

Revisiting Adult Learning Theory through the Lens of an Adult Learner

In reading the last section of our primary text, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) in my Adult Learning and Development class, I continued to feel as though I was being self-assured of my previous learning experiences once again. The final section of the text focused on basic psychological concepts and theories that I had become familiar with while completing my undergraduate degree. However, our text highlighted the tangential relationships between these psychological concepts and adult learning theory. These relationships led me to ask myself:

- What discoveries [from the reading] relate to my personal development?
- What about the content surprises me?
- If necessary, how would I use this information as presented in the readings particularly in my current occupational position?

The first chapter of our text focuses on traditional learning theories. Upon first reading, I felt as if I was reading a psychology text, and I guess, in fact, I was. The text discusses five different theories, or as the authors put it, "orientations," to learning: behaviorist, humanist, cognitivist, social cognitive, and constructivist. The behaviorist theory is basically a theory that focuses on how the environment helps to shape the learning processes of an individual. When I think of this approach, I most often think of the famous Pavlov dog experiment. I

grew to know this response as classical conditioning, and, in many respects, this seems to be the most prevalent teaching model in the practice today. Let's take my high school memories for example, although it has been more than 18 years since my high school graduation. What I remember most from this period of my life is the school bell. As a matter of fact, from my earliest memories, the school bell was an essential part of my public school education. When the bell rang, we knew that we either needed to be in class, moving to another class, or being dismissed for the day. While the bell didn't signify any sort of learning response, it did entrench in every student a behavior – a conditioning – on how to act and what to expect within the next few moments. For many of us the anticipation of the bell led to a heightened anxiety level since we knew that just on the other side of the bell was the dreaded AP history class, or for others, the worrisome gym class, but in that way, we were all Pavlov's dogs.

Another example of this theory of learning is the way in which a teacher would set up and decorate the classroom. It was every hope of our French teacher that with each picture of Paris or any other miscellaneous Francophone city or country placed on the classroom wall, our desire to learn the language would be that much more heightened. I remember the same with my science classes, my history classes, and virtually every other class that I can remember. So, in many ways, our teachers were

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trying to change our behavior in respect to a certain subject, and for many of us, this worked just fine. Our text cites Skinner (1971) as saying that the “ultimate goal of education is to bring about behavior that will ensure survival of the human species, societies, and individuals” (p. 280). But is this really learning? I would challenge this statement by saying no. I would consider this just to be survival. But then again, we would need to define “learning,” which, I quickly understand, can be just about anything to any one person. In short, the behaviorist theory treats the individual as a subject that is completely reliant on its environmental surroundings.

The next theory that was discussed was the humanist theory of learning. This theory establishes the perspective that an individual has the potential to grow, and further, has the desire to grow.

This theory points to the fact that people strive to be the best that they can be – a similar message to what the Army would like you to believe. Merriam et al. cite Rogers (1983) and Maslow (1970)

with saying that inherently, people [in general] strive for good, and that their behavior is that of choice and not environment. I believe that several religions employ this school of thought through their teachings. I am most familiar with the Catholic Church as taught through the Jesuit tradition. In my personal experiences, the pastor of my church teaches the congregation to “treat others as you would hope to be treated.” While these words are particularly attributed to the words and practices of Jesus, the Christ, it seems to me that the root of these teachings and words lend to the greatest positive potential for all human beings, which, coincidentally, matches with Maslow’s highest level of human motivation – self-actualization.

Whether we follow with the words of Jesus, Buddha, Shiva, Cthulu, or any other of a handful of deities, and whether we’d like to acknowledge it or not, the followers of these gods are attempting to self-actualize as many of them believe that their basic needs have been met and they are attempting to understand the world around them, or as Merriam et al. state, “among the growth motivations was found the need for cognition, the desire to know and understand” (p. 282). Bringing this type of approach to the adult classroom allows for the student to feel a greater connection with the subject matter at hand.

Next, the authors of our text address the cognitive theory of learning. For me, this theory seems to be the

most effective, or at least, this is the one theory that resonates deepest with my educational experiences as an adult learner. This theory focuses on the learner finding meaning in what is being taught and being able to apply the new information to examine previous experiences. The authors of our text quote Grippin and Peters (1984) as stating, “The human mind is not simply a passive exchange-terminal system where the stimuli arrive and the appropriate response leaves [behavior theory]. Rather, the thinking person interprets sensations and gives meaning to the events that impinge upon his consciousness” (p. 285). Let me expand with another personal example. Upon graduating from high school, I had every intention of studying pre-medicine with the hopes of one day becoming a pediatric cardiovascular surgeon. That was

in 1991, when I didn’t really have much life experience to draw from. Well, from that point forward, my life changed in many dramatic (and some not so dramatic) ways: the death of my grandmother, my

grandfather and eventually, the death of my mother.

After losing my mom, I quickly began to feel as though my life had no real meaning. I was suspended from college and I just sort of floated through life until I returned to Denver and was hired at the Colorado Association of Nonprofit Organizations. The position was an entry level position, but one where I felt comfortable and felt no real pressure to excel. During my tenure with the organization, I realized that if I wanted to move on (make more money) I would have to complete my undergraduate degree. I enrolled at Metropolitan State College of Denver and majored in French. I found little interest in the subject so I changed my major to psychology, and then again to counseling. It wasn’t until I found classes that focused on nonprofit organization management that I began to take a true interest in furthering my education. These classes were most interesting to me because I could immediately apply what I had learned in class to my daily job responsibilities. It was only a matter of time before my employer recognized this growth as well, and I began to advance within the organization through increased duties and corresponding title changes. “Learning involves the reorganization of experience in order to make sense of stimuli from the environment” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 285), and this is why I believe I began to find success in my educational goals. Merriam

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et al. cite Ausuble (1967) as suggesting that learning can only be meaningful when it can be related to concepts that already exist in a person's cognitive structure. I continue to find this to be true in my experiences as I continue to formalize my education. I do best in classes where I can find some personal meaning, versus those classes where I find little or no connection or the connection is very abstract (thus my aversion to any sort of history class).

A slightly different take to cognitive theory is social cognitive theory, which is defined "by observing others, people acquire knowledge, rules, skills, strategies, beliefs, and attitudes" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, p. 288). I tend to believe that this sort of learning model is best demonstrated through superior/ subordinate relationships, of which two come to mind: (a) parent/child relationships and (b) employer/employee relationships. As children grow they often tend to model the behavior of their parents and/or guardians. Babies learn to talk by mimicking the words they hear in their household. As they grow older, they continue to observe the behavior of adults around them and reserve the opportunity to mimic the behavior at a later date. The same dynamic can be found in the workplace. Oftentimes, employees observe the behaviors and habits of their superiors and when the opportunity arises, the employee will demonstrate the behavior "learned" from their superior. The outcome may not always be favorable, but that is a whole different story. Merriam et al. quote Gibson (2004) who seemed to sum up this theory best:

Before something can be learned, the model must be attended to; some models are more and more likely than others to be attended to, such as those thought to be competent, powerful, attractive, and so on. Information from an observation then needs to be retained or stored for future use. Retention can be through symbols or words: 'Imaginally stored symbols are pictures or mental images of past experiences, whereas verbal symbols capture the complexities of behavior in words. (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 289)

The final theory presented in this section is the constructivist theory. The basis of this theory seems to be a culmination of all the previously-addressed theories, but it is completely focused on the individual making meaning of the learning environment. I can't readily come up with an example to highlight this theory without sounding a bit redundant. Merriam et al. summarize this theory by characterizing it as "both an individual mental activity and a socially interactive interchange" (p. 297).

The remainder of section four of our text focuses on various diversity factors that have influenced adult development as it relates to learning. Some of these include social, gender, sexual orientation, and age factors. In all honesty, I found these sections to be extensions of the behaviorist theory of learning.

In summary, while I don't have an advanced degree, the theories that have been presented in our text, again, seem very "common sense." I find myself, or rather my thoughts about adult learning theory, affirmed and after submission, I hope to share these journal entries with my supervisor as our organization seeks to better understand how to best reach audiences with financial education materials. An understanding of the theories outlined here will help us to better understand that there is no "one size fits all" approach to adult education, and that it is somewhat futile to search for such. The information that I will take from our text as well as from this class as a whole will better allow me to assess the concepts that other researchers put forth to our organization for funding. I am in no way asserting that I now know everything there is to know about adult learning theory, but I am much better off than I was eight weeks ago.

References

- Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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