Adult Learning Theories

Adult learning theories provide insight into how adults learn, and can help instructors be more effective in their practice and more responsive to the needs of the learners they serve.

What Are Adult Learning Theories?

There is no single theory of learning that can be applied to all adults. Indeed, the literature of the past century has yielded a variety of models, sets of assumptions and principles, theories, and explanations that make up the adult learning knowledge base. The more that adult educators are familiar with this knowledge base, the more effective their practice can be, and the more responsive their practice can be to the needs of adult learners. This fact sheet reviews three major theories—andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformational learning—and discusses their implications for practice. It also provides a theoretical grounding for the work of the TEAL Center and links readers to many TEAL resources, all of which are available at http://teal.ed.gov.

What Is Andragogy?

In attempting to document differences between the ways adults and children learn, Malcolm Knowles (1980) popularized the concept of *andragogy* ("the art and science of helping adults learn"), contrasting it with *pedagogy* ("the art and science of teaching children"). He posited a set of assumptions about adult learners—namely, that the adult learner

- Moves from dependency to increasing self-directedness as he/she matures and can direct his/her own learning;

- Draws on his/her accumulated reservoir of life experiences to aid learning;

- Is ready to learn when he/she assumes new social or life roles;

- Is problem-centered and wants to apply new learning immediately; and

- Is motivated to learn by internal, rather than external, factors.

Inherent in these assumptions are implications for practice. Knowles (1984) suggests that adult educators

- Set a cooperative climate for learning in the classroom;

- Assess the learner's specific needs and interests;

- Develop learning objectives based on the learner's needs, interests, and skill levels;

- Design sequential activities to achieve the objectives;

- Work collaboratively with the learner to select methods, materials, and resources for instruction; and

- Evaluate the quality of the learning experience and make adjustments, as needed, while assessing needs for further learning.

Because adults need to know *why* they are learning something, effective teachers explain their reasons for teaching specific skills. Because adults learn by doing, effective instruction focuses on tasks that adults can perform, rather than on memorization of content. Because adults are problem-solvers and learn best when the subject is of immediate use, effective instruction involves the learner in solving real-life problems. (For additional ideas on ways to actualize these suggestions, refer to the TEAL Fact Sheet No. 6 on Student-Centered Learning.)

Andragogy is not without criticism. Brookfield (2003) called the theory "culture blind," stating that the concept of self-directed learning and the concept of the student's establishing a non-threatening relationship with the teacher as facilitator of learning may neglect races and cultures that value the teacher as the primary source of knowledge and direction.

What Is Self-Directed Learning?

Approximately 70 percent of adult learning is self-directed (Cross, 1981), and about 90 percent of all adults conduct at least one self-directed learning project a year (Tough, 1971). Self-directed learning (SDL) is a "process in which individuals take the initia-

tive, without the help of others" in planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences (Knowles, 1975). In essence, SDL is an informal process that primarily takes place *outside* the classroom. What qualifies learning as "self-directed" is who (the learner) makes decisions about content, methods, resources, and evaluation of the learning. Individuals take responsibility for their own learning process by determining their needs, setting goals, identifying resources, implementing a plan to meet their goals, and evaluating the outcomes.

The benefit of SDL is that learning can easily be incorporated into daily routines and occur both at the learner's convenience and according to his/her learning preferences. It can involve the learner in isolated activities, such as researching information on the Internet; it also can involve the learner in communication with experts and peers, as in a traditional classroom.

SDL can be difficult for adults with low-level literacy skills who may lack independence, confidence, internal motivation, or resources. Brookfield (1985) suggests that not all learners prefer the self-directed option and that many adults who engage in SDL also engage in more formal educational programs, such as teacher-directed courses. Within the adult education setting, the teacher can augment traditional classroom instruction with a variety of techniques to foster SDL for individuals or for small groups of learners who are ready and willing to embark on independent, self-directed learning experiences. Self-direction is a critical component of persistence in adult education, helping learners recognize how and when to engage in self-study when they find they must stop out of formal education.

Following are strategies for facilitating SDL. The teacher can help the learner to

- Conduct a self-assessment of skill levels and needs to determine appropriate learning objectives;

- Identify the starting point for a learning project;

- Match appropriate resources (books, articles, content experts) and methods (Internet searches, lectures, electronic discussion groups) to the learning goal;

- Negotiate a learning contract that sets learning goals, strategies, and evaluation criteria;

- Acquire strategies for decision-making and self-evaluation of work;

- Develop positive attitudes and independence relative to self-directed learning; and

- Reflect on what he/she is learning.

The teacher also can

- Encourage and support learners throughout the process, helping them recognize their own growing thought processes and strategies (for suggestions on how to do this, refer to the TEAL Center Metacognitive Processes Fact Sheet); and

- Offer a variety of options as evidence of successful learning outcomes (for additional information about this, refer to the TEAL Center Universal Design for Learning Fact Sheet).

What Is Transformational Learning?

Transformative learning (TL) is often described as learning that changes the way individuals think about themselves and their world, and that involves a shift of consciousness. For example, English language learners often report a shift in their view of U.S. culture and in their view of themselves as they gain confidence communicating in a new language (King, 2000).

Different theorists look at TL through various lenses. Paolo Freire (2000) taught Brazilian workers to read by engaging them, through a problem-posing instructional approach, in discussions about working conditions and poor compensation, thereby helping them change their thinking and strive for social change. To Freire, transformative learning is emancipating.

To Mezirow (2000), TL is a rational process. As individuals reflect on and discuss their assumptions about the world, they often experience a shift in their frame of reference or world view. For this to happen, individuals engaging in reflective discourse need to challenge each others' assumptions and encourage group members to consider various perspectives. It is essential that participants engaging in reflective discourse have complete and accurate information about the topic for discussion, be free from bias, and meet in an environment of acceptance, empathy, and trust (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). A criticism often leveled at Mezirow's TL theory is that it does not account for the effect of the individual's race, class, and gender, or the historical context in which the learning occurs (Corley, 2003; Sheared & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Tay-

lor, 1998; Cervero & Wilson, 2001). It has also been criticized as hyper-rational, ignoring feelings, relationships, context and culture, and temporal aspects (Silver-Pacuilla, 2003).

Adult educators seeking to foster transformative learning within their classes may wish to consider the following:

- **Create a climate that supports transformative learning.** Taylor (2000) suggests that teachers need to be "trusting, empathetic, caring, authentic, sincere, and demonstrative of high integrity" (p. 313). They need to provide students with immediate and helpful feedback, employ activities that "promote student autonomy, participation, and collaboration" (Taylor, 1998, p. 48), and help them to explore alternative perspectives and engage in problem-solving and critical reflection (p. 49).

- **Know your students and the types of learning activities that most appeal to them.** Cranton (2000) suggests that "thinking types" who enjoy logic will appreciate "case studies, debates, critical questioning, and analyses of theoretical perspectives" (2000, p.199). Those who are uncomfortable with confrontation and having their statements challenged may be more successful when learning occurs in "harmonious groups" in which participants discuss, but do not debate, alternative viewpoints. The experiential learner will enjoy field trips and simulations, and the intuitive learner will appreciate brainstorming and games involving imagination.

- **Develop and use learning activities that explore and expose different points of view**. Cranton (2002) suggests using films and short stories. She also suggests having students engage in journal writing to engage in self-reflection. The teacher can ask a learner to write a brief autobiographical essay and then ask other students to review and reflect on the writer's assumptions. Each student can take a turn at writing his/her autobiographical essay. Another technique is to use critical incidents to engage in reflective discourse, in which learners reflect on an experience, either good or bad, and analyze their assumptions and various perspectives. When the teacher writes and shares as an equal, an atmosphere of trust and openness is fostered.

Bringing Theory Into Practice

The art of teaching adults effectively requires an understanding of various principles or theories of how adults learn, and requires making an effort to apply some of those principles to practice. The three major theories presented in this fact sheet and the implications for practice issuing from each are not mutually exclusive. Suggestions for applying these theories to writing instruction for adult learners include the following:

- Incorporate more writing in more contexts in the adult education setting to promote self-reflection and articulation of learning. Use ungraded, short and timed prompts such as "quick writes," "entry/exit slips," or "yesterday's news." Writing is a natural means of self-reflection, and sharing personal writing is a way to bring stories of personal challenge, growth, resilience, and dreams into dialogue.

- Engage adult new writers with online communities of writers, as contributors, readers, and peers, to foster their self-directed learning, self-study, and persistence. (For information on ways to incorporate technology into writing instruction, refer to the TEAL Center Technology-Supported Writing Fact Sheet.)

- Provide feedback that challenges learners' assumptions and deepens their critical thinking. (For ideas on providing constructive feedback, refer to the TEAL Center Formative Assessment Fact Sheet.)

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