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An afternoon with Roger Hiemstra and an evening with Alex Charters: Looking to the past to find a path to the future

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How often do you get to meet the “big names?” Better yet, how often do you have the opportunity to find out their perspectives on our field? This article details the collective wisdom of two "giants" of different generations and their surprisingly similar views of the past, present, and the future of adult education.

The adventure began while five doctoral students from the University of South Florida anxiously awaited the renowned author and self-directed learning expert, Dr. Roger Hiemstra. As recipients of one of the Alexander N. Charters Adult Education Archives Research Grants, we were on a week-long archival research project at Syracuse University. Any feelings of intimidation disappeared when this gentleman greeted us with a twinkle in his eye and unbelievable warmth. The afternoon was filled with laughter, anecdotes, and even songs, as well as wisdom and priceless advice from this experienced adult educator. Incredibly, the experience did not end there. Later that week, we received an invitation to have dinner with one of the founding fathers of adult education, and our benefactor, Dr. Alexander Charters. Imagine our delight at sitting down to a home-cooked meal and sharing an evening with both Charters and his accomplished wife, Dr. Margaret Charters. We sat in awe while being regaled with stories of Cy Houle and the first UNESCO conferences. On our flight back to Tampa, we reflected on how privileged we had been to spend time with two such influential men. We concluded that their modesty and openness were emblematic of their lifelong quest to help adults learn.

Background Information

Hiemstra has lived several lifetimes in the years he has been on this earth. He began his life and education as a son of farmers in an agricultural community. His foundations came from reading with his family, the help he received from a one-room schoolhouse that he attended for elementary school, and the experiences lived while being a part of the local 4-H organization. He was the first in his family to attend college, though with no clear direction to his studies he was not initially successful. He took a break from education and joined the U.S. Navy where he was involved with many interesting missions which included picking up Gus Grissom, an early astronaut, and Enos the chimpanzee after they were launched into space for two full orbits in the 1960s. Hiemstra's career goals changed when he observed Dr. Howard McClusky teach a lesson. Under McClusky's mentorship, Hiemstra completed his PhD and began his career as a university professor. Hiemstra has published numerous books and articles and has conducted extensive research on self-directed learning. His main contribution to the field consists of investigations that test the notion that adults can in fact learn. He has served as the Department Chair of Adult Education at Syracuse University and later as the program Chair of Adult Education at Elmira College (Hiemstra, 2007).

Charters has been a major force on both the national and international stage of adult education since the 1930s. He entered the field as a literacy instructor with the Frontier College in Canada and was awarded his PhD from the University of Chicago in 1949. However, he reflected on his belief that “adults can continue to learn throughout their lives” was formed during his childhood experiences with farmers’ meetings and community discussions. His mark

was indelibly left at Syracuse University. He was the first Vice President of Adult Education at a major U.S. university and organized the adult education archives. In 1998, this collection of invaluable materials was renamed in his honor, becoming known as the Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults. Charters' conviction of the importance of international cooperation was borne of his experiences in World War II. Recognized as a leader in international comparative adult education, he was a founding father of the International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE). He and his wife Margaret, who is a retired professor and past-president of the Syracuse-based women's intellectual study group, the Portfolio Club, are the embodiment of lifelong learning and have touched innumerable lives of learners and educators alike (Charters, N.D.).

What do they know that we do not?

Both Hiemstra and Charters commented on the important role adult education has played in times of societal change. They have both lived lifetimes as adult educators, while we are just in the beginning phases. Hiemstra pointed out how President Johnson's Great Society and its emphasis on the War on Poverty addressed the need to educate previously under-served, under-represented groups. He mentioned the government's recognition of the role of adult educators and the field's importance to the economic and social advancement of the nation. A similar theme was voiced by Charters. He felt the paradigm shift to lifelong learning was a result of the demands on the nation by World War II. While the military educated great numbers of personnel overseas, on the domestic front civilians, especially women, were also engaged in learning new skills and trades. The need for education and training continued to expand, and Charters played

an influential role in its development. He related the story of countless adults entering his university office expectantly holding a newspaper ad that stated “*Adults can learn.*” Suddenly, individuals believed that learning did not end upon leaving formal schooling. This opened the door for new groups to recognize their power to become contributing members of society.

Life is about continuing to learn: The living examples of Hiemstra and Charters

Initially, as one of the youngest among his colleagues and students, Hiemstra felt self-conscious about his teaching, although already a writer and researcher. Regarding his teaching methods, he states, “I didn't feel good about it, but I didn't know what else to do.” As a follower of the concept of lifelong learning, he took advantage of every opportunity to enhance his teaching. He related how much of an impact observing the andragogical techniques of Malcolm Knowles had. Around the same time, Hiemstra had the opportunity to listen to Allen Tough and observe his teaching style. These experiences aided his voyage to becoming the consummate adult educator. He explained, “from 1972 forward I began to experiment in the classroom utilizing . . . andragogical techniques, and by 1974-75, I had changed my teaching around almost 180 degrees and was using . . . adult education kinds of techniques and it really paid off.”

Charters also has continually sought new ideas to support his academic career. His quest drove him to compare adult learning among countries, culminating in the creation of the ISCAE and his involvement in numerous international conferences. From today's vantage point of e-mail and convenient international travel, it is easy to underestimate the challenges faced by the pioneers of international cooperation. Charters has spent the modern era engaging in what he

terms a “way to make peace”, exemplified by his participation in not only the first, but many of the following International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA). He also reflected that technology had advanced so rapidly within his lifetime and that it would continue to be vital to adult education. He related his own experience of learning to use the computer to enhance his professional and personal life, enabling him to continue his goal of lifelong learning.

What implications do these lessons have for our field? What do we do with these lessons?

One cannot walk away from encounters with these two men without learning some important lessons. The experiences and life lessons these men acquired throughout their careers can be used by those of us just embarking on our academic careers. Three of the lessons we learned from both educators were that the future of adult education is not limited solely to universities, that there is a strong connection between politics and the survival/expansion of the field, and that technology helped them expand their own expertise, which led them to be strong advocates of its use. What implications do these lessons have for our field?

We believe that adult educators need to broaden their vision to include other areas where they might be useful: the need to educate adults is everywhere. For example, one area to consider is literacy education of immigrants in need of language and technical training to facilitate their acculturation into society. Additionally, both individuals stressed the impact of modern globalization. Isolation from the world is inevitable if the populace is not able to operate effectively in the international arena. While English is the *lingua franca* of the business world, this could change if other nations rise to economic prominence. The lack of knowledge of other

languages and understanding of different cultures is harmful to the nation. In broadening our vision, adults educators will find a plethora of opportunities to serve adult learning.

We also have an obligation to acknowledge and act upon the strong connection between adult education and the existing economic and political climate. In a recessive economic climate, job transitions become more prevalent and the need to train people for new positions becomes indispensable. The *No Child Left Behind Act* has resulted in the funneling of government support to K-12 education. The funding for the training of adults seems to arise only if there is a surplus of funds. As Hiemstra noted, in the past, the federal government and entities such as the Kellogg Foundation strongly supported adult education. In order to maximize the role adult education plays in vocational training and literacy education, governmental support needs to be stronger. Adult educators must become the loudest advocates for adult education and disseminate the belief that, in the words of Charters, adults “need to keep learning.”

Finally, both educators concurred that technology has played, and needs to continue playing, a leading role in the education of adults. Both men created websites and online resources that give widespread access to adult education information and resources, indicating the indispensable need to continually update one's technological knowledge. Today, adult educators must fully utilize advancements in technology to expand our capabilities to reach new learning communities. We must not fear new technologies, rather we must be creative in adapting them to meet our instructional needs.

The opportunity to listen to the collective wisdom of these "big names" has been eye-opening. We leave this experience knowing that we as adult educators need to embody the concept of lifelong learning ourselves. We need to seek out and remain open to all learning opportunities. We need to stretch ourselves and guard against becoming stale or jaded. Only

then can we facilitate the learning of others, just as these great minds of adult education did for us. We thank Dr. Hiemstra and Dr. Charters for allowing us access into their brains and homes.

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