

One Dozen Ways to Expand Your Adult Learning Skills!

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Abstract

This article presents 12 practical ways of learning as adults at cognitive, affective, and performance levels. Focused on four areas of active engagement, learners are encouraged to trust themselves in formal as well as informal settings with their variety of learning styles, intelligences, and degrees of self-direction. The importance of venturing beyond comfort levels to enjoy the surprises that reside in discovery is emphasized for those in an era of lifelong learning who take seriously *how* they want that learning to occur.

Introduction

As adult learners, whatever our positions or related roles, we tend to rely on our personal strengths. That is, our *preferred* learning styles, intelligences and approaches; our favorite learning resources or settings. Feelings of safety or security at carefully tended learning levels bring ongoing comfort when knowledge, attitudes, or performance may be challenged by new learning encounters. Indeed, as Wlodkowski (1999) has noted, "New learning is usually risky business; the outcome is seldom a certainty" (p. 73). Certainty can be a concern, especially in the adult years when interests and needs or priorities and time often conflict in the decision-making process. Moreover, most adults seek and acquire learning in formal as well as informal settings but often deliberate over questions of value or worth, depth or breadth, in addition to relevancy and cost.

Whether related to job, career, or personal growth, learning for the adult is generally serious business and, when recognized, directly related to change; change based not only on desire but effective action. In an era when there is increasing recognition of learning as a lifelong process and persons

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are living longer, adult learners must consider not only what, why, and when or where they want to learn but *how* they want that learning to occur in terms of the delivery system or the approach that supports it.

The four areas below contain 12 supportive ways of addressing learning at cognitive, affective, and performance levels. Learners with a variety of learning styles and intelligences, as well as self-direction, should find the approaches useful. Learners may also find the acts of goal-setting, resource identification, implementation, and evaluation of the learning experiences invigorating, exciting, challenging, or frustrating. (Does learning occur without varying degrees of dissonance?) In any case, the learner will be in charge. Just do not miss the *surprises*. Sometimes surprises make all the difference.

Area 1: Learn Something New, in a New Way, and in a New Setting

Expansion of learning occurs when learners step outside of known areas where they are capable of functioning effectively—and step we do. Such action is akin to that noted by Thoreau in his 1857 Journal (cited in Heat-Moon, 1991): “New earths, new themes expect us” (p. 9). Surely themes for adult learners abound especially in terms of how the acquired learning might be used. Application, however, must be understood in relation to adult development. As described by Tennant and Pogson (1995), “The idea of development has meaning only in terms of a cultural and historical framework” (p. 198). Continuing, the authors suggest “Development thus proceeds through a constant interaction between the person and the social environment. Both the developing person and the social environment are active in this process” (p. 199).

Given the opportunities and resources present for today’s adult learners, most topics can be approached from a variety of perspectives and learning levels in response to a variety of individual as well as social needs. That can be a plus for those wanting not only to know but who feel response must be at a personal action level. In an attempt to relate the Holocaust to the current situation in Darfur, the need for such action was described by Robert B. Zoellick in *Lessons for Today’s World*, the Annual Report (2005-06) of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

Bearing witness means we remember, but memory is not enough.
Bearing witness means giving testimony, but statements are not enough.
Bearing witness means learning from history, but knowledge is not enough.
Bearing witness must also mean acting.

(p. 29)

Even the pursuit of untried areas of learning enrichment can be less threatening if learner engagement is accompanied by confidence and tenacity or at least the support of an effective facilitator. For example, Betty Edwards (1986) convincingly reminded hesitant learners who evidenced doubt about their artistic abilities: “My claim is quite modest: if you can catch a baseball, thread a needle, or hold a pencil and write your name, you can learn to draw skillfully, artistically, and creatively” (p. 8). Such inspiration can be satisfying, if not personally motivating. However, let us neither shrink from the new nor wither in self-doubt when determining new learning directions. We can proceed alone or with others, but if growth is expected, it is important to proceed.

Area 2: Learn Something Alone, with One Other Person, and with Others

Let’s face it: The relationship of the individual to the group really does matter. Here in the United States of America, where individualism ranks high on the list of national values, we nevertheless work, play, worship, and (yes) learn with others. Our learning settings may be formal or informal, self- or other-directed, and designed to meet a multitude of learning needs. This observation is clearly stated in *Learning and Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The authors observed: “In considering the spectrum of learning opportunities available to adults, it is important to acknowledge all of these arenas of learning, from the highly structured to the more informal ways adults go about learning” (p. 27).

In adult education, we recognize the importance of self-direction in learning and—depending on particular needs—the benefits, as well as challenges, of learning in dyads, triads, and small and larger groups. Our individual skills must often *fit* to function effectively, and the need for expansion may surface. Before difficulties arise, it is well to proactively consider the possible impact of cultural and historical development factors. In some cases, the greater of these may be cultural.

Area 3: Learn Something Through Use of Technology, Travel, and Active Experimentation

Earlier, the introduction of the computer may have at least been considered a catalyst for culture shock. Its impact has been well described

by Forester and Morrison (cited in Teich, *Technology and the Future*, 2006):

Computers are certainly the most important technology to have come along this century, and the current Information Technology Revolution may in time equal or even exceed the Industrial Revolution in terms of social significance. We are still trying to understand the full implications of the computerization that has already taken place in key areas of society, such as the workplace. The impact of computers and computer-based information and communication systems in our way of life will continue to grow in the coming years. (pp. 265-266)

The impact is indeed growing and presenting challenges to *cultures* in the widest meaning of the term. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recently launched the Global Libraries Initiative with partnerships in three countries: Botswana, Latvia, and Lithuania. As described by Martha Choe (2007), director of the initiative, "Everyone should have access to the benefits of the digital age, no matter their age, gender, ethnicity, income level, or where they happen to live" (p. 54). Under the arrangement, country partners will provide significant matching funds to support the libraries and sustain no-cost access to the technology and training.

Nationally the impact of the *computer revolution* has been evidenced in the proliferation of distance education programs. McKenzie (2007) observed, "Distance education has changed the way education is perceived, delivered, and planned for the future. It is projected that by 2008, 10% of all degrees awarded will be on-line" (p. 22).

Whatever the projections or outcomes, the sharpening of computer-related and other emerging technology skills appears necessary for adult learners in today's world. In response, formal or informal learning plans may need to be drafted without prolonged delay. As Morrison, Ross, and Kemp (2004) have observed, "The proof of an instructional plan's success is whether a satisfactory level of learning is achieved in an acceptable period of time" (p. 13).

Adult learners should also be attentive to another area of learning concern: that of experiential learning. In a discussion of multiple developmental pathways, Tennant and Pogson (1995) suggested:

Turning to experience is fine, but it needs to be done in a critical way. A little reflection may reveal that these basic skills can be acquired in other ways, or that they turn out not to be basic skills at all. What is required here is a certain amount of openness to experimentation and other possibilities. This general attitude of

openness is in fact a frequently cited attribute of those who successfully develop expertise in their work. (pp. 197-198)

Travel as a *way of learning* involves experiential approaches of value and has become a favored activity for adult learners. Why not learn from the *shocks* and discover the *joys* of seeing, speaking, interacting, and understanding from different perspectives? As North Americans in the United States, we have something to share as well. It is important to note here that, as Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) have suggested, “The purpose of examining other systems is not to replace the Western tradition but rather to expand our understanding of learning and knowing” (p. 219).

Area 4: Learn Something That Makes You Feel Good, Better, and Best

Having something to share may mean (first) re-assessing our strengths; that is, those attributes that bring such personal satisfaction and comfort and are reflected in our attitudes. Wlodkowski (1999) has noted that “attitudes are of great importance in understanding adult development because they predispose one’s choices of activities, companions, and environments across the life span” (p. 73). These choices for the adult learner are not only varied but may be multi-dimensional. That is, they lead from *one thing to another in connected fashion* over a period of time. If we believe we all have our *gifts* (and some of us do), we may be in for a lifetime of discovery.

George Vaillant (2002) addressed the issue in a practical message following a long-term study of adult development at Harvard University:

Play, create, learn new things and, most especially, make new friends. Do that and getting out of bed in the morning will seem a joy—even if you are no longer “important;” even if your joints ache, and even if you no longer enjoy free access to the office Xerox machine. (p. 248)

The choice of learning pursuits in adulthood can be intriguing and productive if we are in touch with our values, attitudes, and feelings about the choices. Whatever the choice, our knowledge, feelings, and abilities as fully functioning human beings are not separate entities. Nathaniel Burton (cited in Burton & Lombard, 1978), a Master Chef, expressed his feelings about his chosen field this way: “It’s an intriguing business, cooking. And it never ceases to excite or challenge me. I love the preparation and serving of excellent food” (pp. 7-8). *Love* may indeed be an important element of those life-learning choices we make and cling to. If so, do we recognize and

value it as a learning outcome?

Conclusion

Maybe this expansion of adult learning skills is all about moving from something we enjoy (or do not) to something we will enjoy more (or might) in an ongoing journey of discovery. *How* that learning occurs may be less complicated than we imagine. After all, the 12 ways of learning described are directly related to just three adult and personal skill areas: (a) *awareness* (of our values, cultural and historical perspectives); (b) *openness* (to new experiences, challenges, or surprises); and (c) *connectedness* (effective communication, interaction, and service). The choices and timing for development indeed are ours and . . . learning occurs where it occurs.

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