

## Overview

Recent research in adult learning has been stimulated by the influx of non-traditional age students in higher education: approximately 50% of today's college students are adults. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), participation in adult education among individuals age 16 or older increased from 40 percent in 1995 to 46 percent in 2001 and then declined to 44 percent in 2005. Nationally, individuals age 16 or older participated most in work-related courses (27 percent), followed by personal interest courses (21 percent), as well as part-time college or university degree programs (5 percent) in 2005. Yet the roots of adult learning harken back to the early 20th century. Edward Thorndike and colleagues published the first book on adult learning in 1928; much of their work drew on a behavioral psychological framework. Other theories of learning that have influenced adult education include cognitive, humanist, and social learning orientations. In *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* (2008), Sharan Merriam draws attention to the field's emergent understanding that learning is not simply a cognitive activity. Rather, learning is a "much broader activity involving the body, the emotions, and the spirit as well as the mind" (p.95). Two contemporary theories of adult learning have had a significant impact on adult education: andragogy and transformational learning.

In *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, Malcolm Knowles borrowed the European term "andragogy" to distinguish adult learning from the more familiar term, pedagogy. He defined andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1980, p.43). Six assumptions provide the basis for his conceptualization of adult learners (Knowles, 1975, 1984, 1989):

- 1) they need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking it;
- 2) they have an independent self-concept and can direct their own learning;
- 3) they have an accumulation of life experience that must be acknowledged;
- 4) their readiness to learn is related to what they need to know to cope with their life circumstances;
- 5) they are problem-centered and are interested in immediate application of new information, and
- 6) they are motivated to learn by internal (vs. external) factors.

Approximately twenty years after Knowles proposed his theory of adult learning, Jack Mezirow suggested a theory specific to the adult years. He defines transformational (or transformative) learning as "the process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one's experience" (1990).

In contrast to information learning, which changes what we know, transformational learning changes how we know. For Mezirow (2000), transformative learning "refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (pp. 7-8). Mezirow outlines four main components in the transformational learning process within a framework of rational thinking: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action. Other adult learning scholars have expanded his theory to include other ways of knowing beyond rational thinking: emotion, intuition, levels of consciousness, and neurobiological components of learning have been addressed.

In addition, although an emphasis on the individual learner still exists in theories of adult learning, there is an increasing awareness of the context-based nature of learning, including historical, sociocultural, and physical influences. This shift in understanding from the individual learner perspective to the learner in context is particularly relevant for teachers working in multicultural, multigenerational environments.

## Implications for Teaching

In their meta-analysis of adult learning methods (2009), Dunst and Trivette found the following practices significantly related to study outcomes:

- 1) Introduction of the learning topic in advance of class through preclass quizzes, warm-up exercises, and self-instruction;
- 2) Role plays and simulations;
- 3) Problem-solving tasks and real-life application of newly learned knowledge or practice; and
- 4) Action planning (engaging the learner in determining the next steps), journaling, and group reflection.

## Additional Resources

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**Note: This section was developed as part of a more comprehensive paper on adult learning by Diane Harkins.**