

Adult Education Philosophies: Humanist Orientation

The rise of humanism dates back to 1200 during the period of the Italian Renaissance. In opposition to the dominant belief of the Christian Church that humans were inherently sinful, humanism favoured a vision of humans as inherently good (Lange, 2006). Later, in the era of the industrial revolution, humanism rose to counter the prevalent notion that viewed humans as machines. In this philosophy, learning is considered from the perspective of the human potential for growth, and the ideas that behaviour is predetermined by the environment or one's subconscious are rejected (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

I envision humanist adult education philosophy in practice in teaching personal growth and development programs that lead to self-actualization, taught in community centers, or self-learners who access free online courses through I-University.

Learners are viewed as highly motivated, self-directed participants who choose to continue learning in non-formal settings (Zinn, 2007), control their own destiny and will strive for a better world (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Maslow, a key figure in this philosophy, proposed the theory that human motivation is based on a hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). The bases of this theory seeks to explain why students behave as they do and how learning may be affected by unmet physiological or safety needs. Learners may be very involved in planning learning projects and collaborations with other students, and the teacher has a role of facilitator, mentor and helper (Zinn, 2007). Learning contracts, objectives and outcome evaluations are part of the technical paradigm of this philosophy (Chovanec, 1998).

The goal of the teacher is to assist the learners to fulfillment and self-actualization through self-directed learning (Chovanec, 1998; Tisdell & Taylor, 2000) and the student-teacher relationship is central to this philosophy (Lange, 2006). However, because learners are central to this philosophy, there is almost no consideration of socio-cultural context; any differences in learners are believed to be due to personality and not related to race, class or gender (Tisdell & Taylor, 2000). Humanism has also been critiqued for its focus on individualism (Lange, 2006). Key figures in this philosophy are Maslow, Rogers, Knowles, Tough, Mezirow, and Stanage.