



Mines Rescue Pty Limited

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Adult Education and Training Philosophy
with reference to Mines Rescue Pty Limited
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Abstract

What is Adult Education and Training Philosophy? And what does it have to do with the Mines Rescue organisations? On the one hand, it seems like a subject for academics, far removed from the everyday practice of adult education. On the other hand, ask any adult educator or training specialist what they are trying to achieve in the training field, and therein lies something of their philosophy towards adult education. All adult educators, whether in industry, business or mines rescue organisations, have an educational philosophy. An individual's educational philosophy is embedded both in what one believes about teaching and learning, and what one actually does in practice. The philosophy of an adult educator may have a considerable impact on what the training participants gain from the training program, and in the context of mines rescue trainings, the approach undertaken by the trainer can help or hinder in the successful rescue of personnel. This presentation will briefly discuss adult education and training philosophies, with reference to the Mines Rescue Service of New South Wales, which is a long-standing Australian adult education and training provider.

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‘There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience
and that is.....
not learning from experience’

Archibald McLeish

Introduction

In this presentation I aim to critically assess adult education and training philosophy with reference to the Mines Rescue Service (MRS) of New South Wales (NSW) Australia. A number of questions shall be posed in order to explore the philosophical orientation of this organisation and its personnel. The specific questions I am interested in exploring are:

- How is philosophy in adult education and training defined?
- What are the implicit and explicit philosophies of the MRS?
- What is the relationship between trainer and learner? And finally,
- How are the training methods and content reviewed?

Firstly, however, it is necessary to provide a brief background on the MRS and its functions. The MRS was established in Australia in 1926 by legislative approval of the NSW State Parliament. The primary function has always been, and still is, to provide an emergency response of equipment, materials and human resources to assist with rescue and recovery operations at a mine site following an incident. To ensure emergency readiness, the MRS provides periodical training for approximately three hundred and fifty volunteers, known as Brigade members, statewide. The MRS operates four rescue stations within the state of NSW, and they are located at the main coal producing areas near Newcastle, Singleton, Lithgow and Wollongong.

The secondary function is to provide industrial and occupational health and safety (OH&S) training programs to clients from other industries. The MRS is accredited as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and the client base includes a diversity of companies in the manufacturing sector, private businesses and local government. Programs are tailored to meet specific client needs and may include confined space training, workplace safety and induction training, and consultancy services to audit safety management plans and systems.

How is philosophy in adult education and training defined?

A number of leading researchers in adult education theory have discussed philosophical perspectives in adult education and training, but none have specifically used the context of Mines Rescue Services as a case study. Elias and Merriam (1980) suggest that adult education can be viewed as incorporating a number of distinct philosophical orientations. They categorised six main approaches: 'behaviourist', 'humanist', 'liberal', 'progressive', 'analytic' and 'radical'. Of these categories, I propose that the MRS applies different combinations of the behaviourist/humanist and liberal/progressive philosophies, depending on the training group, the program content and the learning environment. These will be discussed in more detail throughout this presentation.

Analytic and radical philosophies, and the applicability of these to adult education and training, will not be addressed specifically on this occasion.

Adult education and training (also known as pedagogy in the field of education) as defined by Schroeder (1989, p 42), is a development method that establishes direction, learning opportunities and personal or professional development for adult learners. Adult education can also be defined as the developmental process in adults, that results in acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Competency Training Institute of Australia 1999, p 21). Essentially, it is a procedure by which adults learn and develop, within an organisational setting (Australian Human Resource Management 1993, p 2521). Pedagogy can be formal or informal, theoretical or practical but it is typically structured in some way. This process begins with a design phase, followed by the actual training, and finally evaluation, to determine whether competency has been achieved or performance improved.

So what is 'philosophy'? And what does it have to do with adult education and training? According to Tisdell and Taylor (2000, p 6) philosophy seems like a subject for academics, far removed from the everyday practice of adult education. On the other hand, ask any adult educator or training specialist what they are trying to accomplish in a training situation and therein lies something of their educational philosophy. That is, their personal fundamental beliefs about the way that training should be delivered and what participants should gain from the training session. Essentially, 'one's educational philosophy is imbedded both in what one believes about teaching and learning, and what one actually does in practice'. All adult educators have an educational philosophy and a belief about what should be achieved in the field of education, even if they do not formally make this explicit to the training organisation. I will now briefly outline what is meant by behaviourist philosophy, and in turn, some explanation of the humanist, liberal and progressive approaches to pedagogy.

The behaviourist philosophy focuses on learning by reinforcement. Competency-based training is a term that many within the coalmining sector are familiar with, and is an example of behaviourist philosophy. This contrasts with the humanist philosophy, which focuses on the learning ability of individuals. Discovery and experimentation, particularly in collaboration with others, is a humanist approach (Price 2000). The role of the trainer in a humanistic setting is to take the role of facilitator, helper and partner in the learning process (Elias and Merriam 1980, p125). The humanist adult educator does not simply provide information, but creates a condition in which effective teaching and learning takes place.

Liberal philosophy differs from behaviorist and humanist in that importance is placed on the role of the adult educator as an expert, or an authority. Essentially, a liberal adult educator has

the function of transmitting a fixed body of knowledge to the adult learner. It follows that the role of the adult learner, is to consume the delivery of knowledge, and to unquestionably accept this information (Elias and Merriam 1980, p26). Finally, progressive philosophy is distinct in that it can be characterised by an approach that is ongoing and life-long, so that all aspects of personal and working experiences are encompassed (Elias and Merriam 1980, p27). That is, the progressive approach stresses the integration of experimental learning so that the training sessions contain opportunities for adult learners to develop new skills and refine old ones.

What are the philosophies of the MRS?

The foremost philosophies of the MRS can be described as a three-tier approach. The first is the belief that for mines rescue brigades to function effectively, they must be competent and well trained, to embark upon the difficult task of entering a hostile mine environment, with the intent of saving life and restoring safe conditions in the mine. The second philosophy is strong leadership, which stimulates group cohesiveness and improves overall rescue team performance. The third is team safety, and the conviction that rescue brigades must ensure a safe return to fresh air conditions, on the completion of the set tasks, with all team members intact. This approach reflects the behaviourist/humanist concepts. A further example of the behaviourist/humanist approach is to view the content of mines rescue training programs. Brigade members demonstrate skills to a national competency level, when performing tasks. They take an active role in the learning process, by practicing new acquired skills and knowledge, and demonstrating a change due to environmental influences. The MRS training personnel also have the philosophy of a co-learner in the educational process, they develop a learning relationship with the brigade members, encourages self-directed learning strategies and self-evaluation. The majority of training programs delivered by MRS to course participants focus on skills development and ensuring compliance with industry and company standards, and safe work practices.

The pursuit of new clients and markets, in particular, has altered the attitudes of staff because they obtained new skills and knowledge related to marketing, communicating with people from diverse backgrounds and working with unfamiliar organisations. Historically, the MRS provided training and services to the coal mining industry only, but now the clientele has been extended to include other industries. Accordingly, the MRS philosophy now places a higher importance value on professional development within the organisation and this has helped to establish a foundation for continual improvement.

Another philosophy of the MRS is the implementation and promotion of annual Mines Rescue competitions. The MRS has conducted these training activities for over 40 years. These are

held to increase the competency of mines rescue brigadesmen by exposing them to simulated scenarios. The winning team receives a group and individual trophy, a shield for the mine they represent, and the opportunity to represent their district at a national Mines Rescue competition. The competition has a positive impact as it establishes camaraderie and a competitive spirit between the teams, improves competency, and consequently the effectiveness and quality of the MRS operations. The MRS asserts that such a training philosophy creates a sense of achievement, effort and service. The meaning of and commitment to, core organisational values can be recognised, rewarded, reinforced and re-affirmed.

What are the relationship between trainer and learner?

The MRS, and indeed my own, educational philosophy, is to encourage course participants to take an active role in the learning activities and to apply this knowledge and skill in the workplace. This is a philosophy that recognises that adults bring lifelong skills and experiences into the training sessions. They are encouraged to share their experiences and be involved in all aspects of the training. This technique highlights a humanist behaviour on the part of MRS training personnel. This philosophy is based on empathy and participant's involvement (MRS Code of Practice 1996, Standard 2, p 1). For example, The MRS encourages participants to develop at their own pace. That is, people with literacy problems or those from non-English speaking backgrounds are offered additional support or alternative methods for learning. This may include peer support and mentoring, delivery of information using a variety of techniques, and attempting to relate the training information to their own personal and workplace experience.

How are training methods and content reviewed?

The MRS utilises a variety of methods to deliver educational and training programs. These include formal lectures, demonstrations, modularised tutorial notes, practical skills training, problem solving exercises, case studies and discussions. activity-integrated learning, written and computer-based assessment and group tasks.

The MRS has in place processes and procedures to promote quality and a philosophy of continual improvement. Specifically, this involves auditing and reviewing training methods and program content on a regular basis (MRS Code of Practice 1996, p 6). Such processes are now mandatory for accreditation as a RTO, so that training methods and content are consistent with nationally endorsed competency standards. Collation and analysis of feedback questionnaires, and recording suggestions and comments from individual participants is another mechanism by which

continual improvement and a best practice philosophy is achieved. Communicating with clients and gaining input prior to the commencement of training is also considered by the organisation, to be an important and professional philosophy.

Conclusion

This presentation has briefly assessed the educational and training philosophy of the Mines Rescue Service of New South Wales with reference to the work of a number of leading researchers. The process undertaken here of examining pedagogical approaches, using a philosophical framework, may help Mines Rescue organisations to better understand and conceptualise the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of teaching and learning and ultimately may prove useful in designing new systems or evaluating curriculum and instruction. Such exercises may also assist to improve inter-personal communications, internally and externally, and contribute to the future development of the Mines Rescue Service internationally. Defining one’s educational philosophy is important, not only because personal beliefs may impact on what we, as adult educators, do in the training environment, but we also examine our practice critically. In doing so, we often become *conscious* of some of our *unconscious* beliefs and behaviours that affect our training performance

In summary, this presentation has highlighted that the Mines Rescue Service has an expanding client base and a diverse range of training packages available. The philosophy of the service now values expertise in adult education, training and development and this will influence the calibre of training programs provided in the future and perhaps more importantly, the effectiveness of the Service’s response capability. It can be concluded that due to the background experience of course participants and trainers, and the learning environment, the organisation has, and should continue to maintain, a flexible educational philosophy that reflects a combination of behaviourist/humanist and liberal/progressive philosophies.

‘It is good to have an end to journey towards.....
but it is the journey that matters, in the end’

Ursula K. Le Guin

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