Learning Theory and Adult Education

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Abstract: *Today a majority of the participants in adult education are unskilled or unemployed adults who must combine acquiring a professional qualification with a change of identity and way of life. As a foundation of such education, staff and planners need a comprehensive learning theory that includes the cognitive, psychodynamic and social-societal dimensions of learning.*

Adult Education as Mass Education

In Denmark over the last few years, adult education has expanded into mass education, and the majority of the participants are no longer skilled and well educated adults updating or extending their qualifications and personal areas of interest. They are, rather, unskilled or unemployed adults who have been forced to adjust, professionally, personally and socially, to a new labour market situation requiring new types of qualifications and general skills.

Actually, what society is demanding of these adults is that they develop a new identity and way of life, and our recent research indicates that their typical reaction is one of profound ambivalence. On one hand they will not accept that they are not good enough as they are. On the other hand the threat of societal and economic marginalisation forces them to take their situation seriously. So, what they do is to develop a set of strategies and defence mechanisms that can protect their self confidence by creating a psychological distance to the educational activities at the same time as allowing them to take in some of the new skills and forms of behaviour.

If adult education is to be of any value under these very problematic conditions, the teachers and administration have to be very respectful and accepting and at the same time firm in their attitudes towards the participants. The challenge is to help them through a hard mental process of change and rehabilitation and simultaneously get them to learn the skills required. The solution seems somehow to be providing firm and competent teaching and encouragement towards self direction with respect to the professional content of the courses as a starting point for open discussions concerning the psychological and societal situation of the participants.

The Need for a Comprehensive Learning Theory

In dealing with such issues we (members of the Adult Education Research Group of Roskilde University) have often felt that our theoretical foundation regarding learning was insufficient, and this has been the incentive for me to take up my old interest in learning theory in a new perspective. At first I saw the challenge as being the combination of cognitive learning theory with personal developmental issues, but gradually I came to see it as a need for a broad, comprehensive theory covering the whole area of learning, personal development, socialisation and qualification. In this perspective I then examined a wide range of existing non-behaviourist American, British, Continental, Russian and Scandinavian theories in the area, and gradually two partly overlapping fundamental assumptions emerged.

The first assumption is that all learning comprises two independent but closely connected processes: namely an external interaction process between the learner and the surrounding material and social world, and an internal acquisition and elaboration process in the learner. The second is that all learning comprises an interplay between a cognitive, a psychodynamic and a social-societal dimension.

However banal and self-evident these assumptions may seem, it appears that no existing learning or development theory has fully realized these basic features. On the contrary, most theories are firmly rooted in one of the three dimensions or in the combination of two of them, and very often their followers have been engaged in little fruitful competition or even conflicts with other standpoints.

Thus my theoretical work has broadly speaking been to scrutinise existing relevant theories to see what important ideas and conceptions each of them could contribute to filling in the overall framework that I had set up, and to attempt to fill the gaps by my own contributions or by bridging points from two or more of the theories. In this way I found it possible to establish a reasonably appropriate structure, which is described in detail in my book: *The Three Dimensions of Learning*.

Learning Theory and Educational Practice

Now, how can such theoretical insights be of any use in the troublesome daily practice of adult education, and especially in adult education that involves a reconstruction of the participants' identity and way of behaviour in the light of their societal and labour market situation?

Fundamentally we have taken it up as a reminder of the complexity of the challenges we are dealing with, and a sort of map which points out the main components of the complexity. It has provided us with an understanding of three main features that we must always consider when planning, practising and evaluating educational activities, and of how these three features are mutually connected.

In relation to our practice and our consciousness about it, the theory has made it possible for us to see how many educational strategies tend to focus on limited parts of a larger complexity. It has also taught us that when we try to work with or in relation to one of the dimensions, we must simultaneously take into consideration what happens to the other dimensions. For instance, it is very important to take motivational and emotional features into account, but in doing so we must not forget the professional content matter and the societal conditions.

Of course, educational problems – and especially problems of such scope and existential depth that we are here dealing with – cannot be solved by learning theory. Political and economic measures are of crucial importance. But we can imply such theory to help us support adults whom society has placed in a position where they have to work intensely with their own identities in order to find a new basis for their lives. We are not therapists, and we think that the problems we are dealing with should not be and cannot be solved by therapy on a massive scale, but by appropriate education and learning.

Learning theory can be a valuable tool for doing so in the efforts of both the teachers and researchers. When our work is carried out in a solid and comprehensive way it also becomes easier for us to help to point out and argue for relevant measures on the political and economic levels.