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Models of adult learning: a literature review by Karin Tusting and David Barton, 2006, NIACE, Co-published with the NRDC ISBN 978 1 86201 280 6, 51pp. £9.95

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In view of the widespread confusions about the relationship between learning and teaching, and the considerable paucity of information about adult learning, it is indeed useful to find this excellent short introduction to a range of models of learning. It is the kind of accessible work on which a great deal of thinking about how to teach adult or older learners can be based. The book is much more than a review of other books about adult learning, as its title might imply, as the authors deal very clearly and in a practical manner with different theories about learning and makes practical and sensible points about their relevance to adult learning.

The bibliography of over 100 books includes many of the classic writers on learning, such as Asubel, Bruner, Dewey, Freire, Gagne, Lave and Wenger, Luria, Mezirow, and Schon, as well as a good coverage of those who have dealt with adult learning, such as Brockett & Hiemstra, Brookfield, Calder, Edwards, Knowles, Merriam and Usher.

Approaches taken among these writers has determined the way the book is organised, in two almost equal parts. Thus, it first inspects key theories from the general psychology of learning, namely behaviourism, cognitivism, developmental theories, activity theory and social constructivism, situated cognition and brain science. Second, it considers the characteristics of adult learning, and briefly explains humanism, andragogy, self-directed and informal learning, as well as and learning how to learn, reflective, experiential and transformative learning, with brief comments about postmodernism and the newly emerging contexts in which learning takes place.

The writers' goal is to set a view of adult learning beside, or even against, predominant views of learning that have been developed in the context of children learning within a formal educational system. Within such systems, in every country of the world, the key issues are about how to teach classes, given the well-known diversity of abilities, individual personalities, and, more frequently than ever before, of age. Not only do we have a growing number of mixed age classrooms across our primary and secondary school sector, we also have eight out of ten students in further education colleges over the age of 19 (*Eight in Ten: Adult Learners in Further Education*, The independent Committee of Enquiry review of the state of adult learning in colleges of further education in England, 2005, NIACE, ISBN: 1 86201 278 4, £9.95).

Ever since formal education became widespread, perennial dissatisfaction with the outcomes of education systems, both pre- and post- school, has led to swings and roundabouts in theory, or, some would say, in fashion, as administrators and political leaders have attempted to improve matters. None have succeeded, any more than other fields that endeavour to control and influence the immense complexities of human character and behaviour. In recent years, the reliance has been on the apparently commonsense, but in fact extremely vague notion that individuals have different learning styles, and teachers need to accommodate these. This is such a pervasive belief, and so unfounded and in fact unworkable for teaching,

that I feel it is worth devoting some time in this review to an attempt to persuade readers not to give in to it for adult teaching and learning.

It is a pity that this book's research was done in 2003, so that it missed the recent and exceptional F.Coffield et al (2004) *Learning Styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning: A systematic and critical review*. Learning Skills Research Centre. (The full work was, and may still be, freely available from: <http://www.lsrc.ac.uk/publications/index.asp>) which once and for all demolishes the vapid acceptance of ideas about learning styles. The writers point out that: "the proliferation of concepts, instruments and pedagogical strategies, together with the sheer number of dichotomies in the literature conveys something of the current conceptual confusion. We have, in this review, for instance, referred to:

convergers v. divergers
verbalisers v. imagers
holists v. serialists
deep v. surface learning

etc, to a total of over 35 dichotomies. [which]betokens a serious failure of accumulated theoretical coherence and an absence of well-grounded findings". (*op. cit.* p.136) They go on to argue that in practice, this has led to "labelling, vested interests and overblown claims" because "the temptation to classify, label and stereotype is clearly difficult to resist" (p.138), and "the commercial industry that has grown around particular models makes independent researchers think twice before publicly criticising either the shortcomings of the models or the hyperbolic claims made for them" (p.139).

The vacuum created by the absence of an agreed theory or theories of post-16 pedagogy, and by the lack of widespread understanding about learning has enabled the versions of 'best practice' produced by" such unsupported claims to gain a prominence they do not deserve. They conclude by saying that "some of the best known widely used [notions of learning styles] have such serious weaknesses (low reliability, poor validity and negligible impact on pedagogy)... We therefore advise against pedagogical intervention based solely on any of the learning style" literature (p.139) until there has been "independent, critical, longitudinal and large-scale studies with experimental and control groups to test the claims for pedagogy made" (p.144).

Although the above paragraph is true, there remains a serious question about what the statement presupposes, namely that teaching is a kind of converse of learning, the other side of the coin as it were, such that if only we knew the truth about learning, that would clearly tell us how to teach. But logic suggest a different presupposition. The very diversity of learners coupled with the self-evident fact that they *can learn* in the face of *any* kind of teaching, together indicate that teaching and learning are not mirror images of each other.

My own work in training teachers of adult or older learners is focussed less on learning theory than on teaching theory – though, obviously, learning is the goal and pre-supposed end-result of the teaching process. For this reason I would suggest that the key issues for teaching adult or older learners is around the theories of andragogy which is given reasonable space by Tusting and Barton (pp. 24-26). The assertions about andragogy and the claims of difference between andragogy and pedagogy have been the subject of considerable debate for at least 200 years. There is an excellent overview of the area from the very useful **infed** - an open, independent and not-for-profit site put together by a small group of educators at <http://www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/b-andra.htm>.

They point out that the adult education field has been highly influenced by Malcolm Knowles crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners, such that they are so significantly different from child learners that traditional pedagogy needs to be replaced by people *mature*,

- they *move from being dependent toward being self-directed*;
- they *accumulates experience as a resource for learning*.

- they develop a *readiness to learn*
- they focus on *immediacy and therefore shift from being centred on the subject to being interested in solving the current problems.*
- they develop intrinsic rather than extrinsic *motivation to learn*

Useful critiques of the notion are in this Tusting and Barton 's section on andragogy. Taking this together with the avowed difficulty in conceptualising the education and training of adults in *Eight in Ten (op cit, p. 28)*, and the succinct overview of policy issues outlined in the latter book, the 7 conclusions reached by Tusting and are eminently sensible. Though they refer to learning we can infer that a teacher needs to take account of the fact that adult or older learners (my paraphrasing of the book's final pages 45-46)

1. have purposes in learning related to their own practices and roles outside the classroom;
2. have a drive towards self-direction;
3. have already learned how to learn and can benefit from this knowledge;
4. do learn all the time in the everyday world, and such learning can be built upon in the classroom;
5. are experienced in trying to resolve problems in their own lives, which, again can be built upon in the classroom;
6. are, like all learners, highly individual, so that no teacher can ever be certain of success with all those in a class;
7. can understand their own learning processes, and this can have a radical effect on them, personally and socially.

Many of these conclusions need to be examined in much more detail, and it is to be hoped that further moves towards the training of teachers of adult and older learners will lead not only to better practice but to funding for more fundamental research into the needs, characteristics and desired outcomes for this burgeoning social group.

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