

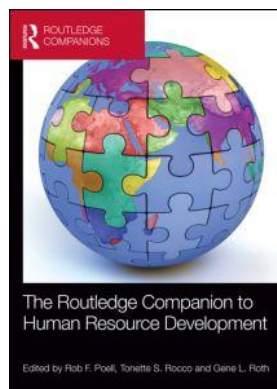
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3

ADULT LEARNING

Knud Illeris

The purpose of this chapter is to give a short up-to-date account on adult learning in relation to learning in general and to children's learning. Adult learning has been part of my focus for over forty years. My research and developmental work has been on what characterizes human learning, especially learning in youth and adulthood with a specific interest in less educated learners (e.g. Illeris 2004, 2006a, 2007, 2009).

Adult learning did not emerge as a special area of interest before about 1970. Prior to 1970 there was, in the industrialized countries, a kind of general understanding that studies of learning should be related mainly to children and youth. Of course there would also be some learning in adulthood, but this would either be for updating, minor issues, or new matters. The age of important and organized learning was considered with few exceptions to be over when one had finished an education and/or got a permanent job. For example, the great names in personality psychology in the 1950s and 1960s launched the ideals and concepts of "the mature personality" (Allport 1961) and "the fully functioning person" (Rogers 1961), i.e. the adult person who had reached a level of integrity and needed no further learning or development, and Erikson saw youth as the age of identity development, whereas adulthood was the age of stabilization of what had already been learned (Erikson 1968). For adults stability was both the norm and the ideal, and changes were related to disruptions and weakness.

Around the 1970s changes in the world were more frequent and the ideal of stability was supplemented by an ideal of flexibility. Adults needed to be able to change, which implies a need to reject earlier learning and engage in new learning. Gradually adult learning became a very important issue. These new tendencies followed two main courses, learning for work and learning for social change.

In the trades and industries interest in adult learning was mainly related to the movement of human resource development (see e.g. Swanson and Holton 2001), and in practice seemed to be realized according to the so-called "Matthew effect" that "for whoever has to him shall be given and he shall be caused to be in abundance" (Matthew 13:12), i.e. that those who already have learned most also get the best opportunities to learn more, both in practice at work and by further educational activities – which as a side-effect inevitably will lead to an increased social imbalance.

But adult learning also became a focal point in social movements which involved the uneducated, poor, and oppressed people in a combination of basic education and personal consciousness

raising, often related to political objectives. The most famous and widespread of these movements was, no doubt, initiated by Brazilian Paulo Freire, who combined the teaching of reading and writing with so-called “generative themes,” and whose book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been translated into a great number of languages and sold more than 700,000 copies (Freire 1970). Another similar, but in the English speaking world not so well-known example, was started by German trade union courses, in which the sociologist Oskar Negt introduced exemplary learning, similar to Freire’s generative themes (Negt 1968). The idea of transformative learning, introduced in the USA by Jack Mezirow (and to which I shall return later in this chapter), was similarly inspired by the women’s liberation movement (Mezirow 1978).

Somewhere between these two trends the United Nations published the book *Learning to Be* (Faure *et al.* 1972) which introduced the catchphrase or slogan of “lifelong learning.” Lifelong learning gained a central position in international politics and was adopted by many countries although it has often had a stronger impact as a slogan than in consequent learning arrangements for ordinary people.

Adult learning versus children’s learning

American Malcolm Knowles claimed that adults’ and children’s ways of learning differ and that an increasing focus on adult education should be accompanied by an increased interest in researching and understanding of what characterized adult learning to inform adult education. He proposed the term of “andragogy” in relation to adult education and as a counter play to “pedagogy” for children (e.g. Knowles 1970), but this raised a veritable storm of protest and rejection from learning theorists and educational scholars, who claimed that learning is the same for all people and would certainly not let the up and coming adult education field be overtaken by the “andragogy morass” (Davenport 1987, see also Hartree 1984). More recently, British Alan Rogers has deliberately maintained “that there is nothing distinctive about the kind of learning undertaken by adults” (Rogers 2003: 7).

This question, however, needs a closer elucidation to avoid such unprofitable discussion covering an underlying power struggle. For the traditional psychology of learning, there are no age-conditioned differences, because learning has been studied as a common phenomenon of which researchers endeavored to discover the basic and decisive characteristics. Therefore research often involved animals and humans in constructed and simple laboratory situations. And in relation to adult education the researchers claimed that adults’ learning as a psychological function is basically of the same kind as children’s learning.

This depends, however, on which definition of learning is used. If learning is defined as only the internal psychological function of acquisition of new knowledge, skills and attitudes, as traditional learning psychology tends to do, it is to some extent possible to claim that, independent of the concrete conditions such as age differences or social background, learning processes are fundamentally the same.

But if the emotional dimension and social interaction processes are also seen as necessary and integrated elements of learning, the picture changes. The majority of modern learning theorists have accepted this, and some have even considered learning as mainly or only a social process (e.g. Lave and Wenger 1991, Gergen 1994). In relation to age it is obvious that the nature of our relationships to the social and societal environment changes during the life course from the newborn child’s total dependence to a striving for independence in youth and adulthood and, eventually, a new sort of dependence at old age. These changes strongly influence the character of the social and emotional dimensions of learning. In order to see what is characteristic of adult learning, I shall therefore start by pointing out some basic features of children’s learning.

In general, learning in childhood could be described as a continuous campaign to capture the world. The child is born into an unknown world and learning is about acquiring this world and finding out how to deal with it. In this connection, two learning-related features are prominent, especially for the small child. First, children's learning is comprehensive and uncensored. The child learns everything within its grasp, throws itself into everything, and is limited only by its biological development and the nature of its surroundings. Second, the child places utter confidence in the adults around it because it has no criteria to evaluate their behavior. Children must, for example, learn the language these adults speak and practice the culture they practice.

Throughout childhood, the child's capturing of its surroundings is fundamentally uncensored and trusting as it endeavors, in an unlimited and indiscriminate way, to make use of the opportunities that present themselves. Of course, late modern society has led to growing complexity and even confusion of this situation as older children receive impressions from their pals and especially from the mass media, which go far beyond the borders of their own environment. But still the open and confident approach must be recognized as the starting point.

Opposite of childhood learning stands learning during adulthood. Being an adult essentially means that an individual is able and willing to assume responsibility for his/her own life and actions. Formally, our society ascribes such "adulthood" to individuals when they attain the age of 18. In reality, it is a gradual process that takes place throughout the period of youth, may last well into the 20s or be entirely incomplete if the formation of a relatively stable identity is chosen as the criterion for its completion (which is the classical description of this transition provided by Erik Erikson, 1968).

As concerns learning, however, being an adult also means, in principle, that the individual accepts responsibility for his/her own learning, i.e. more or less consciously sorts information and decides what he/she wants and does not want to learn. The situation in today's complicated modern society is that the volume of what may be learned by far exceeds the ability of any single individual. This is immediately true concerning content in a narrow sense, but it also applies to views and attitudes, perceptions, communications options, behavioral patterns, lifestyle, etc. So input must always be sorted.

As a general conclusion, however, children's uncensored and confident learning is in contrast to adults' selective and self-directed learning, or to put it in more concrete terms:

- adults learn what they want to learn and what is meaningful for them to learn
- adults draw on the resources they already have in their learning
- adults take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take (if they are allowed to)
- and adults are not very inclined to learn something they are not interested in, or in which they cannot see the meaning or importance. At any rate, typically, they only learn it partially, in a distorted way or with a lack of motivation that makes what is learned extremely vulnerable to oblivion and difficult to apply in situations not subjectively related to the learning context (Illeris 2006a: 17).

These conditions imply that learning incentives or adult education options, consciously or subconsciously are met by skeptical questions and considerations such as: Why do "they" want me to learn this? What can I use it for? How does it fit into my personal life perspectives?

Finally learning in youth in this connection can be seen as a transition in which the uncensored learning of children is gradually replaced by the selective learning of adults, and the identity is developed as a kind of scale or yardstick of the selectivity.

Common adults' attitudes to learning

It is not only researchers, administrators and teachers who traditionally have had the idea that learning is mainly related to childhood and youth. Also among adult learners this understanding is widespread. When adults have to involve themselves in ordinary learning courses, they will often talk about it as “having to go back to school” and this is certainly not meant positively. On the contrary adults experience the situation as if they are forced to return to an artificial kind of childhood, something that is degrading or even humiliating – because returning to school indirectly means not being good enough for the tasks in which one is involved.

In what we call free and democratic societies adults are in principle regarded as people of majority who can and must take responsibility for themselves and what they do and say. But at the same time they are subject to risks and situations which they cannot control. In relation to learning and education, anyone can suddenly and without having any responsibility for it themselves realize that their qualifications have become worthless and no longer can be sold on the (labor) market. This may happen, for example, if the owners and stakeholders of their workplace decide to move it to a country far away in which labor is cheaper, or if a new management undertakes a reorganization which makes certain departments and persons unnecessary. But there may also be other and more personal reasons as for example, a bad relationship to a leader, low concentration because of too many problems at home, too many days lost through illness, etc.

A considerable number of adult learners do not participate in adult education because they want to do so, but because for some reason outside their control they have to do so. The central condition is that these adult learners are not in control of the situation. Therefore they are ambivalent – and the slogan of lifelong learning may in such situations become very ambiguous. Reality seems quite different from the ‘maybe’ good intentions of powerful organizations like UNESCO, OECD, EU or the World Bank. Adult education today is usually far from the emancipating projects of the folk high schools or public enlightenment – in relation to which the idea of lifelong learning was originally launched.

Therefore not only the concrete learning content, but also the general learning situation and the messages and influence it contains, will often be met with skeptical attitudes, and will be seen and dealt with in the light of the individual's own experience and perspectives, whether it is communicated in the form of conversation, guidance, persuasion, pressure or compulsion. If the possibilities for learning shall be turned in a positive direction, the adults must accept them psychologically, they must be able to understand the meaning of the learning activities in relation to themselves and their life situations (see e.g. Illeris 1998, 2003, 2006b).

Adult learning possibilities

Whereas questions of the specific character of adult learning were neglected by traditional learning psychology and also by most adult educational research, there has been some often indirect discussion concerning adults' possibilities for learning.

The cognitive learning theory put forward by Jean Piaget in the 1930s on the basis of extensive empirical studies, focused on the development of learning possibilities in childhood through a number of cognitive stages and sub-stages and thus maintained that there is a highly specific developmental course. This development ends between the ages of 11–13 when the “formal operational” level is reached. The formal operational level makes logical-deductive thinking possible as a supplement to the forms of thinking and learning acquired at earlier stages (see e.g. Flavell 1963).

However, Piaget's perception of this process has been questioned from several quarters. On the one hand, it has been pointed out that far from all adults are actually able to think at a formal operational level. Empirical research indicates that in England in about 1980 actually less than 30 per cent of adults could think at this level, even though at the beginning of puberty a decisive development occurs in the possibilities for learning and thinking in abstract terms, so that distinguishing a new cognitive phase extending beyond the formal operational level is justified (Shayer and Adey 1981, Commons *et al.* 1984). American adult education researcher Stephen Brookfield has pointed to four possibilities for learning which, in his opinion, may only be developed in the course of adulthood: the capacity for dialectical thinking, the capacity for applying practical logic, the capacity for realizing how one may know what one knows, and the capacity for critical reflection (Brookfield 2000).

Recent brain research seems indirectly to support Brookfield's claims. A well-established understanding today, psychologically as well as neurologically, is that the brain matures for formal logical thinking in early puberty. But evidence has been found that the brain centres of the frontal lobe that conduct such functions as rational planning, prioritization and making well-founded choices, do not mature until the late teenage years (Gogtay *et al.* 2004) or perhaps even later. This finding seems to provide some clarification of the differences between the capacity of formal logical and practical logical thinking and learning as well as between ordinary cognition and meta-cognition in adolescence and early adulthood.

The general conclusion must be that during puberty and youth a physiological and neurological maturing process takes place that makes possible new forms of abstract and strictly logical thinking and learning. An individual acquires the potential to operate context-independently with coherent concept systems and manage balanced and goal-directed behavior (whether or not this potential is actually applied is, as mentioned, a different question). Teenagers' determination to find out how things are structured and to use such understanding in relation to their own situation could be seen as a cognitive developmental bridge signifying the difference between children's and adults' ways of learning.

The longing for independence and the longing for coherent understanding of how they themselves and their environment function and why things are the way they are, in a decisive way, separates adult learning from the learning of childhood. Up through the period of youth, individuals will increasingly assume responsibility for their own learning and non-learning, make choices and rejections, and in this context understand what they are dealing with and their own roles and possibilities.

However, all this has been enormously complicated by the duality of late modernity between the apparently limitless degrees of freedom and reams of information, and the far-reaching and often indirect pressure for control from parents, teachers, youth cultures, mass media, and authorities. The transition from child to adult has thus, in the area of learning, become an extended, ambiguous and complicated process, with blurred outlines and unclear conditions and goals.

Barriers towards learning

In our complicated modern society the amount one can learn far outstrips what any person can manage, and this applies to the content of learning as well as the options for attitudes, modes of understanding, communication possibilities, patterns of action, lifestyles etc. Selection becomes a necessity, and in principle adults would like to carry out and take responsibility for this selection themselves.

Thus, adults' basic desire to learn and to direct and take responsibility for their own learning are strongly modified, first by the impact of their school experiences, and second by the inevitable

selection which is necessarily developed into the kind of semi-automatic defense system which has been described as “everyday consciousness” (Illeris 2004: 113ff., 2007: 160ff.).

The way this works is that one develops some general pre-understandings within certain thematic areas. When one meets with influences within such an area, these pre-understandings are activated so that if elements in the influences do not correspond to the pre-understandings, they are either rejected or distorted to make them agree. In both cases, the result is not new learning but, on the contrary, the cementing of already existing understanding.

This is also part of the reason why adults are skeptical and often reluctant vis-à-vis everything that others want them to learn and they themselves do not feel an urge to learn. Consciously or unconsciously, they want to decide for themselves. But, at the same time, it is easier to leave the decisions to others, to see what happens, and retain the right to protest, resist or drop out if one is not satisfied. In sum, the attitude is thus very often ambiguous and contradictory.

However, the very widespread and important mechanisms of learning defense should not be confused with learning resistance, which is a much more active and usually also conscious kind of general learning barrier. Whereas the system of learning defense is gradually built up during youth and exists in advance of the situations in which it works, resistance is provoked by elements in the learning situation and content which are unacceptable to the learner. There may be many reasons for learning resistance, of which some are unconscious and may be anchored in traumatic experiences in childhood, whereas others are conscious and may, for instance, have to do with political, moral, or religious convictions.

Teachers and educators need to realize that learners are excited and sensitive in situations of learning resistance. Often, when adults are asked when they have really learned something of personal importance, they refer to situations of learning resistance. Therefore, in such situations learners should not just be turned down or neglected, but the teacher should try to find an opportunity for a personal talk, so the learner can be helped to find the reason for the reaction, determine what was at stake, and the consequences for different actions.

Identity, life projects and transformative learning

The main thread here is that adult learning may be subjectively meaningful or not and this outcome is determined by the learner’s life course and life projects.

The essence of the life course has resulted in the building up of an identity, i.e. a central mental instance containing the understanding of who one is, who one wants to be, and how one experiences oneself and is experienced by others. While the concept of identity was originally a psychological construction, mainly elaborated by Erikson (1968), it has been further explained by modern sociologists, such as German Ulrich Beck (1997) [1986]), British Anthony Giddens (1991) and Polish-British Zygmunt Bauman (2000). The central understanding which has been developed, as least as I see it (Illeris 2014), is what Bauman has termed the age of “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000). In order to cope with the ever-changing world we have to develop identities which are so stable that we have a coherent experience of ourselves, and at the same time so flexible that we can transform ourselves in accordance with changes in our life situations. In this regard Jack Mezirow’s concept of transformative learning gains new meaning and importance, because it can be seen as the kind of adult learning which deals with the necessary transformations of the identity.

In relation to identity, the role of life projects in relation to adult learning has relevance. Adults usually have life projects that are relatively stable and long-term, for example, a family project that concerns creating and being part of a family, a work project that concerns a personally and financially satisfying job, perhaps a leisure-time project concerning a hobby, a life project to do with fulfillment, or a conviction project that may be religious or political in nature.

These life projects are embedded in the life history, present situation and possible future perspectives of the individual and are closely related to identity. We design our defenses on this basis so that we usually let what is relevant for our projects come through and reject the rest. Also on this basis, as the central core of our defenses, we develop defense mechanisms to counter influences that could threaten the experience of who we are and would like to be.

These matters typically comprise the fundamental premises for school-based or course-based adult learning seen from the perspective of the learners. These premises make the learners' initial motivation quite crucial and influence how they regard the study course in relation to their life projects.

In some cases, adult learning can lead to extensive, enriching development for the participants if they arrive with positive motivation and the study programs live up to or exceed their expectations. But in many adult education activities a considerable proportion of the participants only become positively engaged if they meet a challenge that "turns them on" at the beginning or along the way. Quite often, in current adult education situations, participants are only engaged superficially and do not learn very much, leading to the waste of human and financial resources.

What we all must realize is that the adult's way of learning is very different from the child's and that adult education must, therefore, be based on fundamentally different premises. The basic requirement is that the adult must take, and must be allowed to take, responsibility for his or her own learning. Adult learning activities should be designed out of respect, support and even demand for this basic requirement. We all have a great deal to learn in order to fully understand these fundamental conditions of adult learning.

Current adult learning theory

Efforts to work out a theoretical basis for adult learning came late and have been rather sparse until the 1980s. However, since then quite a few important contributions have been launched of which the most important shall be taken up here.

I have already mentioned Jack Mezirow's contribution on transformative learning, which was launched in 1978 and has been further developed (e.g. Mezirow 1991, 2000, 2006, 2009). Seen from a theoretical point of view the most important innovation in Mezirow's approach has been his attention to adults' possibilities of involving themselves in a type of learning that implies changes of a broader and further-reaching kind than what is comprised in Piaget's concept of accommodation (cf. Illeris 2007, 2014).

American Robert Kegan's constructive-developmental theory of human development refers to broad personal learning at different levels and can be understood as partly a support and partly a critique of Mezirow's approach as being too narrowly cognitively oriented (Kegan 1982, 1994, 2000).

The most comprehensive contribution has, however, been delivered by the British sociologist Peter Jarvis, who since the middle of the 1980s has published books and articles on adult and lifelong learning and at the same time has edited the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* and a number of international handbooks. His first important book was *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* (Jarvis 1983), which has later been revised twice. Then came two more exceptional books which strongly introduced the social dimension of adult learning (Jarvis 1987, 1992). After many other publications in 2006–2008 he published a trilogy on *Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society*, covering his full theoretical understanding (Jarvis 2006, 2007, 2008) and finally he has edited two important international handbooks (Jarvis 2009, Jarvis and Watts 2012). In general his theory can be said to be founded in the philosophical and social dimensions,

whereas the psychological dimension is less comprehensive. Jarvis' contribution has supplied a comprehensive and coherent theoretical understanding of adult learning.

Other theories from later years have helped to complete the picture. Some of the most specific contributions have been made by the Finnish psychologist Yrjö Engeström (e.g. Engeström 1987, 2009 [2001]) building on the Russian activity-theoretical approach from the mid-war period (Lev Vygotsky, Aleksei Leontjev), the American organizational theorists Chris Argyris and Donald Schön's contributions on organizational learning (e.g. Argyris and Schön 1996), the German sociologist Peter Alheit (e.g. Alheit 2009) who has been a driving force of the so-called biographical approach, seeing adult learning in the perspective of the life course in interaction with important external events – and, finally, I hope it will not be too presumptuous to mention by own contribution in this connection (e.g. Illeris 2004, 2007, 2011, 2014).

Seen in relation to the concept and issue of human resource development I hope that this chapter has contributed to making it clear that such development is not just a practical matter of following various more or less detailed recommendations or prescriptions. The human mind is not an automatically functioning construction following certain rules or directions but an extremely complex, unpredictable and personal creation following its own ways or ideas and sometimes also unconscious patterns – and that all of this has become particularly distinct in the present ever-changing world. In relation to adult learning the point of HRD must therefore be to encourage and make space for the manifold potentials offered by the available human resources.

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