



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Research Review

Models of adult learning: a literature review of models applicable to *Skills for Life*

Synopsis

This paper summarises a wide-ranging review of literature on adult learning, drawing out the different models of adult learning in existence and the significance of this work for research and development in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. The review aims to cover work which has looked at learning in settings other than compulsory schooling. We suggest that a full understanding of adult learning must be a complex one which, rather than seeing learning principally as an individual, cognitive phenomenon, takes into account the interrelationship of many factors in the learning situation, while placing the learner's contexts, purposes and practices at the centre.

Key Points

- ❑ Adults have their own motivations for learning. Learners build on their existing knowledge and experience. They fit learning into their own purposes and become engaged in learning. People's purposes for learning are related to their real lives and the practices and roles they engage in outside the classroom.
- ❑ Adults have a drive towards self-direction and towards becoming autonomous learners. Learning is initiated by the learner and one role of the teacher becomes to provide a secure environment in which learning can take place.
- ❑ Adults have the ability to learn about their own learning processes, and can benefit from discussion about and reflection on this. They are able to learn

how to learn. For instance, there are different learning styles which people synthesise in any situation. Teaching can enable learners to develop their range of learning styles.

- ❑ Learning is a characteristic of all real-life activities, in which people take on different roles and participate in different ways. People learn by engaging in practice and can be supported in participating in new ways. Teaching can scaffold these activities, enabling learners to develop new forms of expertise.
- ❑ Adults reflect and build upon their experience. Reflective learning is generated when people encounter problems and issues in their real lives and think about ways of resolving these.
- ❑ Reflective learning is unique to each person, since it arises out of the complexities of their own experience. A great deal of learning that happens is incidental and idiosyncratically related to the learner, it cannot be planned in advance. While there are things that can be done to encourage reflective experiential learning, there is no set of steps that can be followed that will guarantee it will happen.
- ❑ Reflective learning enables people to reorganise experience and 'see' situations in new ways. In this way, adult learning is potentially transformative, both personally and socially.

Background and rationale of research

Ideas about what learning is and how it is achieved are central to all aspects of work in adult basic skills. Theories of learning provide a starting-point for principles of teaching. Any curriculum or training course has views of learning built into it and any teaching plan is based upon a view of how people learn.

Most educational research is on children and most views of learning have been developed in the context of children learning within a formal educational system. Inevitably such views have been tied into child development and compulsory schooling. However, when one moves away from models of child development, and examines the models which have been produced from disciplines looking at settings beyond compulsory schooling, a very different view of learning emerges. This paper is a review of models of learning which have focused on adults. The aim of this review is to survey these fields and thereby provide ideas which are useful for developing teaching and learning within the *Skills for Life* strategy.

Main elements of research

This review is wide-ranging and covers ideas from many fields about how adults learn. The theories which are covered are ones which have proved useful in other areas of the education of adults.

It begins by outlining the principal ideas about learning in traditional psychology from the fields of behaviourism, cognitivism, cognitive constructivism, and developmental psychology. It then describes a competing paradigm which sees learning as a form of social participation, summarising models from sociocultural psychology, activity theory, and situated cognition.

The review moves on to consider contributions from the field of adult education, including models of andragogy, self-directed learning, reflective and experiential learning, transformative learning and postmodern understandings of learning. It also addresses models which have been developed from within fields dealing with rapid change, including management learning and distance learning. The review concludes with a summary of the main findings.

Research team

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References and further reading

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