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Drawing from previous chapters in this volume, this final chapter proposes that adult learning theory is attending more to the various contexts where learning takes place and to its multidimensional nature.

Adult Learning Theory for the Twenty-First Century

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The one thing that all of us educators of adults have in common, regardless of our work setting or learner population, is that facilitating learning is at the heart of our practice. Whether we are assisting adults in preparing for the GED, coaching executives in a Fortune 500 company, or demonstrating a new agricultural technique in a developing country, the more we know about how adults learn the better we are able to structure learning activities that resonate with those adult learners with whom we work. This third update volume offers readers glimpses into some of the recent thinking and research in adult learning. It is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to adult learning theory, but rather a snapshot as to recent developments in understanding and theorizing adult learning.

We are in a much different place today with regard to adult learning theory than even when the second update was published in 2001. Embodied learning, spirituality, and narrative learning were topics only briefly touched on in the 2001 edition. This third update has separate chapters on embodied learning, spirituality and learning, and narrative learning. In addition to these new chapters, there are chapters on the latest constructions of workplace learning, non-Western perspectives on learning, the most recent developments in postmodernism, and what neuroscience has to tell us about the brain and learning.

The only constant across three updates is a chapter in each one on transformational learning (TL). But there are important differences in emphasis across the three chapters, as reflects major developments in this theory.

In 1993, the chapter on TL was mostly a description of theory as particularly laid out by Mezirow; in 2001 there was much more of an empirical research base to draw from; and in this most recent update, not only has the empirical work continued but diverse theoretical perspectives have also emerged.

What this review of the updates over just the last fifteen years has to tell us is that adult learning theory is a dynamic area of research and theory building. Adult learning is a complex phenomenon that can never be reduced to a single, simple explanation. Rather, I think what we have is an ever-changing mosaic where old pieces are rearranged and new pieces are added. So what we might conclude about adult learning today will most likely be out of date by the time this volume is a year old.

However, on the basis of the chapters in this volume, I think some observations can be advanced about what is characterizing adult learning theory at the moment, and where we seem to be heading. Two such observations are that there is increased attention to the various contexts where learning takes place, and learning is a multidimensional phenomenon, not just a cognitive activity.

Increased Attention to the Learning Context

Beginning with behaviorist research in the early decades of the twentieth century, adult learning theory in North America has focused on the individual learner, how that learner processes information, and how learning enables the individual to become more empowered and independent. Andragogy and self-directed learning are about the individual adult learner, as has been much of Mezirow's conceptualization of transformational learning. It wasn't until the 1980s that the field began to attend to the context in which learning takes place. This awareness was fostered by the infusion of situated cognition theory, feminist theory, critical social theory, and post-modern theory.

Today the historical, sociocultural context of adult learning is recognized as a key component in understanding the nature of adult learning. In her chapter on workplace learning, Fenwick makes this point in observing that workplace learning is "not just human change but interconnections of humans and their actions with rules, tools and texts, cultural, and material environments." Some of the new perspectives consider learning as part of the system's cultural and historical norms. An emerging line of research in workplace learning is literally context-based, as researchers consider how physical space and spatiality encourages or inhibits learning.

Two other chapters in particular focus on the context in which learning takes place. In his discussion of new developments in postmodern thinking, Hill introduces us to the new New Social Movement called the Convergence Movement, where learning is meaning making through such contexts as popular education, radical citizenship education, and critical consumption activism. The chapter on non-Western perspectives

of learning and knowing juxtaposes the Western context of learning from an individual perspective to the communal orientation of many non-Western epistemologies. Just in these three chapters, the workplace, social movements, and non-Western cultures are forms of context that expand our thinking beyond the individual learner.

In the other chapters of this update, context is quite present in considering a particular form of learning. For example, in Tisdell's chapter on spirituality and learning, she notes that spiritual development often involves "reclaiming" one's cultural heritage. In the chapter on transformative learning, Taylor reviews several formulations that are more context-sensitive than Mezirow's theory, including Freire's social-emancipatory view, a cultural-spiritual view, and a planetary orientation that "recognizes the interconnectedness among universe, planet, natural environment, human community, and personal world." Chapters on the brain, narrative learning, and embodied learning also recognize that such learning is firmly embedded in the lived experiences of learners in the world.

Thus the spotlight has definitely shifted from understanding adult learning from the individual learner's perspective to the learner *in context*. I am conceiving of *context* as a broad concept referring to where the learner is situated concretely (as in the workplace) or socioculturally (as in working-class America, Confucian society, and so on). This linking of the individual's learning process to his or her context makes for a richer, more holistic understanding of learning in adulthood.

Recognition That Learning Is a Multidimensional Phenomenon

For a good part of the twentieth century, adult learning was understood as a cognitive process, one in which the mind took in facts and information, converting it all to knowledge, which then could be observed as subsequent behavior change. Although there is still research going on in memory and information processing, especially as a function of age, currently learning is construed as a much broader activity involving the body, the emotions, and the spirit as well as the mind. Even reviewing the technical aspects of how the brain functions in learning, Taylor and Lamoreaux in their chapter on the brain point out that for the brain to make meaningful connections, learning needs to be tied to physical, embodied experience: "The brain's physical responses to the sensory data are recorded—literally, embodied—as experience, hence accessible to reconstruction as memory; without such physical responses, there is no basis for constructing meaning." The brain is, after all, a part of one's body. Yet another connection can be made between the mental and the physical. Recent studies using imaging techniques to study brain functioning, according to Ed Taylor's chapter on transformative learning theory, have found that the structure of the brain itself changes during the learning process. The "neurobiological" approach to

transformative learning suggests that such learning “is strengthened by emotive, sensory, and kinesthetic experiences.”

The multidimensional nature of learning is often construed as taking a more holistic approach to learning. Freiler’s chapter on learning through the body most prominently makes the case that learning is a holistic endeavor. From the Moken sea gypsies who “felt” the December 2004 tsunami coming on and so fled to high land, to miners and athletes who are acutely conscious of embodied space, to using embodied learning activities in the classroom, the body has become more visible as a source of knowledge and site for learning. But it is not that the body is merely a vehicle for learning; it is what the body *feels*, the affective dimension of learning, that combines with the intellect in significant learning.

In addition to the mind-body connection resurfacing in the adult learning literature, spirituality and its relationship to adult learning and adult education has emerged as a prominent stream of writing and research in the last ten years. We can only speculate why spirituality is now receiving attention; perhaps we turn to it to guide and inspire us in a fast-paced, uncertain world; or perhaps because learning is now seen as more multidimensional, spirituality is “safe” to discuss. Tisdell explores many facets of this attention to spirituality, pointing out that spirituality in adult education can be found in the practice of social justice educators, in the workplace, and in the experiences of individual learners.

Yet another facet of this multidimensional approach to adult learning is the emergence of narrative learning as a way to theorize learning. Clark and Rossiter’s chapter on this topic makes the observation that we “story” our lives to give meaning to our experiences. Learning can be construed as meaning making; therefore narrative is a form of learning. We learn through stories of others, but also “when we’re learning something, what we’re essentially doing is trying to make sense of it, discern its internal logic, and figure out how it’s related to what we know already.” We create a narrative, a story, about what we’ve learned. Narratives exist on many levels: the individual, family, society, the workplace, and so on. One of postmodernism’s tasks, according to Hill, is to take on and critique some of the “metanarratives” of adult learning. Metanarratives are “comprehensive ways to order and explain knowledge and experience”; they are stories about what we believe to be true.

Storying our experiences and recognizing that the body and the spirit are important components in learning are quite commonplace in non-Western epistemological systems. Globalization and communications technology have resulted in adult educators in the West becoming more aware of diverse worldviews and epistemologies regarding learning and knowing. Interaction with people from all over the world has promoted an awareness of different perspectives on learning, teaching, and what counts as knowledge. These perspectives are now informing our understanding of learning and how best to promote learning. Kim and I explore some of these

perspectives in our chapter on non-Western systems of thought. We found that non-Western systems eschew mind-body, emotion-reason, and individual-group dichotomies and see learning as holistic, lifelong, and community-based.

Whether it be from non-Western epistemological systems or from our own Western perspective, it appears that adult learning research and theory building are expanding to include more than just an individual, cognitive understanding of learning. The mind, body, spirit, emotions, and society are not themselves simply sites of learning; learning occurs in their intersections with each other.

Fostering Adult Learning

Recognition that adult learning is more than cognitive processing, that it is a multidimensional phenomenon, and that it takes place in various contexts has not only enhanced our understanding of *how* adults learn but expanded our thinking as to which instructional strategies might be employed to foster adult learning. Each chapter in this update is anchored in practice in terms of what each dimension of adult learning “looks like” in the real world, but also what strategies we might make use of in promoting such learning. Not surprisingly, there is a fair amount of overlap across the chapters.

When adult learning is construed as meaning making or knowledge construction, as all the authors maintain, then several strategies are particularly recommended. Encouraging reflection and dialogue, whether with the self, another, or a group, enables learning to take place. However, learning to reflect—especially in a critical manner—is itself a developmental process that needs to be fostered in adult learning settings. Critical reflection is essential for transformative learning, for engaging in the new New Social Movements, for developing brain capacity, and for confronting power and politics in workplace learning.

Connecting new learning with learners’ previous experience is a long-standing strategy promoted by adult educators since Lindeman and Knowles. Recent research in several areas has confirmed the importance of processing new information or experience with prior experiences. Brain-based research has documented that “when storing new sensory input, the brain ‘looks for’ connections to earlier information” (Chapter Five). These connections are our “learnings”; with no meaningful links to prior experience, little if anything is retained. In narrative learning, stories can both draw us into an experience from which we can learn and enable us to make meaning of an experience. Embodied learning requires that we attend to the body in our experiences. Tisdell’s research on spirituality (Chapter Three) suggests that significant spiritual experiences from which we learn are those related to life experiences where we “see the extraordinary in the ordinary business of life.”

Finally, in addition to connecting with the learner's life experiences and promoting reflection and dialogue, all the authors recommend expanding our repertoire of instruction to include creative and artistic modes of inquiry. Non-Western and indigenous knowledge systems have always turned to stories, folklore, myths, symbols, music, dance, and even dreams as sources of knowledge. With the growing understanding that adult learning is a multidimensional and holistic phenomenon, we are beginning to recognize the value of incorporating more creative modes of inquiry into our practice.

What then of adult learning theory for the twenty-first century? The authors of chapters in this volume seem to be saying very similar things: that there is an ever-expanding understanding of what adult learning is and can be. We need only attend to our own mind, body, spirit, and emotions and the sociocultural and material contexts in which we ourselves learn to recognize the potential of this expanded vision for our adult learners.

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