This chapter describes a four-lens model for understanding adult learning theories and provides adult educators and administrators with a useful conceptual framework for working with adult learners in adult degree programs.

Adult Learning Theory and the Pursuit of Adult Degrees

Richard Kiely, Lorilee R. Sandmann, Janet Truluck

Diane Johnson, after home-schooling her three children, knew she needed an official credential to continue to work in the field of elementary education. Facing mandatory retirement from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, William Branson enrolled in a master’s program in counseling to assist incarcerated juveniles that he had been dealing with for years. Amy Garcia, a mother of two small children, seeks an online, cohort-based program to provide her the skills and abilities needed to advance her career while meeting family and work demands.

Diane, William, and Amy reflect several of the groups that make up the growing number of adults pursuing formal degree programs. The strongest growth in educational participation in the past two to three decades has been in part-time enrollments of students over age twenty-five, in particular, women (University Continuing Education Association, 2002). The population of those over sixty years old in the United States is expected to grow from 45 million in 2000 to more than 91 million in 2030; many are participating in adult degree programs (University Continuing Education Association, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that one-third of the nation’s postsecondary institutions offered some form of distance education courses during 1997–1998, and as many as 1,230 degrees and 340 certificates are offered through distance education (Lewis, Farris, Snow, and Levin, 1999). Being time- and place-independent, these degree programs and courses have particular appeal to adult learners.

These adult learners thrive as they pursue degrees in programs that build on principles of adult learning. This chapter reviews the landscape of adult learning theory, provides a four-lens model as a device to navigate the
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vast territory of adult learning including theoretical perspectives and their practical applications, and discusses application of adult learning theory to adult degree programs.

The Territory of Adult Learning Theory

The territory of adult learning theory is extremely diverse and complex (Merriam, 2001a; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). For both novice and expert adult educators and practitioners, what might begin as a simple review of the literature on adult learning theory can instead become an extremely frustrating and lengthy endeavor. A number of adult educators over the past two decades have attempted to map conceptually the boundaries of adult learning theory as a way to help practitioners negotiate the territory more effectively (Brookfield, 1995; Mackeracher, 1996; Merriam, 1988, 1993a, 1993c, 2001a; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). A sampling of metaphors used by each author suggests that no one theory can capture the nature and process of learning in adulthood (Merriam, 1993c, 2001a).

For example, Mackeracher (1996) views adult learning through the multicolored and multifaceted lens of a kaleidoscope. According to Mackeracher, adult learning is a dynamic and interconnected set of processes that are emotional, social, physical, cognitive, and spiritual.

Merriam (1988) depicts the territory of adult learning as a maze and offers a six-part matrix to help adult educators navigate through different topical areas, including characteristics of adult learners and credos and theories of adult learning. In a more recent update, Merriam (2001a) describes adult learning as an “ever-changing mosaic, where old pieces are rearranged and new pieces added” (p. 1). Included in that mosaic are more traditional adult learning theories that focus on learning processes and characteristics of individual adult learners (andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformational learning) and emerging approaches that draw from critical, multicultural, and feminist traditions to understand better how context affects adult learning (Merriam, 2001a).

Merriam and Caffarella’s comprehensive guide to adult learning theory (1999) offers perhaps the most extensive map to date, and it provides a useful and detailed conceptual framework for understanding and explaining the diverse and vast territory of adult learning theory. Their conceptual map looks at three areas: the nature of the adult learner, the context within which adults learn, and the learning processes that adults engage in to differentiate learning in adulthood from learning in childhood. The four-lens model we describe in this chapter builds primarily on Merriam and Caffarella’s three-part typology of adult learning and incorporates the perspective of the educator as an important additional lens to understand and apply adult learning theory in practice. Taken separately, each of the four lenses illuminates different dimensions of the territory of adult learning.
However, it is our contention that the four lenses should be taken together to construct a broader, more holistic vision of learning in adulthood. For adult and continuing educators who design and administer adult degree programs, the four-lens model described in this chapter offers a useful device to navigate the vast territory of adult learning, including theoretical perspectives and their practical applications. The model we explore depicts the four lenses (learner, process, educator, and context), theories that tend to focus on a particular dimension, pertinent concepts, and types of teaching and learning strategies specific to each lens (Table 2.1).

Two issues emerged in our efforts to describe the four-lens model. Due to space limitations, we discuss what we consider the most prominent adult learning theory within each lens. While we have located only one adult learning theory within each lens, we also recognize that each of the theories also informs our understanding of aspects of each of the other lenses. We have located the theory within the lens where we believe it places the most emphasis. Transformational theory, for example, tends to focus on

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how individual adult learners experience the meaning-making process and, in particular, the processes of critical reflection and dialogue. Transformational learning theory also focuses on the individual learner's perspective transformation and the influence of the sociocultural context on his or her frame of reference.

**Learner Lens**

Research in educational, cognitive, and developmental psychology has wielded a significant influence on the development of adult learning theory (Merriam, 1993a, 1993b, 2001b; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). As a result, adult learning theorists have tended to focus on the individual adult learner (Cross, 1981; Kidd, 1973; Knowles, 1970, 1980; Tough, 1971). This focus means understanding the characteristics of adult learners (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1970), the developmental tasks of adulthood (Havinghurst, 1972), their motivations for learning (Houle, 1961), and important individual factors that impede and enhance their ability to participate in adult learning programs and activities (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). In addition, through pioneering brain imaging technologies and genetic mapping, neuroscientists have learned more about the brain in the past decade than in all previous history (Quartz and Sejnowski, 2002). A new discipline known as cognitive neuroscience is beginning to make the connections between mind-body-context and how adults learn and continue learning throughout life (Weiss, 2001).

The most prominent theorist to focus on the individual adult learner is Knowles (1970, 1980), who proposed andragogy, “the art and science of teaching adults,” as a learning theory unique to adults. Knowles's andragogical model posits six assumptions regarding the characteristics of adult learners that differentiate them from child learners (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 1998):

1. In terms of their self-concept, adults tend to see themselves as more responsible, self-directed, and independent.
2. They have a larger, more diverse stock of knowledge and experience to draw from.
3. Their readiness to learn is based on developmental and real-life responsibilities.
4. Their orientation to learning is most often problem centered and relevant to their current life situation.
5. They have a stronger need to know the reasons for learning something.
6. They tend to be more internally motivated.

The central dynamic principle at work in Knowles's andragogical equation is that adults are a unique breed of learner and require a different instructional strategy from traditional teacher-centered and subject-focused
pedagogy. That is, because adults bring a diverse combination of knowledge, experience, and independence to the classroom, adult educators should work to ensure that adult learners participate as much as possible in the content, delivery, and evaluation of curricula within a climate of mutual respect (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 1998).

Focusing on the adult learner has practical implications in terms of developing and implementing educational programs for adults. For example, drawing from the six assumptions in Knowles’s andragogy, and later versions of self-directed learning theory (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991; Garrison, 1997; Long and others, 1996; Merriam, 2001b), administrators and instructors would want to learn as much as possible about adult learners’ needs, prior experience, and knowledge and find ways to build on the breadth and diversity of their experience. They would also need to anticipate possible obstacles to adult participation, including time, cost, confidence level, personal and social responsibilities, fears, and levels of self-esteem (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Valentine and Darkenwald, 1990; Valentine, 1997). One way to anticipate barriers to participation and factors affecting retention is to identify ways to address constraints that are situational (cost, time, life situation) or dispositional (beliefs, attitudes, confidence), as well as institutional norms, including inadequate support services, staff, computer access, and parking (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Another effective strategy is to use one of many learning style inventories or personality tests designed to help adult learners identify individual learning preferences and then develop instructional strategies that build on learning strengths and addressing weaknesses.

As viewed from the individual adult learner lens, successful programs attend to meeting the needs of individual adult learners with a curricular focus that aims to foster greater autonomy and self-direction (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Merriam, 2001b). Instructional strategies and activities would include the adult learner in many aspects of the content and delivery of education. Adult learners would be encouraged to share the responsibility for assessing their level of proficiency, choosing the content and methods of instruction to ensure greater relevancy and ownership, and sequencing learning activities appropriate to their knowledge, skill, and, importantly, their level of self-esteem (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 1998; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Consistent with the research on cognitive neuroscience, we are learning that creating rich, compensating learning environments, which involve complex and novel situations, have a significant impact on the brain and mental performance throughout life (Quartz and Sejnowski, 2002). The following vignette highlights a view from the lens of the adult learner:

A university staff person by day, Diane Johnson is a zealous adult student whenever she can work in a class from her program of study. After homeschooling her three children, which she enjoyed, Diane knew she needed an
official credential to continue to work in the field of elementary education, so she enrolled in a state university–based curriculum especially for adult students returning to school. Diane chose a non-cohort-based program, so she could “stop out” for a semester or two depending on her workload. She thrives on the support provided by the program organizers (special testing, placement and advisement, study skills supports including identification of personal learning style) and fellow students in an OWLS (Older Wiser LearnerS) group. For example, she was given Grow’s Self-Directed Learning Scale (1991), a useful tool for students to evaluate their readiness to learn. By using this scale, students can find themselves on a continuum of being a very dependent learner to becoming an independent, self-directed learner. Diane scored on the high end of being a self-directed learner, which gave her increased self-confidence in her ability to reach her educational goals. She also began to understand that she could take control and direct her own learning endeavors with or without the assistance of others. She knows it will take some time to complete her bachelor’s degree this way, but she is buoyed by her increasing sense of self-efficacy and ability to shape her own learning and is enjoying the intellectual and social stimulation.

Process Lens

Although the focus on the individual adult learner is the dominant lens in the adult learning literature, the process lens has received increased attention in the past decade (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Merriam, 1993c, 2001a). While theories that focus on the individual adult learner look primarily at what constitutes “adultness,” the process lens focuses on how adults learn (Merriam, 1993c). That is, by what processes do adults learn and experience change? Mezirow’s transformational learning model (1991) is the most prominent learning theory to address this question.

Mezirow (1978) developed a theory of perspective transformation based on a national study of adult women participating in reentry programs at U.S. community colleges. Mezirow found that the experience of returning to school caused many women to reexamine critically their assumptions and dependence on culturally defined gender roles and expectations. In particular, many women questioned the taken-for-granted assumption that “the women’s place is in the home” and began to develop a new interpretation of their identity and social role. Mezirow (1981) labeled both the processes that women engaged in and the transformational learning outcome that these women experienced as “perspective transformation” (p. 6). Mezirow defines perspective transformation as “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting on these new understandings” (1990, p. 14).
Mezirow (1991) predicates his theory of transformational learning on the assumption that most people are unaware of the origin of the meaningful structures that make up their worldview and justifications on which they base their beliefs, values, and actions. He claims that “our frames of reference often represent cultural paradigms . . . learning that is unintentionally assimilated from the culture—or personal perspectives derived from the idiosyncrasies of primary caregivers” (2000, pp. 16–17). Because most in-school learning is additive (that is, there is an increase in subject matter knowledge, skills, and competencies) or occurs within existing frames of reference (problem solving and changes in values, attitudes, and beliefs), we rarely have the opportunity to question the validity of the assumptions that make up our worldview. According to Mezirow (1981), adult educators should redirect their aim toward facilitating perspective transformation, “the learning process by which adults come to recognize the culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them and take action to overcome them” (p. 7).

The learning process of perspective transformation is normally triggered by significant or critical events in one’s life such as divorce, sudden death of a family member, and childbirth or results from a series of cumulative anomalies that are incongruent with one’s existing frame of reference (Mezirow, 1995). Mezirow calls these ambiguous and problematic triggering events “disorienting dilemmas” (1991). Once a disorienting dilemma occurs, adult educators can help foster perspective transformation by encouraging adults to engage in three fundamental processes: “critical reflection on assumptions, discourse to validate the critically reflective insight, and action” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 60). Transformational learning processes can help adult learners recognize and overcome distorted assumptions that make up their personal perspectives so that they are more developmentally functional in guiding observations, interpretations, and actions.

In terms of the practical implications for adult educators and administrators, Mezirow’s transformational learning theory informs a learning process to guide educators in assisting individual adult learners to reflect critically on the validity of their presuppositions, engage in discourse with others to assess further the validity of assumptions, and derive a best tentative judgment through consensus. Therefore, finding space to engage in reflection and providing opportunities for group dialogue are essential to foster transformational learning. Mezirow (2000) contends that the highest goal of adult education is to foster learning processes that result in perspective transformation that he equates with helping adults “realize their potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible, and autonomous learners” (p. 30).

William Branson’s job at the Federal Bureau of Investigation lasted more than a quarter-century. He enjoyed his polygraph responsibilities and hated the idea of mandatory retirement. He felt disoriented and almost depressed not knowing what meaningful work he could do in the future. Through his years
in the FBI, he had witnessed the impact of crime, peer pressure, and incarceration of juveniles and entertained the idea that he could make a difference. William’s church offered an accredited master’s program in counseling. After much discussion with program advisers, family members, and colleagues and deep reflection, he joined the degree program. Through the program’s independent course work, small group meetings with other students, and service-learning work in local juvenile detention centers, William finally is studying something he is truly interested in and hopes that his studies will benefit young people in the future.

**Context Lens**

Context also plays an important role in shaping and understanding how adults learn. Jarvis (1987) questions learning that focuses solely on individual adult learners and argues that “learning is not just a psychological process that happens in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives but that it is intimately related to the world and affected by it” (p. 11). Adult learning viewed through the context lens is fundamentally a social process that begins with adults as individuals and also, importantly, as “persons-in-society” (p. 193). Wilson (1993) also contends that theories that focus on the individual learner do not adequately address the “recursive,” “dynamic,” and context-bound nature of learning in adulthood (p. 75).

Caffarella and Merriam (2000) suggest that from a contextual perspective there are interactive and structural dimensions to adult learning. The interactive aspect of context requires an understanding of the relationship among the learner, the social surroundings, and the physical setting—the kind of learning that is situated in “real life” (Caffarella and Merriam, 2000). For Hansman (2001), it means “paying attention to the interaction and intersection among people, tools, ideas, and context within a learning situation” (p. 44).

One important theory that has emerged to help explain how context affects adult learning is situated cognition (Caffarella and Merriam, 2000; Wilson, 1993), which is useful for explaining how the interactive dimension of context shapes learning in adulthood (Caffarella and Merriam, 2000). Wilson (1993) explains that adult learning is more adequately understood as a “situated” cognitive process in which “adults no longer learn from experience, they learn in it, as they act in situations and are acted upon by situations” (p. 75). Such a learning model, he argues, is similar to Schön’s theories of reflection-in-action (1983, 1987) in that it emphasizes that learning occurs while reflecting in the “doing” of the experience (Wilson, 1993, p. 75). The notion of the “situatedness” of learning in terms of both the learner and the setting presents learning as an experiential activity that is “situationally located, tool dependent and socially interactive” (p. 79).

From a “situative” view, “individuals learn as they participate by interacting with the community (with its history, assumptions and cultural values, rules, and patterns of relationships), the tools at hand (including objects,
technology, languages, and images), and the moment’s activity (its purposes, norms, and practical challenges)” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 253). Fenwick points out that “a particular context of learning presents possibilities from which learners select objects of knowing; thus, context influences both the content of experience and the ways people respond to and process it” (p. 250). The situated view of learning also is problematic to the notion of knowledge transfer to other contexts (Fenwick, 2000; Wilson, 1993). If what we learn is intimately connected to various elements, tools, and cultural practices unique to a particular context, what constitutes valid, meaningful knowledge in one context is in no way guaranteed as legitimate and useful in another.

For practitioners, situated cognition means finding ways to engage adult learners in more authentic activities that require learning for real-life problems and situations. Communities of practice and learning are important mediums for engaging in situated cognition. Examples include cognitive apprenticeships, Web-based chatrooms, internships, community-based research, service-learning, and other activities that situate learners in practical situations (Hansman, 2001).

Looking at the structural component of the context lens means focusing on how relationships of power across race, gender, class, disability, and sexual orientation affect the ability of adult learners who represent these groups to participate actively in learning processes (Caffarella and Merriam, 2000; Cervero, Wilson, and Associates, 2000; Tisdell, 1993, 1998). It also requires that educators recognize and address how systems of power and privilege—based on the structural dimensions above—discriminate, oppress, exclude, and deny equal participation and access (Fenwick, 2000; Tisdell, 1998). Adult learning from a contextual perspective must also take into consideration the extent to which socioeconomic, cultural, and political structures of domination determine the nature of relationships, interactions, participation, and practices within educational contexts (Fenwick, 2000). Those who are afforded power due to their social position often dictate the content, process, and purposes of learning consistent with their own interests (Cervero, Wilson, and Associates, 2000).

Adult learning theories that draw from critical theory, feminism, and multiculturalism share the view that power, position, privilege, and politics have a significant influence on the shape and direction of education (Cervero, Wilson, and Associates, 2000; Hayes and Flannery, 2000; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2000; Sheared and Sissel, 2001; Tisdell, 1998). Therefore, adult educators need to be both cognizant of systemic forces, institutionalized oppression, and dominant norms and practices that affect adult learners differentially and vigilant in ensuring and advocating for greater inclusiveness, safety, and voice, particularly for marginalized groups (Hayes and Flannery, 2000).

At work, Amy Garcia coordinates and schedules classes for the continuing education center in her community. However, she wants to become more
involved in curriculum design and development and would also like to
 Teach some of the courses. Although Amy has completed four years of col-
lege with a degree in English, she feels unprepared to move up in her orga-
nization; she needs a master’s degree to qualify for other jobs to which she
aspire. However, obligations at home with two small children and work
limit her time significantly.

Through a coworker, Amy learned about a master’s degree program
offered completely online by a university in her state. Through the program,
she can complete a master’s in adult education in two years. Best of all, there
are no on-campus requirements, and the times she would have to participate
in her courses are very flexible.

Not only did the program format meet Amy’s needs, so did the program
design and instruction. The online discussion groups quickly made her feel
included; through dialogue with other students, she gained self-confidence.
She especially relished the anonymity that the online environment afforded.
She felt she could freely participate without the observable issues of ethnic-
ity and race. Her growing proficiencies with the technologies involved in
being a student of an online program were immediately transferable to her
workplace responsibilities. Amy, her family, and workplace colleagues are all
growing as a result of her participation in the program.

**Educator Lens**

As educators, each of us has a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions regard-
ing the purpose of adult education, the roles of the adult learner and edu-
cators, and the most effective strategies to foster adult learning. Accordingly,
we teach in ways that reflect our past learning experiences, or we emulate
effective teaching strategies that we learned from a mentor. We also base our
assumptions about effective teaching and our practice-based decisions on
our accumulated experience, intuitive insight, and the practical knowledge
we have gained over time. As pragmatic and reflective practitioners, we
make decisions based on our experiences about what works best under
which conditions. However, how often do we reflect on the philosophical
assumptions that shape and influence the way we approach our practice?

Some educators prefer the expert role—the “sage on the stage” who has
primary control over the content and process of learning. Others feel more
comfortable and useful as the “guide on the side,” a facilitator who shares
responsibility for the content, process, and evaluation of learning with adult
learners. Whatever our approach to education, in order to be more effective
adult educators, we need to examine the philosophical assumptions that
guide our teaching beliefs and practices (Elias and Merriam, 1995; Merriam
and Brockett, 1997; Pratt and Associates, 1998; Zinn, 1999). Developing an
awareness of our own and different philosophical traditions is useful
because (Elias and Merriam, 1995; Merriam and Brockett, 1997):
• Philosophies make us aware of the underlying values, beliefs, and theories guiding our practice.
• Philosophies provide different quality criteria for making decisions and framing policy.
• Philosophies highlight different educational purposes and help us construct a social vision.
• Philosophies help us understand our own assumptions regarding learning content and processes.
• Philosophies expand our awareness of different learning traditions and the impact on adult learning.

One strategy for understanding the educator lens is to explore philosophical traditions in adult education. Zinn (1999) has developed a useful inventory for surfacing the philosophical assumptions that guide our practice as adult educators. Zinn's inventory builds on the previous work of Elias and Merriam (1995), who delineate the core characteristics of five separate philosophical traditions informing the practice of adult education (behaviorist, liberal, humanist, progressive, and radical traditions). Each of the philosophical traditions offers a distinct perspective on the purpose of adult education, teaching, and learning activities; the role of the learner and educator; and the relationship among them.

Zinn's inventory (1999) provides an opportunity for adult educators and learners to reflect on dimensions of each of the five philosophical traditions and, importantly, assess the relative impact that each tradition has had on their practice. This inventory helps broaden our concept of the different purposes of adult education, the roles of adult educators and learners, diverse teaching methods, and the theorists and theories that fall within each philosophical tradition. In our experience, reflection on the philosophical assumptions that guide one's practice has led some practitioners to undergo a significant revision of their perspective regarding the purpose of adult education and their role in facilitating that purpose.

With her growing knowledge and sense of efficacy, Diane finds herself increasingly taking on the role of staff problem solver. Building off her program and her own experience as an adult learner, she has diagnosed her workplace as needing to improve communications. With the unit head, she is developing strategies for enhanced dialogue.

As part of William's course of study in counseling, he was asked to develop a set of principles to guide practice. This particularly helped him reflect on and integrate his personal values, as well as the assumptions and expectations he holds of himself and the incarcerated youth with whom he intends to work. Through this reflective process, he found his thinking had changed substantially. In his previous role in the FBI and in interactions with youth, he saw himself as a knowledgeable expert, an authority figure. Through the exposure that his degree program has afforded, William now
is relishing the role of mentor, helper, and even advocate for the youth, with whom he is enjoying working.

In making progress through her program, Amy has taken on the mantle of social activist. Her course work and readings have made her more aware of the issues of recruitment and retention of the Hispanics that her community education program is trying to reach. She began to provide leadership to address the student service needs of minority class participants. She has also begun an outreach effort to make more of the minority community aware of the classes and programs and finally lobbied for and got classes placed in the minority communities themselves. She is currently designing a needs assessment to help her organization be even more responsive to these communities’ learning needs.

**Conclusion**

We find the four-lens model of learner, process, context, and educator, which offers a holistic understanding of learning in adulthood, particularly helpful as it accounts for most of the influences on adult learners as they pursue their degrees. It can be used in planning instruction or in analyzing and diagnosing problems as they occur.

If adult and continuing educators who design and administer adult degree programs carefully consider such a four-lens model, their diverse learners, such as Diane, William, and Amy, will have highly successful experiences as they pursue and complete their degree programs and integrate dimensions of learning in their personal and professional lives.

**References**


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