Adult Learning Theories and Tutoring

Susan Mucha

Abstract

Adults continue to change biologically, psychologically, intellectually, and cognitively throughout their adult years, and they continue to develop and learn throughout their lives. Adults have a grand reservoir of experiences that they can continue to build on and use as a resource for learning. It is important to take adult learning theories into consideration when tutoring adult students in the tutoring center of a college or university. By utilizing the various adult learning theories in a tutoring session, tutors may be able to more effectively assist the adult learners that they are working with and may understand certain behaviors and characteristics of the adult learners.

Introduction

Tutors who are working with adult learners in tutoring centers at colleges and universities should be aware of the various learning theories surrounding adult learners to effectively facilitate learning. Adult learners have many different characteristics than those of young learners, and the approaches to tutoring them should be different. By applying various adult learning theories during a tutoring session, tutors may be able to more effectively assist adult learners with their work and better understand their behaviors and characteristics. This article will present an overview of some of the theories surrounding adult education and how they can be used within the tutoring context to more effectively tutor adult learners.

Adult Learners

According to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), "For the first time in our society, adults outnumber youth, there are more older adults, the population is better educated than ever before, and there is more cultural and ethnic diversity" (p. 7). Working with adults is very different than working with young people. Adults are very often self-motivated and have the desire to learn. They are typically paying for their education and have a more serious and

purposeful outlook on their college career. Adults also have various life experiences and different viewpoints to which they can link their learning. Adults grow intellectually and cognitively throughout their adult years. Merriam et al. (2007) stated, "development thus proceeds through a constant interaction between the person and the environment" (p. 322). Adults build on what they have learned and continue to learn through their experiences and the connections that they make over time. As experiences occur, adults continually add to their knowledge base.

According to Merriam et al. (2007), "To facilitate the process of learning, it is 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" (p. ix). The characteristics of adult learners vary on many accounts. For instance, different generations each have unique aspects, so, quite often, adults are interacting with students from different generations. This can be cause for intimidation, empowerment, or simply, experiencing ideas and contact with students who may be the age of the adult learners' children. The adult students' reasons for pursuing education vary. Some learners have distinct goals for college, where some may just be trying to find their way after a life event. According to Merriam et al. (2007), "the study of pathways of adult cognitive development - that is, how thinking patterns change over time - is often linked to a combination of factors, primarily the interaction of maturational and environmental variables" (p. 325). Therefore, multiple factors must be considered when working with adult learners.

According to Merriam et al. (2007), "fear of memory loss is a common concern of people as they age" (p. 392). Research indicates memory changes as a person ages, with the consensus being that there are certain memory functions that decline as one gets older (Merriam et al.,

2007). Methods can be utilized to help adults offset decreased memory functions, such as, encouraging them to record lectures to be listened to again. Adults may need to use additional study aids as they are learning new material. A tutor is a great resource to help find various study methods that might work for individual adult learners.

The social aspect of learning is prevalent in the field of adult education. Cranton (2006) stated, "We are individuals living in and influenced by our social world, and we are individuals with important differences among us in the way we live, learn, work, and develop" (p. 79). Adults choose to further their education for various reasons, including personal, cultural, and professional reasons. They may feel that an advanced degree helps them to move forward at their place of employment or within their field. Some adults may find that they enjoy the social aspects of learning and enjoy learning alongside those who have similar interests. Society often influences the value that individuals place on education.

Theories and Principles of Adult Learning

Adults learn differently than children do. Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development explain the cognitive development of children from instinctive reflexes at birth to the final stage of formal operations where one can reason hypothetically and logically at around the age of twelve (Merriam et al., 2007). Neo-Piagetian scholars indicate the existence of an additional stage called postformal thought. At this stage, adults analyze their thinking patterns, realize that all knowledge is incomplete and subjective, and exhibit problem-finding behaviors (Merriam et al., 2007).

Perry's Development Schemes are based on his studies of adults, mainly Ivy League white male college students (Merriam et al., 2007). Perry proposed nine positions of cognitive development where the individual interprets every learning experience differently, moving from

simple thinking patterns to highly complex ways of thinking and interpreting knowledge (Merriam et al., 2007). As students move through the positions they become more relativistic in their thought patterns. The students' view of the teacher changes from one of authority to one of facilitator (Merriam et al., 2007).

Andragogy

Knowing that adults learn differently, Knowles presented the concept of andragogy in a 1968 article. Andragogy is specific to how adults learn and how they should be taught. "Andragogy focuses on the adult learner and his or her life situations" (Merriam et al, 2007, p. 83). Knowles proposed that adults learn differently than children and that this should be taken into consideration when planning for and teaching adults.

According to Merriam et al. (2007), Knowles' theory of andragogy was based on the following assumptions:

1. As people mature they move from a dependant personality to self-directing

2. Adults have numerous experiences on which they can use as a resource for learning

3. Adults' readiness to learn correlates to their roles in society and their goals

4. Adults want to immediately apply what they are learning

5. Adults are internally motivated

6. Adults need to know why they need to learn something

These assumptions have practical application in the area of tutoring adult learners at a college or university. Since adult learners are often more self-directed and have an increased desire to be successful, they want to learn the material and are more apt to attend tutoring sessions. Self-direction of the learners in a tutoring session is imperative. Learners need to come to a tutoring session prepared with what their needs are and express those needs to the tutor. In

turn, tutors need to actively involve the learners in the tutoring session by asking for their perspectives and, in that way, ensure that the learners are directing the session's progress.

Adults have numerous life experiences that they draw on as they are learning new concepts. It is important to relate concepts to adult learner's prior knowledge during a tutoring session. For example, if a learner is working on the concept of positive and negative numbers for a mathematics course, the tutor can draw on the learner's experiences with balancing a checkbook. Learning needs to be connected to the learners' knowledge base and to their experiences (Lieb, 1991). Thus, it is imperative that the tutor working with the adult learner draws on that adult learner's knowledge base and experiences. Values and goals are important here, too. Adults often relate education to their position in society. As mentioned earlier, adults seek education to better themselves for their family or for advancement in their careers, and they often have specific goals to meet. Tutors may need to remind the adult learners of these goals and offer them reassurance if the learners begin to express doubts about their abilities in the learning environment.

Since adults want to immediately apply what they are learning, it is beneficial to use real life, relevant examples in tutoring sessions. Tutors guide the learners to determine how they apply the concepts they are learning to their current or future positions. Internal motivation is another assumption that can be applied to a tutoring session. Tutors can discover what motivates these learners through interactions with them and draw on these internal motivations to keep the learners motivated and focused. Finally, since adults often need to know why they are learning something, it is important that tutors explain this during a tutoring session, including the practical applications of the concepts that are being learned.

Knowles' theory of andragogy can be applied when tutoring adult learners in a learning center by actively involving the learners in the tutoring session, drawing on the learners' life experiences, and helping the learners see application of the concepts they are learning. Tutors need to be aware of Knowles' theory of andragogy in order to better facilitate tutoring sessions that meet the needs of adult learners.

McClusky's Theory of Margin

"His theory is grounded in the notion that adulthood is a time of growth, change, and integration in which one constantly seeks balance between the amount of energy needed and the amount available" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 95). McClusky believes that if people have increased power which helps deal with the loads of life, they have an increased chance to participate in the learning process. According to Merriam et al. (2007), "McClusky's model does not directly address learning itself but rather when it is most likely to occur" (p. 96). Although learning may be easier for a student whose power is higher, it does not mean that learning will not occur if a person's load is higher, although it may be more difficult for that person.

This model is evident when working with students who are using tutoring services on college campuses. Many adult learners have external loads (family, work) and internal loads (aspirations, desires) that may be quite heavy. Their power comes from both external (family supports, social, and economic abilities) and internal (skills, experiences, and coping skills) sources and helps them deal with their load. Tutoring can offer additional support and guidance for the learners therefore adding to their power to deal with the load. This model can help tutors understand that learning may be more difficult for the students with higher life loads. Tutors can also work with students on study skills, such as time management, to help them manage their load more effectively. This model can also validate the reasons for offering alternate methods for

tutoring services, such as online tutoring offered during the evenings and weekends for those with work and family commitments during the week. By having additional options, support can be more readily accessible for all students. McClusky's model can be applied to tutoring adult learners by helping tutors understand all aspects involved with learning and helping learners learn how to increase their power.

Illeris's Three Dimensions of Learning Model

Illeris's Three Dimensions of Learning Model states that cognition, emotion, and society must always be present in a learning activity (Merriam et al., 2007). The cognitive dimension consists of knowledge and skills, the emotion dimension consists of feelings and motivation, and the social dimension consists of interaction with others (Merriam et al., 2007). This model is consistent with approaches to tutoring adult learners. Tutoring will be affected by the cognitive dimension (knowledge and skills), emotional dimension (the student's anxiety over the subject or their motivation to learn the subject) and the social dimension (the interaction with the tutor). In some instances it may be students' emotional dimension that hinders the learning process. By offering encouragement and support, tutors who are able to reframe content issues help adult learners overcome barriers that frustration and anger create. Tutors can offer additional support for building knowledge and skills through practice and application. Tutors also need to be aware of the importance of how they approach and interact with the learners to make sure that it is a positive experience.

Jarvis's Learning Process

Jarvis theorized that the five senses (sound, sight, smell, taste, and touch) are involved with the process of learning along with experiences. Jarvis believes that each person's experiences are unique, and when encountered with a situation to which one cannot

automatically react, an opportunity for learning is created (Merriam et al., 2007). When a person reacts to the discomfort experienced as a result of that encounter, that person is changed. This concept can be applied when working with students in a tutoring center. Tutors guide learners through the process of discovery. Since this process can be somewhat uncomfortable for some students, tutors can offer support and guidance. By being aware of Jarvis's Learning Process, a tutor can more effectively understand how to offer support to the adult learner.

Self-Directed, Transformational, and Experiential Learning

Self-directed, transformational, and experiential learning are extremely important to adult learning as well. Adults have unique sets of characteristics and needs. Educators' approaches to adult learning can vary depending upon their philosophies of learning. Tutors can help create environments which foster self-directed, transformational, and experiential learning during tutoring sessions.

Self-Directed Learning

Merriam and Brockett (2007) stated that, "Some of the most important developments in adult education over the past three decades have been in the area of self-directed learning" (p. 135). In self-directed learning, adults are in control of their learning. "Self-directed learning, however defined, is the most frequent way in which most adults choose to learn" (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 140). According to Merriam et al. (2007), one the assumptions of Knowles' theory of andragogy is that adults are more self-directed in their learning.

Merriam et al. (2007) described the instructional model of self-directed learning as representing "frameworks that instructors in formal settings could use to integrate self-directed methods of learning into their programs and activities" (p. 117). This model is particularly relevant to the learners participating in post-secondary institutions and can be applied when

tutoring adult learners at those institutions. Merriam et al. (2007) referenced Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning Model, which consists of four stages, when discussing self-directed instructional models. Stage 1 consists of the learners requiring direction from the instructor; stage 2 consists of the learners beginning to take some responsibility for their learning, but still not having concrete knowledge of the subject; stage 3 consists of the learners gaining in skill and subject matter, yet still needing the instructor for guidance; and stage 4 consists of the learners being able to take charge of the learning without any assistance from an instructor (Merriam et al., 2007). As learners are at all stages of the model, tutors have a great opportunity to promote self-directed learning, because they often work one-on-one with students. Tutors assist the learners in finding possible support to pursue and, most importantly, share with the learners how to go about seeking opportunities to learn on their own.

Transformational Learning

"A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experiences" (Imel, 1998, para.1). Transformative learning occurs "when people critically examine their habitual expectations, revise them, and act on the revised point of view" (Cranton, 2006, p. 19). There are many opportunities for transformative learning; however it can be quite uncomfortable for students to go through the process. A disorientating event is often the trigger for transformative learning. Cranton (2006) stated, "learning occurs when an individual encounters an alternative perspective and prior habits of mind are called into question" (p. 23). The tutor's role is that of a facilitator to help guide the students along in the transformative process. The educator who fosters transformative learning has a moral responsibility to provide and arrange for support (Cranton, 2006, p. 160). As such, tutors are a crucial element in this model.

Merriam et al. (2007) stated that the three main concepts of transformative learning are experience, critical reflection, and development. "Experience is integral to learning" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 144). Tutors help provide the learner with experiences through interactive games and scenarios. They draw on both the learners' prior experiences and their current experiences. Critical reflection is essential to the process of transformative learning. When learners are presented with an experience in which they do not know how to react, they can begin the process. "We must examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions that affect how we make sense of the experience" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 145). Tutors guide the learners through the steps of reflection and why they felt the way they did about a particular situation or experience. Tutors offer different perspectives for the learners to consider and offer encouragement and support through the process. Tutors play devil's advocate in discussions to offer an alternate view, however, tutors must be careful not to promote their own personal views, but let the learners feel free to share theirs even if these views do not match the tutors'.

As learners are reflecting on their experiences, they are also developing from these experiences and their reactions to them. Merriam et al. (2007) stated, "The ability to think critically, which is mandatory to effecting a transformation, is itself developmental; that is, we can become better, more critical thinkers" (p. 147). Tutors can encourage learners to think critically by giving them the tools and support to do so. They can model critical thinking and encourage the learners to think critically by considering alternate points of view.

Adults may experience various aspects of college as disorientating. Tutors, who understand the power of transformative learning, foster an open, safe, and supportive environment for exploration. Establishing rules for respect during the tutoring session and encouraging students to think critically about topics creates the necessary environment for

successful movement through this process. Since the nature of transformational learning is personal, even if their instructors are not using this method within the classroom, students may experience transformational learning through their courses or within their personal lives via tutoring support and guidance.

Experiential Learning

According to Merriam et al. (2007), one assumption of Knowles' theory of andragogy is that adults have numerous experiences they can use as resources for learning. Experiential learning is important to adult education. Although theorists have different perceptions on how adults learn from their experiences, there seems to be consistency with some of the characteristics of the learners. Learners need to be open to learning, willing to reflect critically, and willing to change.

Every individual's experiences and reactions to those experiences are unique; therefore, learners will not have the same reaction to the same experience. Merriam et al. (2007) stated, "As adults live longer, they accumulate both a greater volume and range of experiences" (p. 161). This is important to take into consideration when working with adult learners as these experiences can be used as a foundation for new knowledge.

According to Merriam et al. (2007), "although adult educators have accepted the connection between experience and learning, we are still learning about this connection and how to use it most effectively in both formal and nonformal learning situations" (p. 161). Experiential learning can be viewed through different lenses, and tutors can benefit from the various roles that they are enlisted to play in that learning. For example, from the constructivist lens, "educators serve as facilitators of reflection and encourage learners to discuss and reflect on concrete experiences in a trusting, open environment" (Merriam et el., 2007, p. 169). Tutors

should ensure that the tutoring environment is conducive to promoting learning. They do this by being open and honest with the learners and actively listening to what their prior experiences are. Tutors help the students through problem-solving dilemmas and help the learners discover assumptions that they have. They also lead learners through reflection on their experiences and guide them to find meaning in these experiences.

Tutors can approach experiential learning with the situational framework by creating small study groups, leading the students through role playing activities, and then reflecting on those experiences. Study groups create a supportive community for the learners, so it is important that tutors work with the learners to address any negative emotions that may impede their learning. Merriam et al. (2007) stated, "If the negative feelings are not addressed, what commonly happens is that learning becomes blocked" (p. 165). Negative past experience can halt new learning if the previous experience is not reevaluated. The tutor is a great resource to work individually or in groups with students to work out their negative feelings. Drawing out the learners' fears or frustrations verbally or through journaling, and then critically analyzing those experiences with the learners, could be beneficial for the learners. Through this process the learners can determine what negative feelings they have and address them so they do not become barriers. Encouraging learners to look more deeply at their emotions helps tutors and learners determine what inhibits their learning and assist learners to find their ideal learning situations. Simple things such as becoming aware of how one feels when studying in particular environments facilitates this process.

When viewing experiential learning through the critical cultural lens, tutors can help learners "see the influence of power relationships on their lives" (Merriam et al., 2007. p. 170). Tutors can assist the learners to critically investigate power relationships that occurring in their

lives. Tutors can then offer guidance in finding a solution, if those relationships are problematic. Lastly, viewing experiential learning through the complexity theory lens, tutors can help the learners be aware of multiple perspectives. The role of the tutor is to point out changes and help the learner understand those changes. Through this process, dialog is essential. Tutors can lead discussions bringing to light various perspectives and offer insights to various opportunities. Of course, training tutors to be facilitators is necessary to adequately use this model.

Embodied, Spiritual, and Narrative Learning

According to Merriam et al. (2007), "Most of our knowledge of adult learning is centered on the mind—that is, cognitive processes related to acquiring, storing, and making meaning of new information. However, the whole person is always involved in learning, even when we think it is just our brain" (p. 187). The body and spirit are often neglected when discussing learning, especially when the focus has been that learning occurs only in the brain (Merriam et al., 2007).

Embodied Learning

Embodied (Somatic) learning is making meaning in the experience through the senses and the way the body feels. According to Merriam et al. (2007), "Learning in the experience is immediate, physical, emotional" (p. 192). This differs from simple reflection of the experience, and focuses on our physicality. Incorporating movement with learning is a way to apply it to the learning environment. Within the context of tutoring, embodied learning can be applied by helping the learners recognize sensations within the learning experience. For example, as learners are encountering new concepts tutors guide the learners to consider physical sensations and how they are perceived. Quite often, when learners are encountering difficulty with a new subject, their bodies tense up, which, in turn, hinders the learning process. When learners recognize physical manifestations of stress and anxiety, tutors share strategies to combat those effects.

Tutors also offer examples of concepts through body movement. For instance, when helping students understand the concept of various properties of solving algebraic equations, tutors can suggest the students visualize the equation with their body. The learners should visualize that they are standing in front of a mirror and the mirror itself represents the equal sign. When the learners puts on (or adds) a hat, then the image in the mirror does the same so the equality remains the same even though it looks different. Hence, the algebraic importance of 'what you do to one side, you must do to the other' to maintain equality.

Spiritual Learning

Spiritual learning is making meaning of one's life and feeling connectivity. It is difficult to define what spirituality means as there are a diversity of interpretations. Although difficult to foster in secular institutions of education, a tutor can create an environment which is conducive to spiritual learning. According to Merriam et al. (2007), "The teacher is accountable for designing a learning experience that both supports and challenges the learners" (p. 204). Tutors should create an open, supportive environment for their students which respects diverse points of view. Merriam et al. (2007) stated, "For moments of spiritual learning to occur there must be space in the learning environment" (p. 204). Tutors make sure that they create an environment of open dialog, respect, and accountability. Tutoring may be more intimate than a classroom, so there may be more opportunities for this to occur. Activities which are creative, such as using art, music, or poetry, within a tutoring session also foster spiritual learning. Tutors should also reflect on their own biographies to evaluate their own spirituality within their lives and learning.

Narrative Learning

Narrative learning occurs through the use of stories. According to Merriam et al. (2007), "a narrative framework sees the life course as an unfolding story, one constructed and interpreted

by the individual" (pp. 213 - 214). Reading stories from other peoples' point of view and also creating one's own autobiography incorporates narrative learning into the learning environment. Tutors help adult learners find narrative stories to assist with the topics learners are exploring. Tutors assist students to compare what they are learning to the stories of their own lives. Tutors also create stories to help learners with problem solving. Role playing and recreating stories from history are other ideas to facilitate a narrative strategy. Tutors encourage students to write in journals and analyze their own experiences.

Conclusion

It is important for adult educators, including tutors in a learning center, to acknowledge that adult learners have a unique set of characteristics. Adult learners have extensive prior knowledge on which they relate and build on and a plethora of theories, including those outlined in this article; can be applied when working with adult learners in a learning center. Tutors can foster self-directed, transformational, and experiential learning within tutoring sessions, therefore helping students become better learners. By being aware of embodied, spiritual, and narrative learning, tutors can help students look beyond the cognitive aspects of learning and focus on incorporating emotions and physical feelings into the learning process. All of these ideas ultimately serve tutor and adult learner.

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