

Labour Force Status	N	%	N	%
Employed	38,300	26.2	15,527	8.2
Unemployed	59,567	41.5	15,749	14.6
Not Employed or Seeking Work	27,055	18.7	8,116	17.8
Retired	5,415	3.7	1,630	19.7
	131,350	44.5	36,024	12.9

Applying Adult Learning Theory: Self-directed Learning and Transformational Learning in the Classroom

Among the foundational learning theories used to guide practice in adult education are self-directed learning and transformative learning. Although both have been widely discussed and researched, only a small number of studies focus specifically on applying these theories to the experiences of learners in Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Educational Development (GED), or English as a Second Language (ESL). This brief describes implications of this research for practice with ABE, GED, and ESL learners.

► Self-directed Learning

Self-directed learning (SDL) has been variously defined as (1) a process in which people take primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999); (2) a personal attribute—the psychological readiness to undertake one's own learning (ibid.); and (3) a set of attitudes, behaviors, and skills for self-direction (Grieve, 2003). It has also been described as the learning people do in their everyday lives (ibid.). Perspectives on the goals of SDL vary as well, and include (1) having individuals reach their full potential; (2) fostering a transformed perspective; or (3) promoting emancipatory learning and social change (Baumgartner, 2003).

► Research on Self-directed Learning

Most SDL research has focused on adults with relatively high levels of education who are presumed to have learned how to learn through formal schooling (Reder & Strawn, 2001). One exception is the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning, sponsored by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) and conducted at Portland State University in Oregon. As part of this ongoing project, researchers are tracking the experiences of two groups of adults—those who participate and those who do not participate in formal literacy programs. Preliminary results of the study indicate that substantial numbers of adults who do not have a high school diploma or GED engage in SDL activities to improve their basic skills or prepare for the GED Tests. In fact, individuals in this study with the lowest levels of literacy proficiency were most likely to undertake self-study.

Other research suggests that the self-directed efforts of adults with low educational attainment may be different in nature from those of more highly educated adults. Tough's (1971) early research on SDL framed independent learning projects as a series of sequential steps through which individuals decide what, where, when, and how to learn (Baumgartner, 2003). SDL seen in this way is a wholly autonomous activity. In contrast, Spear and Mocker (1984) suggest that self-directed learners of low educational attainment select from limited alternatives present in their environment—what they called the “organizing circumstance” (Padberg, 1994). Building on this theory, Padberg interviewed 19 adults in GED programs; 16 had engaged in independent learning projects. In most of these projects, environmental circumstances were the driving force for SDL.

Marginalized adults themselves may not recognize or label their learning activities as self-directed. For example, in Andruske's (2000) study of female welfare recipients whose educational attainment was at or below the GED level, participants revealed that they undertook independent learning projects related to welfare entitlements, education and training, employment, legal rights, and health. Through complex and persistent research efforts, they acquired knowledge that helped them safeguard their rights, discover opportunities, and obtain services for themselves and their children. However, most of the women in the study did not view these actions as SDL; they were just “doing what needs to be done” (p. 4).

Proponents of SDL have been criticized for privileging Western values of independence, autonomy, and individualism and for ignoring sociocultural variations in approaches to education (such as those that value collective goals and the fostering of community). In addition, the image of a wholly autonomous SDL learner is problematic. For example, studying the process of second-language learning among 25 U.S.-born and 26 foreign-born adults, Nolan (1990) found evidence of both dependent and autonomous behavior at different learning stages. Cultural differences were apparent: U.S.-born learners were more likely to resist dependence, whereas Asian-born individuals accepted the dependent relationship and also made autonomous learning efforts. At various times, both groups engaged in independent learning from books, tapes, and films; sought the assistance of resource persons such as co-workers who were native speakers; and enrolled in formal language classes. Nolan (1990) suggested that “there is no such thing as a purely autonomous adult second language learner” (p. 276). Grieve (2003) suggests that the extent to which learners participate in a program and show self-

direction depends on factors such as their past experiences with education, how they perceive the roles of the teacher and learner, and how they interpret the learning situation.

Just as the learners in Nolan's study, adults in one study of Ontario literacy programs (Taylor, King, Pinsent-Johnson, & Lothian, 2003) served as resource persons for each other as they self-managed the improvement of their reading and writing skills. Their efforts suggest that SDL does not take place in isolation. For these adults, the ability to evaluate their own learning, a key component of SDL, was fostered as a byproduct of helping peers with literacy tasks.

► Teaching Strategies that Support Self-direction

A key factor in supporting SDL is a facilitative and enabling teaching style. Teachers who shift from a directive to an enabling style act as catalysts for learners without prescribing content, provide resources without structuring all activities, and serve as a reflective mirror without being the only source of feedback and reinforcement (Taylor et al., 2003). ABE teachers in the Taylor study modeled behaviors (e.g., admitting to not knowing all the answers), then gradually moved learners toward peer scaffolding. During collaborative activities, their adult literacy learners engaged in social learning behaviors (inviting, assisting, directing, tutoring, modeling), negotiation (consensus building, compromise), and feedback (information seeking, correcting). This peer-assisted learning helped move them toward independent learning.

So how might practitioners prepare adults for and support them in self-directed learning? A study of a learner-centered literacy program (Fingeret et al., 1994) suggests that program personnel need to:

- Negotiate new power relationships between teachers and learners;
- Understand learners whose cultural backgrounds, personalities, or beliefs about schooling and authority may cause discomfort with the demands of self-direction;
- Recognize that self-direction may be difficult for people who are not accustomed to viewing their lives as a series of choices, or who do not have the skills and experience that support making learning decisions for themselves;
- Be prepared for the tensions that may arise when learners resist goal-setting or do not make decisions about their learning that teachers want them to make;
- Be sensitive to the conflict between learners' expectations of schooling (e.g., desire for traditional grammar instruction) and the learner-centered approach of a participatory curriculum; and
- Acknowledge that concepts such as "autonomy" and "independence" may be problematic for some women, who may feel that their native cultural roles are at odds with their increasing sense of independence.

► Transformative Learning

Transformative learning (TL) involves a profound shift in ways of being and knowing oneself and the world (Baumgartner, 2003). Different theorists look at TL through different lenses. To Kegan et al.

(2001), it is a developmental process individuals undergo as they make transitions. From Freire's (1985) emancipatory perspective, learners come to recognize and transform oppressive conditions. For Boyd (1989), transformation is an extrarational/emotional process leading to a more integrated self (Baumgartner, 2003). Mezirow's (1991) most widely known theory emphasizes a cognitive process of reflection on experiences, assumptions, and beliefs leading to the adoption of a new perspective or changed world view (ibid.).

► Research on Transformative Learning

A limited number of studies have considered transformative learning among ABE learners, with the topic receiving greater attention in the context of ESL. One reason for its popularity in ESL lies in the nature of second-language learning itself. Learning another language often is a disconcerting process because identity and the ability to communicate are embedded in language. The vulnerability and anxiety learners often feel may be tied to the "disparity between the 'true' self and the limited self as revealed in the second language" (Foster, 1997, p. 36). This is an example of the "disorienting dilemma" that Mezirow (1991, cited by Baumgartner, 2003) suggests is the first step toward perspective transformation. Second-language learning involves not only the acquisition of technical skills but also emotions and the potentially emancipatory ability to think and function in another culture (Foster, 1997).

King (2000) interviewed ESL learners to identify how they experience this perspective transformation. Of the 208 adult ESL students who participated in the study, nearly 67% claimed to experience a transformation in at least one of the following areas: (1) their view of English and language learning; (2) their view of U.S. culture; or (3) their self-concept (i.e., gained greater confidence by coping with a new language and culture). Factors that facilitated TL included learning activities (discussion and essays that encouraged reflection and exploration of difference beliefs and world views); personal support, primarily from teachers; and life changes outside the classroom.

King extended her research on perspective transformation to an ABE setting in which 18 of 19 adults reported transformative experiences (King & Wright, 2003). In describing their experiences, the learners focused on academic and personal accomplishment. King and Wright suggest, "Looking at the person and finding ways to make that connection between literacy learning or GED preparation and what potential it holds for them, personally, may be a way that transformational learning could inform ABE practice" (p. 117). The learners in the study experienced a deep, substantive change in their frames of reference and world views. The primary facilitators of these changes were teachers and other students, especially through class discussions in a supportive environment.

The role of a supportive environment in transforming perspectives is also evident in the Adult Development Study conducted by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, which explored the experiences of 41 adult literacy learners in three settings: community college ESL, Even Start ABE, and a workplace literacy program (Kegan et al., 2001). Transformational changes

experienced by these learners included new and more complex ways of knowing and increased confidence, which transferred to other roles besides learner (ibid.). The catalysts for transformative changes in ways of knowing were a supportive and challenging environment. In this study, the environment was composed of learner cohorts. Collaborative activities, emotional support, and the challenge of engaging with diverse fellow learners enabled cohort members to test and adopt new ways of thinking and acting (ibid.).

► Teaching Strategies to Support Transformative Learning

In the Adult Development Study and other work with ABE (D'Amico & Capehart, 2001) and GED learners (Eades, 2001), three factors involved in teaching for transformation were observed: enabling beliefs, collaboration, and modeling. Enabling beliefs included instructors' confidence in the ability of adults with low literacy levels to evaluate their own learning and competence, faith in practice as a primary means for improvement in literacy and numeracy, and belief in modeling as critical to facilitating learning behaviors (D'Amico & Capehart, 2001).

Eades (2001) recommends first establishing a collaborative climate in which all learners are valued and have equal opportunity for expression and ownership of views. In this environment, teachers give minimal input, ask open-ended questions, offer diplomatic validation of differences, relinquish teacher-centered and controlling instructional methods, and guide learners in appreciating the significance, meaning, and applicability of new learning. Taking this approach, teachers can develop lessons that combine collaboration with modeling activities that lead to perspective transformation.

Gallo (2002) shows how this process works for immigrants and refugees learning English as a second language in the workplace. With disposable cameras, the workers took photographs—self-chosen visual images to represent themselves, their workplace, families, and communities—that contradicted images of immigrants in the media. Learning activities included identifying vocabulary words derived from photos, creating picture dictionaries, and writing stories about the photos. The photos generated discussion topics about working conditions, work-family balance, and workplace improvements, and learners were empowered to write a memo to management that generated changes. Learners were able to develop English skills, not only for work but for other life needs. They were also able to examine workplace dynamics and transform their perspectives about their jobs, becoming more aware of power relationships and finding their voice in dealing with them.

As with SDL, theories of TL, and particularly Mezirow's (1991), have been criticized for a focus on the individual learning, an overreliance on rationality, and a neglect of social, political, and cultural contexts. It is these contexts that create both the possibility for radical transformation and the related risks to the individual. Teachers must strike a balance between honoring the safety needs of learners in crisis and overstepping the comfort zone necessary for transformation to occur (Horsman, 2000). Studies of learners in crisis, such as women in prison or mandatory welfare-to-work training programs

(Kilgore & Bloom, 2002), and studies of learners who have experienced trauma (Horsman, 2000) help explain why some disorienting dilemmas may not lead to transformative learning. For such learners, personal circumstances or institutional contexts may reinforce a sense of powerlessness and fail to provide conditions that support reflection and transformation of meaning perspectives.

From a different perspective, Magro (2002) investigated the reluctance of some ESL/literacy teachers to see themselves as transformative educators. Although they recognized that learners had transformative experiences, they did not consider their role transformative. Some associated the idea of a "transformative educator" with manipulation and an imposition of the educators' values. For learners in many of these studies (D'Amico & Capehart, 2001; Eades, 2001; Kegan et al., 2001; King, 2000; King & Wright, 2003), transformative learning had largely positive effects in terms of cognitive, emotional, and psychological development and personal empowerment (though not necessarily leading to emancipatory learning and social change). However, because it involves profound change, TL can be disruptive and disturbing. King and Wright (2003) point out that TL can challenge teachers' ethics and comfort level. Transformative learning can also cause difficulties for learners, in terms of a clash between their new pluralistic perspectives and those of a community they belong to, or when changes in student empowerment increase the risk of violence in an abusive relationship. Teachers understandably are hesitant to take on the role of therapist for learners who are dealing with trauma or abuse.

► Conclusion

Two findings of Magro's (2002) study are significant for teachers trying to apply SDL or TL in adult basic education practice. First is the need to balance teaching ideals with the practical realities of the ABE setting. Second, the kinds of learning associated with self-direction or transformation may have more to do with the readiness of the learner than with specific actions of the educator. The art of teaching for self-direction and transformation requires knowing when to support and when to push learners toward the threshold of change. It also involves the ability "to be flexible enough to move into different roles and adapt accordingly to the learners' individual differences and the institutional parameters" (Magro, 2002, p. 31). Most of all, it means being able to balance what learners want for themselves with what teachers want for learners, using insights from the theories of self-directed and transformative learning as a guide.

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