

Adult Education Philosophies: Behavioural Orientation

Behavioural adult education philosophy evolved from the desire to apply scientific methods of measurable observation of behaviour and controlled experimentation to the study of human beings in the twentieth century (Lange, 2006). There are three basic assumptions about the process of learning, namely observable behavior is of primary interest, behaviour is shaped by the environment, and contiguity and reinforcement explain the learning process (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). As an adult education philosophy in practice, behaviourism works well when teaching in settings such as nursing skills labs, technical colleges and certification exams when learning is observable and measurable (Lange, 2006). The purpose of behaviourism is to promote competence, develop skills and to ensure compliance with set standards or expectations determined by society, professional experts or employers (Zinn, 2007). The authoritative teacher is involved in setting, supervising and ensuring learning outcomes through demonstration, feedback and reinforcement and criterion-referenced testing (Zinn, 2007). The learners under this philosophy, do not participate in setting objectives and are expected to practice skills and behaviours until proficient (Zinn, 2007). Criticisms of this philosophy see the manipulative quality of this type of education where the learners are disempowered from making personal judgements and decisions (Lange, 2006). Key figures in this philosophy include Pavlov, Watson, Thorndike, Skinner, Mager, and Nadler.