

Educating Rita

A Transformation Through Education

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AD-520 – Adult Education
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Boy was I wrong! With just the first few minutes of the film underway, I was certain that *Educating Rita* was going to be a royal British bore. Heavy accents, British-borne figures of speech, and a vocabulary, unlike our own form of English in many respects, made the dialogue somewhat difficult to follow. After watching the beginning 10 minutes for the fourth time, I began to get into the movie and understood why I was watching it. Rita is an adult learner and Frank is an adult educator. And the movie is trying to present the issues pertinent to both.

My approach to watching the movie was to watch it through in its entirety first and watch it a second time while taking notes. My notes fell into two primary categories; insightful quotes from the movie and major themes relating to adult education. Both helped me to see the “big picture” the movie was trying to portray along with all of the subtle little issue details that go along with adult education.

Self Discovery

Being that I began my adult education at the age of 22, I can somewhat relate to what Rita was going through. Although I did not share her passion for education or her desire to travel down the path of self-discovery, I was engaged in adult education at that age. I was certain of what I wanted out of my education and knew where I was going to go with it. I felt I already knew who I was and who I wanted to be. However, over the past few months (and after viewing this movie) I have come to realize that I have begun to travel the same path that Rita did. My focus on true appreciation of my education has only recently become clear.

So, why has it taken me to the age of 34 to begin traveling the path Rita traveled at 26? Two words: experience and maturity. In the past few years of teaching I have come to enjoy what I do with an ever increasing passion. But there is a limit as to how far I can go with that

passion in the high school setting. My impact on students is restricted to the ones I encounter on a daily basis. How can I impact more secondary students? How can I instill in others the type of passion I feel for high school education? The answer was not apparent to me until just recently and, with the classes I am taking for my masters, the end I am searching for has become very clear. My next professional step is to teach teachers. To become an adult educator who shapes and inspires the next generation of high school vocational educators. Rita and I travel the same path: a path of self-awareness and discovery. We travel a path that will lead us, not to *where* we want to be, but to *who* we want to be.

Personal Issues

In the movie, Rita and Frank both come to the educational table with their own set of baggage. Issues relating to relationships, employment, social activities, and their individual perceptions of what Rita wants out of her education all play a vital role in the storyline of the movie. They also illustrate the types of things adult educators need to be prepared to deal with in the classroom.

For us as adult educators, it is important to not only realize, but appreciate the dynamic world that the adult learner is living in. The relationship they have with their spouse, children, and extended family, their employment status and conditions, and their place in the social fabric of society all impact their learning as adults. There are many things they need to juggle, and they are typically so multi-faceted as to make the juggling act a difficult one, to say the least.

As if these issues weren't enough for just one learner and one teacher, there are multiple learners that a teacher deals with on a regular basis. Likewise, the adult learner may have several teachers that they interact with as well. All of this adds up to an extremely complex situation

that is truly worthy of investigation. While the teacher/student relationship in *Educating Rita* is merely one on one, it still does a fine job of illustrating this point very clearly. Adult learners have personal issues outside the four walls of the classroom that need to be considered by the teacher when they are presenting educational material.

Choices, Opportunities, and Motivations

There are two instances in the movie that shed some light on the topic of choices and opportunities. The first involves a heated dialogue between Frank and Rita where Frank asks “What do you want me to teach you?” and Rita concisely replies “Everything.” Rita wants to learn everything. She wants to figure out who she is before she continues with her life. While this is a noble goal, it is not realistic to think that she will learn everything. She may want to learn everything about herself, however, Frank needs to discern for her what Rita needs to learn and what she doesn’t need to learn. At one point in the movie Rita and Frank have a short discussion that I summed up in my notes as “education is the process of making people capable of realizing what does and does not matter”. Giving Rita the tools to make those choices and narrow her learning focus from “everything” to those things that are relevant is crucial in her education.

The second instance is where Rita says “You give me room to breathe. You feed me without expecting anything in return.” If that is truly the case, Rita and Frank have both succeeded in the student/teacher relationship. Frank has provided her with the opportunity to learn with no strings attached and Rita has recognized the opportunity and taken advantage of it. She can explore herself and her world without hindrances and become the person she wants to

be. Isn't that what adult learning is all about; the freedom of self-discovery and self-expression with a goal in mind, albeit ambiguous at times.

Finally, we come to the subject of motivation. What motivates Rita is somewhat abstract to me. She claims she wants to "discover myself first", yet her character and personality leads me to believe she already knows who she is. She is confident, outspoken, witty, and has the drive to be successful in becoming educated. Yet, she claims she needs to discover herself. In my opinion, Rita both does and does not know who she is or what she wants at the outset of the movie. She is in need of a teacher to help her in this quest for self-discovery and Frank very pointedly explains to her that "Possessing a hungry mind is not in itself a guarantee of success." Rita needs to have some direction, a course that will motivate her.

Whether she realizes it or not, (and I think she does) her course is that of self-transformation. As Wilson and Hayes point out, "...transformational learning theory is about change – dramatic, fundamental changes in the way individuals see themselves and the world in which they live." (Wilson & Hayes, 2000) Rita is going through just such a change not only in her education, but also in her life. Leaving her husband, changing careers, and acquiring an education are all part of her life-altering transformation. Rita is fully aware of how this transformation will take place when she says "If you want to change you've got to do it from the inside." Her understanding of this from the outset makes the transformation that much more attainable. The change occurs with her as a willing participant rather than a mere spectator who is succumbing to circumstances beyond her control.

Education = Change

While education for the sake of establishing a foundation of knowledge is necessary in the primary and secondary grades, it is not a change agent at those levels. It is merely providing the fundamental skills and knowledge a young person needs to be a successful, contributing citizen in our society. The goal of adult education, as we've learned in this class, is much different. It is real life education that has immediate application in the learner's life experiences. In essence, the education an adult receives is for the sake of some sort of change in their life.

Merriam and Brockett discuss what Malcolm Knowles has to say with regards to andragogy. They list his six assumptions underlying the concept, one of which is "While adults are responsive to some extrinsic motivators (better jobs, promotions, salary increases, and the like), the more potent motivators are intrinsic motivators (the desire for increased self-esteem, quality of life, responsibility, job satisfaction, and the like)" (Knowles, 1989, pp. 83-84)(Merriam & Brockett, 1997) Whether the motivation is extrinsic or intrinsic, the result is the same; some fundamental change in their life. Whether a job promotion or increased job satisfaction, each one provides a certain amount of change in the learners life.

In retrospect, my initial perception of the movie was accurate, a royal British bore At least to those who don't share our deep interest in adult education. On the contrary, what I found was a nearly 20 year old movie that still has practical application in the field to this day. It succinctly portrays some of the issues that adult educators and adult learners face on a continual basis. And it provides a lasting example of the positive influence adult education has on both educator and learner.