

Chapter 9

Adapting Adult Learning Theories for Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores prominent adult learning theories and their contributions to the understanding and the delivery of adult education. Such theories define and identify characteristics commonly found among adult learners and provide insight regarding factors that can enhance the integration of adult education and information communication technologies. These theories in adult education emanate from educational leaders representing varied perspectives based upon a broad range of activities and interests. However, the commonality among them is to support the unique needs of the adult learner and to contribute to the continual growth and development of the field toward the inevitable incorporation of information communication technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The economic climate within the United States has a direct influence on the development of jobs and job training, resulting in parallel programmatic strategies. During the period from 1933 to 1942, difficult economic times and high unemployment rates resulted in the formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps, part of a legislative package that prompted vocational training and a wealth of new jobs (Hill, 1935; Howell, 1976; Salmond,

1967; U.S. Office of Education, 1935). Current economic factors continue to produce a sharply increased focus on the need for adults to pursue training in order to remain viable within an ever-changing world of work.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (known as the Recovery Act) is specifically intended to create and support ongoing training mechanisms that will serve to maintain and create jobs in the United States. Two of the guiding principles inherent within the legislation are to “increase workforce system capacity and service levels” along with “using data and

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workforce information to guide strategic planning and service delivery” (U. S. Department of Labor, 2009, p. 5).

In preparation for the anticipated new legislation, the U. S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration (ETA) conducted assessments throughout the spring of 2009 in order to ascertain the specific readiness levels of state and local workforce systems and to inform ETA’s strategic technical assistance plans. Consultations with all 53 states and territories and 156 local areas throughout the United States produced information that was categorized in two broad areas: *Administrative Capacity* which included financial management, reporting, and communication and partnership; and *Program Capacity* which included adult services through established federal mechanisms such as One-Stop Career Centers, Workforce Investment Act (WIA) programs addressing reemployment, unemployment, integration with trade and industry, and youth services. Included within this assessment was the organizational capacity for *e-learning*, defined as the delivery of instructional content or completion of learning experiences through use of electronic technology.

As a result of this consultation process, ETA determined that 87% of the states have need of assistance in utilizing electronic labor market tools and more than half require some level of technical assistance in communication and coordination of activities with other agencies. Given the time and distance from state to state and agency to agency, electronic learning methods provide a timely and cost-effective means of fulfilling those educational and training needs.

This monumental assessment and consultation effort by the U.S. Department of Labor ETA and the passage of such an unprecedented legislative mandate dramatically emphasizes the importance of continual training for working adults and for those who are seeking to re-establish themselves in new pathways of employment. The current system of work requires training on the part of both

trainers and workers to cope with reforms that are necessary due to advancing technology. This system of work as we know it must undergo changes if the United States is to remain competitive in the world marketplace. Therefore, sustainability of our work system is of vital importance. As Fullan (2005) has defined it, “sustainability is the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose” (p. ix). America’s work system faces extraordinary challenges if it is to retool the skills of its stakeholders and maintain viable career pathways for continual economic growth and development.

Lifelong learning is an important vehicle that contributes toward changes in the skills and knowledge of adult workers, regardless of their area of interest. Jobs in all levels of the work hierarchy from retail clerks, secretaries, and electrical linemen to medical workers, bankers, and teachers require that professional skills be updated so as to incorporate new technologies. For example, electrical linemen are faced with learning new ways to build and maintain alternative power sources such as solar and wind powered devices. Retail clerks have gone from the by-gone era of simple cash registers to complex computer programs that track not only sales, but also monitor inventory and total store transactions. Trends toward data-driven decision making have also contributed to an emphasis on developing skills that will assess performance, record data, and produce the most current information through the use of communication technologies.

One of the main objectives of this chapter is to examine the characteristics of adult learners and the factors within adult learning theories that can contribute toward the successful transition from traditional classroom techniques to online learning methods. Specifically examined will be aspects of adult learning theories of Malcolm Knowles, Jack Mezirow, Stephen Covey, and Hanna Fingeret. Contributions of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire laid the groundwork that changed

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