

Chapter 5

Adult Learners and Their Development in the Information Society

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ABSTRACT

In a digital world where the amount of information doubles every two years, adults need to evaluate resources carefully and determine how to use relevant information to solve problems and make wise decisions. This changing informational environment affects adult education, and also emphasizes the need for lifelong education and learning organizations, and the intersection of technology and globalization has led to more intense and pluralistic interactions across societies. Because information's meaning and impact are contextualized, shared knowledge and understanding can be harder to achieve. Therefore, information literacy and knowledge management are needed in order to fully realize one's self-potential and an organization's vision. Emerging trends that impact adult learning are discussed: equity, culturally-sensitive information, and information cross-fertilization. A model of adult learning and information interaction is provided.

INTRODUCTION

The need for critical use of information is more important than ever. As early as 1991, the SCANS report noted information location and manipulation as vital skills for contemporary employees. In a digital world where the amount of information doubles every two years, adults need to evaluate resources carefully and determine how to use

relevant information to solve problems and make wise decisions.

Furthermore, it is no longer principally an issue of getting information: it's getting the right information at the right time to do things right and to do the right things. Economic and social activities rely on information and communication technologies. Knowledge is ever-flowing, and social interactions seem web-like (Daniel, 2007). As the world seems to grow smaller, due to increased communication and population transience, the global scene reflects

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a more interactive mode relative to information. Even when a nation appears to act alone to seem isolationist, it cannot survive in that manner because the world is so interdependent. This changing informational environment affects adult education, and also emphasizes the need for lifelong education to prepare today's workforce to deal with an uncertain tomorrow.

If the underlying message is "things change," then the inevitable question is: "What should adult education look like in an information society?" If traditional adult education could be compared to Theory X businesses where employees are told what to do in a highly hierarchical bureaucracy, then contemporary adult education could be compared to Theory Y businesses where participatory management is the name of the game. Learning communities would compare to Theory Z organizations where highly- autonomous networks of teams have replaced hierarchy. In any case, adult education needs to address these changes constructively.

BACKGROUND

To understand the problem and contributing factors, an overview of the information society and adult education is needed.

The Information Society

At the 2003 world summit on the Information Society, governments and world leaders "made a strong commitment towards building a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society for all, where everyone can access, utilise and share information and knowledge" (United Nations, 2006, p. 6). What constitutes an information society? Fundamentally, an information society is one in which information replaces material goods as the chief driver of socio-economics. Human intellectual capital has higher currency than material capital, or at least

intellect is needed to optimize the use of material resources.

Since information and material have always been needed, what particularizes the recent notion of an information (or knowledge) society? New information and technology have vastly increased the speed, access, and interconnectedness of information worldwide. Simultaneously, information and communication have converged, such as telecommunications and broadcasting, giving rise to informational industries. At this point in history, telecommunications and media constitute one-sixth of the U. S. economy, and 30 percent of all economic growth between 1996 and 2000 was attributed to enhanced productivity based on information technology (Wilhelm, 2004). The cost of technology has dropped precipitously so that the majority of people can access it, thereby reinforcing mass media and other information entities. As a result, new forms of organization and social interaction have emerged (Webster, 2002).

This information society impacts existing institutions and cultures. The speed and globalization of information leads to constant change, which can be hard to digest and manage. The majority of jobs now involve technology and other related new skills, so that the idea of a "terminal" degree or a static skill set is becoming an outdated paradigm. Rather, adults often need to "retool" themselves throughout their work lives. Particularly for adults who are largely digital immigrants, this new world of information, especially in electronic form, can be puzzling and overwhelming. Do they have enough background information to understand and use the *new* information?

Using Technology to Manage the Information Society

The attitude about information has changed because of technology; Rutenbeck (2000) identified several challenges of the digital information age: information's malleability and vulnerability, the under-value of print information and the possible

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