

Final exam – Three Essays

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### Abstract

In today's educational society, it is crucial to understand who the adult learner is and as much about them as possible. There are many key issues to address with the learner, as evident as the each learner is different in who they are, how they learn, what motivates them, etc. Individual differences amongst the learners require that the educator create a blended, yet challenging environment for all of the learners to thrive. The theories that relate to these individual differences provide a snapshot of how both the student and instructor can create the best learning environment. Many ways of learning require the student to be intentional about their previous, current, and future educational endeavors. It is also important to see the value of transformative learning and how it impacts education and the learners themselves.

**Question 1****Who is the adult learner?**

There are many things that mark a person as an adult. Having children, being married, working full time, being in the army, etc. Twenty-one years old seems an appropriate age to give to an adult in terms of a number. To be an adult learner, one would assume it includes falling into one of the categories above and purposefully seeking an education. That being said, having a child or falling into a category above does not automatically make you an adult. You have to accept and deal with the responsibilities at a mature level.

One of the biggest concerns or attributes to consider in the process of helping adults learn is the idea of immediacy. Vella (2002) discusses how adults want to be able to put to use the skills they have learned very quickly. “Most adults do not have time to waste. We want to spend our time studying content that will make a difference *now*” (p. 19). While adults may have different motivations for wanting to learn, they do want to be able to use the information they have learned quickly and apply it in a timely fashion. This idea seems to stay in line with a culture that has changed from a simple lifestyle to wanting feedback and tangible items rapidly.

Adults are different when comparing them to youth in the education setting. It appears that choice is the biggest difference. As children, they have to attend school whether they want to or not. As adults, they have the choice, and many choices at that. They can choose what they want to study, who they want to learn from, and how they want to learn it. Motivation plays a part in this as well. Because adults have choices, their motivations are greater or different from children. Adults can be more intentional about their learning because they chose to do it. They also have different motivations for why they want to learn, while the motivation for the child might be to make it to the next grade, or to impress their parents. Adults may also be easier to

help. They can respond to questions with higher level thinking. The developmental stages of adults are much different than that of children. Adults know what they want out of their education, whereas children go with the flow of what is being taught without question. The type of information that is being taught differs so much, from beginning reading and writing, to philosophy and history.

### **What are the key issues to address?**

In working at a career college, there are many key issues that are addressed in our admissions department. The main issues include motivation and personal factors, which tie together. Motivating the student and having them see the need for quality education is a key part in admissions. A prospective student can walk in thinking they want to take a program to find a job, but it is so much more than that! Creating the need and showing how beneficial education is to every person and to the whole person is the goal. Learners want to come to school for multiple reasons – increased employment opportunities, salary increases, pressure from family/peers, or learning for the sake of learning (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, pp. 62-63). The last issue, personal factors, plays a large factor as well. Each prospective student comes in with their own obstacles to overcome – childcare, finances, work schedules, etc. Retention is also an issue that the college faces as a whole. While the programs are designed to be accelerated to get the learner into their field of choice quicker, life circumstances arise that prevent the learner from completing their program.

For our learners, there are a few factors that may influence them from enrolling at our school. While we pride ourselves on being the biggest and best career college in our state, there are many other options for the students to choose from. With distance learning, the learner does not even need to leave their home, let alone their city or state, to attend school. As a private

institution, financial situations can also prevent students from enrolling with us. Career colleges can also have a poor stigma related as people do not consider them to be “real” colleges or accredited institutions.

There are also reasons why our learners do not complete their programs. The students do not feel connected to the campus, they need to focus on work to support their family, or they simply leave as abruptly and suddenly as they might have arrived to enroll. There are students who disappear and we can never get a hold of them again. It is clear that their need was not met at our institution and they did not deem their education important enough with us to continue. That is a problem! Also, students come up with any excuse they can not to continue in school with things get too difficult.

### **What does it mean to “learn?”**

To learn is to retain the information the learner has been given and be able to apply it to their real world circumstances. I really like the idea of learning from multiple avenues to be an educated person that can contribute to society in a tangible way. By learning from and in so many areas, one has enough knowledge to create their own worldview and be able to think on their own without relying on someone else to think for them. It is so easy now to be fed the information from one or few sources and then going into the field and performing at a mediocre level. There is something to be said about learning from multiple sources, deciding what to agree with and disagree with, and creating a perspective that is your own instead of regurgitating information to fit the norm. In a world that is increasingly changing, it is important that learners have the ability to think on their own and create their own understanding

The key theories that help inform our understanding of how adults learn include behaviorist, humanist, cognitivist, social cognitive, and constructivist perspectives. Merriam et

al., (2007) discuss these learning theories and present how different assumptions can be made about these orientations. “Instructors and program developers can use this review of major learning theories to identify their own theory of learning and discover the strategies for facilitating learning that are most congruent with their theory” (p. 294). Some of these theories focus on changes in behavior, while others focus on the learning of skills and knowledge. These theories and this statement say a few different things about the learning process and learners. To start, there are many ways that adults can learn and prefer to receive information. Secondly, these theories provide instructors with different methods in ways to present information to a diverse group of learners. It is the role of the educator to discover the learning preferences of the learners and then reach out to the learner through those means. It also encourages the educator to utilize freedom in their instructional methods. By teaching through different orientations, it may persuade the learner to gain knowledge in a different manner or discover new insight in the learning process.

I think that adults learn best through a constructivist perspective, especially in a career college setting. While this orientation pulls from a handful of ideas, Merriam et al., (2007) says it focuses on the idea that “learners construct their knowledge from their experiences” (p. 297). In the career college setting, most of the programs require a specific skill-set and demand that these skills are learned for the learner to be successful in their field. Being intentional and reflective about learning is so critical to the education environment and this perspective desires that these occur. The learners need to own their education and play an active role in the learning process. “Recently, the emphasis in literature has been on groups as learning environments and on helping learners think about group – as opposed to individual – learning” (Imel 1999). This

supports the desire for learners to feel a connectedness and also encourages educators to promote the learning within the class and groups with less focus on the instructor.

**Question 2: Forms of Individual Difference****What are these broad categories of difference?**

The differences that an educator can face when dealing with learners are numerous. Merriam et al., (2007) says “It is no longer a question of *whether* in adult learning situations we need to address issues of race, class, gender, culture, ethnicity, or sexual orientation but rather a question of *how* we should deal with these issues, the power dynamics involved, and so on” (p. 430). To narrow it down, we will focus on cognitive, personality, gender, and cultural differences. Cognitive differences can refer to the areas of intelligence that affect how the student may learn the information. Personality differences can be defined as the unique ways that the individual learner prefers to take in the material and complete tasks within their education. Gender differences refer to the differences between males and females in the ways they look at the learning process and what may be available to them. Finally, cultural differences can be described as the unique ways that cultures view the education system and process differently. Each of these categories will be defined further with frameworks or models associated with them. It is the differences that make the learning process exciting and create a blended environment for the students to learn from the instructor and each other.

**What is the conceptual framework or models for each category?**

Beginning with the cognitive category, Piaget had a theory about intellectual development with four stages: sensory-motor, pre-operational, concrete operations, and formal operations (Dirkx, 2011a). It is a progressive theory that starts with basic or limited ability to function to being able to process high level or more formal operations. Piaget later moves to post-formal thought that consists of problem-solving, dialectical, and metaphoric thinking (Dirkx, 2011a.) The cognitive differences of individuals may place them in different learning



environments, levels of learning, or help to guide them to certain career choices. The model from Piaget suggests that within the learning, it is a very level-oriented process where the learner will progress through the stages and will only be able to move upwards as more knowledge is obtained.

Moving on to the personality category, it is expected that all adult learners will come into an educational setting with their own personality and ways to react to the learning environment. There are many personality tests available for anyone to take and a very common test is the Myers-Briggs as it helps the student to learn more about their own personality type. Carl Jung was one of the first to advance the notion of psychological differences/types and many people took it up as a personality inventory (Dirkx, 2011b). Being able to define and learn more about how the learner themselves may react or act and can apply that knowledge to learning with groups, classes, instructors, etc.

Next, a look at the gender differences and models that discuss male and female learning. Some of the more direct frameworks to look into are feminist theories. Tisdell, within the Merriam et al., (2007) text, discusses three categories that suggest a helpful framework for feminist theories: individually focused theories, structural theories, and postmodern theories (p. 248). The individual focused theory looks at women as individuals and how they can have equal rights within society. The structural theory addresses the establishment of society and suppression that falls within organizations. Postmodern theory the individuals have the “power to affect or resist the status quo” (p. 249). The focus is more on the relationships with individual people. Anderson (2011) discusses how the genders can have different worldviews and says, “They also tend to represent the world in different terms, in virtue of their gendered interests, attitudes, emotions and values, and perhaps also (although this is a matter of controversy among

feminist theorists) in virtue of different cognitive styles.” Males and females will bring to the education setting a variety of different thoughts and ideas, as Anderson suggests.

Finally, a look into the cultural differences and the conceptual frameworks to go with them. Within the Merriam et al., (2007) text, it is stated that “it would seem feasible that different ethnic groups, with different cultural histories, different adaptive approaches to reality, and different socialization practices, would differ concerning their respective learning styles” (p. 408). The most common categories in the world of education could be looked at as Western or non-Western practices. There are differences in cultures that show preferences towards individual versus community learning, communication, or indigenous versus academic knowledge (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 225). Looking specifically into the non-Western tradition of the Islamic perspective, “the purpose of education is to bring humankind closer to God and His creation (p. 234). It differs from a more Western way of thinking as there is more focus on submission and obeying others. In a Western educational setting, these are guidelines that all should follow, but are not as intentionally focused on.

### **How do these categories relate to our course?**

These categories relate to our course in numerous ways as the adult learners come from all different sorts of backgrounds and histories. Our cognitive differences showed up in some of the first discussions with the class as a whole. One of my first conversations was with Gena and she began to tell me this was another Master’s degree that she was adding to show some education behind what she was doing in her role at the hospital. I felt like I had limited abilities compared to what she has already done. When our group discussed our personality needs on individual versus group work, it was interesting to hear all of the different preferences. Marie and I have similar preferences in some areas and then are completely opposite in another area.

This works well when there are group projects because each member can bring their specialties to the table. As far as the gender aspect is concerned, we had four females in our group. Within our discussion boards, we did not talk much about this concept or way of learning from this angle. In making only an educated guess, Sue may have been motivated differently because of her line of work in a police station and teaching about criminal justice. She may have thoughts about equal rights as her work environment may be more heavily male-dominated. The cultural differences within the classroom can change the dynamic of what is taught, into what depth, and what the response and responsibility is of the learner. One of our group members is living in another country! While I did not get the opportunity to talk to her much about her background, I am sure living in Dubai has changed her perspective (or at least make her think more) on the Western ways of education.

### **How do we address the differences?**

To address the differences we find in the adult learners, the most important thing to do first is to understand the differences and how they may affect the individual learner. In my admissions role at the career college, I meet with students that come in with numerous differences in their cognitive, personality, gender, and cultural backgrounds. Addressing the cognitive levels is difficult as our interaction with perspective students may only consist of a few hours. Each student does complete an essay, which I later review and grade. To address the cognitive differences, I ask many questions about the academic past of the student, their goals, and what they expect out of their education. It is easier to see and discover personality differences in learners, even in the brief time. One of the main questions I ask is whether or not the prospective student wants to work in physical contact with patients or in more of an administrative setting. This immediately lets me know which direction to take with them in

programs that may fit their interests better. With a lot of our programs being skill-based, we see a lot of learners want to receive hands-on learning and have a career where they are not behind a desk as much. Finally, we also see cultural differences. In Oklahoma, there are a lot of Native American and Hispanic students. I also ran into an issue with a student wanting to complete the Medical Assisting program, but could not because of her Jehovah's Witness faith.

**Question 4****Definitions of terms and concepts**

Self-directed learning is the “idea that the adult learner moves from being other-directed or relying on the directions and guidance of others to designing their own course of study to contribute to their own educational goals” (Dirkx, 2011c). It gives the learner more freedom to rely less on the educator and be more intentional about what they want to focus and study on. Self-directed learning is seen more in the adult learning setting as it requires a motivated and driven individual to get what they want out of their education. A model that best describes this process in adult learning is a focus where the individual is independent and pursues the experience for personal growth (Kerka, 1999b). When the learner seeks out the experience and is independent, they are able to be intentional about what they want to learn. While there is some guidance that is found in a traditional education setting, the educator takes their hands out of the experience and lets the learner explore for themselves. It is a way for the learner to experience, make mistakes, and learn on their own without being spoon-fed by someone else.

Reflection is relating to an experience in which is “we go back to the particular experience and we draw what was particularly significant about that experience...and attend to the feelings that are associated within that process” (Dirkx, 2011d). The reflection process allows the learner to rethink about an experience that has occurred and take the time to take in every aspect of it. It gives the learner a chance to see what occurred, what should have or could have occurred, and what would optimally occur in the future experience. A model that best describes this process in adult learning is a model of learning by Boud and Walker that states that reflection is returning to an experience, attending to the feelings, and re-evaluating the experience (Dirkx, 2011d). This model affirms the definition that the learner takes time to go

back and think about the experience. The feelings that were involved may come back and bring emotions that make the experience feel real again, or bring it closer. It also allows the learner to do their own self-assessment on what happened in the experience and what could be different next time.

Learning from and through experiences allows the learner to experience something in the moment and also recalling a previous experience and learning from it. It requires that the learner be aware and demands a certain judgment in ways to think about it and understand it; must be involved and requires engagement (Dirkx, 2011e). A model that best describes this process in adult learning is the FOURthought model of experience-based learning (Dirkx & Lavin, 2003). It is difficult for the educator to see how well the learner has retained the information and it is difficult for the learner to apply it appropriately in a real world setting. A way to address the challenge is utilizing the FOURthought method of experience-based learning.

“The FOURthought model of experience-based learning is structured around four fundamental ways of coming to know (or “thought”) about ourselves and our world from our experiences. These are 1) Trial and error; 2) Rationality/reflection; 3) Creative expression; and 4) Discernment” Dirkx, J.M. & Lavin, R. (2003).

This model allows for freedom and encourages the learner to make decisions based on their own findings and not the reliance of the educator as much. It really makes the learner rely on their previous experiences to help shape their future. Even when they are not learning from others, they can learn from themselves in a previous circumstance.

### **How are these ideas manifested in our understanding of learning as transformative?**

What is transformational learning? According to Merriam et al., (2007) it is “about change – dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live. The mental construction of experience, inner meaning, and reflection are common

components of this approach” (p. 130). Within this very definition, one can see how the ideas self-directed learning, reflection, and learning from and through experience are intertwined and play a role that could lead into transformational learning. Self-directed learning is illustrated in the theories of transformational learning as it shifts the focus and reliance from the instructor to the learner themselves. Because the learner must lean on and trust themselves more, they are forced to review their own belief system and decided how their thoughts fit in with the world. They still have the ability to bounce ideas off of others, ask questions, and seek guidance, but they must fully rely on themselves to create their learning structure. In this manner, self-directed learning falls in line with transformational learning as the learners finds out more about themselves.

Using reflective learning goes right along the definition of transformational learning. The learner takes the time to think back on an experience that has occurred and is able to remember emotions and thoughts about that experience. Through this thought process, the learner can see how the experience affected their life and how it changed them, if it all. The reflection process really allows the learner to think deeply about how their experiences have shaped where they are now. Reflection leads into transformational learning as the learner reshapes their view of what they think they knew. However, self-directed learning has the potential to be limiting based on class, gender, etc. This could hinder possible learning opportunities based on demographics.

Learning from and through experience falls in line with transformational learning when it demands that learner be self-aware and think about their experience as it occurs. The FOURthought model Dirkx & Lavin (2003) encourage the learner to show discernment through the learning process. It gives the learner opportunity to make the sound judgments for themselves about how they see themselves and how they connect with those around them. Taking the time to

learn while the experience is happening forces intentional thinking. In turn, the thinking creates a need to consider about how the learner fits into the world and communities they are currently part of.

### **Experiences with transformative learning**

I see the online learning experience as a good example of self-directed learning. While there is still an instructor who guides, provides the lessons, and even gives PowerPoint presentations, it requires that the learner be very motivated and disciplined to get on and do the work themselves. Within this course, and any course in general, the learner has a choice. They have the choice to complete the required readings, optional readings, track down additional resources, and so on. As they are “on their own” at home without the instructor in front of them telling them what to do, the learner has to decide what they are going to do. If they are struggling or needing assistance, they must be intentional on seeking help. There is a clear variation in the environment in on-campus learning versus online learning, and online learning commands that the learning be more self-directed. Luckily I have the devotion to my education to be persistent and motivated throughout the courses, but it really does necessitate that the learners motivate themselves throughout the course.

These essays fall in line with the idea of learning through reflection. While these essays require certain responses, it also asks the learner (myself) to reflect back to what I have learned this semester and how it applies to these topics. We must reflect back on experiences throughout the program and consider the impact they have had on us at that time and now. There have even been times throughout the course where you ask us to reflect back on something. For example, in the learning log in lesson three, you ask us to reflect on the reasons why we are participating in this class and our current program. I had to think back to when I first started thinking about



going to grad school and deciding on the specific classes I wanted to take. This stirred up emotion in me and even gave me a refreshed sense of motivation to finish out the course!

Learning from and through this experience in our online class has made me think about my role from a different angle while working in admissions at our career college. It has given me new perspectives on the adults that come in looking for a career change and I can now see their motivations for coming to school and placing such high value on their education. I am also able to see how barriers can arise to prevent students to be successful. Through this class I am able to see what I can apply directly into my field and see how the learning experience has affected me so quickly.

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