professional aspirations and how we behave and function as individuals, a learning atmosphere that is supportive and affirming and promotes a more positive self-concept can be an invaluable life experience for the adult learner. The therapeutic classroom milieu provides such an experience.

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*Deceased