



THIRD EDITION

Learning in Adulthood

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

Sharan B. Merriam

Rosemary S. Caffarella • Lisa M. Baumgartner

J JOSSEY-BASS

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PREFACE

Learning in adulthood is an intensely personal activity. Yet at the same time, a multibillion-dollar enterprise has arisen in response to adult learning interests—an enterprise that spends more dollars than elementary schools, high schools, and postsecondary schools combined. Indeed, the field of adult and continuing education is characterized by a bewildering array of programs, agencies, and personnel working to assist adults in their learning. It is precisely the focus on adults as learners, however, that unites an otherwise extraordinarily diverse field. It is also the life context of adults and some of the distinguishing characteristics of the adult learning process that differentiate adult education from other kinds of education. To facilitate the process of learning, it is especially important to know who the adult learner is, how the social context shapes the learning that adults are engaged in, why adults are involved in learning activities, how adults learn, and how aging affects learning ability. *Learning in Adulthood* addresses these topics, among others.

There is a voluminous literature on adult learning, ranging from technical articles on various aspects of adult learning to handbooks, guides, and pamphlets summarizing material for the new instructor of adult students. If one goes to a database such as the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), which catalogues journal articles, monographs, conference proceedings, papers, and so on, or does some random exploring on the World Wide Web, one encounters thousands of citations under the topic “adult learning.” Further, there are dozens of books with either a central or secondary focus on adult learning.

For this third edition of *Learning in Adulthood* we have paid particular attention to work published since the last edition of the book. This third edition of *Learning in Adulthood* builds on material in the 1999 edition, bringing together the important contributions

of the past decade to our understanding of adult learning. While we have preserved important foundational material (such as a discussion of andragogy), we have also brought to bear the most recent thinking and research. We have strived to put together a comprehensive overview and synthesis of what we know about adult learning: the context in which it takes place, who the participants are, what they learn and why, the nature of the learning process itself, new approaches to adult learning, the development of theory in adult learning, and other issues relevant to understanding adult learning.

The book also takes into account recent work in sociology, philosophy, critical social theory, and psychology. In most writing on adult learning, the sociocultural perspective has been widely neglected in favor of the predominant orientation to the individual learner and how to facilitate her or his learning. In addition to the focus on the learner, we attend to the context in which learning takes place and to learners' interactive relationship with that context and with the learning activity itself. We look at how the social structure influences what is offered and who participates, how the sociocultural context creates particular developmental needs and interests, and how social factors such as race, class, and gender shape learning.

This book is intended primarily for educators of adults. We have organized the material so that it will make sense to readers who are new to adult education and at the same time will challenge those who are already familiar with the knowledge base of the field. The organization and presentation of this material reflect our efforts over the years to find the best way to organize courses, workshops, and seminars in adult learning and development for audiences with varying levels of expertise. We have endeavored to put together a book that is at once readable, thorough, and up-to-date in its coverage. In particular, the book is designed for use in courses in adult learning. In addition to those associated with the field of adult education itself, however, those in counseling, health, social work, human resource development, administration, and instructional technology and in such institutions as libraries, churches, business and industry, and higher education often deal on a daily basis with adult learners. We also intend this book to be a resource for practitioners in these fields who would like to know more about adult learners and the learning process.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

This third edition of *Learning in Adulthood* is substantially reorganized from the previous edition. We realized that in most courses using this text, the chapters specific to adult learning theory and models were read before chapters on traditional learning theory, cognition, and psychosocial developmental frameworks. We have organized accordingly. This edition is divided into four parts. Part One describes the context of adult learning. Part Two focuses on theories and models of adult learning. The chapters in Part Three address newer approaches to adult learning, and those in Part Four present material on topics that intersect with adult learning, such as memory and cognition, adult development, and so on.

The chapters in Part One, “Adult Learning in Contemporary Society,” focus on the context of adult learning. Chapter One sets the sociocultural context for adult learning in North America. In it, we discuss three forces—demographics, globalization, and technology—that have shaped adult learning today. It is important to understand how the interaction of those three factors has led to changes in both what adults want to learn and the learning opportunities provided for them. Directly related to the sociocultural context of adult learning are the environments where learning takes place, the subject of Chapter Two. These range from educational and noneducational institutions, such as hospitals and government agencies, to nonformal and community-based agencies, to incidental and informal learning that is more self-directed than structured by others. New in this edition is the online environment, which interfaces with formal, nonformal, and informal modes of learning. Also in this chapter we explore the concepts of organizational learning and the learning organization, and lifelong learning and the learning society. Chapter Three summarizes the literature on who participates in primarily formal adult learning activities, why people participate, and what they choose to learn. We also take a critical look at key questions of access and opportunity, and examine the gaps between the rhetoric and the reality in the provision of formal and nonformal learning activities in our society.

Part Two, “Adult Learning Theory and Models,” builds on foundational material in adult learning, material that is at the heart of our field of adult education. The topics covered in these

chapters represent the field's efforts in distinguishing itself from the education of children. We begin Chapter Four with a description and critique of the best known of these theories: Knowles's (1980) concept of andragogy. Based on five characteristics of adult learners, andragogy focuses on the adult learner as distinguished from preadult learners. In this chapter we also cover three other models of learning, two of which are fairly recent additions to our literature. McClusky's (1970) theory of margin, which has great intuitive appeal to adult learners introduced to it, is explained first. This is followed by Illeris's (2004a) three dimensions of learning model, and the most recent iteration of Jarvis's (2006) learning model. In Chapter Five we explore the rich array of work that has been completed on self-directed learning. Addressed are the goals and processes of self-directed learning, the concept of self-directedness as a personal attribute of the learner, recent approaches to self-directed learning, and some suggestions for building research and theory in this area. Currently, transformational learning has taken center stage in research and writing. Chapter Six summarizes the development of transformational learning, reviews the recent research in this area, and examines unresolved issues inherent in this approach to adult learning. In Chapter Seven, the last chapter of Part Two, we look closely at the role of experience in learning; both how adult learning builds on prior experience and how experience shapes learning. The concepts of experiential learning, reflective practice, and situated cognition are also examined in this chapter.

Part Three, "Newer Approaches to Adult Learning," contains two totally new chapters. We felt that the burgeoning interest in embodied or somatic learning, spirituality and learning, and narrative approaches to learning warranted a chapter (Chapter Eight) in this edition of *Learning in Adulthood*. We uncovered so much recent material in these areas that, had space allowed, we could have devoted more than one chapter to these topics. Chapter Nine on non-Western approaches to adult learning is also new. Although the great majority of the knowledge base represented in *Learning in Adulthood* is from a Western perspective, representing cultural values of privileging the individual learner and cognitive processes over more holistic approaches, we wanted to introduce readers to

other epistemologies, other ways of thinking about learning and knowing. We hope we have done that through brief introductions to five non-Western perspectives. The final chapter in Part Three is an update of critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist pedagogy. These three perspectives draw from literature outside the field of adult education. Scholars have applied these perspectives to our field, enlarging our understanding by inviting us to question how the structural inequities based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, and so on affect learning.

Part Four, which we have titled “Learning and Development,” brings together material from philosophy, psychology, sociology, biology, and so on, that has a bearing on adult learning. In Chapter Eleven, on traditional learning theory, we review five traditional theories about learning—behaviorism, humanism, cognitivism, social learning theory, and constructivism—along with their implications for adult learning. Where one aligns oneself with these theories manifests itself in the view of the adult learner, the role of instructor-facilitator, and the goals of the learning transaction itself. Chapter Twelve focuses on adults’ developmental characteristics. Beginning with biological and psychological perspectives on adult development, we move to sociocultural and integrated perspectives. The work on adult development in recent years places less emphasis on age and stage models and more on the effect of such factors as race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Much has been written lately about cognitive development in adulthood, and so this is treated separately in Chapter Thirteen. Here we review several theoretical models of cognitive development as well as present the concept of dialectical thinking. Chapter Fourteen reviews the work on intelligence, especially as it has been studied from a developmental or aging perspective. Drawing on several disciplines and summarizing recent work on memory and aging, expertise, cognitive and learning styles, and brain-based research, Chapter Fifteen is one of the few compilations of its kind in an adult learning textbook.

Finally, in the last chapter we step back from the accumulated knowledge base to summarize and integrate the material on adult learning presented in earlier chapters. Chapter Sixteen also reflects how we ourselves have come to think about learning in adulthood.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This third edition of *Learning in Adulthood* is a direct response to the field's burgeoning literature base on research and theory in adult learning and the need for a single, comprehensive, up-to-date textbook to use in our adult learning classes. In a very real sense, it has been the students in our programs and the participants in our workshops and seminars who have challenged us to revise and update the previous edition of the book. We were pleased that Lisa Baumgartner agreed to join our team for this edition. Her fresh perspective has undoubtedly made this edition of *Learning in Adulthood* the best yet! Others, of course, have been of invaluable assistance at various stages of the project. David Brightman, our editor at Jossey-Bass, was enormously supportive in assisting us through the process. Colleagues Ralph Brockett, Carolyn Clark, Bradley Courtenay, Ed Taylor, and Libby Tisdell unselfishly provided us with updated materials and took time out from their own work to read and critique draft chapters. Their comments, insights, and suggestions considerably strengthened this book. A special thanks goes to Young Sek Kim, Ph.D. student and graduate research assistant at the University of Georgia, for tracking down references, assisting in editing, and seeing to the technical matter of getting the book ready for the publisher. To all of you we offer our heartfelt thanks. Finally, we thank our family members and friends for their support and patience over the last year.

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SHARAN B. MERRIAM
 ROSEMARY S. CAFFARELLA
 LISA M. BAUMGARTNER

THE AUTHORS

Sharan B. Merriam is professor of adult education at the University of Georgia. Merriam's research and writing activities have focused on the foundations of adult education, adult development, adult learning, and qualitative research methods. She has published more than twenty books and dozens of chapters and articles and held major editorship roles over the past twenty-five years. For five years she was coeditor of *Adult Education Quarterly*, the major research and theory journal in adult education. Currently she is coeditor for the book series *Professional Practices in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning*. She has won the Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education for three different books. Various of her books have been translated into Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and French. Based on her widespread contributions to the field of adult education, Merriam has been inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame and was the first to receive the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education's Career Achievement award. She has served on steering committees for the annual North American Adult Education Research Conference, the Qualitative Research in Education Conference held annually at the University of Georgia, and the Commission of Professors of Adult Education. She has conducted workshops and seminars on adult learning and qualitative research throughout North America and overseas, including countries in southern Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. In 1998 she was a senior Fulbright scholar to Malaysia, and in 2006 a visiting scholar to South Korea.

Rosemary S. Caffarella is professor and chair of the Department of Education in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University. Her research and writing activities have focused on adult learning, program planning, and designing culturally appropriate programs for adults. Caffarella has authored or coauthored seven books—two of which have been translated into Chinese and one into Japanese—and numerous book chapters and articles. She received the prestigious Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education for *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (2nd ed., 1999), coauthored with Sharan Merriam. Her most recent book, *Planning Programs for Adult Learners* (2nd ed., 2002), is a detailed guide for adult educators and trainers working in a variety of settings. In addition, in 2003 she was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from the College of Lifelong Learning in the University of New Hampshire system. She has conducted workshops and presented papers and lectures throughout the United States, Canada, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Australia. Her current project, in partnership with the Universiti Putra Malaysia and a number of other Malaysian organizations and individuals, is educating Malaysian women, their families, and health care professionals about breast cancer treatment and prevention. The project highlights working in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner in a multicultural nation.

Lisa M. Baumgartner is an associate professor of adult education at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb. Her research and writing focus on adult learning and development and women's contributions to the field of adult education. A recipient of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Cyril O. Houle Scholars Research Grant for Emerging Scholars in Adult Education, she completed a study on civil rights activist Septima P. Clark's lifelong contributions to social justice adult education. In addition, she coedited *Adult Learning and Development: Multicultural Stories* with Sharan Merriam (1999). She has served on the steering committee for the annual North American Adult Education Research Conference. She is a consulting editor for the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* and the *Qualitative Report*. In 2004, she received the Commission of Professors of Adult Education Early Career Award, which honors individuals in the early stages of their academic career who have made significant contributions in scholarship and service to the field.

LEARNING IN ADULTHOOD

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PART ONE

ADULT LEARNING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

It is very much the perspective of this book that learning is a personal process—but a process that is shaped by the context of adult life and the society in which one lives. Compare how industrialization of the early years of the twentieth century affected what an adult needed and wanted to learn with the knowledge economy of the early twenty-first century. This learning in turn affects the social context. For example, as we become more technologically savvy, businesses respond by developing more sophisticated systems and gadgets that then require us to keep learning. It is indeed an interactive process between the learner and the social context. The three chapters in Part One explore the sociocultural context of the United States, the range of learning opportunities available to adults in this context, and who takes advantage of these opportunities and why.

Chapter One describes three factors characteristic of American society today that affect what adults want to learn. First, dramatic changes are occurring in the demographic base of our society. Adults outnumber those under eighteen years old for the first time ever. Moreover, the percentage of the population over age sixty-five continues to grow, commanding the attention of policymakers, businesspeople, and educators alike. Our population as a whole is also better educated than ever before, and there is more cultural and ethnic diversity. Therefore, there are simply

more adults seeking learning opportunities, as well as more groups of adults with particular learning needs.

The second and third factors shaping the learning enterprise are globalization and technology. These are very much interrelated, of course; technology has had an enormous impact on the economy. Robotics and automation displace production workers but create other jobs; technology has fostered whole new work structures, such as job-sharing and telecommuting. The effect of the global economy and technological advances on the nature of adult learning is staggering. Adults find that they must continue their learning past formal schooling in order to function at work, at home, and in their communities. The need for new knowledge, for updating old information, for retraining, has resulted in a multibillion-dollar educational enterprise.

Some of this learning takes place in formal settings sponsored by myriad institutions and agencies. As might be expected, business and industry and educational institutions offer a large number of adult learning opportunities, but so do the military, cooperative extensions, churches, hospitals, and other institutions. Chapter Two explores how the context of formal institutional settings influences the learner and the learning process. Also reviewed are learning opportunities that are nonformal, such as those offered by community-based agencies, and informal, incidental, and self-directed opportunities, as might happen in the course of the workday or by watching a television program. In addition, we discuss online learning, a fourth environment for learning that overlays formal, nonformal, and informal modes of learning. In the second half of this chapter, we explore the interrelated concepts, first, of organizational learning and the learning organization, and second, of lifelong learning and the learning society.

Chapter Three profiles who participates in adult learning, why adults participate, and what an adult chooses to learn. Most of this information on participation and motivation is in reference to formal learning, such as that provided by educational institutions and employers. Estimates of the percentage of the adult population that participates in learning have steadily risen over the past forty years, with the most current study suggesting that approximately 46 percent of all adult Americans participate. Studies of self-directed learning and other nonformal types of education put the