D505 Adult Learning Through the Lifespan

Course Portfolio

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Adult Development

What assumptions, concepts and theories inform your understanding of how adults develop across the lifespan?

I wrote in my first post of this class that I had never really thought about adult development before. At this point though I am still a novice in my thinking, I have broadened my schema. My initial thoughts after our first week of reading I still believe to be true. These ideas were reinforced as the class progressed. I would comfortably say at this moment that:

- Adult development is biological
- Adult development is contextual
- Adult development is social
- Adult development is systematic

Adult development is biological

Each of us is a physical being, structured by human evolution and our own DNA. This is the basis from which development begins. We have a physical body which ages. We have a gender which affects our self-concept, the roles we take on and often the opportunities we have or are denied. And we have a brain which fosters our cognitive abilities and psychological self which in turn spawns our self-concept, “one’s beliefs and expectations about whether one has the ability to successfully complete or accomplish a particular task (Lemme, 2006, p.87) and one’s agency,

As our physical body ages, we continue to learn and develop. In contrast to the biological perspective of Freud and Piaget, Baltes and others came to believe in the life-span development perspective. Lemme (2006) describes the key perspectives on life-span development enumerated by Baltes in 1987 (p. 9). Our developmental path is uneven. We continually advance and decline in different psychological and social aspects, at different times, based on many factors present in layers of our environment. Age related change also affect our development though myths about intellectual decline have been dispelled.

Adult development is contextual

We take this physical and psychological body into the world and we are influenced by our surroundings, not in a mechanistic way, but as active participants. Where we live and our cohort group is important to our development. The influences of ethnicity and religion shape who we are and how we interact with the world. We participate in the world of work and are influenced by it. And we are shaped by our socioeconomic status and often confined by it. “It is difficult to break loose of one’s social address, one’s status groupings, if you will, despite individual initiative— initiatives are constructed within the strictures of the resources available” (Hendricks & Hatch, 2008).
**Adult development is social**

We are social beings. From birth on, we are shaped by the relationships we develop with those around us. There is a human need to affiliate. We form critical dyads which influence us and change over time. We are in constant interplay with family, friends and co-workers, neighbors and ethnic/religious group members who promote, or detract from our well-being and sense of self. And all relationships are in turn influenced by the context in which they take place. “Relationships do not exist in isolation. Rather, they are embedded in and influenced by various layers of the environment” (Lemme, 2006, p.202).

**Adult development is systematic**

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory is the model of development I favor. It is an ecological, unified view of human development, which accounts for biological, contextual, and social forces. The model is a four level system of nested microsystems, “activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). Different levels act with greater or lesser influence at different times.

This is a model which has at its core a systems approach to development. The developing individual is seen as “a growing, dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21). He goes on to say that “the environment also exerts its influence, requiring a process of mutual accommodation” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21). And finally, he links the influences of a single setting through interconnections to other settings and to influences from the larger environment of shared values, laws, or customs.

I also believe that we pass through broad stages as we develop across the lifespan. This process is subject to great variability, yet it seems to me that we are all confronted with similar life challenges. Of all the stage models presented in Lemme (2006) I am most drawn to Havighurst’s 1953 list of adult developmental tasks. I appreciate the fact that there are only three stages. I believe life has a strong element of randomness and so I am drawn to a model which is less exact in its age spans.
Adult Learning

What assumptions, concepts and theories inform your understanding of how adults learn across the lifespan?

I teach adults in my work and I quite familiar with Knowles’ theory of Andragogy. I understand that adults have a lifetime of experience through which they assimilate their learning, they are independent, self-directed, and self-motivated, and they must have a reason to learn which is relevant and applicable to their life. Although Andragogy has been criticized for being apolitical and for being based on white middle-class values (Sandlin, 2005), I still believe the basic ideas of Knowles are sound and practical.

After reading and reflecting during this course, I now have a broader, more solid understanding of how adults learn. I would comfortably say at this point that:

- Learning is active, lifelong, experience-based and contextual
- Learning is a cognitive act of knowledge construction
- Learning is a social act

Learning is active, lifelong, experience-based and contextual

Learning is rooted in experience. Dewey wrote in 1938 in Experience and Education “all genuine education comes about through experience” (as cited in Merriam, Cafferella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 162). Experience for Dewey included emotional, ethical and aesthetic components as well as knowledge (Elkjaer, 2009). Kolb specified concrete experience, observation and reflection, conceptualization, and actual use and modification as learning components (Merriam, Cafferella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 164). We continue to experience the world as we move through the life-span, therefore learning is a lifelong endeavor.

Situated Cognition theorists argue that all learning is situated in a context which shapes the learning process. “Learning is an integrated aspect of activity in and with the world at all time” (Lave, 2009). At the micro level, context involves people and relationships, the learner’s past experience, the reason for learning and the content and methods of learning. Context is so critical in the Situated Cognition model that it is more difficult to access our leaning the further removed we are from the context in which the learning took place (Merriam, Cafferella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 328). The macro level of context involves society – “our society has become highly multicultural and diverse, and political and economic conditions often shape the learning experience” (Merriam, Cafferella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Learning is a cognitive act of knowledge construction

Learners process information into personal knowledge. Learning is assimilated into a schema, an organized unit of knowledge for a subject or event. When new knowledge doesn’t fit, a
schema is modified or a new schema is created to accommodate the information. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) state that, “Meaning is made by the individual and is dependent on the individual’s previous and current knowledge structure” (p. 291).

According to schema theorists, Alba and Hasher (1983) schema may guide our attention, choose specific information to be encoded, and then interpret that new information based on relevant prior knowledge. I favor the general constructivist perspective of learning which views knowledge as individually constructed by each learner.

There is a psychological aspect to building our schema. Our emotions – what we like and dislike, our values, our ethical self - play a role in the processes outlined by Alba and Hasher and therefore in adult learning. For much of our learning we must pause for some time to reflect on what the new information means to us. This reflection brings those psychological aspects into play.

**Learning is a social act**

Wenger (2009), a Social Constructivist, states, “We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning.” We learn about appropriate behavior by observing others in social situations. This includes, “knowledge, rules, skills, strategies, beliefs and attitudes” (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007, p. 288). “Learning is always situated in a particular context which comprises not only a location and set of activities...but also a set of social relations which give rise to those activities” (Eraut, 2000).

Wenger writes about Communities of Practice, which are “formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor” (as cited in Smith, 2003, 2009). Through communities of practice we gain specific knowledge and align around the norms of the community. We share our knowledge with newer members yet we also create new knowledge.

Much of situated learning which happens within and outside our communities of practice is non-formal. Non-formal learning happens outside of the classroom, with no teacher or specific outcomes and no credit awarded. Most learning is non-formal. Eraut (2000) states that this learning “takes place almost spontaneously in response to recent, current or imminent situations without any time being specifically set aside for it”.