

The impact of psychology on adult learning

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ABSTRACT: Developing effective educational practices for adults hinges on a deep understanding of the psychological principles that govern their learning processes. The motivational drivers, learning requirements, and obstacles faced by adults returning to education are substantially different from those of younger learners. When educators integrate established psychological frameworks into their instructional design, they can create learning experiences that are more meaningful, captivating, and ultimately, more effective. This paper explores the profound influence of psychology on adult education, detailing how various psychological theories can be leveraged to enhance the pedagogical process for this demographic.

Keywords: *Adult Pedagogy, Andragogy, Cognitive Psychology, Lifelong Learning, Educational Neuroscience, Learner Motivation, Instructional Design*

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education is witnessing a significant increase in the enrollment of non-traditional adult students. This demographic shift necessitates that educators and institutions move beyond conventional, youth-focused

educational paradigms to more effectively cater to the distinct learning needs of adults. Prevailing theories in cognitive psychology and sociocultural constructivism, while valuable, do not offer a complete framework for understanding adult learning and development on their own. Historically, these perspectives have been considered incompatible, stemming from divergent theoretical origins.

However, a more holistic understanding can be achieved by reconciling these two viewpoints, which respectively emphasize the internal mental processes and the external cognitive influences. Billett (1998) proposed a path toward this reconciliation by identifying common ground and areas of compatibility between these constructivist theories, suggesting a more robust foundation for explaining how adults think and act. The convergence of these perspectives is supported by contemporary theories that view an individual's acquisition of knowledge as a socially mediated, interpretive, and often contested journey. Furthermore, the concept of ontogeny, or life history, helps to bridge the gap between Piagetian and Vygotskian thought, rendering their key differences compatible. Consequently, any comprehensive discussion of knowledge construction and continuous development in adults must consider the dual contributions of both internal cognitive functions and external social inputs. Adding another layer to this understanding, research across education, psychology, and neuroscience indicates that emotions are a critical component of the learning process.

Review of Research in Adult Learning Psychology

Recent scholarly work has explored various facets of adult learning through a psychological lens. For instance, a study on the spiritual identity development of young adult female postgraduate psychology students in South Africa utilized reflective writing and interviews to gather data. The findings, analyzed through interpretative phenomenological analysis, suggest that while spiritual identity exploration is a lifelong process, emerging adulthood offers a fertile ground for deepened development. This development is contextual and is notably fostered by postgraduate psychology training and exposure to diverse spiritual and religious viewpoints. The process of reflecting on significant life challenges leads to sophisticated meaning-making about one's purpose and the creation of a personal

spiritual narrative. This highlights a reciprocal relationship between the formation of a spiritual identity and the practice of psychology, positioning spirituality, values, and worldviews as vital elements of the therapeutic process for many individuals.

In a different vein, the applicability of Montessori educational methods to adult learners is being explored. Although some elements of this approach have been adapted for specific adult populations, such as those with learning disabilities or dementia, a comprehensive validation for general adult education has been lacking. An exploratory study by August (2023) provides a rationale for this adaptation by examining the foundational goals of Montessori education and Maria Montessori's own concepts of human development, concluding with initial recommendations for a Montessori-based adult education framework.

The professional development of educators who teach languages to older adults has also been a focus of recent research. One qualitative study investigated the use of one-to-one counseling to support these educators. Using open-ended questionnaires and a grounded theory approach, the study found that scaffolded reflective practice was instrumental in developing the educators' awareness of their learners' autonomy. While junior and mid-career educators emphasized the value of peer and instructor feedback, senior educators found instructional clarity and the direct application of theory to practice to be most crucial for fostering learner autonomy. This suggests that enhancing educators' understanding of effective instructional strategies can also bolster their own learning skills. Such findings have significant implications for designing professional development programs for educators working with older adults.

Further research on Hungarian foreign language teachers highlights their strategies for fostering autonomy in senior learners. Through semi-structured interviews, it was found that these teachers employ communicative language teaching methods that are adapted to the altered cognitive capacities and different learning interests of older adults. Learner-centeredness emerged as a key principle, both in general skill development and in the specific promotion of autonomy through methods like one-to-one counseling. The teachers stressed the importance of raising self-awareness in the learning process as a cornerstone of developing learner autonomy.

Fundamentally, the psychological profile of an adult is a significant determinant of their identity as a learner. The motivation for an adult to enroll in and persist with their education is often tied to the personal attainment of their learning goals, with the facilitator playing a crucial supportive role. The learning process is highly individual, driven by what each person finds motivating. Two core assumptions underpin the adult learning perspective: first, that learning is an internal, cognitive event with little emphasis on the external environment ; and second, that a universal set of principles can be established to help all adults become more effective learners, regardless of their background. Key topics grounded in this perspective include learner participation and motivation.

Effective Learning Methodologies for Adults

Several learning theories and styles are particularly relevant to adult education.

- **Perceptual Learning:** This approach focuses on honing the ability to discern subtle differences between two or more stimuli. A musician's ability to distinguish between nearly identical notes is a classic example of perceptual learning in action. This practice of identifying nuanced distinctions helps learners to more deeply comprehend the material and to differentiate between crucial and non-essential information. Rather than a superficial engagement with the subject matter, perceptual learning demands a deeper dive into the detailed differences between related concepts. It also emphasizes the development of speed in identifying critical information, making it an efficient approach. This method is considered more profound than traditional approaches like declarative learning (the memorization of facts) or procedural learning (the memorization of steps in a process), as it fosters genuine understanding over rote memorization.
- **Self-Directed Learning:** Adult learners often thrive when they can take an independent approach to their education. Championed by Malcolm Knowles, the theory of self-directed learning posits that adults are most motivated when they have control over the what, how, and when of their learning journey. Educators can facilitate this by acting as guides, providing necessary

resources, and empowering learners to define their own educational objectives.

- **Cooperative Learning:** This methodology leverages group engagement to enhance individual skills. The power of cooperative learning lies in the shared pursuit of knowledge, where participants collaborate to ensure every member achieves a comprehensive understanding of the material. This approach mitigates the sense of competition that can often arise in educational settings, transforming students into active participants in their own learning process. The foundation of this method is Social Interdependence Theory, which suggests that in a group, each individual's success is linked to the efforts of their teammates. The goal is to cultivate "positive interdependence," a state where every member understands that group cooperation is essential to achieving their personal goals. This theory is backed by extensive research indicating that cooperative efforts lead to greater achievement than competitive or individualistic approaches.
- **Motivation Theories:** Understanding what drives adult learners is paramount. Psychological theories distinguish between intrinsic motivation (acting for inherent satisfaction) and extrinsic motivation (acting for external rewards). By discerning these motivational drivers, educators can tailor their strategies to either cultivate intrinsic interest or strategically use extrinsic rewards to boost engagement.
- **Dual Coding:** The theory of dual coding suggests that information is more easily retrieved if it is stored in two distinct ways: verbally and visually. Neuroimaging data confirms that our brains process verbal and visual information differently, with each medium offering unique recall benefits. While visual information is generally easier for most people to recall, verbal learning is more effective when information must be remembered sequentially. Therefore, the choice of medium should depend on the required style of recall, not on a presumed "learning style" of the student. In fact, extensive studies have failed to provide conclusive evidence for the existence

of fixed learning styles, and learners are better served by focusing on proven methods like dual coding.

As Merriam (2017) notes, although it is widely acknowledged that adults learn continuously throughout their lives, the strong association of learning with formal schooling often leads adults to not recognize or value their own ongoing learning experiences. The learning environment for adults must be highly attuned to their needs and interests, as long as these are aligned with policy provisions. A successful adult education program is heavily dependent on the quality of its learning environment, which encompasses the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts of the instruction. This environment has the power to either significantly enhance or detract from the educational program's success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, psychology provides an indispensable framework for understanding and enhancing adult learning. By applying psychological principles, educators can create learning environments that are not only more effective and productive but also more encouraging and supportive of the diverse needs of adult learners. From strategies that boost motivation and facilitate goal-setting to the implementation of active learning techniques, a psychological perspective can guide teaching practices that foster both knowledge acquisition and personal development. Ultimately, a nuanced understanding of the psychological factors influencing adult learning is essential for empowering these learners and ensuring their success on their educational paths.

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