

Chapter 106

Examining Adult Learning Assumptions and Theories in Technology–Infused Communities and Professions

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ABSTRACT

Adult learning in today's society is primarily focused on the needs of adults as they function in their communities and professions. Adult learning principles and theories have been the foundation of adult education practice for over a century. However, a review of the historical context reveals that this new technology-infused learning landscape is dramatically different from its predecessor. This makes a reexamination of these ideas important for their future application. This chapter will reexamine the adult-learning principles of transformative learning, andragogy, and critical reflection in this technology-infused world and propose a new paradigm and corresponding practices for the new learning landscape in communities and professions.

INTRODUCTION

Adults in today's society are largely members of two groups: their community and their profession. Community education brings images of non-profit and social service organizations while professional development suggests more formal classroom settings. However, the effective and successful

participation of adults within these groups requires continuous learning in diverse venues.

Technology's influence is pervasive in what they do, how they do it, and how they continually learn in order to accomplish their personal and professional goals. While technology is often treated as a piece of equipment or a methodology, in fact it has become infused into everyone's actions and thoughts. It is not technology in the world but technology as a part of the world. As people stare

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at personal handheld devices or new LED displays in public places, it is easy to take for granted the access to up to the minute information about where friends and family are and when the next train will arrive. Technology changes the approach to communication and reshapes the thinking process. The adaptation to this new environment provides a new idea of space and society. Consistent with this thinking, Loader (1998) notes that numerous social scientists share the idea that “society is being transformed by a revolution in information technology which is creating an entirely new social structure” (p. 4). Hakken (1999) continues on this theme by suggesting that the @ symbol used to indicate an electronic domain in an email address, is also an indication of the social space to which one is connected.

The objective of this chapter is to examine several traditional assumptions and theories that have shaped adult learning practice for over a century. However, they will be examined through the technology infused lives of today’s adult learners. Technology is not just a tool or a lens. Because infusion implies that technology has permeated the very essence of the theories, they may appear different and offer new challenges and opportunities to both the theorist and the practitioner.

BACKGROUND/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Historically, adult education has been practiced before its theories were developed. Now technology enhanced learning has been practiced for several decades. It seems time to examine the basic principles of adult learning in this practice. This chapter will reexamine three ideas that are key elements in the theory and practice of adult learning in community education and professional development: Mezirow’s transformative learning; Knowles’ self-directedness and Brookfield’s critical reflection.

Mezirow’s Transformative Learning

Dr. Jack Mezirow, Emeritus Professor at Teachers College/Columbia University first proposed his theory of transformative learning in the 1980s. The theory’s hallmark of a disorienting dilemma as the source for reevaluating one’s assumptions and progressing to leaning has been a much debated issue over the decades. Was it a singular event or a series of events that caused the dilemma? Mezirow defines transformative learning as a process by which our taken-for-granted frames of references are transformed by making them more “inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 255). Whether in communities or professions, transformative learning became a desirable goal of adult learning.

Knowles’s Andragogy and Self-Directedness

Many theories of adult learning are grounded in the work of Malcolm Knowles. By the 1980s, he had delineated several assumptions about adult learners. He formulated them into six core andragogical principles: “the learner’s need to know, self-directed learning, prior experience of the learner, readiness to learn, orientation to learning and problem solving, and motivation to learn” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 183). Several of Knowles’ principles of adult learning suggest a connection between experience and learning. Knowles indicated that adult learners had experience that could be a resource for their learning, needed to feel ready to learn, and saw an immediate application for their new knowledge. Discussion around these principles continues in the field of adult learning today.

Brookfield’s Critical Reflection

A major contributor to those discussions was Stephen Brookfield. Brookfield (1986) particularly

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