

Chapter 20

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 the technology-infused learning landscape of today 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 primarily members of two groups: their community and their profession. Community education brings images of non-profit, interest/hobby classes and social service organizations while professional development suggests more formal classroom settings and work-related. However, the effective and successful participation of adults within these various groups requires continuous learning in diverse venues.

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Examining Adult Learning Assumptions and Theories

Technology's influence is pervasive in adult education – with what they do, how they do it when they do it, and how they continually learn 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 (Parker, 2010). As people stare at personal handheld devices (smart phones or tablets) or LED displays in public places, for example, Manhattan's Times Square or Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing, it is easy to take for granted the access to up-to-the-minute information about where friends and family are, what is happening in the global news, or when the next train will arrive. Technology has changed the approach to communication, and searching for information, and reshaped the thinking process. Adapting to this technological environment provides a new idea of space, time, community, and society. In the late 1990s, Loader (1998) noted that numerous social scientists shared the idea that “society is being transformed by a revolution in information technology which is creating an entirely new social structure” (p. 4). However, with this ‘information revolution’ and ‘new social structure’ also came the challenges created by the ‘digital divide’ (Zdjelar & Zadjela Hrustek, 2021). These challenges include access, affordability, and an individual's ability to use digital technology; all of which are essential aspects in the creating of an information/knowledge society (Bornman, 2015).

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. As the term infusion implies, 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 was practiced before its theories were developed. Now that technology-enhanced learning has been practiced for several decades, it seems timely to examine the basic principles of adult learning in light of 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, an 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 learning has been a much-debated issue over the decades. Was it a singular event or a series of events that caused the dilemma? Mezirow (2000) defines learning as the ‘process of using a proper interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action (p.5). The part that experience plays in Adult learning has long been seen as a “fundamental role” (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020, p.197). Whether in communities or professions, transformative learning became a desirable goal of adult learning.

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