Applying Self-directed, Transformational and Experiential Learning in the Development of Learning Programs, Personal Interactions and in Learning Communities

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Self-directed Learning

Andragogy, a theory about adult learning that was popularized by Malcolm Knowles in the early 1970s (Kenner & Weinman, 2011), is commonly understood to be about the ways that adults learn, and the art and science of helping adults learn. Adults differ from younger learners in that they are self-directed, are self motivated, chose their learning, and therefore will not chose to learn something that they are not interested in; they bring to the classroom a great deal of knowledge accrued from experiential learning, and they are able to apply that learning to the information that they receive in the classroom (Knowles [1984] in Kenner & Weinman [2011]). Adults learn through formal (institutional), nonformal, and informal settings and contexts (Merriam et al, 2007) and have different motivations than younger learners. Some of these motivations are driven by a need to know, a desire to develop personally, professionally or socially and they focus on these types of goals; they are, therefore, active learners, desire an interactive learning environment and want instructors who are focused on their needs (Minter, 2011, p. 9; Illeris, p. 173).

Practical Application

Even though adult learners are understood to be self-directed, Kenner and Weinerman (2011) point out that there is a high rate of attrition among adult college learners; therefore, in forming strategies to teach adult learners in a college setting, it is important to understand that, although the adult learner is self-directed and brings a richness of experiential learning to the classroom, a gap generally exists in their formal education and that can have an impact on how they learn in the classroom. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) posit that educators who have adult
learners in their class should understand theories about adult learning and they refer to three metacognitive frameworks (tacit theory, informal theory, and formal theory) but focus on two in particular (tacit theory and informal theory) that educators should understand in order to identify how adult learners learn, and also to create coursework that would be most appropriate to their learning style (p. 89).

_Tacit theory_ has to do with acquiring metacognitive skills outside of a specific framework; according to this theory, adult learners acquire these deeply ingrained difficult-to-let-go-off skills from peers, teachers, and the local culture (Kenner and Weinerman [2011], p. 89). Metacognition has to do with “learners' automatic awareness of their own knowledge and their ability to understand, control, and manipulate their own cognitive processes” (Purdue Calumet University, 2011) and what learners know about their own cognition (the process by which they understand things), or cognition in general (Schraw, 1995). An example of this type of skill is learning by rote. When transitioning to an academic environment, these skills can be “particularly detrimental” (p.89) to the adult learner because learning by rote does not involve critical thinking – a skill that is especially necessary in higher academic learning. Magno (2010) opines that metacognition is “the ability to use knowledge to direct and improve thinking skills” (p. 138) and that it has a direct correlation to critical thinking because when engaging in critical thinking students need to use metacognitive skills to monitor their thinking process, check whether they are making progress toward appropriate goals, ensure accuracy, and make decisions about the use of time and mental effort (p.138). _Informal theory_ has to do with learners who have also received their learning over time from peers and from their environment “but they have at least a rudimentary conscious thought process regarding their metacognitive framework”
Kenner and Weinerman (2011) point to adults who recognize and link their behavior in the workplace to a reward system and therefore advance in their professions as an example of the informal theory of metacognition. For example, in a work environment where repetitive action is called for, the employee can advance by mastering the actions; no critical thinking (e.g. problem solving) is really called for. However, although this tool or ability may be useful in the adult’s daily life it may be inadequate in an academic setting where critical thinking is a necessary function of higher learning and therefore the adult learner might feel frustrated and inadequate (e.g. Kenner and Weinman, 2011). An understanding of these theories can help educators to better understand the adult student’s ability to successfully adapt to an academic environment and also create strategies to integrate the adult learner into the academic environment.

**Transformational Learning (TL)**

Transformative learning is about dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world we live in (Merriam et al, 2007, p. 130). While there are many lenses through which transformational theory can be viewed, Jack Mezirow’s (1978) psychocritical perspective on adult learning focuses on the individual. Viewed through this lens, transformational learning has to do with the sense and inner meaning that an individual makes of her life-changing experiences (e.g. Merriam et al, 2007, p. 131); transformative learning occurs when there is a change in our meaning schemes – i.e., our beliefs or attitudes, or when there is a change of our entire perspective (habit of mind) (p.133). Very often the experiences that result in transformation are gripping and intense. Reflecting on these “gripping narratives” can shed
light on “learning dilemmas, core anxieties and impossible expectations that people are dealing with” (Apte, 2009, p. 177).

**Practical Application**

Education, and the pursuit of education, can provide opportunities for transformative learning in the adult’s life when she is exposed to different ways of learning, and when deeply held assumptions are challenged and she emerges a changed individual. For example, in the earlier example of the worker who was accustomed to learning by rote, or doing repetitive tasks, the decision to go to college might have been precipitated by a sudden understanding of the limits of her own understanding or knowledge, and the realization that her upward mobility in her organization might be limited by her own limited education. This realization can be a sudden jarring and unpleasant experience that becomes the impetus for change – radical change that can potentially transform the adult from a “doer” to a decision-maker. However, the decision to take charge of her own future through expanding her educational boundaries does not ensure success in academia for, as previously discussed, there are generally significant gaps in the adult’s education and, in the classroom, and this can cause much angst and frustration. Apte (2007) proposed a framework through which transformative learning might be facilitated by an educator. This framework is composed of four components: (1) confirming and interrupting current frames of reference (2) working with triggers of transformative learning (3) acknowledging a time of retreat or dormancy (4) developing the new perspective (p. 169).

Apte (2009) pointed out that our previous knowing, strategies and strengths may actually be barriers to our learning and can block the emergence of new solutions, thereby presenting
challenges to instructors (p. 170). It is important for a facilitator or instructor to understand that the adult entering college may experience a series of stages which Mezirow identified as elements of transformative learning:

- A disorienting dilemma
- self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame
- a critical assessment of assumptions
- recognition of the ones discontent and the process of transformation is shared
- exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
- planning a course of action
- acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
- provision of trying out new roles and,
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow [2000] in Apte [2009], p. 171).

In order to help the adult learner in the transformation process, an instructor can focus questions on the learner that seek to understand such things as what is regarded as normal behavior in the student’s world (e.g. repetitive actions at work); what are their expectations of themselves (e.g. to be as successful in the classroom as they were in their places of work?); what actions does the student considered good or bad (following instructions might be viewed as good, questioning the process might be viewed as bad); do their expectations line up with that of others; what information has the student not considered before (p. 173). Mezirow (2003) defines transformative learning as
…learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. (Mezirow, 1991, 2000 in Mezirow, 2003, p. 59).

For example, the adult accustomed to structured, repetitive work and technical step-by-step manuals might not be emotionally prepared for the ways in which reading requirements are structured in a college setting - instead of a lineal chapter to chapter progression, to this adult college reading might seem to be an unstructured process of “jumping around” the textbook when chapters are read out of succession. If the student has not been accustomed to questioning procedures, for example, she might not have developed an ability to think critically and so she might not have the confidence to question new ideas (such as the seeming illogic of this new way of reading a text) that are presented to her, even if she thinks they are wrong. Transformation for the learner can occur when she realizes that the tight confines that she is accustomed to living or working within that produced her “habit of mind’ does not exist in higher learning, and boundaries shift as new information emerges through new research, for example. An instructor can also question her own assumptions about what adults bring to the classroom, and what might be expected of them. These assumptions may be embedded in the ideas that he is presenting, and even in the materials that are being used (e.g. Apte, 2007, p. 173). Understanding such things as what provokes the learner’s curiosity, what invokes fears and anxieties can help the instructor to work with the triggers that can transform learning (Apte, 2007).
Experiential Learning (EL)

Hedin (2010) points out that there is significant variability in definitions of experiential learning (p. 108). For example, it has been described by Yount (2001) as “the active participation of learners in events or activities which lead to the accumulation of knowledge and skills; Lewis and William (1994) describe it as learning by doing, and Dewey (1938), Usher and Solomon (1999) view it as learning from experience that take place in everyday life (in Hedin, 2010, p. 108, Merriam et al, 2007, p. 162). Merriam et al (2007) point out that the experiences of adults have always been viewed a critical component of learning in adulthood (p. 184) but also noted that Dewey (1938) opined that not all experience was “genuinely or equally educative” (p. 162). Experiential learning, according to Hedin (2010) has two distinguishing features in that it (1) directly engages the learner in the phenomena related to their studies and (2) it requires the learner to reflect on the experience and learn from it (p. 109). David Kolb (1984), whose works on experiential learning build on that of Dewey and others, proposed that knowledge results from a combination of grasping experience and learning from it (in Hedin, 2010; Merriam et al, 2007, p. 164). Merriam et al (2007) describe two types of experiential learning – reflective and non-reflective – in which the learner either remembers the experience and repeats it nonetheless, or just does as she is told; or instead plans, monitors and reflects on the experience (p. 164).

Application of EL in a Classroom

Reflective experiential learning can inform the adult experience in academia – despite gaps in her formal learning. For example, in a classroom application a former business owner who is pursuing a degree in business might reflect on her practical experience in business in
order to fully understand the new learning; thus, her new formal learning will be informed and enhanced by her reflections on her experiential learning, and she will build/construct new ideas from her past learning. This is a type of experiential learning that is constructivist in perspective (e.g. Fenwick [2003] in Merriam et al, [2009]) and new learning is built upon or constructed from earlier experiential learning. Other Fenwick perspectives on experiential learning include situative theory of learning in which learning is intertwined with doing and learning involves participation in a community of practice. In this model, according to Fenwick, the outcome of experiential learning is that the community refines its practice, develops new ones or discards ones that are no longer relevant (Merriam et al, 2007, p. 160); such learning involves group interaction. Psychoanalytic theory of learning recognizes that subconscious fears, for example, can impede the adult’s learning; critical cultural theory of learning has a distinguishing feature which, according to Gustafson (2005) “is the way of thinking about diversity and categories of social and human difference” (p. 4), and complexity theory applied to learning explores the “ecological relationships between cognition and environment (Merriam et al, 2007, p. 160). Understanding these theories can afford the adult instructor a deeper understanding and insight into the adult learner’s motivations for learning, most appropriate ways of learning, and barriers to her learning.

**Relevance of SDL, TL and EL to my Future as a Teacher**

Although I am not a teacher at this time, I do intend to teach at the college level in the future; therefore, it is important that I understand these concepts and their applications in the instruction of adults, and in creating coursework that are relevant to their goals and compatible
with the ways in which they learn. For example, as an educator I cannot assume that an adult learner is automatically or better prepared than a traditional learner for college or university by virtue of his or her experiential learning. That very learning, plus the gap in academic learning might actually be powerful and disruptive forces against learning. The relevance that I can draw from these theories and bring to the classroom are embedded in my understanding of the challenges that adult learners face in making a transition from what might be a world in which they have achieved significant experience and success, to one in which they might feel inadequate and unworthy. As an educator I have to understand and manage the hopes and expectations of the adult learner. I have to manage my own hopes and expectations and assumptions and align them with those of the students that I will be teaching. This means, for example, staying abreast of new knowledge that is often presented through research and emerging theories, using transformative experiences as narratives that can inspire and encourage learning, and recognizing the potential and limitations of the adult learner’s experiential learning.

**Summation**

It is vital for educators who teach adults to have grounding in adult learning theories and a basic understanding of pedagogy and andragogy in order to know the differences between the learning needs of both types of students (i.e. the traditional and the nontraditional student). Higher learning instructors generally do not have the training in teaching models or theories that teachers through K-12 do; while grade school teachers are required to be trained in pedagogical theories, the requirements for college teaching are a Master’s degree or PhD (e.g. Minter, 2011).
Formal learning in pedagogy and andragogy would no doubt enhance the teaching experience and inform the ways in which higher education instructors teach. Without an understanding of these theories about learning, teachers will most likely bring to the classroom the teaching models that they were exposed to, or rely on philosophies that were shaped by their own experiential learning. In both cases, it is possible that the adult student-teacher relationship might not be fully optimized because the expectations of the adult learner and that of the educator might be misaligned. In this case, it might be of great value to the educator to undergo a transformation of her own that challenges her own assumptions about how to teach adults by studying andragogical theories. As a future educator, these theories have exposed me to a wider understanding of the barriers that adults who are returning to college face. While they may have experienced success in their daily lives, and even though they may bring a wealth of experiential learning to the classroom, the gap in adults’ formal education can cause them fear, anxiety and frustration when they find that higher learning invariably calls for the application of tools and new ways of thinking that they might not have used before. Yet, experiential learning can inform a personal narrative that can be transformative and of great benefit to adult learners in the classroom as they acquire new learning and use these types of learning as compasses and reference points that can guide them into new understanding and meaning. When educators become facilitators and co-learners with adult students, they can themselves experience transformation in their own learning, teaching, and in the creation, delivery and presentation of coursework that is accommodating to adult learners and their ways of learning.
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