



Professional Development **Fact Sheet** **No. 5**

ADULT LEARNING THEORIES

There is no single explanation or all-encompassing theory that explains how adults learn. The adult learning process is complex, context bound, and highly personal. As a result, there is no single theory of learning that can be applied to all adults. Instead, the literature of the past century has yielded a variety of models, sets of assumptions and principles, theories, and explanations that make up the adult learning knowledge base. The more adult educators are familiar with this knowledge base, the more effective their practice can be, and the more responsive it can be to the needs of adult learners. This fact sheet reviews three major theories and discusses their implications for practice.

What is Andragogy?

In attempting to document differences between the ways adults and children learn, Malcolm Knowles (1980) popularized the concept of *andragogy* (“the art and science of helping adults learn”), contrasting it with *pedagogy* (“the art and science of teaching children”). He posited a set of assumptions about adult learners, namely, that the adult learner

- Moves from dependency to increasing self-directedness as he/she matures and can direct his/her own learning;
- Draws on his/her accumulated reservoir of life experiences to aid learning;
- Is ready to learn when he/she assumes new social or life roles;
- Is problem-centered and wants to apply new learning immediately; and
- Is motivated to learn from internal, rather than external, factors.

Inherent in these assumptions are implications for practice. Knowles (1984) suggests that adult educators

- Set a cooperative climate for learning in the classroom;
- Assess the learner’s specific needs and interests;
- Develop learning objectives based on the learner’s needs, interests, and skill levels;
- Design sequential activities to achieve the objectives;
- Work collaboratively with the learner to select methods, materials, and resources for instruction;
- Evaluate the quality of the learning experience and make adjustments, as needed, while assessing needs for further learning.

Because adults need to know why they are learning something, effective teachers explain their reasons for teaching specific skills. Because adults learn through doing, effective instruction focuses on tasks that adults can perform, rather than on memorization of content. Because adults are problem-solvers and learn best when the subject is of immediate use, effective instruction involves the learner in solving real-life problems.

What is Self-Directed Learning?

Approximately 70 percent of adult learning is self-directed (Cross, 1981), and about 90 percent of all adults conduct at least one self-directed learning project a year (Tough, 1971).

Self-directed learning (SDL) is a “process in which individuals take the initiative, without the help of others” in planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences (Knowles, 1975). In essence, SDL is an informal process that primarily takes place *outside* the classroom. What qualifies learning as “self directed” is who (the learner) makes decisions about content, methods, resources, and evaluation of the learning. Individuals take responsibility for their own learning process by determining their needs, setting goals, identifying resources, implementing a plan to meet their goals, and evaluating the outcomes.

The benefit of SDL is that learning can be easily incorporated into daily routines and occur both at the learner’s convenience and according to his/her learning preferences. It can involve the learner in isolated activities, such as researching information on the Internet; it also can involve the learner in communication with experts and peers, as in a traditional classroom.

SDL can be difficult for adults who lack independence, confidence, internal motivation, or resources. Brookfield (1985) suggests that not all learners prefer the self-directed option and that many adults who engage in SDL also engage in more formal educational programs, such as teacher-directed courses. Within the adult education classroom, the teacher can augment traditional classroom instruction with a variety of techniques to encourage SDL for individuals or for small groups of learners who are ready and willing to embark on independent, self-directed learning experiences. Following are strategies for facilitating SDL. The teacher can help the learner to

- Identify the starting point for a learning project;
- Conduct a needs assessment to determine the learning objectives;
- Match appropriate resources (books, articles, content experts) and methods (Internet searches, lectures, electronic discussion groups) to the learning goal;
- Negotiate a learning contract that sets learning goals, strategies, and evaluation criteria;
- Acquire strategies for decision-making and self-evaluation of work;
- Develop positive attitudes and independence relative to self-directed learning; and
- Reflect on what he/she is learning.

The teacher also can

- Encourage and support the learner throughout the process, providing guidance as needed;
- Offer a variety of options as evidence of successful learning outcomes;
- Create an atmosphere of openness and trust with learners;
- Recognize and reward learners for their efforts in meeting learning objectives; and
- Promote learning networks, discussion groups, and study circles among learners.



What is Transformational Learning?

Transformative learning (TL) often is described as learning that changes the way individuals think about themselves and their world, and that involves a shift of consciousness. For example, English as a second language learners often report a shift in their view of U.S. culture and in their view of self as they gain confidence communicating in a new language (King, 2000).

Different theorists look at TL through various lenses. Paolo Freire (2000) taught Brazilian workers to read by engaging them in discussions about working conditions and poor compensation, thereby helping them change their thinking and strive for social change. To Freire, transformative learning is emancipating.

To Mezirow (2000), TL is a rational process. As individuals reflect on and discuss their assumptions about the world, they often experience a shift in their frame of reference or world view. For this to happen, individuals engaging in reflective discourse need to challenge each others' assumptions and encourage group members to consider various perspectives. It is essential that participants engaging in reflective discourse have complete and accurate information about the topic for discussion, be free from bias, and meet in an environment of acceptance, empathy, and trust (Mezirow, 2000). A criticism often leveled at Mezirow's theory is that it does not account for the effect of the individuals' race, class, and gender, or the historical context in which the learning occurs (Taylor, 1998).

Adult educators seeking to foster transformative learning within their classes may wish to consider the following strategies:

- **Create a climate that supports transformative learning.** Taylor (2000) suggests that teachers need to be "trusting, empathetic, caring, authentic, sincere, and demonstrative of high integrity" (p. 313). They need to provide students with immediate and helpful feedback, employ activities that "promote student autonomy, participation, and collaboration" (Taylor, 1998, p. 48), and help them to explore alternative perspectives and engage in problem-solving and critical reflection (p. 49).
- **Know your students and the types of learning activities that most appeal to them.** Cranton (2000) suggests that "thinking types" who enjoy logic will appreciate "case studies, debates, critical questioning, and analyses of theoretical perspectives" (2000, p. 199). Those who are uncomfortable with confrontation and having their statements challenged may be more successful when learning occurs in "harmonious groups" in which participants discuss, but do not debate, alternative viewpoints. The experiential learner will enjoy field trips and simulations, and the intuitive learner will appreciate brainstorming and games involving imagination.
- **Develop and use learning activities that explore and expose different points of view.** Cranton (2002) suggests using films and short stories. She also suggests having students engage in journal writing to engage in self-reflection. The teacher can ask a learner to write a brief autobiographical essay and then ask other students to review and reflect on the writer's assumptions. Each student can take a turn at writing his/her autobiographical essay. Another technique is to use critical incidents to engage in reflective discourse, in which learners reflect on an experience, either good or bad, and analyze their assumptions and various perspectives.

The art of teaching adults effectively requires an understanding of various principles or theories of how adults learn and making an effort to apply some of those principles to practice.

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Developed by the California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO), under contract with the California Department of Education.

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