

Attuning to Your Philosophical Orientation: An Interview with Dr. Sarah Moukhliiss

John L. Pauls

Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology & Special Education, Michigan State
University

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Dr. A. Emiko Blalock

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In September of 2024, I sat down with Dr. Sarah Moukhliiss, a STEM Online Learning Library at the University of North Florida with a background in instructional design, library science, and professional learning development for adult learners, to discuss adult learning.

Moukhliiss and I, while working for different universities, had numerous shared experiences regarding adult learning; we both completed the same doctoral program in Florida as adult learners, both were parents during their academics, and both provided professional learning for adult educators around the United States as learning specialists. As adults, Moukhliiss and I have extensive insight into being an adult learner and designing for adult learners.

In this conversation, Moukhliiss discussed her opinions on adult learning, from both a student and designer perspective. Moukhliiss works with students at the University of North Florida (UNF), assisting master and doctoral students in the health sciences college with research and analysis. She discussed her experience as an adult learner in her doctoral program, which helps her understand the adult learners she supports at UNF. As an adult learner, Moukhliiss recalls her aggravation when many of her courses were published with out-of-date syllabi, or incomplete course design. She went on to discuss how, based on that experience, she pursued additional learning in her profession in quality assurance so her adult learners would not face the same frustrations.

Moukhliiss attributed her success in her doctoral program to some key adjunct professors who communicated and collaborated in a more compatible manner as an adult learner. Recalling this shared experience with Moukhliiss, I highlighted examples of when adult learners were not honored during their experience, such as not keeping to established release dates for weekly content in the learning management system, which caused issues for the adult learners who had already planned their week around the established due dates.

Moukhliiss goes on to discuss her role as a professional learning specialist, providing learning and development to teachers around the United States. She states one of the most important aspects of this experience is making it learner-focused, applicable, and relatable. Practices like honoring their lived experiences, asking adult learners to share their own knowledge, and tailoring the learning experience to the individual goals of the learner with a student-centered learning approach. Moukhliiss discussed the importance of choice and voice with adult learners, with a focus on empowering the adult learner to follow their own path according to their individual needs. According to Moukhliiss, her focus on designing learning for adults is focused on impact, stating “we want to make sure it’s impactful tomorrow, what we teach today” (Pauls, 2024).

In my own views of learning, I view it as being a cyclical, organic, life-long process that sometimes does not fit neatly into a box. I believe in the importance of honoring lived experiences with adults, and creating an adaptable, applicable, and student-focused learning experience. I also wonder how these principles may be appropriate for some of our non-adult learners, especially given the traumatic events of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current economic and sociopolitical issues impacting our younger learners. With high school students often working and helping provide for their families, at what point can adult learning theory be applied? Is it at the age of adulthood, or based on the complexities, emotional maturity, and individual circumstances of the learner?

Moukhliiss described the importance of connecting with the adult learners, being a support, instead of a mandate. Recalling a particular experience working with an indigenous educator in New Mexico, Moukhliiss shared her own personal story of being married to an indigenous man who was not allowed to learn his native language due to colonization, which

created a more personal connection between Moukhliiss and the teacher, allowing for a collaborative and supportive experience built upon that shared human connection.

When recalling my own philosophical orientation to adult learning, I believe that the learning must be practical, applicable, and flexible. Adults have their own lives, responsibilities, families, and needs, all of which will take priority over learning when necessary. As such, flexibility, organization, and choice are paramount to motivating, engaging, and learning with adult learners.

I also believe adults will often view teachers or facilitators as their peers- why is this person qualified to tell me, an adult, what to do? With this in mind, understanding the frustration that occurs when adult learning experiences do not align with the needs of the learner, an effective adult learning experience is one that is based on the needs of the learner, one that affords autonomy and respects identity, perspective, and background. The impactful adult learning experience is one that helps accommodate new knowledge into existing schemas by tying it into the adult's life. Adult learning is social; learning from others' experiences in a way that feels collaborative and supportive may elicit deeper meaning and results as compared to a traditional instructionist perspective.

References

Pauls, J. [Drjohnpauls]. (2024, September 12). *Interview with Dr. Sarah Moukhliiss- Ponderings on Adult Learning* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHT0AjJPL7g>