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Developing Adult Learners: A Model

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Abstract: Based on research with experienced adult educators, this framework for practice proposes a model of “developmental intentions” designed to encourage epistemological development in adult learners. This interactive session will also explore how developmental intentions can inform classroom strategies for teachers and trainers of adults.

Constructive-Development Theory and Adult Learning

The literature suggests, and adult educators increasingly realize, that there can be a chasm between what adults learn and, to use William Perry's phrase, really learn. As a result, adults can appear to “take in” new information but in fact may be unable to apply it in any meaningful way to their lives and beliefs. Furthermore, many adults who seek out higher learning seem to be at a threshold of change, ready to think about what they know and how they know it in new, more complex, ways. This is markedly different from their earlier tendency to focus on learning as a process of getting knowledge; they are, instead, increasingly willing to construct knowledge, even when it means they must surface and challenge their existing perceptions and assumptions. Adult development theories, particularly constructive-developmental theories, describe such new capacities in terms of an epistemological shift (Kegan, 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986; Perry, 1970). According to such theories, the “rules” or frameworks that guide us as we construct meaning change throughout our lives. “Real” learning then, leads an adult not just to know more, but to know differently. The implications of such knowing extend far beyond the bounds of a classroom or training session. Ultimately, how we know is who we are (Kegan, 1982).

In light of the “teachable moment” that exists when adults seek further education, many adult educators, rather than focus on information acquisition or behavior modification, have instinctively expanded their efforts to affect not only what their adult students know, but how they go about making meaning of what they know. In our own educational practice, we had intuitively moved in this direction even before we were fully aware of the developmental literature that supported it. We also noted, however, that many colleagues whose practice seemed to evidence similar goals nevertheless maintained an explicit focus on their field, discipline, or subject-matter. How then, we wondered, did experienced adult educators frame developmental objectives, and how did those objectives guide their practice?

Research and Results

To answer these questions, we sought out adult educators, some of whom have international reputations, as well as less renowned colleagues whose work we knew to be developmental focused. These included educators in the U.S., Australia, and the United Kingdom. We asked: What do you want your adult learners to walk away with, developmentally

speaking, at the end of your time together? We intentionally did not define developmentally speaking.

The results, compiled in a table of “Developmental Intentions,” are comprised of thirty-six discrete items in five over-arching categories or dimensions. These categories are explained from the perspective of a learner, as follows.

- (1) *Toward knowing as a dialogic process*: I want to become more aware of how I construct knowledge, to recognize the sources of the ideas I currently hold, and to engage with others in order to more effectively reconstruct knowledge as new experiences and reflection warrant.
- (2) *Toward a dialogic relationship to oneself*: I want to be able to recognize myself; to see who and how I am not only through the prism of my experience, but through reflection on that experience; to take responsibility for how I may choose to be in the future. The self I discover is not the essence of who I am, it is my construction, and as such, subject to reconstructing.
- (3) *Toward becoming a continuous learner*: I want to focus on learning as what I do when I am interested in ideas or activities. Though I may call on others for advice, input, expertise, or directions, I will decide my learning goals, seek appropriate resources, and actively engage with the process. I also recognize that learning is likely to lead to new ways of constructing myself, and I accept that challenge.
- (4) *Toward self-agency and self-authorship*: I want to acknowledge that I construct the choices I make and the values I hold, and that I’m responsible to act on behalf of those values to the best of my abilities.
- (5) *Toward connection with others*: In discovering the self-constructed, individual nature of myself, I nevertheless want to recognize and act on the essential connectedness of the human enterprise: Though we may be existentially alone, we find our most human expressions in community. I wish to engage in a form of connectedness in which I can, without loss of my selfhood, bring myself into relationship and community.

Since development is a process of becoming rather than a destination, in order to underscore the sense of movement, we chose to express the five dimensions and the thirty-six characteristics as actions (for example, reflecting) rather than as conditions (for example, reflection). We also discovered, in the process of analyzing the data, that our fellow adult educators did not frame these characteristics as developmental outcomes; no one can “develop” anyone else. Instead, our informants told us, they saw these as goals but also as methods. In order to encourage in adults the capacity to, for example, surface and question assumptions, associate truth not with static fact but with contexts and relationship, or accept responsibility for choices one has made and will make, the most effective strategy was to create situations in which adults were required to engage in precisely these activities. Having a conscious awareness of the potential for developmental outcomes helped faculty to support learners in gaining the associated capacities and skills.

The Developmental Intentions

The developmental intentions (see chart) describe the dynamic nature of an adult’s process of change. Whereas most theories describe development in terms of movement along a

continuum of growth, any individual's process defies linear organization. We found that the thirty-six discrete items interacted across the five dimensions. As a result, assigning characteristics to a particular dimension became, at times, a somewhat arbitrary exercise: some overlapped, some were sequential, and some seemed to enhance the potential for others to emerge.

As people engage in these actions, they also develop the capacity to recognize the interplay of differentiation and integration in their own lives. They see themselves as made up of parts and yet a coherent whole, always in process, never competely arriving. Taken together, the five dimensions represent aspects of a self that is capable of sophisticated, ongoing engagement with the world of ideas and with learning from experience—a self that can examine its own biases and assumptions, make and carry out thoughtful commitments, and reach out to others for mutual enhancement. In short, a self that responds effectively and with increasing ease to both internal and external changes.

Teaching and Training Strategies

A common theme among the intentions is their focus on experience—attending to experience, interpreting experience, relying on experience, using experience as a point of reference, and creating experiences. They also underscore the necessity that learners engage in reflection and construct meaning. In the more than seventy exercises and activities based on the intentions, additional themes emerged that informed practice. These included concerns about power, control and authority in the classroom; awareness of the tension between adults' needs to be self-directed and yet do “what the teacher wants”; recognition of the relationship between assessment and learning; balancing coverage of the material with time for reflection on experience; and acknowledgement of potential limitations of adults' experiences as the basis for learning.

The crucial nature of the mentor as guide—one who prepares the learner for a journey, blazes the trail, provides both a map and a lifeline, and allows the learner to set the pace—also emerged as a defining factor in successful implementation of the developmental intentions.

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