

## Adult Learners - Lifespan Development

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*This paper will analyse the lifespan development stage(s) of my learners, and identify those perspectives offered in Merriam and Caffarella's (1999) typology framework (biological, psychological, sociocultural or integrative) that seem most relevant, with discussion linked to the major lifespan development theories associated with the perspective(s). This will be followed by a justified description of appropriate teaching strategies to facilitate the personal development of my learners.*

Analysing developmental stages of learners allows us, as educators, to identify needs within the context of lifespan development and recognise changes that have potential for development throughout the course of learning; we can enhance the learning abilities of our adult learners by educating with development in mind and facilitating learning with a view to transform (Taylor, Marienau & Fiddler (2000). I will be discussing the lifespan development stage(s) of two of my learners, whom I'll refer to as Learner 1 and Learner 2, along with relevant teaching strategies that intend to develop and transform.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) offer a typology framework of four developmental theories that provide ways of observing adult development and illuminating various aspects of it. The biological perspective is related to physiology and aging and the role that nature plays in development, the psychological perspective focuses on how inner self is shaped, the sociocultural perspective provides a way to examine how growth and change are influenced by society and culture, and the integrative perspective suggests that biological, psychological and sociocultural perspectives, when viewed in combination, offer a more promising way to observe the complexities of adult development. The integrative approach takes a holistic view of adult development and recognises intersections between mind, body, soul and environment within sociocultural and historical contexts (Baumgartner, 2001). I will therefore be analysing my learners from an integrative perspective.

Learner 1 is a single mother, 29 years of age and works part time in an office environment. Learner 1 was born in the district, has struggled to find a partner, worries that she's too old for a relationship, and would like to move to another area of Tasmania to make a fresh start; she is seeking full time work and hopes that undertaking Certificate III in Information Technology will facilitate her move by increasing her chances of finding work

elsewhere. She dislikes her current job, describes herself as 'sick of it', 'sick of having no money', 'needing a change'. Learner 1 has mentioned that her mother was an abusive alcoholic, they no longer communicate and she wants to be different to her mother.

In analysing Learner 1 when viewed through the lens of time as the integrative factor (Merriam, S.B., in Clark & Caffarella, 1999), it could be observed that the social time context has shaped development as is displayed by the learner's assessment of herself as being too old for a relationship, it appears to be perceived as "off-time" when compared to her internalisation of social norms and expectations. When viewed from Kegan's constructive development theory 'ways of knowing' (as cited in Drago-Severson, 2004), it could be observed that Learner 1's underlying structure of thinking may be that of an 'instrumental knower', meaning appears to be made at the second order of consciousness [imperial], motivated by one's own desires, viewing the pursuit of education as a way to acquire something, education is seen as something that may 'fix' her situation. From a narrative dimension (Rossiter, M., in Clark & Caffarella, 1999), the mention of her mother in relation to the temporal dimension may indicate that there are unresolved past feelings from her childhood that are influencing her present desire for change. It could also be observed that Learner 1 is experiencing a 'delayed non-event transition' (Schlossberg, Walters & Goodman, as cited in Merriam 2005), in relation to the marriage [relationship] that is still yet to materialise. From a biological and psychological perspective based on Erikson's sequential eight stage model (as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), development of Learner 1 may be in a stage of resolution between intimacy versus isolation.

Learner 2 is a married mother of two in her mid 30's, having moved here around 8 years ago from overseas. Learner 2 spoke no English when she moved here and still struggles with the language, she has suffered depression since moving to Tasmania and often feels isolated and homesick. Learner 2 has told of her use of whitening cream to lighten her skin and has, in the past, lightened her hair to 'fit in'. Learner 2 is undertaking Certificate III in Information Technology with a view to managing the website and electronic records for an owner operated business shared with her husband. Her husband works elsewhere full time and currently manages the business himself with paid help, Learner 2 would like to remove the burden of responsibility from her husband and save money by managing the business herself now that her children are at school.

In analysing learner 2 viewed through the integrative lens of development as separation and connection (Taylor, K., in Clark & Caffarella, 1999), based on Erikson's model, it could be observed that Learner 2 may also be in a stage of resolution between intimacy versus isolation in relation to separation from her family, society and culture. Learner 2's underlying structure of thinking appears to be that of a 'socialising knower' when viewed from Kegan's theory (as cited in Drago-Severson, 2004), as meaning appears to be made at the third order of consciousness [interpersonal], defined by others, education is pursued to 'be someone', someone who helps her husband. From the sociocultural perspective of Phinney's model describing a process of ethnic identity (as cited in Chavez, A.F. & Guido-DiBrito, F., in Clark & Caffarella, 1999), it could be observed that Learner 2 is yet to resolve the "clash of value systems between nondominant and dominant groups in the manner in which minority members negotiate a bicultural value system". This is evidenced in her use of skin and hair products to alter her appearance to 'fit in' to the dominant group. From a spiritual dimension (Tisdell, E.J., in Clark & Caffarella, 1999), Learner 2's mention of depression, isolation and homesickness may be related to the loss of connectedness with her history and heritage and the loss of familiar surroundings and tradition.

Both learners can be observed to be in a period of change or transition and could therefore benefit from learning strategies that include a range of perspectives on particular topics and a variety of experiences in relation to content in an endeavour to challenge learners with alternative ways of interpreting experiences (Merriam, 2005). Facilitated group work, discussions and opportunities for storytelling, where critical reflection is encouraged, would allow opportunities to appreciate diversity and difference, bring other perspectives into own meaning making systems, and acknowledge Learner 1's feelings and assumptions about her childhood and relationship concerns, and Learner 2's feelings and assumptions about her sense of loss and grief and her feelings and assumptions surrounding acceptance and fitting in. In regard to teaching with developmental intentions (Taylor et al., 2000), the intent here would be to encourage movement along the dimension 'toward knowing as a dialogical process' so that learners recognise the source of their ideas and become aware of how they construct knowledge and meaning. "Giving voice often leads to students formulating a sense of community because they begin to recognise and understand what connects them to, and separates them from, each other" (Lee & Sheared, 2002).

Learner 1 could be encouraged towards transition as a 'social knower' by structured journaling and reflecting with a focus on how others make her feel about herself, Learner 2

could be encouraged towards transition as 'self authoring' by structured journaling and reflecting with a focus on identifying the perspectives and expectations of others as being separate to her own (Drago-Severson, 2004). Self assessment tools could also aid the reflective process. The intent here would be to encourage movement along the dimension 'toward a dialogical relationship to oneself' (Taylor et al., 2000) so that learners recognise who they are is their own construction and can therefore be changed or reconstructed at will.

Critical reflective strategies, such as journaling, self assessment and collaborative group activities, would assist all learners as they face transitions, now and in the future. Taylor, Marienau and Fiddler (2000) suggest learners can be assisted to examine how they make meaning and encouraged to accept responsibility for the meanings they construct, development can be realised by a shift in values, attitudes and understandings. Learners can be guided towards learning 'how to learn', towards a way of thinking that Mezirow (as cited in Taylor et al., 2000) describes as "increasingly inclusive, discriminating, and integrative of experience [as well as open to] alternative perspectives", in essence transforming the learners understanding of the very way that meaning itself is constructed.

## References

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