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## A Holistic Conceptualization of Adult Learning and its Critiques of Selected Concepts and Theories

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# **A Holistic Conceptualization of Adult Learning and its Critiques of Selected Concepts and Theories**

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Keywords: Holistic theory, adult learning, transformative learning

**Abstract:** This paper critically evaluates several contemporary concepts and theories of adult learning. Most of existing adult learning theories and conceptualizations tend to narrowly define knowledge and learning. Holistic learning theory provides an integrative framework that can be used adequately explain many propositions of major contemporary theories and concepts of adult learning.

The topic of adult learning has been at the central stage of adult education literature, and many theories and concepts have been constructed. However, no unifying theory of learning has emerged due to the complexity and diversity of the adult learning process. The existing literature offer fragmented and sometimes contradicted explanations of adult learning. The purpose of this article is: (1) to briefly introduce a newly developed holistic theory, and (2) to critically review several selected contemporary adult learning theories and concepts from the perspective of holistic theory.

## **The Nature of Knowledge and Holistic Learning Theory**

The theoretical foundation of this paper is based on a newly developed holistic theory of knowledge and learning (Yang, 2003). This theory was established on a dialectic view of the nature of knowledge and adult learning.

### *The Nature of Knowledge*

Holistic theory defines knowledge as a social construct consisting of three distinctive and interrelated facets—explicit, implicit, and emancipatory knowledge (Yang, 2003). However, the above three knowledge facets have not been accurately and exclusively defined and thus these notions may cause conceptual confusions. The present paper builds on this theory and uses three different terms for the clarity purpose. This paper uses three related and yet different terms to indicate three knowledge facets—perceptual, conceptual, and affectual knowledge. Perceptual knowledge refers to personal kinesthetic understanding of the world through direct experience and involvement in a particular situation. Conceptual knowledge indicates abstract concepts and a scheme of interrelated concepts that may be transferred across situations. Affectual knowledge is individuals' sentiment attached to certain objects. Knowledge is viewed as human beings' awareness and understanding about reality gained through personal familiarity, cognitive and mental processing, and emotional affection.

Holistic learning theory asserts that the construct of knowledge consists not only of the three facets but also of three knowledge layers: foundation, manifestation, and orientation (Yang, 2003). The first layer is a stratum of foundation or premise, which serves as the basis for our knowing and determines the boundary of conceptual knowledge. Foundation includes those assumptions that have been taken for grant as valid and are not normally requiring proof. The manifestation layer represents the outcomes of our knowing. The orientation layer defines the

direction and tendency of knowing action. So the orientation layer indicates the driving forces of our learning process. Table 1 presents indications of the three layers across the three facets.

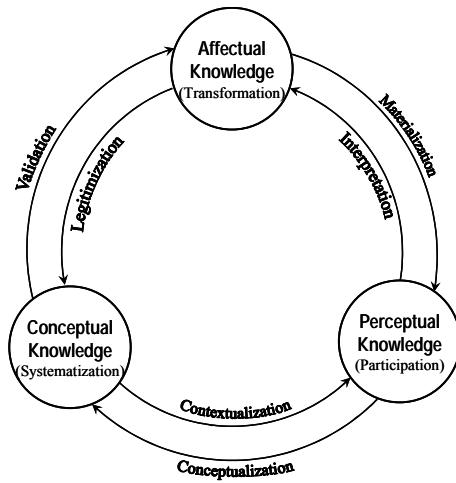
**Table 2.** Holistic Learning Theory: Indications of individual knowledge facets and layers

Knowledge Layers	Knowledge Facets		
	Conceptual	Perceptual	Affectual
Foundation	Axioms, assumptions, beliefs, premises	Habits, social norms, traditions, routines	Values, aspirations, ideals, visions
Manifestation	Theories, principles, models, conceptual frameworks, formulas, propositions, concepts, assertions	Skills, techniques, tacit understandings, know-how, intuition, mental models	Attitudes, motivations, interests, perceived needs, ethics, moral standards
Orientation	Rationality	Reality	Liberty

*Learning as Dynamic Interactions among Knowledge Facets*

Holistic learning theory points out that it is learning that unifies different facets and brings learning meaning. Each of the three facets of knowledge provides a support needed for the other facets to exist. Knowledge exists in dynamic dialectic interactions among all three facets. Knowledge is created and transformed through the interactions among three knowledge facets (Yang, 2003). Figure 1 illustrates such interactions corresponding to nine mode of learning: participation, conceptualization, contextualization, systematization, validation, legitimization, transformation, interpretation, and materialization.

**Figure 1.** Dynamic Relationships of Three Knowledge Facets and Implied Modes of Learning.



*Learning as Individual and Social Activity*

An individual learner has to interact with his/her immediate social group or organization within certain social/cultural contexts. A group or organization has to encompass three major components—critical, technical, and practical knowledge. The dominated affectual knowledge of associated members constitutes critical knowledge which is normally reflected in mainstream values and visions. Practical knowledge is made up of common perceptual knowledge of organizational members. Technical knowledge represents institutionalized conceptual/explicit knowledge and is usually incorporated in systems and structures. Similar to individual knowledge, group and organizational knowledge can be viewed as a social construct with three facets and each of the facets has three layers. Table 2 lists some indicators of three layers of group and organizational knowledge in three domains.

**Table 2.** *Holistic Learning Theory: Indications of group and organizational knowledge*

Knowledge Layers	Knowledge Facets		
	Technical	Practical	Critical
Foundation	Institutionalized Conceptual Knowledge (System & Structure)	Collective Perceptual Knowledge (Process & Practice)	Dominated Affectual Knowledge (Value & Vision)
Manifestation	Rules, regulations, policies, standard operation procedures, technical specifications, formal communication channels and formats.	Social norms, customs, conventions, shared understandings, intuitions, insights, routines, technical know-how, sensed changes.	Mission, managerial philosophies, perceived social responsibilities, morale, ethical and moral standards, and spirituality.
Orientation	Efficiency, optimize	Effectiveness, flexible	Justice, Responsibility

### **Critiques of Key Adult Learning Concepts and Theories**

Holistic theory provides an integrative framework to examine some of the contemporary adult learning concepts and theories. Most of the contemporary learning concepts and theories have established their learning models based on part of knowledge facets and related interactions. Consequently, major propositions of the contemporary learning concepts and theories can be adequately interpreted by holistic learning theory.

#### **Andragogy**

Central to the concept of andragogy are its major propositions or assumptions about adult learner. In the light of holistic learning theory, these assumptions have focused on certain facets of knowledge. Andragogy concept places emphasis on the characteristics of adult learners and posits that their life experiences can be valid source of learning. Consequently, andragogy emphasizes the role of the perceptual facets of knowledge. It also calls for a facilitating role for the instructors to help learners be aware of and recognize their perceptual knowledge gained from practice. However, this concept fails to clearly identify and recognize the important role of two other knowledge facets. The actual role of the instructor is not well defined in andragogy. Some instructors call themselves facilitators, yet others assume the role of experts. From the perspective of holistic learning theory, the role of facilitator may be appropriate when learners possess rich experience and the main task of learning is to help them articulate perceptual knowledge, which tends to be implicit, to explicit conceptual knowledge. Nevertheless, an expert role may be more adequate when there is a consensus that conceptual or technical knowledge needs to be delivered in an efficient way such as health and safety training.

Andragogy recognizes the role of learners' need, self-concept and internal motivation in adult learning. These three assumptions all fall into affect domain and thus related to affectual knowledge. However, andragogy does not acknowledge the ultimate role of affectual facet of knowledge in adult learning. Because pre-adult learners have no or limited legal rights to determine right from wrong, their learning in the domain of affectual knowledge tends to be relatively passive. That is to say, pre-adult learners and some adult learners in special settings

such as correctional education have to accept values and ethics normally determined by others in the domain of affectual/critical knowledge. In most adult learning settings, learners are legitimate citizens and thus have the right of self-direction. It is vital for educators to recognize the role of self-concept and thus help adult learners to fully reach their developmental potentials.

#### *Self-Directed Learning*

Self-directed learning is “a process of learning in which people take the primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 293). Most self-directed learning models promote learner-centered and controlled learning activities, which will ultimately result in change of learners’ affectual knowledge, but few of them recognize the vital role this knowledge facet plays in adult learning. Such approach to learning has been established on an individualist value system and assumes that human beings will find freedom/liberty as long as they find out right self-directions. Holistic theory of learning challenges such assumption and posits that individual direction and action are normally determined by one’s value and belief systems. Individual value and beliefs systems tend to interact with broad social and cultural factors mainly through three knowledge facets.

Although self-directed learning tends to promote emancipatory learning, but fail to fully recognize the dynamic relationships among different facets of knowledge. Holistic theory allows us to better understand the relations among key constructs of self-directed learning concept. In his attempt to build a comprehensive model of self-directed learning, Garrison (1997) suggests that three dimensions (self-management or contextual control, self-monitoring or cognitive responsibility, and motivation or entering/task) are central to a meaningful and worthwhile self-directed learning. These dimensions in fact reflect three domains of the knowledge facets respectively under the view of the holistic theory. The contextual control dimension represents learner’s perceptual knowledge in a particular learning context, the self-monitoring or cognitive responsibility dimension seems to indicate conceptual knowledge, and the motivation dimension corresponds to the affectual facet of knowledge. Therefore, holistic learning theory covers major dimensions of self-directed learning. Further more, holistic theory provides reciprocal relations among the three dimensions and clearly spells out how each of these dimensions interacts with others. In practice, learners’ motivation for a self-directed learning activity may change as a result of enhanced self-monitoring ability or frustration of out-controlled contextual condition.

#### *Reflective Practice*

The reflective process between theory and practice exemplifies the dynamic relationship between conceptual and perceptual knowledge. Reflection-in-action tends to learn from professional practice and thus construct perceptual knowledge. Schön uses terms such as “theories-in-use,” “knowledge-in-action” and “knowing-in-action” to describe the perceptual facet of knowledge. They all represent “a process we can deliver without being able to say what we are doing” (Schön, 1987, p. 31). The holistic theory acknowledges that perceptual knowledge is embedded in practice or learners’ experiences; it further points out the difference between experience and perceptual knowledge. Reflection-in-action thus can be viewed as only one of the viable ways of learning perceptual knowledge for professionals.

Although the concept of reflective practice offers a viable explanation of effective professional practice and challenges technical rational perspective of professional education, several limitations are evident from the holistic perspective of learning. First, the role of affectual/critical knowledge in learning is not well recognized by many authors in this area (e.g., Kolb; 1984; Schön, 1987). What are the influences of emotion and affectual knowledge such as

learning need and motivation on reflective process? Do ethical and moral factors influence reflective process? How can practitioners gain effective reflective skills? Are reflective processes (reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action) sufficient to educating proficient professionals?

Most theories of reflective practice tend to emphasize the role of experience and practice, and they normally fail to acknowledge the essential role of conceptual/technical knowledge and a closely related learning mode, systematization. While it is necessary to recognize the tremendous values of perceptual/practical knowledge gained from professional practice and to acknowledge the fact that existing technical knowledge originally come from perceptual and practical knowledge, there is a tendency to devalue the role of theory and basic science. Further more, technical/conceptual knowledge such as well established theories and basic science have inherent merit as they provide learners with systematic and fundamental conceptual knowledge that otherwise they will not be able to develop by themselves or take more time to develop. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize values of both conceptual and perceptual knowledge gained from basic science and practice respectively.

The reflective theory implies that most (if not all) professionals need to and are capable to engage in reflective practice. What has been commonly over looked is the solid scientific knowledge base that most professionals bring into their practice. There is an assumption that most professional situations are neither clear nor well defined as described in basic scientific texts, and that contexts are ever changing. The reflective theory posits that there is a mismatch between explicit theory and real practice. Nevertheless, there are also many situations where problems are clear, and well defined. In such situations, simply transmitting basic technical knowledge and skills can bring efficiency. Even if a new issue occurs that challenges the existing technical knowledge and calls for new approach, simply learning from practice via reflection-in-action may not necessarily provide an adequate solution.

#### *Transformational Learning Theory*

Transformational learning occupies the center in the adult education literature. This theory describes how adult learners interpret their life experiences and make meaning. Under the view of the holistic theory, meaning schemes fall into the manifestation layer of three knowledge facets and meaning perspective included two other layers—foundation and orientation. Here the foundation layer of conceptual/explicit knowledge corresponds to epistemic assumptions, foundation layer of perceptual/implicit knowledge represents social and cultural assumptions, and the affectual layer characterizes psychic assumptions. Therefore, Mezirow's original theory suggests that perspective transformation is a process where an individual learner's foundation and orientation layers of knowledge experience a significant change. Holistic learning theory differentiates three facets of knowledge and thus adds to new understanding of transformational learning. Holistic theory posits that transformational learning appears only if foundation (i.e., one's ideology) of affectual knowledge changes.

One of the major critics of Mezirow's transformational learning theory states that its individualistic perspective limits this theory (Newman, 1994; Welton, 1994). In the light of holistic learning theory, Mezirow's (1998) responses to the critics are adequate because individual learning is interacting with learning at organization or social level. Appropriate social actions such as civil right movement require combined transformational learning at individual level. There is nothing wrong for a learning theory to focus on the change at the individual level, but a robust learning theory should include the dynamic interactions between individual learners and their social/environmental factors. The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 describes the dynamic relation between individual and collection knowledge and action.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this paper is to present a coherent and integrative view of human learning. Based on a newly developed holistic theory of knowledge and learning, this paper critically evaluates several contemporary theories and concepts of adult learning. Most of existing adult learning theories and concepts tend to narrowly define knowledge and learning and fail to offer adequate explanation for adult learning. Holistic learning theory suggests that knowledge is a multi-facets social construct. Adult learning involves dynamic interactions among three knowledge facets and layers at both individual and organizational levels. Many propositions and concepts of adult learning in the literature can be adequately explained by holistic learning theory. Holistic theory thus provides a comprehensive framework of adult learning that integrates different knowledge facets and layers at both individual and social levels.

There have been emerging literature on holistic view of adult learning and different terms such as wholistic or organic learning have been used (Beckett, 2000; Illeris, 2004), but the field is ambiguous. The proposed holistic framework of knowledge and learning integrates cognitive, affective, psychomotor, and social dimensions into a coherent learning model. The melding nature knowledge facets and layers provide a new epistemology of practice for adult learning.

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