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Models of adult learning: a literature review

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Summary

Ideas about what learning is and how it is achieved are central to all aspects of work in adult basic skills. Theories of learning provide a starting point for principles of teaching. Any curriculum or training course has views of learning built into it and any teaching plan is based upon a view of how people learn.

Most educational research is on children and most views of learning have been developed in the context of children learning within a formal educational system. Inevitably such views have been tied into child development and compulsory schooling. In contrast, this paper is a review of models of learning that have focused on adults. It is a wide-ranging review and covers ideas from many fields about how adults learn: the aim is to provide ideas that are useful for NRDC research into teaching and learning. The theories covered are ones that have proved useful in other areas of the education of adults.

The adult research began as a reaction to child-based models and aimed to sketch out the distinctiveness of adult learning, developing an adult-based *androgogy* to be contrasted with child-based *pedagogy*. This work has shifted to recognise that there are different types of learning and that different models of learning are appropriate to different situations. These models point to the richness and complexity of learning and, rather than seeing them as right or wrong, we aim to show how they contribute to one another and add to the understanding of learning. They are presented here as providing potential for use in adult basic skills.

The key ideas about how adults learn are that:

1. Adults have their own motivations for learning. Learners build on their existing knowledge and experience. They fit learning into their own purposes and become engaged in it. People's purposes for learning are related to their real lives and the practices and roles they engage in outside the classroom.
2. Adults have a drive towards self-direction and towards becoming autonomous learners. Learning is initiated by the learner and one role of the teacher is to provide a secure environment in which learning can take place.
3. Adults have the ability to learn about their own learning processes, and can benefit from discussion and reflection on this. They are able to learn how to learn. For instance, there are different learning styles that people synthesise. Teaching can enable learners to develop their range of learning styles.
4. Learning is a characteristic of all real-life activities, in which people take on different roles and participate in different ways. People learn by engaging in practice and their participation can be supported in new ways. Teaching can 'scaffold' these activities, enabling learners to develop new forms of expertise.
5. Adults reflect and build upon their experience. Reflective learning is generated when people encounter problems and issues in their real lives and think about ways of resolving them.
6. Reflective learning is unique to each person, since it arises out of the complexities of their own experience. A great deal of learning is incidental and idiosyncratically related to the learner: it cannot be planned in advance. While there are things that can be done to

¹ This NRDC project was directed by David Barton and Diana Coben. We are grateful to Diana Coben and Rachel Hodge for detailed comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

encourage reflective experiential learning, there is no set of steps that can be followed to guarantee it will happen.

7. Reflective learning enables people to reorganise experience and 'see' situations in new ways. In this way, adult learning is potentially transformative, both personally and socially.

Introduction

This paper summarises a wide-ranging review of literature on adult learning, drawing out the different models of adult learning and their significance for research and development in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. Most research in learning has focused primarily on children, and most views of learning have been developed within the context of children being educated in a formal school system. However, when one moves away from models of child development, and examines the models produced from disciplines looking at settings beyond compulsory schooling, a very different view of learning emerges. The aim of this review is to survey these fields and thereby provide useful ideas for developing teaching and learning within the ***Skills for Life*** strategy.

Historically, the field that has addressed learning most directly is psychology. Early theories developed in the USA and Europe saw learning principally as a phenomenon of the individual. This review outlines the principal features of these theories, focusing on behaviourism, cognitivism, cognitive constructivism and developmental psychology. At the same time, within the fields of sociocultural psychology, activity theory and situated cognition, work in the Soviet Union developed understandings of learning as a form of social participation, and this has been followed by more recent research in Europe and the USA that takes the same approach. We summarise the main features of this body of work.

In outlining these approaches, we bring to light two distinct paradigms of learning in psychology: that which sees learning as principally concerning processes going on within an individual, and a more recent one which understands learning as being a socially situated phenomenon, best described and understood in terms of people's ongoing participation in social contexts and interaction. Brain science has seen a similar shift: from theories that focused on the development and characteristics of the brain as an isolated entity to more recent understandings of the brain as developing in a fundamentally interactive way with the world around it. We therefore also briefly mention developments in this field.

Adult education is of course another significant area in which theories of adult learning have been developed. Much of the literature in this field is driven by the question of whether or not there are features of adult learning that make adult education a field of work and enquiry in itself, separate from the discipline of studying learning in schools. We begin by considering models that have taken this starting point, describing the characteristics of learning that have been identified as being 'distinctive' to adults. Several of these features have become significant fields of theory in their own right.

One key idea within the field of adult learning theory is the model of the adult as a self-directed or autonomous learner. Any model of adult learning that claims to be complete has to take into account the self-directedness of much learning, and the fact that the majority of learning in people's lives takes place outside formal learning provision. We present a

summary of work on self-directed learning, informal learning and learning how to learn. Another influential idea in the field has been that adults learn primarily through reflection on their experience. We briefly present the ideas of the primary theorists in the field of reflective and experiential learning. Critical reflection is often central to those models of adult learning which see learning as individually and/or socially transformative, and these transformative models will be described. We also examine the claims made by theorists taking a postmodern approach to learning.

We then move on to address models of learning produced from other fields. It is often said that we live in a context of continual, rapid and unprecedented change, and that this is one of the reasons why adult learning has become increasingly important. We examine models of learning developed in two fields that address this question of change directly: management learning, and online and distance learning.

We conclude by summarising the main findings of the review and suggest that a full understanding of adult learning must be a complex one. Rather than seeing learning principally as an individual, cognitive phenomenon, it must take into account the interrelationship of the many factors in the learning situation, and place the learner's contexts, purposes and practices at the centre. We also list the implications of the review for our understanding of adults' learning.
