



Breaking Barriers: Research Report

The principles of adult learning

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Introduction

Most educational research is on children and most views of learning have been developed in the context of children learning within a formal educational system. Inevitably such views have been tied into child development and compulsory schooling. However, when one moves away from models of child development, and examines the models which have been produced from disciplines looking at settings beyond compulsory schooling, a very different view of learning emerges (Barton & Tusting, 2003).

This short report describes the main principles adult educators should think about when developing and delivering learning programmes, and literacy programmes in particular, for adults. These principles illustrate the differences between the way that adults and children learn and underpin “andragogy”, that is, the theory and practice of the education of adults. In essence, this report addresses two questions: How is teaching adults different from teaching children? Do adults learn differently from children?

In the 1970s and 80s, the American education theorist Malcolm Knowles (1984a, 1984b) developed five assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that differentiate them from child learners and four principles that he argued should be applied to adult learning.

Knowles’ Five Assumptions of Adult Learners are:

1. Self-concept

As a person matures his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.

2. Role of Experience

As a person matures he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.

3. Readiness to Learn

As a person matures his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.

4. Orientation to Learning

As a person matures his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his/her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness.

5. Motivation to Learn

As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal.



Knowles' Four Principles of Andragogy are:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centred rather than content-oriented.

This report discusses these assumptions in greater depth, with particular messages for educators working in the field of adult literacy.

Self-concept

The key difference between learning that happens in school and most learning that takes place after the end of formal education is that adults choose to engage in learning. And unlike children, who are required by law to go to school, adults are free to choose to engage and to persist in education. Hostler (1986) asserts that we conceive of adults as autonomous and self-directing, with a consequent right to participate in decisions which affect them. Learning processes which recognise this also build students' own confidence to participate, thus developing autonomy in a virtuous circle.

Self-concept refers to one's belief in oneself as competent and capable in a particular domain, e.g. reading, and is closely tied to identity: do you see yourself as someone who reads and who is capable of success at reading?

Adults need to be responsible for their own decisions and to be treated as capable of self-direction. This is therefore linked to Knowles' first assumption that adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction. Adults need to understand why something is important to know or do. They need to have the freedom to learn in their own way and they also need guidance and support to learn in their own way.

They are responsible for their own decisions. As an adult educator this may mean not giving learners all the facts, but instead encouraging them to find out things for themselves by, for example, setting tasks that involve problem-solving. This practice also builds "learning to learn" skills, when learners are asked to reflect on the process and consider how transferrable these skills might be to other contexts. A focus on learning to learn implies that adult literacy programmes should not merely concentrate on delivering learning or skills, but also include space for discussion and reflection, where participants think about their experiences of their learning, how they learn best, and what they can do to gain more control over and improve their own learning. Within the classroom setting teachers should bear in mind that adults will have different learning styles, and learn at different speeds, in different ways and require different amounts of support



Adults can also be encouraged to learn independently through a learning programme that offers ‘scaffolded’ supports initially but which moves to fewer supports as the learning progresses.

A focus on self-directed learning is a reminder that adults have their own motivations for engaging in education, and are capable of engaging in self-directed autonomous learning. Barton and Tusting (2003) argue that educators also need to be aware that self-directedness arises from the interaction between an individual and the broader social context in which they engage.

Role of Experience

Adult learners have a variety of experiences of life which represent the richest resource for learning. These experiences are however imbued with bias and presupposition.

Learning is built on previous knowledge and experience. Educators must recognise therefore that life experience and knowledge is a valuable experience; this is Knowles’ second principle of andragogy that experience, including making mistakes, provides the basis for learning activities. It is important to note that experience can, however, be negative as well as positive, particularly for adults who are reengaging with learning following previous negative experiences of compulsory schooling.

This principle of adult learning is seen more clearly in the social practices model. Rather than a model which views “learning as principally concerning processes going on within an individual, the social practices model understands learning as being a socially situated phenomenon, best described and understood in terms of people’s ongoing participation in social contexts and interaction” (Barton and Tusting, 2003: 6). Research from the UK suggests that the more teachers know about the personal circumstances and styles of each individual learner, the more they can adjust the content and the management of their teaching to give learners the maximum opportunities for learning (Ivanic et al, 2006).

In Scotland and Ireland, for example the term “literacies” is used to refer to the skills, knowledge and understanding required for both literacy and numeracy practices. In Scotland, the social practice model is used and adult literacies are seen as an aspect of lifelong learning. An important principle is that learners are much more likely to develop their skills if these are relevant to their own everyday experiences. Literacy and numeracy are complex capabilities and important to people in terms of their work, family and quality of life.

In order to design appropriate educational programmes for adult literacy it is important to understand fully adults’ existing literacy skills and practices; their prior knowledge should be recognised and their learning motivations and needs identified. Adult literacy educators need to draw on the experiences of their learners and be



aware of what is going on in their lives outside of the classroom (or other teaching area).

The most effective approaches for teachers of adult literacy include considered attention to the following:

- social and cultural diversity and its effect on learning and on curriculum development and delivery
- the social, cultural and economic background of individual learners and the implications of this for learning and teaching
- ways of ensuring that linguistic diversity is valued and accommodated within programmes of learning and teaching
- the concept of inclusive learning
- the broad range of learning needs including the needs of those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and the facilities and arrangements that are available to help meet these needs.

With this knowledge, teachers of basic literacy courses need to bear in mind that ‘A beginner reader is not a beginner thinker’ (Ivanic et al, 2006: 47)

- Tutors need to work from a social practices view of literacy, to work from people’s lives and to contextualise skills
- tutors should listen to learners and try to understand their lives, motivations, interests and capabilities
- pedagogy should be responsive and flexible
- funding should take into account time needed for responsiveness to students’ lives
- success should be defined in relation to learners’ lives
- tutors need to be responsive to what learners bring to learning.

Readiness to Learn

Adults are ready to learn those things they need to know in order to cope effectively with life situations. So, for effective learning, adults know that the time is right for them to learn and that what they are learning will be of value to them.

An acknowledgement of the notion that there is “a right time” for learning would include welcoming back into learning adults who may have ‘dropped out’ or ‘stepped out’ in the past.

In terms of timing, learning has a practical dimension for adults that it does not have for children. Adults have busy lives, often combining learning with work and with other commitments, including caring and family responsibilities. Learning for adults needs to be responsive to this, for example by being flexible and fitting in with everyday life, available at times and in places that are accessible to adult learners, with no barriers to prevent learners of all ages and abilities engaging in education.



Blending traditional classroom forms of learning with online learning is one approach that may support adults' readiness to learn. Ideally, programmes of basic education would be available free of charge to participants.

Orientation to Learning

Knowles asserted that adults need to know why they need to learn something before they will engage in that learning. This is also linked to his third and fourth principles of adult learning: that adults are most interested in learning about subjects that are relevant to their lives, and that adults engage in problem-centred, rather than subject-centred learning. Adults are motivated to learn to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks they confront in their life situations.

This theory is therefore very different to the learning model that takes place in schools, which is driven by subject and where children learn what the teacher tells them they need to learn.

As educators of adults, contextualisation – in real world situations – is key to effective learning. Tasks should be related to learners' aims and goals so that they can immediately see their value. Educators should make sure that activities can be related to specific interests and contexts and are not too general to be useful.

Teaching works best where tasks are practical and related to real life problem solving situations. Educators can use case studies as a basis for individualising issues (but not making it too personal). By presenting issues through case studies, learners are able to see situations from a more objective point of view

Motivation to Learn

Most adults have multiple, complex and highly personal reasons for engaging in and persisting in learning.

As noted above, adult learning, unlike compulsory schooling, is for the most part a voluntary activity. This means that motivation is critical and that it must be strong enough to overcome potential barriers. The first hurdle is recognising that literacy skills need to be improved; research shows that adults tend to overestimate their literacy skills' levels. Coupled with a lack of self-awareness, some adults feel no need to improve: they may have developed strategies for coping with their poor skills, such as relying on family members or work colleagues, or they may be embarrassed to admit to struggling with reading and writing. For adults in this category, there is evidence that recruitment messages focusing on other motivations – such as learning to benefit one's children, or to improve digital literacy skills – may help adults overcome or avoid the shame and taboos associated with poor literacy.

As this illustrates, motivation may be intrinsic (come from inside the individual or be about issues affecting the individual) or extrinsic (broader social factors). Motivation



is not only a personal trait, but conditioned by how learners see themselves and their possibilities and by their level of social capital. External motivators such as getting a better job or a higher salary may motivate adults, but Knowles and others argue that adults are more influenced by internal motivations such as increased job satisfaction, heightened self-esteem, better quality of life, and personal growth and development.

Carol Dweck's 2006 theory of motivation divides students into two types, based on the student's own theory about their own ability. Differences between the two groups only show when the student is challenged or faces difficulties:

- Fixed IQ theorists, who believe that their ability is fixed, probably at birth, and there is very little if anything they can do to improve it.
- Untapped Potential theorists, who believe that ability and success are due to learning, and learning requires time and effort. In the case of difficulty one must try harder, try another approach, or seek help etc.

In order to motivate adults to learn, and to keep on learning, the learning process must be positive and encouraging and learners should know that they are respected.

One critical dimension in this respect is in the language that is used. Seven guiding principles were developed by ELINET (the European Literacy Network) to inform choices of language when writing or speaking about adult literacy in advocacy, research and practice¹. These principles state that the aim should be to use terminology which:

- provides precision appropriate to communicative purpose
- communicates transparently and simply, as appropriate to audience, purpose and context
- is respectful
- is positive; that is, where possible avoids contributing to a deficit model
- recognises that 'people are not at levels, skills are'
- recognises that 'a beginner reader [or writer] is not a beginner thinker'
- is appropriate to linguistic and cultural context, as well as to audience and purpose.

Literacy should be seen as a spectrum rather than a binary system of people being either literate or illiterate. Accordingly, it is wrong to speak of 'illiterate' adults – almost everyone has a degree of knowledge of literacy practices in their social context and is therefore literate to a degree.

Literacy skills are part of people's linguistic repertoire, which, in today's multilingual and multicultural societies, can be diverse and multiple. For example, adults with low literacy levels in the official language of their place of residence may be literate in

¹ See <http://www.eli-net.eu/research/terminology/>. Accessed 12/02/16.



one or more other languages, or they may use a variety of the official language rather than the 'standard' form.

One critical motivation for many adults engaging in learning is the motivation of helping children with their learning. Parents play a central role in children's emergent literacy development. They are the first teachers, and shape children's oral language and communication abilities as well as their attitudes to reading by being good literacy role models, providing reading materials, and reading to the child. Family literacy programmes address parents or other adult caretakers and may have different aims:

- to improve young children's language and literacy development
- to improve the literacy skills of children and parents ('dual track')
- to support parents to enhance early literacy development of their children.

While some family literacy programmes focus only on literacy skills (e.g. as measured by test scores), other programmes take a more holistic approach by improving parents' literacy and parenting skills. Programmes may, for example, complement a focus on literacy skills with an emphasis on child or parent non-cognitive skills, e.g. self-regulation or good parenting practices.

ICT skills and Digital literacy skills

There are three important reasons for incorporating technology into strategies for the development of adults' literacy. Firstly, a great deal of adults' literacy practices now take place online and so any literacy education initiative that does not incorporate technology risks failing to equip adults with the digital literacy skills and knowledge necessary for them to deal with the demands placed on them by their individual literate environments. Secondly, adults often have busy lives with little time to spare to join formal or non-formal adult literacy education programmes. Technology can facilitate their engagement by making resources and support available that adults can access when and where they have time. Thirdly, technology provides the possibility of including multimedia and interactive resources that can make adult literacy learning more attractive and realistic, encouraging and even inspiring adults to develop their reading and writing practices.

Technology may be used to deliver part of an adult literacy learning programme in combination with traditional face to face learning (blended learning) or to provide stand-alone online learning. In some cases it may enable cost-effective expansion of the learning offer.



Adult Literacy Provision in Europe

Knowles' theory of adult learning is not without criticism. It has been argued, for example, that it is a prescriptive, rather than a descriptive model which does not take into account adult learning as it happens in practice, and the specific social contexts in which it takes place, and the purposes of it. Therefore critics of andragogy suggest that taking note of the different contexts and practices in which adults engage is more important than identifying what is intrinsically different about adults.

Provision of adult literacy education refers to formal or non-formal classes and other learning opportunities aimed at improving the reading and writing skills of adults. In describing the system of adult literacy provision we should consider the broadest possible spectrum of opportunities available to adults and understand that a diversity of providers and types of provision are required. These may take the form of formal courses leading to accreditation, but they may equally be non-formal, with the main aim being to build confidence and to engage adults, who may have had negative prior experiences of learning and for whom a formal course is inappropriate. Such non-formal provision may be delivered in a class with a teacher, but it may also take the form of a reading circle or one-to-one support in a workshop.

In effect all adult literacy provision is aimed at closing the gap by supporting adults to acquire the literacy skills that they need and without which they may be at risk of failing to meet the demands placed on them as citizens, employees and family members.

There is a great deal of information for policy makers to draw on from the OECD's 2012 Survey of Adult Skills and from other surveys to identify groups of adults most likely to have poor literacy and this can be used to design and target awareness raising campaigns and learning provision. However, policy makers should also be aware that while adults with low proficiency in literacy are more likely than the rest of the adult population to exhibit certain characteristics (e.g. non-completion of upper secondary level education, low-level employment, lack of engagement in civic affairs etc.), the majority of them do not. Many adults with poor levels of literacy are successful citizens, employees and family members, but would also benefit from improving their literacy.

Given that so much of adult learning takes place informally outside of classrooms, just through experience, it is also important for educators to take note of the literate environment. Adults' reading and writing skills and practices respond to and are shaped by the demands on and supports for their reading and writing in any particular domain. Accordingly, consideration should be given to these demands and the support available to adults in all areas of their lives. It is important to offer a broad range of reading and writing opportunities so that adults are motivated to make use of their literacy skills, as it is the use of reading and writing that enhances people's literacy skills.



A positive literate environment is one in which:

- adults are encouraged and supported in engaging with written material
- care is taken in workplaces and other public spaces to ensure that written communication is accessible and that employees are supported in using reading and writing as part of their working practices
- guidelines on clarity of written communication are agreed and followed by organisations, both public and private, which engage in written communication with the public
- examples of poor written communication are highlighted and good practice is promoted and celebrated
- national communication campaigns increase awareness of issues around adult literacy and contribute to de-stigmatisation of poor literacy among adults
- adults with poor literacy are encouraged to join flexible programmes of adult literacy education
- there is a comprehensive and coherent national infrastructure for adult literacy provision
- reading and writing for pleasure are promoted and celebrated as of central importance to national culture
- there is a vibrant and varied culture of national and local publishing and a well-resourced network of public libraries.



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