Chapter 2
Adult Learning Theories

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ABSTRACT

Learning theory encompasses conceptual frameworks that elucidate how individuals acquire, process, and retain knowledge and skills. These theories provide models for understanding not only learning mechanisms but also inform the development of educational practices for adult learners. They incorporate various perspectives, including cognitive, behavioral, and constructivist approaches, each offering distinct insights into the learning process. Adult learning theories have evolved in response to the recognition that adult learners possess distinct characteristics, needs, and motivations compared to younger learners. This evolution has been driven by an emphasis on autonomy, experience, and the practical application of learning. Andragogy emphasizes self-directed learning, the significance of life experiences, and the necessity for learning to be relevant and immediately applicable to adult learners. Experiential Learning Theory posits that adults learn most effectively through experience, involving a cyclical process of action, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation.

INTRODUCTION

In psychology and education, there is no universally accepted definition of "learning." Various psychological schools, behaviorists, cognitive psychologists, and humanistic psychologists, have different perspectives on learning, leading to diverse learning theories that will be discussed further in this handbook. Generally, learning is viewed as an outcome or achievement manifested as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors. Primarily, however, learning is considered a process

involving the manipulation of one's own experiences, known as experience-based learning. Experts in adult education and learning describe learning as the process by which we generate knowledge by transforming experiences (Kolb, 1984) or as the transformation of experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and feelings (Jarvis, 1995).

The significance of what an individual learns depends on how precisely they internalize and incorporate this knowledge into their cognitive frameworks (Dirkx, 1998). The learning process is somewhat elusive and will likely retain an element of mystery. Numerous definitions of learning exist, as it can be objectively observed from various disciplinary perspectives, each with its own objectives or concerns. The goal of adult learning, whether it involves constructing or reconstructing an experience, is to organize and understand the meanings that make up the world in which an adult operates, both in thought and action (Bélanger, 2011). Adult learning theories is extremely diverse and complex. According to Caffarella and Merriam (2000), reviewing adult learning theory literature can transform from a straightforward task into a challenging and time-consuming journey for both novice and experienced adult educators and practitioners. Over the past twenty years, several adult educators have strived to conceptually delineate the scope of adult learning theory to better assist practitioners in navigating this complex field (Brookfield, 1995; Caffarella & Merriam, 2000; MacKeracher, 2004). The metaphors each author employs suggest that the nature and process of adult learning cannot be fully encompassed by any single theory (Merriam, 2001).

Adult Learning

Adult learners gain knowledge through formal, non-formal, and informal methods (Merriam et al., 2012). Formal learning, which includes accredited education and training, is a deliberate and institutionalized form of learning that lasts at least one semester and is validated by relevant authorities. Examples of formal learning are vocational qualifications and Bachelor's degree programs (Eurostat, 2016; OECD, 2019). Formal learning happens within educational institutions and typically leads to degrees or credits, involving an adult educator, specific course content, and some evaluation process (Foley, 2020). Non-formal education, on the other hand, occurs outside traditional classrooms and includes a range of organized activities such as professional associations, business groups, industry collaborations, religious, and community-based initiatives (Merriam & Brockett, 2011). Non-formal learning, which includes unaccredited education and training, is a purposeful, structured learning that is either brief, lasting less than a semester, or not formally recognized by authorities. This includes qualifications obtained from short courses and work-shops (Eurostat, 2016; OECD, 2019). These non-formal activities can complement,

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