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What's in a Learning Theory? A Comparison of Contemporary Learning Theories, Their Shared Elements, and Their Vision of Society's Role in Learning

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Abstract: In the context of the 'learning age,' this literature review examines the shared elements of contemporary adult learning theories and their vision of society in learning.

Keywords: adults, learning theories, society

We live in a society sometimes referred to as a learning age or a learning society, and according to Biesta (2013), this growth of learning is partially due to the addition of new, constructivist theories of learning (p. 245). In order to respond to this 'learning age' within the field of adult education, we must investigate this surge of contemporary learning theories and assess how they address the concept of learning. The following sections will introduce the contemporary learning theories selected for this article, identify and investigate their shared elements, and consider their vision for society in learning. This literature review intends to answer two research questions: What are the shared elements of contemporary learning theories? How do these contemporary learning theories envision the role of society in learning?

The Literature Review

This literature review relies on the contemporary adult learning theory literature and the learning theorists' own remarks on what a learning theory should contain. Recently published collections of adult learning theories from Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007) and Illeris (2018) were consulted, and the theorists' original, seminal works were selected for further review. As a result of the vast literature available on many of these learning theories, and their diverse theoretical viewpoints, the scope of this paper will not be able to these theories as a whole. Instead, this literature review will only incorporate the specific theorists and works provided in *Table 1*.

These theories of *Table 1* were chosen because of their substantial influence within the field of adult education. Transformative learning (Mezirow; 2000; 2018), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Michelson, 2015), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) hold their own scholarly journals. Jarvis has been a "leading and original theorist of learning" (Holford, 2017, p. 2). Engeström continues the tradition of cultural historical activity theory in his expansive learning, and Tennant's background integrates a comprehensive understanding of psychology. Olesen (2018) and Rasmussen (2018) are also included in this analysis to represent a psycho-social perspective and a critical theory approach, respectively. Finally, the work of Biesta, Holst, and Merriam offers considerations of learning theories today.

Contemporary Learning Theories and Their Shared Elements. Learning theorists have frequently addressed the topic of components of a learning theory. Engeström (2018) proposes four central questions, which a learning theory must answer:

1. Who are the subjects of learning – how are they defined and located?
2. Why do they learn – what makes them make the effort?
3. What do they learn – what are the contents and outcomes?

4. How do they learn – what are the key actions and processes? (p. 46)

While Engeström focused on the basic elements required to develop a theory of learning, others directed their attention to specific concepts which should be incorporated in a theory; Jarvis (2006) stated that the person as a learner, their experience of the learning, and the social situation of the learning must always be present (p. 198). Through a discussion of the five shared elements: the learners, the purpose for learning, the outcome of learning, the process for learning, and the role of society in learning, we can obtain a more complete picture of the key features in our understanding of learning.

Table 1. Selected Theories of Adult Learning

Theory / area of study	Contributing theorist(s) & works studied	Learning texts¹
Communities of practice	Wenger (1999)	2018
Expansive learning ²	Engeström (2018); Engeström & Sannino (2016)	2018
Experiential learning	Kolb (1984); Michelson (2015)	2007
Holistic learning	Jarvis & Parker (2005); Jarvis (2006; 2007)	2007 & 2018
Psychology in adult learning	Tennant (2005; 2018); Olesen (2018)	2007 & 2018
Three dimensions of learning	Illeris (2004; 2018)	2007 & 2018
Transformative learning	Mezirow (2000; 2018)	2007 & 2018
Study of adult learning theories ³	Olesen (2018); Rasmussen (2018); Holst (2017); Biesta (2013); Merriam (2018; 2017; 2008; 2007)	n/a

The Process of Learning. The process of learning is identified as a specific matter of importance in the development of a learning theory (Engeström, 2018; Olesen, 2018). For some, learning occurs as a result of a “disjuncture” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 49), a “questioning” (Engeström & Sannino, 2016, p. 411), or a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 2018, p. 118). These learning processes denote an instance in which the learner begins a process of change as a result of some interaction with the social world. Kolb (1984) and other experiential learning theorists approach this process of interaction between individual and social by looking at the role of that continuous interaction itself describing learning as, “a process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience” (p. 26).

Mezirow (2000) and Kolb (1984) invoke reflection as an integral stage in this process. On the other hand, coming from the perspective of the social world instead of the learner, Wenger (1999) views the process as learning through practice; in other words, this active engagement in the world also constitutes the world (p. 95), and therefore, reflection is not necessary for the learning to take place. Michelson’s (2015) experiential learning considers reflection as inherently linked to action: “learning is understood as a moment of emotional and physical response” (p. 94).

¹ In this case, “learning texts” refers to the theorists’ appearance in comprehensive learning texts refers to Knud Illeris’s (2018) *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists...In their own words* and Merriam, et. al.’s (2007) *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*.

² Expansive learning theory evolved from the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) tradition.

³ The study of adult learning theories category represents those theorists whose works analyze other contemporary learning theories.

The Role of the Learner. In order to place this process of learning within a larger context, theorists also address the role of the learner within the learning process. The comprehensive theories of learning tend to distinguish between the internal, psychological process and the external, interaction-based processes (Jarvis, 2006; Illeris, 2004; Wenger, 1999). While several theorists highlighted the value of these psychological processes which occur within the learner (Olesen, 2018; Tennant, 1997), others stress the relationship of the learner and the world in which they are learning (Michelson, 2015; Jarvis, 2006; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger, 1999; Kolb, 1984).

The learners' role is multifaceted, and it requires information on their identities, their relationships with the educator, and their interaction with the world. The learner's identity is produced, "as a lived experience of participation in social communities" (Wenger, 1999, p. 151) and is important for both positive and negative learning experiences (Olesen, 2018). In discussing the role of the educator, various authors emphasize the value of relationship-building curriculum (Mezirow, 2000), the role of educators as learning resources (Wenger, 1999), and the educator's task of empowerment for the learner (Rasmussen, 2018).

The Purpose of Learning. All theories addressed the process of learning and the role of the learner within this process. However, these concepts are only relevant through the framework, or their purpose, for learning. Illeris defined this as when the, "individual strives to maintain a steady equilibrium in his or her interactions with the surrounding world" (Illeris, 2004, p. 29). Jarvis and Parker (2005) also noted the need for understanding the world and establishing harmony. There is a common purpose of exploring how the learner maintains balance in the world.

A universally identified concept across the learning theories is role of meaning and meaning making (Merriam, 2008). Wenger (1999) argued that, "living is a constant process of negotiation of meaning" (p. 62). Other purposes such as the questioning and promoting of certain values are present in the work of several theorists. Examples include a sharing of democratic practices (Mezirow, 2000, p. 9; Olesen, 2018, p. 172), "a critical awareness of the assumptions that underlie practice" (Tennant, 2005, p. 2), and a "main challenge of expansive learning is to get engaged in the formation and fostering of alternatives to capitalism" (Engeström & Sannino, 2016, p. 416).

The Object of Learning. In order to construct and negotiate meaning – and therefore produce learning – theorists discuss the product of learning. In this case, the object of learning is considered as the formation of knowledge; although this is not exhaustive of all potential ways of viewing the possible object of learning, it provides a clear comparison of the theories for the purpose of this study. Essential to this understanding is the subjectivity of knowledge. There is "no fixed truth or totally definitive knowledge" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3). Others echoed this subjectivity: Jarvis (2006) described knowledge as subjective, conveyed through language, while Wenger (1999) stated that, "knowing is a matter of participating" (p. 4), and Kolb (1984) viewed knowledge as "continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner" (p. 27).

Within this set of selected theories, some theorists concentrate on the role of the social world in knowledge construction, while others direct their attention to the learner and his or her relationship to knowledge construction. Under the communities of practice theory, "knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world" (Wenger, 1999, p. 4). By comparison, theorists such as Kolb (1984), Illeris (2004), and Mezirow (2000) focused on the role of the social world in how the individual creates knowledge;

in other words, they approached knowledge construction and the social world as interacting with the individual in the making of meaning.

Society and Learning in the Learning Society. The processes of producing meaning and developing knowledge do not occur in a vacuum. Olesen (2018) highlighted this importance for critical theories; he claimed that critical theories of learning should, “maintain a focus on understanding the learning processes themselves but also reflect the societal dynamics and interests involved in this redefinitions of the research horizon” (Olesen, 2018, p.172). The theorists differ in their points of conception, and this influences their vision for the role of society in learning. Those who emerge from social theory tend to direct their attention to the interaction between the person and society to explain the learning in society (Jarvis, 2006; Wenger, 1999). For example, Michelson (2015) called for, “regrounding knowledge in the embodied and the social” (p. 189). However, those who originate from a cognitive or psychoanalytical perspective, like transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; 2018), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and Tennant (1997; 2018), are more interested in society’s influence on the individual learner.

This difference in origin of thought is also significant for interpreting the individual agency within the social world. Tennant (2018) called for “engaged agency” by which he argued that “we cannot stand completely outside our culture” but “we do have the capacity to question its assumptions and practice” (p. 177). On the other hand, Wenger’s communities of practice is concentrated on the collective dimensions of learning. Finally, the origination of these theories implicates the ways that they account for the “existing structure of society” (Illeris, 2004, p. 19), and several authors cited the influences of the capitalist society on the individual learner (Michelson, 2015; Engeström & Sannino, 2016, Jarvis, 2007; Illeris, 2004).

Discussion

The discussion of the shared elements provides an opportunity to explore the current descriptions and evaluate needs for future theory development and analysis. All theories are concerned with the learner’s interaction with society and seek to place the process of learning within a larger context. The theorists’ orientation toward the internal, psychological processes or the external, interactional processes influences how they envision meaning making and the process of learning itself, the multifaceted role of the learner, and how society, the learner, and the learning process are related. There is strong agreement in the purpose of learning and its relation to making meaning in our world.

The difference in the point of origin leads to substantial variation in interpretation of the relationships between the learners and their world. As Mezirow (2018) noted, “there is a debate over whether a learning theory must be dictated exclusively by contextual interests” (p. 126). This struggle to define the relationship between learner and context is visible the variations among the learning theories selected for this review. This can lead to an incomplete understanding of the complex relations of society, the individual, and learning for our field. Future work should more closely examine this relation of society, learning, and individual as it is understood in theories of adult learning.

Limitations and Implications for Theory and Practice

I acknowledge that while the analysis of theorists’ own language is an effective method for examining their learning theories, these elements of learning are complex, and it is out of the scope of this work to incorporate all works from major theorists, all divisions within the major

theories, and all contemporary theories which are relevant to our adult learning field. Future work which examines the divisions within theories and expands this review to spirituality and learning, and embodied and somatic learning (Merriam, 2018) should be conducted. Likewise, the complex relations of the learner and society must be explored in greater detail.

This increased focus on learning is also occurring in the context of a, “new era of global polarization” (Holst, 2017, p. 88), and as adult educators, we must rely on our understanding of learning to identify the ways in which these behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs are learned. This analysis is significant for practice as well. The educator is required to build a relationship with the learner and can be a resource for learning (Wenger, 1999) and empowerment (Rasmussen, 2018). Michelson (2015) called for adult educators to combine methods such as dialogue with a, “willingness not to wall off the self from the unreasonable, the incoherent, the passionate” (p. 193). If this is the case, adult educators’ pedagogical strategies should reflect methodologies of dialogue and allow space for students to examine “incompatible elements” of their own experiences (Michelson, 2015, p. 193).

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