An Update on Adult Learning Theory

Dr. Sharan B. Merriam
The University of Georgia, USA
Forces Affecting Adult Learning

- Globalization
- Communication Technology
- Knowledge Age (Information doubles every 73 days)
- Rapid Change (1/2 life of knowledge)
Shift to Lifelong Learning

Learning is lifelong and lifewide

UNESCO “pillars” of learning:

- Learning to know
- Learning to do
- Learning to live together
- Learning to be
- Learning to change  
  (Delors, 1996)
I. Three Foundational Theories of Adult Learning

- Andragogy
- Self-Directed Learning
- Transformational Learning
Andragogy

- As adults mature, they become more independent and self-directing;
- An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience;
- Readiness to learn is related to life stage and social role;
- An adult is more problem centered; wants immediate application;
- An adult is more internally motivated.  
  (Knowles, 1980)
Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

- Upwards of 90% of adults are engaged in independent learning projects;
- In these projects, adults plan, carry out, and evaluate their own learning;
- Learner’s interest in and ability to engage in SDL varies, and may depend on the situation;
- SDL is about taking control of your own learning.
Transformational Learning

- Transformational learning is about change--dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live;
- Most often begins when an important life event causes us to question our way of making meaning in our lives;
- We then critically examine our assumptions and beliefs.
Transformative Learning (con’t)

- The learner considers options for new roles, relationships, activities (often with the help of others)
- A new course of action is engaged in
- The learner has a changed perspective from which he/she reengages with society.
- The change is usually visible to others.
II. Some Recent Thinking

- Situated Cognition/Contextual Learning
- Embodied/Somatic Learning
- Spirituality and Learning
- Non-Western Perspectives
Situated Cognition

- Context-based
- Tool-dependant
- Socially interactive
Problem Solving in Conjunction With Context
(not simply a mental process)

- Grocery Shopping
  - 98% correct when actually shopping
  - 59% correct on paper and pencil test

- Yogurt

  How much is $\frac{3}{4}$ of $\frac{2}{3}$ of a cup?
Importance of Context

- Whether formal or informal, learning occurs in context with others – it is a social activity
- Use of “authentic” vs. decontextualized contexts
- Locate learning in real-life problem solving and experience
Emotions and Somatic Knowing

- In the West – Learning is a rational, cognitive process through the brain
- But body, spirit and emotions are also involved in meaningful learning
Somatic or Embodied Learning

- Learning through our bodies – since receptors are throughout the body’s nerves, emotions can be stored and mediated by parts of the body other than the brain.
- We learn *in* the experience; It is immediate, physical, emotional
“When I finished the third stroke, I recognized a strong feeling that remained in my body... It was similar to a feeling in my palm which I remembered from canoeing in the wilderness. I closed by eyes with this image. And again I wrote Kawa with a brush as if I was paddling with the flow of the river. In the left sidestroke the water flows with a paddle (brush). In the middle stroke, I hold the water and stop the brush. For the third, I sink the paddle deep down, holding the heavy water for the longest stroke. I push it all the way down. I felt the Kawa character written in this way came alive, as if flowing in front of me. I encountered the vital life of the Kawa character in this way.... The character is no longer an object outside myself, it is something living within” (Yoshida, 2005, p. 133).
Somatic/Embodied Learning

- **Kinesthethic** – movement and action of the body
- **Sensory** – accessing and processing information through our senses
- **Affective** – emotions enmeshed in neural networks; “There are no neurotransmitters for ‘objectivity’; even the simplest responses to information signals are linked with possibly several ‘emotional’ transmitters” (Mulvilhill, 2003, p. 10).
Embodied/Somatic Learning

- Yoga – mind, body and spirit in concert to work towards enlightenment

- The Relationship between physical condition and levels of stress in one’s life

- Athletes “Visioning” Their Movements Prior to Actual Engagement

- Health Practitioners “Reading” Body Language of Patients for Better Diagnosis
Spirituality and Learning

- Spirituality – “one’s personal belief and experience of a higher power or higher purpose” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 309)
- Connected to learning through meaning-making
  - Helps to give our lives coherence
  - Helps to make sense (meaning) of our experience
  - Meaning-making uses myths, symbols, images, dreams that are culturally embedded, spiritually oriented
Fostering Spirituality in Learning

- Examine own beliefs, current spiritual preferences and resistences
- Create space that is safe, supportive, open, for spiritual connectedness to occur
- Dialogue to connect with others, with community, with inner self, perhaps with energy beyond self
- Use creative and imaginative activities such as visualization, storytelling, poetry, music, symbols and rituals
If the World Consisted of 100 People

- 61 Asians
- 14 Americans (North and South America)
- 13 Africans
- 12 Europeans
- 1 Australian (Oceania)

- 70 Would Be Non-White; 30 White
- 50 Women; 50 Men
- 7 Are 65 Years Of Age and Above
- 67 Are Non-Christians; 33 Are Christians
Non-Western Perspectives

- Learning is a Lifelong Journey
- What “Counts” as Knowledge is Broadly Defined
- Learning and Instruction are Holistic and Informal
Implications for Practice

- Develop self-directed, autonomous, *lifelong* learners
- Make learning as “authentic” as possible
  - apprenticeships
  - reflective practicums
  - internships
  - case study instruction
Implications for Practice

- Foster *holistic learning* wherein instructional activities engage not just the mind, but the body and the spirit

- Be aware of and acknowledge cultural differences in learning; draw upon the strengths of other worldviews about learning and knowing
All Learning Theories Suggest:

Learning is most effective when connected to:

- Real-life Problems, Issues, and Needs
- The Learner’s Previous Life Experiences
- Other Learners