

Theory and Practice of Adult and Higher Education

reviewed by Michelle D. Young - July 02, 2018

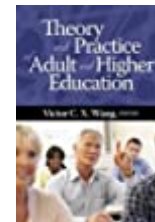
Title: Theory and Practice of Adult and Higher Education

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For years, American higher education operated on a model of academic disciplines, sprawling course catalogues, lecture-driven teaching, and pervasive testing established in the early 19th century. Within this model, academic rigor was measured in part by the number of students who failed a course, particularly courses that were “gateways” to specific majors. When a student failed, it was seen as a reflection of their effort or intelligence rather than the instruction they received. Things have changed, however, and student learning and engagement have become more central to the work of higher education. There is growing interest in changing the way higher education is organized, and in implementing programs that support student retention, student learning and engagement, and the development and delivery of quality teaching.

Higher education faculty may not consider the fields of adult education or higher education to be their areas of expertise, but their daily practice is influenced by both. As a professor of educational leadership at the University of Virginia, I work with adult learners in a complex higher education environment. As such, I found Viktor Wang’s edited volume, *Theory and Practice of Adult and Higher Education*, to be a valuable collection of essays, providing insight into the concept of andragogy and how it differs from pedagogy, questioning the ethnocentricity of adult learning theory and teaching practices, unpacking different perspectives on transformative learning, and reframing faculty development as adult education.

In Chapter Four, which takes up the concept of andragogy, Wang and Hansman share the core set of principles of andragogy: (a) the learner’s need to know, (b) self-concept of the learner, (c) prior experience of the learner, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learning, and (f) motivation to learn. Building on this discussion, other chapter authors tackle topics such as how adults learn, the social construction of learning, transformative learning, the insight into adult learning provided by brain research, and the importance of mentoring in supporting personal and professional growth.

Mezirow’s (2000) work on transformational learning theory plays a significant role in a number of the chapters. Mezirow observed that “a defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know to avoid the threat of chaos” (p. 3). Adults create complex meaning systems to bring coherence to their experiences. The act of identifying patterns and making sense of them in multiple ways is what leads to transformative learning. This type of learning requires a deep awareness of one’s own assumptions and expectations, the ability to critically reflect and engage in reflective discourse, a willingness to examine one’s assumptions in light of new and different information, and a willingness to adjust one’s frames of reference.

Transformational learning theory has proven to be an important framework for the preparation of educational professionals. Like many professionals, educators require a change of perspective when stepping into a new role. For example, when teachers step out of the classroom and into an organizational leadership role, their assumptions are challenged and reframed. Without a redefined frame of reference, an individual is unable to negotiate the multidimensional expectations of their new roles. Similarly, when educators are challenged by different perspectives on equity and social justice, transformative learning experiences often prove essential to their adoption of new frames of reference and habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000).

Providing a counter to both Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning and Knowles’ (1968) concept of andragogy, Chapter One, by Stephen Brookfield, focuses on the ethnocentric nature of these and other adult learning theories. He argues that the dominant notions of how adults learn and what motivates them to learn reflect only a small portion of the increasingly diverse adult population. Subsequently, he makes the case that efforts to include diverse perspectives within the field of adult learning have failed due to what he refers to as “repressive tolerance” (p. 1). While not necessarily intentional or conscious, the way the field of adult education has broadened the number of perspectives available has resulted in new perspectives being positioned as “other” to dominant Eurocentric perspectives, fetishizing them as exotic. Brookfield then uses the work of Lucius Outlaw and Cornel West to explore alternative ways of thinking about adult learning.

Perspective and culture emerge in Chapter Six as well, which focuses on the transnational delivery of professional degree programs. The author raises questions about the assumptions that are often made regarding the relevance and appropriateness of U.S. program content and delivery methods for adult students in other countries. Chapter Seven takes a more practical approach, presenting a definition of global learning intended to provide guidance for program design along with several case examples.

Finally, in Chapter Fourteen, Benoit critiques the tradition of assuming that advanced subject knowledge prepares faculty members to translate their expertise into excellence in teaching. Depending on one's discipline, the path to becoming a researcher can be completely devoid of learning to teach about one's research. Benoit argues that greater attention to adult learning and development can offer insights into supporting the learning and development of faculty throughout their professional careers. To some degree, this is already happening; many colleges and universities have established teaching centers, and more doctoral programs are providing teaching internships or mini-courses on effective college-level teaching. Whether and how these higher education programs draw from adult education theory and research remains to be seen.

In the preface to his book, Wang points to the "lack of scholarly work that connects existing theories and practices across the two fields" of higher education and adult learning (p. viii). While not explicitly taking up this problem, the scholarship included in this volume makes evident the importance of adult learning theory to the work of higher education.

References

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