Psychology and Adult Learning

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Abstract

Leading educational psychologists address problems in adult development and learning in this book. "What Does Educational Psychology Know about Adult Learning and Development?" (M. Cecil Smith, Thomas Pourchot) is the introduction. "We Learn, Therefore We Develop" (Nira Granott) tackles the problem of distinguishing between learning and development. "Abstraction, the Will, the Self, and Modes of Learning in Adulthood" (Juan Pascual-Leone, Ronald R. Irwin) describes a process-analytic account of consciousness, cognition, and personal factors that interact to determine learning. "Extending Sociocultural Theory to Adult Learning" (Curtis Jay Bonk, Kyung A. Kim) proposes an extension of sociocultural theory based on Vygotsky's research and writing. "On the Development of Adult Metacognition" (Gregory Schraw) describes the development of metacognition in adulthood and its relationships to knowledge and intellectual abilities. "Changing Mind, Changing World" (Bruce Torff, Robert J. Sternberg) describes the role of practical intelligence and tacit knowledge in adult learning. "The Role of Adults' Beliefs about Knowledge in School, Work, and Everyday Life" (Marlene Schommer) considers the critical role of adults' epistemological beliefs in their school, work, and everyday lives. "Adult Intelligence" (Phillip L. Ackerman) presents a knowledge-based perspective of adult intellectual ability marked in its distinction from traditional views of intellectual functioning in adulthood. "Mnemonic Strategies for Adult Learners" (Russell N. Carney, Joel R. Levin) describes memory-enhancing techniques for those whose memory abilities may be affected by aging processes. "Adult Age Differences in Reading and Remembering Text and Using This Information to Make Decisions in Everyday Life" (Bonnie J.F. Meyer, Andrew P. Talbot) examines the interplay between various reading processes and adults' abilities to use the information they acquire from text across the life span.

Keywords: Perpespective, Educational Psychology, Adult Learning, Development

Introduction

Educational psychology is the study of how people learn, including teaching methods, instructional processes, and individual differences in learning. It explores the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social influences on the learning process. Educational psychologists use this understanding of how people learn to develop instructional strategies and help students succeed in school. This branch of psychology focuses on the learning process of early childhood and adolescence. However, it also explores the social, emotional, and cognitive processes that are involved in learning throughout the entire lifespan. The field of educational psychology incorporates a number of other disciplines, including developmental psychology, behavioral psychology, and cognitive psychology. Approaches to educational psychology include behavioral, developmental, cognitive, constructivist, and experiential perspectives.

Until recently, the individual perspective, driven by the psychological paradigm, was the predominate way we thought about learning in adulthood (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Two basic assumptions form the foundation for this perspective. The first is that learning is something that happens internally, primarily inside of our heads. In essence the outside environment is given little if any attention in the way we think and learn. Second, this perspective is based on the assumption we can construct a set of principles and competencies that can assist all adults to be more effective learners, no matter what their background or current life situation. A sampling of topics grounded primarily in this perspective include participation and motivation (Boshier & Collins 1985), self-directed learning (Tough, 1971), andragogy (Knowles, 1970), transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991), memory and learning (Ormord, 1995), and the neurobiology of learning (Sylwester, 1995). Three of these topics are discussed to illustrate this perspective: participation, self-directed learning, and transformational learning. Participation is one of the more throughly studied areas in adult education. We have a sense of who participants, what is

studied, and what motivates some adults and not others to enroll in a course or independent learning project. Beginning with the landmark study of Johnstone and Rivera (1965), other national studies have sought to describe adult learning (for example, Valentine, 1997). What is interesting is that the original profile put forth by Johnston and Rivera (1965) has changed little over the past thirty years. Compared to those who do not participate, participants in adult education are better educated, younger, have higher incomes, and are most likely to be white and employed full time. The accumulation of descriptive information about participation has led to efforts to build models that try to convey the complexity of the phenomenon. This work on determining why people participate, that is the underlying motivational structure for participation, has been carried on most notably by Boshier and others using Boshier's Educational Participation Scale (EPS) (Boshier and Collins,1985; Fujita-Starck, 1996). Between three and seven factors have been delineated to explain why adults participate, such as expectations of others, educational preparation, professional advancement, social stimulation, and cognitive interest. A number of other models, grounded in characteristics of individual learners, have been developed to further explain participation; several of these models also link a more sociological or contextual approach with that of the individual backgrounds of learners (for example, Sissel, 1997). Although learning on one's own or self-directed learning has been the primary mode of learning throughout the ages, systematic studies in this arena did not become prevalent until the 1970s and the 1980s (Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1987). The majority of this work draws from humanistic philosophy, which posits personal growth as the goal of adult learning. Therefore, understanding how individuals go about the process of learning on their own and what attributes can be associated with learners who are self-directed have been the two major threads of this research tradition. The process of self-directed learning was first conceived as primarily linear, using much of the same language we used to describe learning processes in formal settings (Knowles, 1970; Tough, 1971). The emphasis was placed on what skills and competencies learners needed to be self-directed in their learning endeavors. As more complex models were developed, this emphasis began to shift to viewing the self-directed learning process as much more of a trail and error activity, with many loops and curves. In addition, as in the participation literature, contextual aspects of the process, such as the circumstances learners found themselves within, were found to also be important (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Garrison, 1997).

Perspectives in Educational Psychology

As with other areas of psychology, researchers within educational psychology tend to take on different perspectives when considering a problem. These perspectives focus on specific factors that influence learning, including learned behaviors, cognition, experiences, and more.
The Behavioral Perspective: This perspective suggests that all behaviors are learned through conditioning. Psychologists who take this perspective rely firmly on the principles of operant conditioning to explain how learning happens.[1]

For example, teachers might reward learning by giving students tokens that can be exchanged for desirable items

such as candy or toys. The behavioral perspective operates on the theory that students will learn when rewarded for "good" behavior and punished for "bad" behavior. While such methods can be useful in some cases, the behavioral approach has been criticized for failing to account for attitudes, emotions, and intrinsic motivations for learning.

The Developmental Perspective

This perspective focuses on how children acquire new skills and knowledge as they develop.[2] Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development is one example of an important developmental theory looking at how children grow intellectually.[3]

By understanding how children think at different stages of development, educational psychologists can better understand what children are capable of at each point of their growth. This can help educators create instructional methods and materials aimed at certain age groups.

The Cognitive Perspective The cognitive approach has become much more widespread, mainly because it accounts for how factors such as memories, beliefs, emotions, and

motivations contribute to the learning process.[4] This theory supports the idea that a person learns as a result of their own motivation, not as a result of external rewards.

Educational psychologists who take a cognitive perspective are interested in understanding how kids become motivated to learn, how they remember the things that they learn, and how they solve problems, among other topics.

The Constructivist Approach

This perspective focuses on how we actively construct our knowledge of the world.[5] Constructivism accounts for the social and cultural influences that affect how we learn.

Those who take the constructivist approach believe that what a person already knows is the biggest influence on how they learn new information. This means that new knowledge can only be added on to and understood in terms of existing knowledge.

This perspective is heavily influenced by the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who proposed ideas such as the zone of proximal development and instructional scaffolding.

Experiential Perspective

This perspective emphasizes that a person's own life experiences influence how they understand new information.[6] This method is similar to constructivist and cognitive perspectives in that it takes into consideration the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the learner.

This method allows someone to find personal meaning in what they learn instead of feeling that the information doesn't apply to them.

Recap

Different perspectives on human behavior can be useful when looking at topics within the field of educational psychology. Some of these include the behavioral perspective, the constructivist approach, and the experiential perspective.

Topics in Educational Psychology

From the materials teachers use to the individual needs of students, educational psychologists delve deep to more fully understand the learning process. Some these topics of study in educational psychology include:

- **Educational technology**: Looking at how different types of technology can help students learn
- **Instructional design**: Designing effective learning materials
- **Special education**: Helping students who may need specialized instruction[7]
- **Curriculum development**: Creating coursework that will maximize learning
- **Organizational learning**: Studying how people learn in organizational settings, such as workplaces
- **Gifted learners**: Helping students who are identified as gifted learners[8]
- **What is an Adult Learning Theory?**
- Adult learning theory, or andragogy, is the study that examines how adults learn and master knowledge, competences, and new skills. Adult learning theory principles are based on the premise that grown ups learn differently than children. Here are some basic differences between teaching children and creating training for mature persons.

Children	Adults
Child-oriented learning provides a basic foundation of knowledge and helps develop critical thinking skills.	Adults have an existing base of knowledge and life experience. Mature students seek out continuous learning based on personal interests, wants, and needs.
Younger learners typically have no choice but to study and may lose enthusiasm if they are not engaged in what is happening around them.	Unlike children, grown up learners understand why they're learning, so their motivation to learn is naturally high.
It's necessary to be in charge of the classroom.	It's beneficial to let adults work things out for themselves and organize themselves.
Teachers play a central role in delivering knowledge and guiding learning activities.	The role of "teacher" may be effectively filled by a mentor, coach, training facilitator, peer, or subject matter expert.

Difficulties in Adult Learning

These are the most common difficulties, or learning barriers, typically encountered by adult learners that can prevent them from growing their skills and impact their readiness to learn. Since corporate training takes the largest share in adult learning, we'll cover adult learning barriers in that context.

Focusing

With only 5% of the workweek that employees are ready to spend on training (according to the most optimistic estimates), it's evident that adults generally tend to have other priorities. They have too much on their plate, not only at work but in their personal life. That presents the challenge to stay focused on training and reduce distractions (e.g., noisy learning environment, children and pets demanding attention at home, or smartphone addiction).

Seeing the big picture

If adults don't see where they stand in the company, don't feel valued, or know what depends on them, corporate training often may seem unnecessary. Employees may simply not understand why their employer tries to involve them in corporate training programs. It's necessary to show that employee training and development are important for their growth in the company and to make a real impact on overall business performance.

Having a purpose

That's the same old 'what's in it for me' situation. Mature learners want to know exactly how the new information will help them in life or work. If the purpose of training isn't concrete enough and doesn't target the learning needs of the audience, it may become an unbreakable barrier, and no training will make sense.

Imposter syndrome

Adults tend to fear not knowing something they perceive to be essential for their new role, another career path, or a different profession. Motivation to learn may decline due to the fear of criticism as well. So, if the training topic is something new for the grown up, they may suffer from imposter syndrome, and that hinders their growth and professional development greatly.

To distinguish the critical aspects of adult learning, education theorists and psychologists had to elaborate theoretical frameworks that would reinvent learning experiences and practices for adults. Over the last century, a number of different theories have gained prominence. There's no single model that explains how and why grown ups learn best; however, each one sheds light on a particular aspect of adult education.

We've made a review of six of the most popular adult learning theories and methodologies to see how each can be used to facilitate adult training techniques to deliver desired learning outcomes.

Learning Theory Comparison Chart

Here's a comparison chart of the best learning theories for adults we will examine in the article. We hope it'll help you select the best strategy for your own learning program design needs.

CONCEPT	SUMMARY	BEST SUITED FOR
Andragogy	Adult learners are autonomous and self-directing, and seek out learning based on personal needs. Mature learners must be able to apply what they learn in real-life situations.	Problem solving Structured formal learning Learners with a defined need to know
Transformational Learning	A person's beliefs and expectations shape their view of the world. Through a rational analytical process, a person can consciously change their old	Complex analytical processes Evaluation and analysis Long-term personal growth

	beliefs and implement new ones.	
Experiential Learning	A hands-on approach where individuals learn by doing. Puts the learner at the center of the learning process. Learning happens through an active process of doing and reflection.	Mechanical skills Leadership skills Process improvement Systematic thinking
Self-Directed Learning	Process where individuals take complete ownership of the learning process to diagnose learning needs, identify resources, implement learning, and assess their results.	Process updates Self-motivated learners Technology and software skills

Conclusion, we advocate that more research be undertaken from an integrative framework. While we are well aware of the challenges of studying adult education from this integrative perspective, we believe that accounting for both the individual learner and context of the learning offers the greatest potential for advancing our understanding of the complex phenomenem of adult learning.

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