

# Chapter LV

## Cognitive Development: The Learning Path of Community Development Practitioners

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### ABSTRACT

*Adults continue to learn and revise their representation of knowledge scheme with a rational reflection on previous experience and interlink to action in the social setting. There is little knowledge about this cognitive process in China as collectivist conformity to a totalitarian state has been the mainstream culture. This chapter presents a case of cognitive development of a group of university graduates who started their first career in NGOs. The stretching-on four stages of cognitive development are represented as: a) Getting away from the authority reference; b) Landing on opened-up horizons of reflection; c) Building up interlinks across knowledge scheme and action; and d) Linking cycles of experience with appropriation.*

### INTRODUCTION

The non-government organization (hereafter NGO) has become an emerging institution in China, which has begun providing services to the disadvantaged since the mid 1990s. NGOs of various kinds have taken a moral obligation to the lifting of the deprived and become a means of social action (Kang, 2001). Nevertheless, before beginning such work, practitioners have to master at least some qualities as pre-conditions

to act. Such may include knowledge about the local issues, knowledge of how the target group perceived their issues and skills of working in a nonnative social context. We know little about where such acquisition is taking place. What is the process of learning? If practitioners aim at facilitating the transformation of target groups, their own learning needs to have a significant impact on their own subsequent experience as well as on that of the target group.

Adult learning is a life path of continued discovering. Dewey (1938) defines education as the process of continuous reconstruction of experience. Individuals learn from what they have gone through and modify the quality of those that come after (Dewey, 1938: 27-41, Kidd, 1959). Thus, experience, especially collective human experience, becomes educative and sheds light on actions thereafter. Adults would, in any circumstance, consciously or subconsciously “improve our ability to anticipate reality by developing and refining our meaning schemes and perspectives so that we may use them more effectively to differentiate and integrate experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 146). This process is defined as transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000).

Nevertheless, Taylor (2000, 2003, p. 318) has reviewed 66 major studies on transformative learning and points a need of in-depth component analysis. His later review finds less research to be devoted to identifying transformative experiences in different culture settings. Most studies have captured a single snapshot of learning experience, ignoring transformative learning occurring in a particular context (Taylor, 2007, p. 176).

This chapter will address stages of cognitive development in the acquisition of knowledge and skills in action. A case in Inner Mongolia, China will be examined to see how a group of young NGO practitioners have grown up out of their experiences in a career adventure. The stretching-on four stages of cognitive framework will be presented with the horizons of their mind-sets or knowledge scheme as how they have perceived their social settings.

## BACKGROUND

Adult education theories have full accounts in understanding the role of action of the learners who continuously grow and reinterpret their exiting experiences for improving their sequential experience. Knowles (1970) in his major publication *The*

*Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy* postulates that as adults grow, they will move from dependency toward increasing self-directedness and they start to accumulate a reservoir of experience, and adults attach meaning to their experiences (Knowles, 1980:44). Their experience has therefore formed “the adult learners: a living textbook” (Lindeman (1961, pp. 6-7). Taylor also points out (2000, pp. 288) that “only in adulthood are meaning structures clearly formed and developed and the revision of established meaning perspective takes place.” The learning of adult, as the formal teaching agents who connect pupils with materials are withdrawn, is a fundamental process of the human beings that we need to understand to help ourselves see how we figures our paths ahead. Several perspective views provide rapports to this proposition.

Mezirow (2000, pp. 7-8) proposed the transformative learning theory for adult learning which refers to the process by which adults transform their taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets); and this process makes adults more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or more justified to guide action (2000, pp. 7-8). That is what development means in adulthood (1991, pp. 155).

Billet (1998) has identified compatibility between cognitive and sociocultural contributions to adult learning. Several factors are woven in the process of learning and give influences on the shaping of the forthcoming experience. Billet draws the concept of ontogeny from Scribner (1985, as quoted from Billet, 1998), the evolving life history of individuals, as providing a platform for compatibility between cognitive views and sociocultural constructivist views. Initially, the organization of knowledge is individual or idiosyncratic and different interpretations are inevitable in any social encounter (Billett, 1998,

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