



Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice

Merriam, Sharan B.; and Bierema, Laura L.
Wiley, 2013

Book Review

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Sharan Merriam and Laura Bierema aim to present “an overview of the major theories and research in adult learning in language that those new to adult education can understand.” They also seek to “[point] out applications of these ideas to practice” (xii). They have certainly hit the mark. They discuss relevant theory clearly and concisely, including multiple perspectives and ethical issues. Graphs, tables, and charts illustrate complexity and detail. Each chapter ends with a summary of its main points, a list of its highlights, and suggestions plus resources for pedagogical development and classroom practice. These features make *Adult Learning* eminently useful for college, university, and seminary professors, pedagogical development professionals, and anyone else who introduces adults to new ideas or new skills.

Adult Learning falls roughly into four parts. Chapters 1 and 2 set the stage. First, the authors examine the social and developmental contexts of adult learners. In order to thrive in a global and diverse society that values knowledge and technology, we must develop habits of lifelong learning. But what kind of learning best serves our needs? Should it change our behavior? Develop our bodies, minds, and spirits? Train our brains? Socialize us? Help us make sense of our experiences? The authors outline five approaches to consider based on these questions.

Chapters 3 to 5 are devoted to the latest research on three prominent theories of adult learning. Andragogy (as opposed to pedagogy) presumes that learners are self-directed, experienced, preparing for particular social roles, and ready to apply what they learn. Self-directed learning, although facilitated by teachers, makes adult learners responsible for what they learn and how they learn it. Transformative learning uses critical reflection and dialogue to help learners rethink their worldviews.

The next four chapters build on significant components of adult learning theory, exploring the roles of experience, body and spirit, motivation, and the brain. Adult learning is not limited to the cerebral dimensions of memory, intelligence, and cognition. It also involves activity and emotion; evocations of the past and incentives for the future. Merriam and Bierema discuss pedagogies for all five ways of knowing and end with three chapters on contemporary contexts for learning. These include digital technologies, approaches to critical thinking, and cultural diversity.

Adult Learning succeeds because the authors practice what they preach. They address an audience of adults who are developing themselves for a social role -- the role of a teacher. At the same time, they assume that their readers are not highly trained in pedagogical theory. As they share their expertise, therefore, they appeal to their audience's teaching experience and motivations to hone the craft of teaching. They address contemporary higher educational contexts, help faculty think critically about teaching practice by presenting multiple perspectives, and offer concrete suggestions for applying new pedagogies. *Adult Learning* is a book to be read once, consulted often, put into practice, and shared with others.

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