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Beyond Andragogy: New Directions in Adult Learning Theory

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Abstract: While andragogy is here to stay, we have moved beyond centering it at the heart of adult learning theory. Five other ways to understand adult learning will be presented in this symposium: transformative learning, spirituality and adult learning, embodied knowing, the neuroscience of adult learning and narrative learning.

Adult learning is at the heart of all adult education practice. From literacy to continuing professional education, from the workplace to an art museum, from a college course to a yoga class, enabling the learning of adults is what holds an otherwise very diverse field together. For decades, Malcolm Knowles's andragogy was how our field differentiated itself from childhood education and indeed, for many practitioners was the "window" into understanding adults as learners. Andragogy became a template for designing instruction for adult learners. It is still many newcomers first introduction to our field. While andragogy is here to stay, the purpose of this symposium is to present what is really *new* thinking in adult learning. We have moved beyond centering andragogy at the heart of our adult learning theory. Expanding our understanding of adult learning offers the potential for engaging more adults in learning, the common denominator across the many dimensions of adult education practice.

Five perspectives on adult learning will be presented in this symposium. First is a glimpse into some of the new thinking around transformational learning. While not a new topic, emerging are a number of alternative conceptions of *transformative learning* beyond Mezirow and Freire's seminal work such as neurobiological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric and planetary views. The second presentation will be on *spirituality and adult learning*. The popular press has brought spirituality forward especially as it manifests in the workplace and higher education. How spirituality is being conceptualized as a component of adult learning will be explored in this second presentation. Because of the West's focus on cognitive processing, the body as a site of learning and knowing has until recently been ignored. The growing research base on *embodied or somatic knowing* is the topic of the third presentation. Embodied learning is an alternate way of knowing that reconnects the mind and body. This connection between the mind and body is actually being reinforced by the latest developments in the *neuroscience of learning*. The fourth presenter will explain how learning, embodied experience, and reflection interact in making meaningful connections in the brain; in fact, imaging techniques have revealed how learning changes the brain itself. The fifth topic is on *narrative learning*. Human beings have always told stories to make sense of the world and to convey "truths" of the culture. What is new, is understanding how stories are a form of meaning-making. We learn through stories and creating a narrative to make sense of our experience is itself learning.

The New Andragogy: Transformative Learning Theory

Edward W. Taylor

Penn State University-Harrisburg

Three decades have passed since transformative learning's (TL) humble beginnings in Mezirow's (1978, 2000)* study about women's experiences of returning to college. As a theory that sees learning as a process of construing new or revised interpretations of experience through reflection, it has accomplished what the study of andragogy had hoped to and much more. For example, andragogy is more a framework for teaching adults than a lens for explaining learning. Also, its related research is encumbered with host of challenges (e.g., noncomparability of studies, the wide variation in definition and implementation, learner control and voluntarism) (Rachal, 2002). TL on the other hand, although sharing some similar challenges, has persisted due to significant substantive research and theoretical critique offering a framework for both understanding learning and guiding the teaching adults (Taylor, 1998, 2007). As a result it has overshadowed andragogy, moving from the margins to the center of the study of adult learning both in adult education and variety of other disciplines (e.g., medical education, distance education). Furthermore, it is also no longer represented by several theoretical lenses but instead by eight, by some accounts.

One way to appreciate the range of alternative conceptions is to break them down into two groups based on their unit of analysis. The first group uses the individual primarily as the unit of analysis in transformative learning, which includes the following conceptions: psycho-critical (Mezirow); psycho-analytic (Boyd & Meyers, 1988; Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 2000); psycho-developmental (Kegan, 2000; Daloz, 1986) and neurobiological (Janik, 2005). The former emphasizes personal transformation over context and social change, reflecting a more universal view of learning. The second group includes four additional conceptions: social-emancipatory (Freire, 1984); cultural-spiritual (Tisdell, 2003; Brooks, 2000); race-centric (Williams, 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Sheared, 1994); and planetary (O'Sullivan, 1999). TL in this group sees social and individual change as one in the same with an appreciation for difference, placing a greater emphasis on positionality and its relationship to both the process and practice of transformative learning.

Despite all the interest in transformative learning in the field of adult education classroom, like andragogy, there is still much not known about the practice of transformative learning in the classroom. One area in particular is the lack of understanding about the impact of fostering transformative learning on learner outcomes (grades, test scores). Definitive support is needed if educators are going to recognize transformative learning as a worthwhile teaching approach with adult learners. Other areas of research include understanding the student's responsibilities in relationship to the transformative educator when fostering transformative learning? Second, there is a need to understand the peripheral consequences of fostering transformative learning in the classroom. For example, how does a student's transformation affect peers in the classroom, the teacher, the educational institution, and other individuals who play a significant role in the life of the student? Finally, the growing body of research and alternative perspectives should remind educators that fostering transformative learning is much more than implementing a series of instructional strategies with adult learners. It is first and foremost about educating from a particular educational philosophy, with its own assumptions about the purpose of education, role of the educator, and nature of knowledge.

Spirituality and Adult Learning

Elizabeth J. Tisdell

Penn State University-Harrisburg

While the assumptions underlying andragogy are firmly based in the potential of adults to learn, grow and develop, nowhere is the spiritual dimension of the human being directly addressed. It wasn't until the 1990s that spirituality and its relationship to adult learning began to appear in our literature in direct discussion, though as English (2006) observes, it was an underlying influence for many in the field who have been advocates for social justice, such as Horton and Freire (1990).

There is often much confusion about what the term "spirituality" means and how it is distinguished from religion. In general in contemporary literature, spirituality is seen as being about an *individual's* personal experience with the sacred, which can be experienced anywhere—in a secular setting, in a religious context, or in the natural world. Religion, on the other hand, is about an *organized community of faith*, with an official creed, and codes of regulatory behavior. When defined as an individual's personal experience with the sacred, spirituality can indeed be experienced anywhere including the classroom. Recent writers have discussed the influence of spirituality and soul in how it affects learning on an individual and a cultural level and what it suggests for educating adults more generally (Dirkx, 1997; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003), or as culturally responsive education in classroom settings (Tisdell, 2003; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006); or in the arena of workplace learning or in community work for the common good (Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1995; Fenwick & Lange, 1998). The strong influence of spirituality is also still present in those educating for social justice in myriad adult education settings.

Adults often report learning important life lessons through significant spiritual experience. There are many types of spiritual experiences. Those commonly reported in research studies happen in the context of births, deaths, and close brushes with death; through dreams and synchronicities; experiences in meditation, and nature; and through bursts of unanticipated creative expression (Tisdell, 2003; Wuthnow, 2001) that may relate to the integration of some aspect of one's identity, around culture, gender, sexuality or life role status. Often these types of spiritual experiences happen through unconscious and symbolic knowledge construction processes (Fowler, 1982): people tap into some earlier event or meaning stream through images, symbols, music, stories, or ritual from one's earlier life, and as a result of the experience reintegrate it in some new way. It often results in a reordering of chaos, and an embrace of paradox. People construct knowledge in powerful ways through spiritual experiences, or those that tap into the symbolic and imaginal realm. The ability to create, imagine, and come to further insight through symbol, metaphor, and art is part of the experience of being human that is so often ignored in education; yet it sometimes gets to the heart of spirit. Thus, attending to spirituality in adult learning involves making space for its expression, attending to paradox, sacredness, and the graced moments in teaching and learning that lead to unexpected insights.

Learning through the Body

Tammy J. Freiler

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As we enter this world from our mothers' wombs, our infant bodies are bombarded by all sorts of sensory stimuli from our environment at birth. Experiences of infancy remind us about

the significance of our bodies as catalysts for new learning in this world, particularly in regards to sensory processes and reflexive responses to the environment. Furthermore, as we leave this world, for most individuals, developmental age-related, illness-related, and injury-related losses bring sharp attention back to the experiences of the body. We are generally engaged in and through our bodies on a daily basis. Being in our bodies is not a new experience. So why is learning through our bodies a new direction in adult learning theory? It is a matter of attention, growing insight, and approach toward learning through the body as a source of knowledge that points to this new direction.

While many of us have a sense of physicality in our bodies, it can be rather detached from knowing. Somewhere from womb to tomb, the continuity of learning through the body can be blurred and disconnected. Western thought has traditionally been rooted in a mind/body dichotomy, privileging the mind in knowledge construction and obscuring the body. We are accustomed to learning through a separatist view of body and mind, and we have been situated in chairs row after row in institutional learning spaces with little or no room for attention to the body. Furthermore, how to bring attention to the body in learning spaces can be steeped in challenges, risks, and complexities given that the body is a highly personal entity for most individuals.

However, the construction of knowledge really extends beyond the mind and its rational processes to other ways of knowing where we come to know the physical, socio-emotional, and spiritual world. Holistic learning opportunities in adult and higher education are beginning to draw attention to engaging and reconnecting the body and mind, the whole person, in learning experiences that guide best practice and inform adult learning theory. Embodiment, embodied learning and somatic learning are being discussed in terms of an awareness of bodily experiences as valued sources of knowledge construction through objective and subjective realms (Brockman, 2001; Clark, 2001; Crowdes, 2000; Freiler, 2007; Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

Furthermore, approaches to learning through the body are emerging in broad, innovative, integrated ways of knowing in resonance with andragogy as follows; they are participative rather than passive; they provide adult learners with alternate opportunities for knowing that are situated not just in their own comfort zones but also in gentle risks and challenges that facilitate new knowledge from previous knowledge: and they account for life experiences of adult learners (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Yang, 2003). Opportunities to directly or subtly incorporate attention to the body in learning offer great potential for creating significant experiences by embracing the spirit of human experiences and development, which are whole and integrated and not separatist. Learning through the body is most certainly worth navigating as a pioneering direction in adult learning.

Learning with the Brain in Mind

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Saint Mary's College of California

Until recently, most knowledge about brain function was derived from studies (often post-mortem) of brains that had been injured or diseased. In the last ten years, however, innovations in imaging technology have made it possible to look into the normally functioning brains of living persons. These new tools enable neuroscientists and educators to seek correspondence between theories of learning and how the brain actually works, thus going beyond andragogy to understanding the learning process more concretely. As adult educators, we have followed this

emerging literature for several years. Though still in its infancy, we find the neuroscience of adult learning offers largely untapped resources for educators who would foster and enhance adults' capacities for lifelong learning.

As one example, adult educators have long known, anecdotally, that learning is enhanced through practice and application. Now, however, it is possible not only to identify the parts of the brain but also the kinds of learning activities more likely to create enduring synaptic connections. From the brain's perspective, learning begins with sensory signals from the outside world that take the form of electrochemical activity traveling along neurons (brain cells) and across synapses (the spaces between), creating patterns of connection. When these connections are restimulated, the pattern becomes stronger: neurons that "fire together, wire together," which is why repetition is often essential to learning. But new experiences need not always lead to new and different pathways. The brain first seeks to make sense of sensory input by comparing it to what it already "knows." As a result, existing patterns of connection change, expand, and "reroute," leading to denser, more complex, neural networks: "*this represents learning as we understand it today*" (Goldberg, 2001).

The role of memory in learning is somewhat paradoxical. Rather than being something stored in a particular *place* in the brain, memory is a *process*. "Memories are *constructions assembled* [from *various* places in the brain] *at the time of retrieval*, and the information stored during the initial experience is only one of the items used in the construction; other contributions include information already stored in the brain, as well as things the person hears or sees and then stores after the experience" (LeDoux, 2002, p. 203, italics added).

There is no one right way to teach adults; nevertheless, we may enhance learning when we align practice with this understanding of brain function. When adults are confronted with ideas for which their brains can find no related prior experience, and therefore no meaningful links to existing patterns, it may be difficult to create the necessary associations. While memory aids may be useful in establishing patterns for information-based learning and behaviors, they are less effective for learning that focuses on meta-objectives of higher education, such as openness to new ideas and multiple perspectives, the capacity for accurate self-reflection, and greater cognitive complexity. Such learning outcomes may require changes in the brain more readily accomplished by working intentionally *with* the brain's process of making meaning, as this leads to the creation of more complex, more interconnected neural networks. This presentation will therefore focus on "best practices" based on current understandings of how the brain actually learns.

Narrative Learning

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Marsha Rossiter University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

Learning in adulthood is integrally related to lived experience. The main assumption of andragogy is that adults bring a store of life experience to the learning encounter and that experience can serve as a resource for learning, but what is not considered are the differing ways in which experience and learners are understood to be connected. Constructivist learning theory locates learning in the reflection on experience, while situated learning theories see learning as happening in the interaction between learners and their contexts. Narrative learning theory posits

an even closer connection between learners and experience. The nature of experience is always prelinguistic; it is “language” after the fact, and the process of narrating it is how learners give meaning to that experience.

Narrative is a uniquely human way of meaning-making. Everyday we make sense of our life experiences by storying them, by constructing narratives that make things cohere. Coherence creates sense out of chaos by establishing connections between and among these experiences. Sometimes it’s a matter of locating experiences within a particular cultural narrative; at other times it’s a matter of constructing a narrative for ourselves that enables us to deal with an experience. Narrative is also how we craft our sense of self, our identity, and how group identities are formed. In all modes it’s important to understand narrative as a highly social process.

We believe narrative learning is a twofold concept—fostering learning through stories, and conceptualizing the learning process itself. When used as a pedagogical strategy, stories are powerful precisely because they engage learners at a deeply human level. Students learn through stories in three ways. First, learners hear stories; this implies reception. Stories are powerful because they engage learners at a deeply human level, appealing to our emotions and imaginations that take us far beyond the cognitive level. Second, learners tell stories; in this mode the learner is the actor rather than the receiver. In the telling of stories learners link their cognitive understanding of something to their own experience. And third, learners recognize stories, by which we mean that they come to understand that they themselves are constituted and positioned narratively, and this understanding creates the possibility for critique and its emancipatory possibilities. Narrative also offers a way to conceptualize the learning process itself. When we are learning something we are trying to make sense of it, discern its internal logic, and see how it’s related to what we already know. Learning something means working to create a coherent narrative of new ideas and concepts—we story our understanding. It’s an ongoing and complex process in which we identify and wrestle with the pieces that don’t yet fit together (what we don’t yet understand), and we recognize the gaps (what we still do not know). The process of constructing that narrative, that story, is how we can see our understanding of something come together and make sense. Narrative learning, then, is both an effective pedagogical approach and a useful way of conceptualizing the learning process.

Adult Learning Theory for the Twenty-First Century

Sharan B. Merriam
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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 we convene next year at AERC!

In the early decades of the 20th century, adult learning theory in North America 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. However, based on recent work in adult learning theory I think some observations can be advanced about what is characterizing adult learning theory at the moment.

Two such observations are that (1) there is increased attention to the various contexts where learning takes place, and 2) learning is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, not just a cognitive activity.

Today the historical, sociocultural context of adult learning is recognized as a key component in understanding the nature of adult learning. For example, in Tisdell's presentation on spirituality and learning, she notes that spiritual development often involves "reclaiming" one's cultural heritage. Taylor reviewed several formulations of transformative learning that are more context-sensitive than Mezirow's theory, including Freire's social-emancipatory view, a cultural-spiritual view and a planetary orientation. Recent research 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. This shift to understanding the learner *in context* broadly conceived of where the learner is situated concretely (like the workplace), or socioculturally makes for a richer, more holistic understanding of learning in adulthood.

A second observation is the recognition that learning is a holistic phenomenon involving the body, emotions, the spirit as well as the mind. As was pointed out, for the brain to make meaningful connections, learning needs to be tied to physical, embodied experience. The brain is after all, a part of one's body. And clearly the body has become more visible as a source of knowledge and site for learning. What the body *feels*, the affective dimension of learning combines with the intellect in significant learning. Spirituality and its relationship to adult learning and adult education can be found in the practice of social justice educators, in the workplace, and in the experiences of individual learners. So too, narrative learning uses the natural "storying" of our lives as another pathway to meaning-making.

When adult learning is construed as meaning-making or knowledge construction as all the presenters maintain, then we can draw several implications for practice. First, encouraging reflection and dialogue, whether with the self, another, or a group enables learning to take place. Second, recent research in several areas has confirmed the importance of processing new information or experience with prior experiences. Finally, in addition to connecting with the learner's life experiences and promoting reflection and dialogue, we can expand 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 multi-dimensional and holistic phenomenon, we are beginning to recognize the value of incorporating more creative modes of inquiry into our practice.

*Full references may be obtained by contacting symposium participants or by accessing individual chapters in Merriam, S. B. (Ed.) (2007). *Third update on adult learning theory*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 119. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.