Learning in Adulthood
A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

Sharan B. Merriam
Rosemary S. Caffarella · Lisa M. Baumgartner
LEARNING IN ADULTHOOD
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Learning in adulthood is an intensely personal activity. Yet at the same time, a multibillion-dollar enterprise has arisen in response to adult learning interests—an enterprise that spends more dollars than elementary schools, high schools, and postsecondary schools combined. Indeed, the field of adult and continuing education is characterized by a bewildering array of programs, agencies, and personnel working to assist adults in their learning. It is precisely the focus on adults as learners, however, that unites an otherwise extraordinarily diverse field. It is also the life context of adults and some of the distinguishing characteristics of the adult learning process that differentiate adult education from other kinds of education. To facilitate the process of learning, it is especially important to know who the adult learner is, how the social context shapes the learning that adults are engaged in, why adults are involved in learning activities, how adults learn, and how aging affects learning ability. Learning in Adulthood addresses these topics, among others.

There is a voluminous literature on adult learning, ranging from technical articles on various aspects of adult learning to handbooks, guides, and pamphlets summarizing material for the new instructor of adult students. If one goes to a database such as the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), which catalogs journal articles, monographs, conference proceedings, papers, and so on, or does some random exploring on the World Wide Web, one encounters thousands of citations under the topic “adult learning.” Further, there are dozens of books with either a central or secondary focus on adult learning.

For this third edition of Learning in Adulthood we have paid particular attention to work published since the last edition of the book. This third edition of Learning in Adulthood builds on material in the 1999 edition, bringing together the important contributions
of the past decade to our understanding of adult learning. While we have preserved important foundational material (such as a discussion of andragogy), we have also brought to bear the most recent thinking and research. We have strived to put together a comprehensive overview and synthesis of what we know about adult learning: the context in which it takes place, who the participants are, what they learn and why, the nature of the learning process itself, new approaches to adult learning, the development of theory in adult learning, and other issues relevant to understanding adult learning.

The book also takes into account recent work in sociology, philosophy, critical social theory, and psychology. In most writing on adult learning, the sociocultural perspective has been widely neglected in favor of the predominant orientation to the individual learner and how to facilitate her or his learning. In addition to the focus on the learner, we attend to the context in which learning takes place and to learners’ interactive relationship with that context and with the learning activity itself. We look at how the social structure influences what is offered and who participates, how the sociocultural context creates particular developmental needs and interests, and how social factors such as race, class, and gender shape learning.

This book is intended primarily for educators of adults. We have organized the material so that it will make sense to readers who are new to adult education and at the same time will challenge those who are already familiar with the knowledge base of the field. The organization and presentation of this material reflect our efforts over the years to find the best way to organize courses, workshops, and seminars in adult learning and development for audiences with varying levels of expertise. We have endeavored to put together a book that is at once readable, thorough, and up-to-date in its coverage. In particular, the book is designed for use in courses in adult learning. In addition to those associated with the field of adult education itself, however, those in counseling, health, social work, human resource development, administration, and instructional technology and in such institutions as libraries, churches, business and industry, and higher education often deal on a daily basis with adult learners. We also intend this book to be a resource for practitioners in these fields who would like to know more about adult learners and the learning process.
Overview of the Contents

This third edition of *Learning in Adulthood* is substantially reorganized from the previous edition. We realized that in most courses using this text, the chapters specific to adult learning theory and models were read before chapters on traditional learning theory, cognition, and psychosocial developmental frameworks. We have organized accordingly. This edition is divided into four parts. Part One describes the context of adult learning. Part Two focuses on theories and models of adult learning. The chapters in Part Three address newer approaches to adult learning, and those in Part Four present material on topics that intersect with adult learning, such as memory and cognition, adult development, and so on.

The chapters in Part One, “Adult Learning in Contemporary Society,” focus on the context of adult learning. Chapter One sets the sociocultural context for adult learning in North America. In it, we discuss three forces—demographics, globalization, and technology—that have shaped adult learning today. It is important to understand how the interaction of those three factors has led to changes in both what adults want to learn and the learning opportunities provided for them. Directly related to the sociocultural context of adult learning are the environments where learning takes place, the subject of Chapter Two. These range from educational and noneducational institutions, such as hospitals and government agencies, to nonformal and community-based agencies, to incidental and informal learning that is more self-directed than structured by others. New in this edition is the online environment, which interfaces with formal, nonformal, and informal modes of learning. Also in this chapter we explore the concepts of organizational learning and the learning organization, and lifelong learning and the learning society. Chapter Three summarizes the literature on who participates in primarily formal adult learning activities, why people participate, and what they choose to learn. We also take a critical look at key questions of access and opportunity, and examine the gaps between the rhetoric and the reality in the provision of formal and nonformal learning activities in our society.

Part Two, “Adult Learning Theory and Models,” builds on foundational material in adult learning, material that is at the heart of our field of adult education. The topics covered in these
chapters represent the field’s efforts in distinguishing itself from
the education of children. We begin Chapter Four with a descrip-
tion and critique of the best known of these theories: Knowles’s
(1980) concept of andragogy. Based on five characteristics of adult
learners, andragogy focuses on the adult learner as distinguished
from preadult learners. In this chapter we also cover three other
models of learning, two of which are fairly recent additions to our
literature. McClusky’s (1970) theory of margin, which has great
intuitive appeal to adult learners introduced to it, is explained first.
This is followed by Illeris’s (2004a) three dimensions of learning
model, and the most recent iteration of Jarvis’s (2006) learning
model. In Chapter Five we explore the rich array of work that
has been completed on self-directed learning. Addressed are the
goals and processes of self-directed learning, the concept of self-
directedness as a personal attribute of the learner, recent
approaches to self-directed learning, and some suggestions for
building research and theory in this area. Currently, transforma-
tional learning has taken center stage in research and writing.
Chapter Six summarizes the development of transformational
learning, reviews the recent research in this area, and examines
unresolved issues inherent in this approach to adult learning. In
Chapter Seven, the last chapter of Part Two, we look closely at the
role of experience in learning: both how adult learning builds on
prior experience and how experience shapes learning. The con-
cepts of experiential learning, reflective practice, and situated cog-
nition are also examined in this chapter.

Part Three, “Newer Approaches to Adult Learning,” contains
two totally new chapters. We felt that the burgeoning interest in
embodied or somatic learning, spirituality and learning, and nar-
rative approaches to learning warranted a chapter (Chapter Eight)
in this edition of Learning in Adulthood. We uncovered so much
recent material in these areas that, had space allowed, we could
have devoted more than one chapter to these topics. Chapter Nine
on non-Western approaches to adult learning is also new. Although
the great majority of the knowledge base represented in Learning
in Adulthood is from a Western perspective, representing cultural
values of privileging the individual learner and cognitive processes
over more holistic approaches, we wanted to introduce readers to
other epistemologies, other ways of thinking about learning and knowing. We hope we have done that through brief introductions to five non-Western perspectives. The final chapter in Part Three is an update of critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist pedagogy. These three perspectives draw from literature outside the field of adult education. Scholars have applied these perspectives to our field, enlarging our understanding by inviting us to question how the structural inequities based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, and so on affect learning.

Part Four, which we have titled “Learning and Development,” brings together material from philosophy, psychology, sociology, biology, and so on, that has a bearing on adult learning. In Chapter Eleven, on traditional learning theory, we review five traditional theories about learning—behaviorism, humanism, cognitivism, social learning theory, and constructivism—along with their implications for adult learning. Where one aligns oneself with these theories manifests itself in the view of the adult learner, the role of instructor-facilitator, and the goals of the learning transaction itself.

Chapter Twelve focuses on adults’ developmental characteristics. Beginning with biological and psychological perspectives on adult development, we move to sociocultural and integrated perspectives. The work on adult development in recent years places less emphasis on age and stage models and more on the effect of such factors as race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Much has been written lately about cognitive development in adulthood, and so this is treated separately in Chapter Thirteen. Here we review several theoretical models of cognitive development as well as present the concept of dialectical thinking. Chapter Fourteen reviews the work on intelligence, especially as it has been studied from a developmental or aging perspective. Drawing on several disciplines and summarizing recent work on memory and aging, expertise, cognitive and learning styles, and brain-based research, Chapter Fifteen is one of the few compilations of its kind in an adult learning textbook.

Finally, in the last chapter we step back from the accumulated knowledge base to summarize and integrate the material on adult learning presented in earlier chapters. Chapter Sixteen also reflects how we ourselves have come to think about learning in adulthood.