

Adult Learning: An Overview

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Adult learning is frequently spoken of by adult educators as if it were a discretely separate domain, having little connection to learning in childhood or adolescence. This chapter will examine critically this claim by exploring four major research areas (self-directed learning, critical reflection, experiential learning and learning to learn) each of which have been proposed as representing unique and exclusive adult learning processes.

Issues in Understanding Adult Learning

Despite the plethora of journals, books and research conferences devoted to adult learning across the world, we are very far from a universal understanding of adult learning. Even though warnings are frequently issued that at best only a multitude of context and domain specific theories are likely to result, the energy expended on developing a general theory of adult learning shows no sign of abating. Judged by epistemological, communicative and critically analytic criteria, theory development in adult learning is weak and is hindered by the persistence of myths that are etched deeply into adult educators' minds (Brookfield, 1992). These myths (which, taken together, comprise something of an academic orthodoxy in adult education) hold that adult learning is inherently joyful, that adults are innately self-directed learners, that good educational practice always meets the needs articulated by learners themselves and that there is a uniquely adult learning process as well as a uniquely adult form of practice. This chapter argues that the attempt to construct an exclusive theory of adult learning - one that is distinguished wholly by its standing in contradiction to what we know about learning at other stages in the lifespan - is a grave error. Indeed, a strong case can be made that as we examine learning across the lifespan the variables of culture, ethnicity, personality and political ethos assume far greater significance in explaining how learning occurs and is experienced than does the variable of chronological age.

Major Areas of Research on Adult Learning

The four areas discussed in this section represent the post-war preoccupations of adult learning researchers. Each area has its own internal debates and preoccupations, yet the concerns and interests of those working within each of them overlap significantly with those of the other three. Indeed, several researchers have made important contributions to more than one of these areas. Taken together these

areas of research constitute an espoused theory of adult learning that informs how a great many adult educators practice their craft.

Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning focuses on the process by which adults take control of their own learning, in particular how they set their own learning goals, locate appropriate resources, decide on which learning methods to use and evaluate their progress. Work on self-direction is now so widespread that it justifies an annual international symposium devoted solely to research and theory in the area. After criticisms that the emphasis on self-directed learning as an adult characteristic was being uncritically advanced, that studies were conducted mostly with middle class subjects, that issues concerning the quality of self-directed learning projects were being ignored and that it was treated as disconnected from wider social and political forces, there have been some attempts to inject a more critical tone into work in this area. Meta-analyses of research and theory conducted by Australian, Canadian and American authors have raised questions about the political dimension to self-directedness and the need to study how deliberation and serendipity intersect in self-directed learning projects (Collins, 1988; Candy, 1991; Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991). There has also been a spirited debate concerning Australian criticism of the reliability and validity of the most widely used scale for assessing readiness for self-directed learning (Field, 1991). At least one book, developed in the South African adult educational experience, has argued that self-direction must be seen as firmly in the tradition of emancipatory adult education (Hammond and Collins, 1991).

A number of important questions remain regarding our understanding of self-direction as a defining concept for adult learning. For example, the cross-cultural dimension of the concept has been almost completely ignored. More longitudinal and life history research is needed to understand how periods of self-directedness alternate with more traditional forms of educational participation in adults' autobiographies as learners. Recent work on gender has criticised the ideal of the independent, self-directed learner as reflecting patriarchal values of division, separation and competition. The extent to which a disposition to self-directedness is culturally learned, or is tied to personality, is an open issue. We are still struggling to understand how various factors - the adult's previous experiences, the nature of the learning task and domain involved, the political ethos of the time - affect the decision to learn in this manner. We also need to know more about how adults engaged in self-directed learning use social networks and peer support groups for emotional sustenance and educational guidance. Finally, work is needed on clarifying the political dimensions of this idea; particularly on the issues of power and control raised by the learner's assuming responsibility for choices and judgments regarding what can be learned, how learning should happen, and whose evaluative judgments regarding the quality and effectiveness of learning should hold sway. If the cultural formation of the self is ignored, it is all too easy to equate self-direction with separateness and selfishness, with a narcissistic pursuit of private ends in disregard to the consequences of this for others and for wider cultural interests. A view of learning which views adults as self-contained, volitional beings scurrying around engaged in individual projects is one that works against cooperative and collective impulses. Citing self-direction, adults can deny the importance of collective action, common interests and their basic interdependence in favour of an obsessive focus on

the self.

Critical Reflection

Developing critical reflection is probably the idea of the decade for many adult educators who have long been searching for a form and process of learning that could be claimed to be distinctively adult. Evidence that adults are capable of this kind of learning can be found in developmental psychology, where a host of constructs such as embedded logic, dialectical thinking, working intelligence, reflective judgment, post-formal reasoning and epistemic cognition describe how adults come to think contextually and critically (Brookfield, 1987, 1991). As an idea critical reflection focuses on three interrelated processes; (1) the process by which adults question and then replace or reframe an assumption that up to that point has been uncritically accepted as representing commonsense wisdom, (2) the process through which adults take alternative perspective on previously taken for granted ideas, actions, forms of reasoning and ideologies, and (3) the process by which adults come to recognize the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values and to understand how self-evident renderings of the 'natural' state of the world actually bolster the power and self-interest of unrepresentative minorities. Writers in this area vary according to the extent to which critical reflection should have a political edge, or the extent to which it can be observed in such apparently a-political domains of adult life as personal relationships and workplace actions. Some confusion is caused by the fact that psychoanalytic and critical social theoretical traditions co-exist uneasily in many studies of critical reflection.

The most important work in this area is that of Mezirow (1991). Mezirow's early work (conducted with women returning to higher education) focused on the idea of perspective transformation which he understood as the learning process by which adults come to recognize and re-frame their culturally induced dependency roles and relationships. More recently he has drawn strongly on the work of Jurgen Habermas to propose a theory of transformative learning "that can explain how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence the way they construe experience, the dynamics involved in modifying meanings, and the way the structures of meaning themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional" (Mezirow, 1991, p.xii). Applications of Mezirow's ideas have been made with widely varying groups of adult learners such as displaced homemakers, male spouse abusers and those suffering ill health, though his work has been criticised by educators in Nigeria, the United States, New Zealand and Canada for focusing too exclusively on individual transformation (Collard and Law, 1989; Ekpenyong, 1990; Clark and Wilson, 1991).

Many tasks remain for researchers of critical reflection as a dimension of adult learning. A language needs to be found to describe this process to educators which is more accessible than the psychoanalytic and critical theory terminology currently employed. More understanding of how people experience episodes of critical reflection (viscerally as well as cognitively), and how they deal with the risks of committing cultural suicide these entail, would help educators respond to fluctuating rhythms of denial and depression in learners. Much research in this area confirms that critical reflection is context or domain-specific. How is it that the same people can be highly critical regarding, for example, dominant

political ideologies, yet show no critical awareness of the existence of repressive features in their personal relationships? At present theoretical analyses of critical reflection (frequently drawn from Habermas' work) considerably outweigh the number of ethnographic, phenomenological studies of how this process is experienced. Contextual factors surrounding the decision to forgo or pursue action after a period of critical reflection are still unclear, as is the extent to which critical reflection is associated with certain personality characteristics.

Experiential Learning

The emphasis on experience as a defining feature of adult learning was expressed in Lindeman's frequently quoted aphorism that "experience is the adult learner's living textbook" (1926, p. 7) and that adult education was, therefore, "a continuing process of evaluating experiences" (p. 85). This emphasis on experience is central to the concept of andragogy that has evolved to describe adult education practice in societies as diverse as the United States, Britain, France, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Estonia, Czechoslovakia, Finland and Yugoslavia (Savicevic 1991; Vooglaid and Marja, 1992). The belief that adult teaching should be grounded in adults' experiences, and that these experiences represent a valuable resource, is currently cited as crucial by adult educators of every conceivable ideological hue. Of all the models of experiential learning that have been developed, Kolb's has probably been the most influential in prompting theoretical work among researchers of adult learning (Jarvis, 1987). But almost every textbook on adult education practice affirms the importance of experiential methods such as games, simulations, case studies, psychodrama, role play and internships and many universities now grant credit for adults' experiential learning. Not surprisingly, then, the gradual accumulation of experience across the contexts of life is often argued as the chief difference between learning in adulthood and learning at earlier stages in the lifespan. Yet, an exclusive reliance on accumulated experience as the defining characteristic of adult learning contains two discernible pitfalls.

First, experience should not be thought of as an objectively neutral phenomenon, a river of thoughts, perceptions and sensations into which we decide, occasionally, to dip our toes. Rather, our experience is culturally framed and shaped. How we experience events and the readings we make of these are problematic; that is, they change according to the language and categories of analysis we use, and according to the cultural, moral and ideological vantage points from which they are viewed. In a very important sense we construct our experience: how we sense and interpret what happens to us and to the world around us is a function of structures of understanding and perceptual filters that are so culturally embedded that we are scarcely aware of their existence or operation. Second, the quantity or length of experience is not necessarily connected to its richness or intensity. For example, in an adult educational career spanning 30 years the same one year's experience can, in effect, be repeated thirty times. Indeed, one's 'experience' over these 30 years can be interpreted using uncritically assimilated cultural filters in such a way as to prove to oneself that students from certain ethnic groups are lazy or that fear is always the best stimulus to critical thinking. Because of the habitual ways we draw meaning from our experiences, these experiences can become evidence for the self-fulfilling prophecies that stand in the way of critical insight. Uncritically affirming people's histories, stories and experiences risks idealizing and romanticising them. Experiences are neither innocent nor free from the cultural contradictions that

inform them.

Learning to Learn

The ability of adults to learn how to learn - to become skilled at learning in a range of different situations and through a range of different styles - has often been proposed as an overarching purpose for those educators who work with adults. Like its sister term of 'meta-cognition', learning how to learn suffers for lack of a commonly agreed on definition, functioning more as an umbrella term for any attempts by adults to develop insight into their own habitual ways of learning. Most research on this topic has been conducted by Smith (1990) who has drawn together educators from the United States, Scotland, Australia, Germany and Sweden to work on theory development in this area (1987). An important body of related work (focusing mostly on young adults) is that of Kitchener and King (1990) who propose the concepts of epistemic cognition and reflective judgment. These latter authors emphasize that learning how to learn involves an epistemological awareness deeper than simply knowing how one scores on a cognitive style inventory, or what is one's typical or preferred pattern of learning. Rather, it means that adults possess a self-conscious awareness of how it is they come to know what they know; an awareness of the reasoning, assumptions, evidence and justifications that underlie our beliefs that something is true.

Studies of learning to learn have been conducted with a range of adult groups and in a range of settings such as adult basic education, the workplace and religious communities. Yet, of the four areas of adult learning research discussed, learning how to learn has been the least successful in capturing the imagination of the adult educational world and in prompting a dynamic programme of follow-up research. This may be because, as several writers have noted, in systems of lifelong education the function of helping people learn how to learn is often claimed as being more appropriate to schools than to adult education. Many books on learning to learn restrict themselves to the applicability of this concept to elementary or secondary school learning. While it is useful to acknowledge the school's foundational and formational role in this area, it is also important to stress that developing this capacity is too difficult to be left solely to primary and secondary education. Learning to learn should be conceived as a lifelong learning project. Research on learning to learn is also flawed in its emphasis on college students' meta-cognition and by its lack of attention to how this process manifests itself in the diverse contexts of adult life. That learning to learn is a skill that exists far beyond academic boundaries is evident from the research conducted on practical intelligence and everyday cognition in settings and activities as diverse as grocery shopping and betting shops (Brookfield, 1991). The connections between a propensity for learning how to learn and the nature of the learning task or domain also need clarification. Learning how to learn is much more frequently spoken of in studies of clearly defined skill development or knowledge acquisition, and much less frequently referred to in studies examining emotional learning or the development of emotional intelligence.

Emergent Trends

Three trends in the study of adult learning that have emerged during the 1990's, and that promise to

exercise some influence into the twenty first century, concern (1) the cross-cultural dimensions of adult learning, (2) adults' engagement in practical theorizing, and (3) the ways in which adults learn within the systems of education (distance education, computer assisted instruction, open learning systems) that are linked to recent technological advances.

Cross Cultural Adult Learning

Although the literature base in the area of cross-cultural adult learning is still sparse, there are indications that the variable of ethnicity is being taken with increasing seriousness (Cassara, 1990; Ross-Gordon, 1991). As China has opened its borders to adult educators in the 1980's research on Chinese conceptions of adult learning is starting to emerge (Pratt, 1992). As literature in this area points out, framing discussions of cultural diversity around a simple binary split between white and non-white populations vastly oversimplifies a complex reality. Among ethnic groups themselves there are significant intra and inter-group tensions. In the United States, for example, Black, Hispanic and Asian workers have points of tension between them. Within each of these broad groupings there is a myriad of overlapping rivalries; between African-Americans and immigrants from the British West Indies; between Colombians, Puerto-Ricans, Cubans and Dominicans; between Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians and Hmong tribes people. Also, the tribal cultures of native Americans cannot be conceptualized as a culturally homogeneous block.

Two important insights for practice have been suggested by early research into cross cultural adult learning. First, adult educators from the dominant American, European and northern cultures will need to examine some of their assumptions, inclinations and preferences about 'natural' adult learning and adult teaching styles (Brookfield, 1986). For the Hmong tribes people from the mountains of Laos who are used to working cooperatively and to looking to their teachers for direction and guidance, ways of working that emphasize self-directedness and that place the locus of control with the individual student will be experienced, initially at least, as dissonant and anxiety-producing (Podeschi, 1990). However, their liking for materials that focus on personal concrete experience fits well with the adult education practices that emphasize experiential approaches. Second, 'teaching their own' is a common theme surfaced in case studies of multicultural learning. In other words, when adults are taught by educators drawn from their own ethnic communities they tend to feel more comfortable and to do better. Ethnocentric theories and assumptions regarding adult learning styles underscore the need for mainstream adult educators to research their own practice with native and aboriginal peoples. This will require a critically responsive stance towards their practice (Brookfield, 1990) and a readiness to examine some of their most strongly held, paradigmatic assumptions (Brookfield, 1987).

Practical Theorizing

Practical theorizing is an idea most associated with the work of Usher (Usher and Bryant, 1989) who has focused on the ways in which educational practitioners - including adult educators - become critically aware of the informally developed theories that guide their practice. Practical theorizing has its origins in

practitioners' attempts to grapple with the dilemmas, tensions and contradictions of their work. Actions educators take in these situations often appear instinctual. Yet, on reflection, these apparently instinctive reactions can be understood to be embedded in assumptions, readings and interpretations that practitioners have evolved over time to make sense of their practice. Practitioners seem to come to a more informed understanding of their informal patterns of reasoning by subjecting these to critical review drawing on two important sources. First, they compare their emerging informal theories to those of their colleagues. This happens informally in individual conversations and in a more structured way through participation in reflection groups. Colleagues serve as reflective mirrors in these groups; they reflect back to the practitioner readings of her or his behavior that come as an interesting surprise. As they describe their own reactions and experiences dealing with typical crises, colleagues can help the individual worker re-frame, broaden and refine her own theories of practice. Second, practitioners also use formal theory as a lens through which to view their own actions and the assumptions that inform these. As well as providing multiple perspectives on familiar situations, formal theory can help educators 'name' their practice by illuminating the general elements of what were thought of as idiosyncratic experiences. These two sources - colleagues' experiences and formal theory - intersect continuously in a dialectical interplay of particular and universal perspectives.

Distance Learning

In contrast to its earlier equation with necessarily limiting correspondence study formats, distance education is now regarded as an important setting within which a great deal of significant adult learning occurs (Gibson, 1992). Weekend college formats, multi-media experimentations and the educational possibilities unleashed by satellite broadcasting have combined to provide learning opportunities for millions of adults across the world. That adult educational themes of empowerment, critical reflection, experience and collaboration can inform distance learning activities is evident from case studies of practice that are emerging. Modra (1992) provides an interesting account of how she drew on the work of radical adult educators such as Freire, Shor and Lovett to use learning journals to encourage adults' critical reflection in an Australian distance education course. Smith and Castle (1992) propose the use of "experiential learning technology, facilitated from a distance, as a method of developing critical thinking skills" with "the scattered, oppressed adult population of South Africa" (p. 191).

Further Research

Ten important issues need to be addressed if research on adult learning is to have a greater influence on how the education and training of adults is conducted. First, much greater definitional clarity is needed when the term 'learning' is discussed, particularly whether it is being used as a noun or verb and whether it is referring to behavioral change or cognitive development (Brookfield, 1986). Many writers speak about adult learning systems when they are really referring to adult educational programs. Although learning often occurs in an adult educational program, it is not a necessary or inevitable consequence of such a program. Second, the interaction of emotion and cognition in adult learning needs much greater attention. For example, can we speak of the emotional intelligence adults develop? Classificatory

schema and conceptual categories dealing with adult learning tend to focus on settings for learning (communities, schools, religious communities, the workplace and so on) or on externally observable processes (self-directed learning, collaborative learning, and so on). Emotional dimensions to conceptual or instrumental learning, or how adults learn about their own emotional selves, are matters that are rarely addressed. We need much more attention to how making meaning, critical thinking and entering new cognitive and instrumental domains are viscerally experienced processes. Third, adult learning needs to be understood much more as a socially embedded and socially constructed phenomenon (Jarvis, 1987). Current research on adult learning draws almost exclusively from psychologistic sources. It is easy to forget that the 'self' in a self-directed learning effort is a socially formed self and that the goals of adults' self-directed learning can therefore be analysed as culturally framed goals. Learning is a collective process involving the cultural formation and reproduction of symbols and meaning perspectives. It should not be understood or researched as if it were disconnected, idiosyncratic and wholly autonomous. Fourth, many more cross-cultural perspectives are needed to break the Eurocentric and North American dominance in research in adult learning and to understand inter-cultural differences in industrialised societies. Blithe generalizations about 'the adult learner', 'adults as learners' or 'the nature of adult learning' imply that people over 25 form a homogenous entity simply by virtue of their chronological age. Yet the differences of class, culture, ethnicity, personality, cognitive style, learning patterns, life experiences and gender among adults are far more significant than the fact that they are not children or adolescents. We need to be much more circumspect when talking about adults as if they were an empirically coherent entity simply by virtue of the fact that they are no longer in school. In particular, we need to challenge the ethnocentrism of much theorising in this area which assumes that adult learning as a generic phenomenon or process is synonymous with the learning undertaken in university continuing education classes by white American middle class adults in the post war era.

Fifth, the role played by gender in learning is as poorly understood in adulthood as it is at other stages in the lifespan. It is still an open question as to whether the forms of knowing uncovered in some studies of adult women learners are solely a function of gender, or the extent to which they are connected to the developmental stages of adulthood, or are culturally constructed. Sixth, the predominant focus in studies of adult learning on instrumental skill development needs widening to encompass work on spiritual and significant personal learning and to understand the interconnections between these domains. This is particularly so given the fact that in surveys of adult learning most people point to learning in workplaces, families, communities and recreational societies to be more prevalent and significant than learning undertaken within formal education. Seventh, a way should be found to grant greater credibility to adults' renderings of the experience of learning from the 'inside'. Most descriptions of how adults experience learning are rendered by researchers' pens, not learners themselves. More phenomenographic studies of how adults feel their way through learning episodes, given in their own words and using their own interpretations and constructs, would enrich our understanding of the significance of learning to adults. Eighth, the growing recognition accorded to qualitative studies of adult learning should be solidified. In speaking of research that has influenced their practice, adult educators place much greater emphasis on qualitative studies as compared to survey questionnaires or research through experimental designs. Ninth, research on adult learning needs to be integrated much more strongly with research on adult development and adult cognition. With a few notable exceptions (Tennant, 1988; Merriam and Caffarella, 1991) these two strongly related areas exist in separate though parallel compartments,

possibly because of adult educators' self-effacing refusal to become involved with what they see as academically 'pure' research. There is also a belief held by many adult educators that theirs is a field of applied practice and that questions of theoretical and conceptual import should therefore be left to academics working within universities. And, finally, the links between adult learning and learning at other stages in the lifespan need much more attention (Tuijnman and van der Kamp, 1992). To understand adult learning we need to know of its connections to learning in childhood and adolescence and to the formation during these periods of interpretive filters, cognitive frames and cultural rules.

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