

# Developing Adult Learners

## Strategies for Teachers and Trainers

**Kathleen Taylor, Catherine Marienau, and Morris Fiddler**

The following is excerpted from **Chapter One: Linking Learning with Development**.

### **Learning and Changing**

Most adults who initially seek out formal learning to help them deal with external change do not realize that it is also likely to engender internal change. Similarly, they may not realize that seeking higher education or higher-level training is often an outgrowth of change that is already in process. If asked, most are likely to name reasons connected to job security or career advancement; a few come "just because" learning something new appeals to them for its own sake or, in the case of a degree program, to complete something left undone. For those whose primary attention has been devoted to supporting others, putting their own goals first is itself a dramatic shift in priorities. As one learner said: "All my life I've done for others--this is something I'm doing for me."

Though adults' expressed purpose is usually to work toward pragmatic goals, thoughtful self-reflection often reveals more complex desires as in the case of these three learners from diverse backgrounds:

In response to the Vietnam draft, my family moved to Canada, where I finished high school. I tried higher education but dropped out because I couldn't conform--I didn't want to listen to some stuffy professor, I wanted to change the world! But I finally realized I would have to have more education to make the kind of contribution to society that's important to me.

I am the first woman in my family to get a divorce and the first to pursue a college education--I don't know which is harder for my mother to accept. What I know is I must step outside the boundaries of my culture and learn to make my own way in the world.

After fifteen years as a manager, I thought I had a pretty good idea what management was. Then I started leadership training, and came up against all these new ideas. Pretty soon, I discovered that it wasn't really about the ideas, it was about me. I had to learn to think in a different way about what I meant by "being a manager."

Grappling with these complexities can bring about changes in how people understand aspects of their world and themselves; such changes become, in turn, the framework for new beliefs and actions. Vaill (1996) calls this "learning as a way of being" and claims that in today's world of constant challenge and change, which he terms "continuous white water," such substantive, lasting learning is essential. Indeed, in their longitudinal research on "learning that lasts," Mentkowski & Associates (2000) found that "when learners reflect on deeply held personal beliefs and assumptions, they embrace a transforming developmental challenge, pulling their self-reflection into an awareness of themselves in a wider world" (p. 202).

According to Eduard Lindeman (1961), whom many identify as the father of adult education, "Life becomes rational, meaningful, as we learn to be intelligent about the things we do and the things that happen to us. If we lived sensibly, we should all

discover that the attractions of experience increase as we grow older. Correspondingly, we should find cumulative joys in searching out the reasonable meaning of the events in which we play parts" (p. 7).

Lindeman's description of learning as seeking meaning in experience is matched by current descriptions of adult development. Since the literature of adult learning and adult development frequently defines each in terms of the other (Bright, 1986), we will explore them as intertwined.

### **Adult Development**

Though the modern study of adult development can be dated from the mid-twentieth century, since ancient times philosophers, poets, and other students of human nature have framed human development as a series of changes (for example, the sphinx's famous riddle to Oedipus; Shakespeare's "Seven Ages of Man"). Currently, development spans many disciplines, including biology, psychology, and philosophy (epistemology). Development can be broadly defined as a process of qualitative change in attitudes, values, and understandings that adults experience as a result of ongoing transactions with the social environment, occurring over time but not strictly as a result of time (Nemiroff & Colarusso, 1990, p. 98; Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 199; Weathersby & Tarule, 1980, p. 2). Four aspects of development that cut across various models and theories provide a foundation for understanding adult learners:

- People develop through interactions with their environment
- Development follows a cycle of differentiation and integration
- Within individuals development is a variable, not uniform, process
- The ability to reframe experience serves as a marker of development

### **Environmental Interactions**

According to John Dewey (1938/1963), experience is created by interactions between external conditions (what goes on outside of one's skin) and an individual's "personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities" (p. 42). Development therefore takes place in a social context of environmental prompts as people act on the world and it, in turn, acts on them. However, how adults experience this interaction is influenced by how they perceive and make sense of the events that make up that experience. The norms of cultural practices, authorities, class, and racial identity, for example, shape how and what people know and thus the course of their development.

### **Differentiation and Integration**

Development can also be thought of as an ongoing cycle of differentiation and integration. When adults encounter events that cannot be adequately interpreted through or assimilated into their existing frames of reference, the process of differentiation may begin. If so, they come to experience themselves, albeit unconsciously, as made up of parts that do not form a coherent whole.

No wonder that adults can find certain learning experiences challenging and even, at times, traumatic when they find themselves at odds or dissatisfied with what they have believed, the boundaries of their socialization, or the values that have served as givens. Ideally, though, this disintegration becomes an opportunity to create a new kind of integration; but to successfully accommodate these new experiences requires a larger, more complex frame of reference. This accommodation is also a dialectical process, in that the resulting synthesis transcends the previous contradictions. This way of thinking about development--as a recurring cycle of differentiation and integration--contrasts with concepts of development as a culturally idealized, normative endpoint.

### **Variable Process**

When people operating from one set of beliefs encounter others who operate from another set of beliefs, the potential exists to change one or both sets of ideas. Particularly in circumstances that provide for thoughtful reflection and analysis, people may slowly come to see, feel, and understand things differently. However, these changes do not necessarily happen in concert, and some aspects of the developmental process may be "ahead" or "behind" as a more complex worldview, or perceptual framework, emerges.

Age may be a fairly good predictor of development in the lives of young people, but chronological maturity is not necessarily an indicator of adult development. Adults who are not afforded the necessary interactions and supports may never develop beyond the way of perceiving generally associated with early adolescence (Kegan, 1986). In addition, "the nature, timing, and processes of development will vary according to the experience and opportunities of individuals and the circumstances of their lives" (Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 197). Some of these circumstances may be random events in individual lives; others may be a product of socialization--for example, the experiences of Latina women are likely to be different than those of African-American men, and so forth.

### **Reframing Experience**

Another way to conceptualize developmental change is in terms of how adults perceive and reframe their life themes. Life themes refers to beliefs that guide an individual's choices and self-understanding, such as responsibility, success, competence. These often originate in childhood and adolescence, though some may emerge during adulthood. These themes help interpret and bring order to the myriad perceptions, thoughts, actions, and feelings that constitute an individual's interactions with her environment. Other themes derive from cultural, racial, and gender identification, social class and position, and individual differences. How people interpret and reinterpret these themes affects their engagement with and perceptions of new experiences. However, such life-themes are often invisible to the person whose life they inform. Or to the extent that someone becomes conscious of these themes, she may perceive them simply as "That's the way I am."

When, however, someone can not only acknowledge but reframe these beliefs--can, for example, perceive them as "how certain experiences and my reactions to them have led me to be"--she has moved toward a more complex self-construction and the possibility to be some other way.

### **Learning and Development**

These four aspects of development have in common elements also associated with learning. Through recurring cycles of interacting with their environment, people interpret what is going on either through their existing frames of reference or by constructing new ways of making meaning. Precisely how people engage in learning, or when they do it, will vary for individuals.

The dynamic intersection between learning and development concerns the fundamental change in how meaning is made or how we know what we think we know. Mezirow's (1996) definition of learning elaborates on this point: "Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (p. 162). Looked at from a learning perspective, development is a qualitative change, or transformation, in a way of knowing. Kegan (2000) emphasizes the significance of form to this concept of transformation: "At the heart of a form is a 'way of knowing' (what Mezirow calls a 'frame of reference'); thus genuinely transformational learning is always to some extent

an epistemological change, rather than merely a change in behavioral repertoire or increase in the quantity or fund of knowledge" (original emphases).

Mezirow's (1991) description of transformative learning describes "a way of thinking that is increasingly inclusive, discriminating, and integrative of experience [as well as open] to alternative perspectives." Ensuing shifts in values, attitudes, and understandings are functions of this fundamental change in epistemology. People come to these new understandings because their very form of knowing--that is, the "rules" by which they construct meaning--is itself transformed.

Not all learning has this developmental potential. In-form-ative learning simply adds to the form as it is, whereas trans-form-ative learning "puts the form itself at risk of change" (original emphasis, Kegan, 2000). The new form is also bigger than the earlier one; it is the larger mind of which educational philosophers such as Newman and Whitehead wrote long before developmental psychology provided theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence to support their contentions.

### **Learning That Transforms**

Among the transformations that such learning can engender is a qualitative shift in how adults understand both the task of learning and themselves as learners. In the least developed conception, learning is understood as increasing or acquiring "knowledge"--something that originates outside the self--primarily by memorizing or reproducing. Reproductive learners, according to Sjolj (1982, p. 182), therefore take a surface approach and think in terms of "getting" and storing this knowledge. A second, somewhat more sophisticated, conception is preparatory-to-action learning, which focuses on a different kind of knowledge acquisition--taking in procedures and facts so they can be used in some practical way. The most complex conception, reconstructive learning, centers on the learner's abstraction of meaning; this is a deep approach to learning, "an interpretive process aimed at understanding reality," and most significantly from a developmental perspective, "learning as changing as a person" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 38).

Using phenomenographic methodology, studies have shown that if learners come to the learning environment expecting to accrue knowledge as discrete bits of information, and if nothing is done to influence a change in that perspective, reproductive learning will be the outcome (Richardson, 1999). Whether learners change their conceptions is, however, strongly influenced by educators' conceptions (Prosser & Trigwell, 1997). In an Australian study, for example, history instructors who thought about their task in terms of "delivering" the content of the course to their students encouraged surface approaches to learning. By contrast, instructors who supported deep approaches to learning were those who saw the study of history as a process of developing interpretations and shared with their students their own process of grappling with the content to abstract meaning (Marton & Booth, 1997, pp. 176-177).

Based on our practice as adult educators, our familiarity with theories of adult development and adult learning, and our understanding of phenomenographic theory and research, we suggest that reconstructive learning--learning in which adults construct or reconstruct meaning--is at the core of development. Given that connection, we propose that educators who wish to encourage development must intentionally focus on strategies that can be used to prompt deep approaches to learning. In this way, adults are supported to move beyond conceptions and practices related to learning as information (that is, "knowledge acquisition") toward conceptions and practices that focus on the possibility of learning as transformation (that is, "changing as a person").

### **Educating with Development in Mind**

An educator who has read thus far may well think, "Why do I need to worry about development and 'deep approaches' now? I've been teaching biology [or business management, history, or organizational development] successfully for years." We acknowledge that most adult educators' primary focus is not simply to impart information, but also to create in learners an enthusiasm for thoughtful discrimination among conflicting ideas and to counter rigidity of belief. By extension, then, many adult educators are already, if tacitly, teaching or training for development. At the same time, however, we suggest that the definition of successful may need to be revisited in light of the potential for transformational learning in adults.

We also suggest (and research confirms [Schneps, 1989]) that information-focused approaches to learning often leave learners' underlying assumptions intact. Reproductive learning is unlikely either to challenge existing beliefs and interpretations or--of particular note to those involved in workplace education--to enable learners to use information in new settings. Learners may appear to "take in" the new information but in fact may "isolate [the] discovery in the world of academics alone and never allow it to raise questions about [their] own life and purposes" (Perry, 1970, p. 37). By contrast, when people actively engage with a topic, including drawing on what they already "know" (experience), thoughtfully critiquing both their experience of the present event and their previous assumptions about this or similar events (reflect), and attempting to arrive at understandings both rooted in the past and responsive to the present (make meaning), they are more likely to hold multiple perspectives, think flexibly, and deal with ambiguity--in short, they are not simply adopting new ideas but moving toward changing the ways in which they construct the ideas they hold.

Given the brief association many instructors have with adult learners, any given instructor may not see evidence of transformational learning nor of the deeper levels of personal transformation that tend to result from expansion of one's meaning-constructive system. One can, however, provide the environments within which changes are more likely to occur and be gratified to know that such development is an ongoing process of becoming rather than of arrival at some final destination. It is lifelong movement toward more complex ways of knowing and more sophisticated understanding of self and others.

Such changes--not just in what but in how one knows--can lead to changes in all the arenas of adult life. As Schommer (1989) found, the more developed adults' conceptions of knowledge, "the more likely they were to take multiple perspectives, be willing to modify their thinking, withhold ultimate decisions until all the information is available, and to acknowledge the complex tentative nature of everyday issues" (p. 138). Adults with these capacities are likely to be more deliberative, responsible, and competent in carrying out the work of society. They may also do a more effective job of wisely rearing the next generation. They are likely to be less reactive and more considered in personal, workplace, and political decisions, as well as better able to adapt to changing circumstances. They are also better able to recognize the need for more just, humane, and equitable economic and social structures and to work toward achieving those goals. They are more likely to act as stewards of the limited resources of our planet.

For all these reasons, we focus on development of the individual as an essential step toward creating a better society and therefore agree with contemporary educators and psychologists who hold that development should be a major aim of those who educate adults (Chickering et. al, 1981; Kegan, 1994; Kolb, 1984; Daloz, 1999; Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997; Belenky et al., 1986). This, then, is the central theme of our book: Adult development is influenced by the educational environment, hence by choices and intentions of individual educators with regard to teaching, training, and learning. The next chapter will therefore describe specific theoretical constructs that can inform our

choices and intentions in order to set the stage for learning activities framed by those intentions.