Chapter Sixteen Reflections on Learning in Adulthood

This book is testimony to the fact that we know quite a lot about learning in adulthood. Each chapter speaks to some aspect of learning, whether it be the context, the learner, the process, or some combination of these factors. In the process of reviewing and reflecting on all of this material, we arrived at our own understanding of learning in adulthood. This last chapter is our opportunity to articulate what we ourselves have learned about this phenomenon.

Many who have written on the topic of adult learning have tried to delineate principles summarizing what has been learned from research or observed in practice and axioms that can be applied to practice. **Knowles's (1980)** assumptions underlying andra- gogy, discussed in **Chapter Four**, are a good example of a set of principles about adult learners that has implications for practice. Others have advanced similar lists, often with a distinctive orientation. **Smith (1982)** distinguishes the learning process from the learners. He presents six observations about learning, such as "learning is a personal and natural process" and "learning has its intuitive side" (p. 35), and notes four critical characteristics of adult learners: a different orientation to education and learning, an accumulation of experience, special developmental trends, and anxiety and ambivalence. In a popular version of this approach, **Zemke and Zemke (1995)** in an update of their 1981 article, listed "thirty things we know for sure about adult learning" dividing these "thirty things" into the three categories of adult motivation, curriculum design, and classroom practice. **MacKeracher (1996)**, who

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of the research, writing, and debate in the field's early efforts to distinguish itself from other subfields of education. Our answer, in essence a summary of the book, is that learning in adulthood can be distinguished from childhood in terms of the learner, the context, and to some extent, the learning process. Furthermore, it is not just that differences can be seen in these areas. Equally important, the configuration of learner, context, and process together makes learning in adulthood distinctly different from learning in childhood. In this chapter we first explore these differences and then discuss how well our understanding of the phenomenon is addressed by theory and practice. Finally, we speculate on the next steps in furthering our understanding of adult learning.

The Learner

The focus on the individual learner, grounded primarily in the psychological paradigm, drove research and practice in adult learning until the 1990s. Representative lines of inquiry from this perspective include the ways we have traditionally framed the life experiences of individual learners, the linking of the psychological frame of development to learning, much of our research on motivation and participation, the information processing framework of cognition and memory, and the neurobiology of learning.

The comparatively richer life experiences of individual adults have been cited by nearly all writers as a key factor in differentiating adult learning from child learning. As **Kidd (1973)** noted over thirty years ago, "Adults have more experiences, adults have different kinds of experiences, and adult experiences are organized differently." It is these experiences that set adults "off from the world of children" (p. 46). If accumulated life experiences differentiate children from adults, they also differentiate one adult from another. A group of sixty-year-olds will have less in common than a group of twenty-year-olds.

Experience is an assumption "that can arguably lay claim to be viewed as a 'given' in the literature of adult learning" (**Brookfield, 1986**, p. 98). Knowles (1980, p. 44) conceives of it in terms of a "growing reservoir of experience" that functions as "a rich resource for learning." It also establishes a person's self-identity: "Adults derive their self-identity from their experience. They define who they are in terms of the accumulation of their unique sets of experiences."

And "because adults define themselves largely by their experience, they have a deep investment in its value" (p. 50).

Experience, however, can be quite varied as Fenwick (2003, p. 13) points out, including the following:

Direct embodied experience, an immediate encounter in the here-and-now, planned or unplanned, involving us physically, emotionally, sensually, mentally, and perhaps spiritually; ... *vicarious experience* [in which we] ... imagine ourselves immersed in the encounter. We sometimes are exposed to *simulated experience*, a direct experience planned to be like something real. ... We can experience through *reliving* a past encounter. ... There is also *collaborative experience*, joining others in a shared community of experience whose meaning is constructive together amid conversation and joint action. ... [Finally], *introspective experience*, such as mediation or dreaming, or reading, are powerful forms of experience occurring in a special psychic space. ... All of these dimensions suggest different ways to understand whatever is construed to be learning in each context.

Whatever the type of experience, it functions in several ways that are particular to adult learning. First, as Knowles observed, adult learners themselves become important resources for learning. Adults can call on their experiences in the formulation of learning activities, as well as serve as resources for others in a learning event. Second, the need to make sense out of one's life experiences is often an incentive for engaging in a learning activity in the first place. Third, the actual engagement of past experiences with learning is somewhat different for adults than for children. An adult's major use of experience in learning is on reintegrating or transforming meanings and values, while children tend to use their experiences in accumulating new knowledge and skills. As Mezirow (2000, p. 5) points out, "[L]earning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action." Finally, it should be noted that an adult's past experiences can become obstacles to new learning. Some may have to unlearn negative attitudes toward learning, old ways of doing things, prejudicial views, and so on.

The arena of development from a psychological perspective is another way in which adults are differentiated from children. While it is true that both adults and children are involved

in developmental processes, the nature of the processes is qualitatively different. This difference can be clearly illustrated with **Havighurst's (1972)** developmental tasks for different life stages. From infancy through adolescence, the tasks reflect physical maturation (learning to walk, getting ready to read) or preparatory activities needed for future adult roles. Beginning with the tasks of young adulthood, there is a shift to functioning well as an adult—bringing up young children, managing a home, achieving adult civic and social responsibilities, and so on. **Erikson's (1963)** life stages also reflect a shift from childhood dependence to adult- oriented dilemmas. In the first five stages of infancy through adolescence, the child deals with establishing trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, and identity. Adults struggle with intimacy, generativity, and integrity, characteristics manifested in adult roles of spouse, parent, worker, and citizen. In at least one developmental theory, the notions of adult experience and development converge. Part of **Kohlberg's (1973)** theory of moral development stipulates that one cannot attain the higher stages of development until one has experienced irrevocable moral decision making. **Fowler (1981)**, whose stages of faith build on Kohlberg's idea, also maintains that later stages cannot be attained until adult life. Even some models of cognitive change and development assume an accumulation of experience with age. Mezirow (1991, p. 193), for example, asserts that "transformations likely to produce developmentally advanced meaning perspectives usually appear to occur after the age of thirty," while **Kegan (1994)** asserts that most people do not even enter the highest levels of consciousness until their forties.

In addition to a sequential stage-phase view of development, life events and transitions differentiate adult learning from child learning. Many of the life events and transitions that adults face are peculiar to adulthood and require adjustments—adjustments often made through systematic learning activity. It is these transitions and life events that are likely to result in significant, meaningful learning (**Merriam & Clark, 2006**). They are also what motivate many adults to seek out learning. **Aslanian and Brickell (1980)**, for example, found that 83 percent of adult learners in their study were involved in learning to cope with a transition. The transitions were primarily career related (56 percent), followed by family life transitions (35 percent). "To know an adult's life schedule," they concluded, "is to know an adult's learning schedule" (pp. 60–61).

There is little doubt that there is a strong link between the motivation to participate in a learning activity and an adult's life experiences and developmental issues. From studies of participation and motivation that document that adult roles, especially that of worker, are prime motivators for learning, to **Mezirow's (1991)** process of perspective transformation that is precipitated by a "disorienting dilemma"—that is, one's familiar patterns of coping with life events prove ineffective—learning in adulthood is a function of social roles and developmental issues.

Research on human memory and how the brain functions also has the learner center stage in understanding learning. From these perspectives learning has been conceived as something that primarily goes on inside the heads of individual learners. Through studying memory we continue to try to decipher how adults receive, store, transform, and retrieve information and how these processes are affected as we age. We have even tried to see if we could improve these processes through formal learning activities, and more recently, by using various forms of pharmaceutical interventions. One of the most intriguing knowledge bases on which to draw about learning in adulthood in the last few years is neurobiological. By discovering more about how the brain actually functions, we have a better chance of unlocking lifelong learning disabilities and such disastrous diseases as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, which can render adults incapable of learning even at a rudimentary level. There is a great deal of potential to enhance what we know about individual learners, especially when we merge the ideas from the cognitive and neurobiological sciences.

In addition to what is happening in the mind of an adult learner, there is a burgeoning literature looking at learning as an embodied, emotional, perhaps spiritual occurrence (see **Chapter Eight**). While this research and writing still focuses on the individual learner, it is at the same time expanding our understanding of learning beyond an information processing, cognitive activity.

Just being an adult is thus a crucial factor in distinguishing between learning in adulthood and learning in childhood. The accumulation of experience, the nature of that experience, the developmental issues adults address, how the notions of development and experience relate to learning, and how aging affects our memory and the more general neurological basis for learning—all of these differentiate adult learners from children.

The Context

Historically, adult educators in social action and community-based learning programs have taken the context into account in their work. From Jane Adams's Hull House immigrant programs to Highlander's Research and Education Center's involvement in labor movements, civil rights, and environmental action, the adult learner was seen as affected by, and having an effect on, his or her social context. However, it has not been until the last fifteen years or so that context has received more systematic attention in the literature on adult learning. There are at least two ways to think about context in this more recent work. The first is the notion that learning is a product of the individual *interacting* with the context. Recent theories of situated cognition, reflective practice, and cognitive development are representative of this interactive view. A second way to view the importance of context in learning is to consider how the structures and institutions of society affect learning. These *structural* dimensions include factors such as race, class, gender, cultural diversity, and power and oppression.

The interactive dimension of the context acknowledges that an adult's life situation is quite different from that of a child. A child's life situation is usually characterized by dependency on others for his or her well-being. The majority of adults, in contrast, are adults because they have assumed responsibility for managing their own lives. As Paterson (1979, p. 10) reminds us, "To say that someone is an adult is to say that he [sic] is entitled, for example, to a wide-ranging freedom of life-style and to a full participation in the making of social decisions; and it is also to say that he is obliged, among other things, to be mindful of his own deepest interests and to carry a full share of the burdens involved in conducting society and transmitting its benefits. His adulthood consists in his full employment of such rights and his full subjection to such responsibilities." The taking on of social roles characteristic of adulthood—roles such as worker, spouse or partner, voting citizen, and parent—differentiates adults from children better than chronological age does.

This difference in the social position of adults and children is reflected in contextual differences in their lives and their learning. A child's life is bounded by home and school, whereas an adult's life situation is defined primarily by work, family, and community. Through home and school, children learn to be adults; going

to school is a full-time job. Theoretically at least, both home and school are sites where young people learn how to function as adults. The curriculum in both settings is determined primarily by others, who decide what is important to know in order to become responsible members of society. Education, even undergraduate education for traditional-age students, is basically preparatory—young people are "prepared" for the world of work.

Adults, in contrast, typically add the role of learner to other full-time roles and responsibilities. The learning that adults do arises from the context of their lives, which is intimately tied to the sociocultural setting in which they live. As Jarvis (1992, p. 11) has observed: "Learning ... is about the continuing process of making sense of everyday experience." Jarvis also draws a connection between motivation and context: "The reason for participation does not always lie within the learner but in the dynamic tension that exists between the learner and [the] socio-cultural world" (1983, p. 67). The potential for learning occurs "at the intersection of us and our world" (**Jarvis, 2006**, p. 10). For example, an assembly-line worker whose job has been outsourced will need to retrain for other employment; a nurse will need to keep up with changes in the health care system and technology. Zoning and tax laws, waste disposal management, and so on that affect citizens' lives in communities also lead to new learning. Thus learning in adulthood is characterized by an interaction between the adult and his or her lifeworld and the duties and responsibilities inherent in the adult roles of worker, spouse, partner, parent, and citizen.

The differences in context between the lives of children and adults and how these differences influence learning are highlighted in an article by **Resnick (1987)** contrasting learning in school and outside school. She writes that "school is a special place and time for people—discontinuous in some important ways with daily life and work" (p. 13). There are several ways that school learning differs from other (mostly adult) learning. First, in school, individual cognition has, until recently, been primarily rewarded, whereas outside school shared cognition is the norm. In school "a student succeeds or fails at a task independently of what other students do. ... In contrast, much activity outside school is socially shared. Work, personal life, and recreation take place within social systems, and each person's ability to function successfully depends on what others do and how several individuals' mental and physical

performances mesh" (p. 13). Second, "school is an institution that values thought that proceeds independently, without aid of physical and cognitive tools," at least in testing situations (p. 13). In the real world, people use all sorts of tools on a regular basis, such as books, notes, calculators, and computers, to solve problems and function more effectively. Resnick points out that it is the use of tools that allows "people of limited education to participate in cognitively complex activity systems" and cites Brazilian black market bookies' use of prepared probability tables for functioning in a demanding mathematical system (p. 14). In our own society, personnel in fast food restaurants ring up orders on a computer where the food items are keyed by picture and word.

Resnick also points out that too often school learning is decontextualized, resulting in little transfer between school and real-world reasoning. Finally, generalized learning occurs in school, but situation-specific competencies are needed out of school: "Schools aim to teach general, widely usable skills and theoretical principles. ... Yet to be truly skillful outside school, people must develop situation-specific forms of competence" (p. 15). What people in all settings (including, Resnick points out, adult technical training, management, and continuing professional education) need to learn is "to be good adaptive learners, so that they can perform effectively when situations are unpredictable and task demands change" (p. 18). Resnick's analysis underscores the contextual differences between learning in childhood and in adulthood and acknowledges the importance of the more recent work on situated cognition and reflective practice (see **Chapter Seven**).

In delineating differences between children and adults regarding the context, we note that these differences have ramifications with regard to social and ethical issues. Since children's education is preparatory, for example, they are expected to learn certain social and moral values as well as specific bodies of knowledge. Adult education struggles with issues of provision and access to learning opportunities, perhaps because adult education is primarily a voluntary activity, whereas schooling for children is compulsory. Similarly, the ethical issues involved in adult learning differ somewhat in that an adult's learning is often intimately tied to his or her life situation and status as an adult. Questions thus arise regarding agency and responsibility in the learning activity, as well as the outcomes of that interaction. **Daloz's (1988)** now famous

article titled "The Story of Gladys Who Refused to Grow: A Morality Tale for Mentors" explores this very issue of how much adult educators should "push" the development of their adult students.

The context, then, in which adult learning takes place generally differs from the context of most childhood learning. Moreover, every adult learning situation differs from every other situation, whether the learning is done in a formal or nonformal setting or on one's own. Certainly informal learning contexts, including social action and community-based learning, are where much of adult learning takes place. While these contexts vary from individual to individual, they all hold the potential for learning and in fact organize our learning. We need only see them as sites for learning. In a delightful and insightful book on the integration of learning and living, Bateson (1994, p. 9) writes, "When the necessary tasks of learning cannot be completed in a portion of the life cycle set aside for them, they have to join life's other tasks and be done concurrently. We can carry on the process of learning in everything we do, like a mother balancing her child on her hip as she goes about her work with the other hand or uses it to open the doors of the unknown. Living and learning, we become ambidextrous." At another point, she comments on the unfortunate tendency of our society to compartmentalize: "If only for tax purposes, we are forced to label activities as work, or play, or learning, or therapy, or exercise, or stress reduction, missing the seriousness of play, the delight of good work, the healing that happens in the classroom. For adults, learning is rarely the only activity going on. ... By emphasizing a single thread of activity, we devalue the learning running throughout" (p. 108).

The importance of context is not just that it is interactive with one's learning. There are structural dimensions to our social context, often unseen and unacknowledged, that subtly affect learning. This aspect of context recognizes that our society has become highly multicultural and diverse, and that political and economic conditions often shape the learning experience. It is no longer a question of *whether* in adult learning situations we need to address issues of race, class, gender, culture, ethnicity, and sexual orientation but rather a question of *how* we should deal with these issues, the power dynamics involved, and so on. We are beginning to recognize that it is important to know the backgrounds and experiences of our learners not only as individual learners but also as

members of social and culturally constructed groups such as women and men; poor, middle-class, and rich; black, white, and brown. These socially constructed notions of who our learners are and who we are as educators and the subsequent power dynamics should be given the same attention in teaching and learning, planning, and administrative functions as the "technology" (that is, program design, instructional strategies) of our practice. (See **Alfred, 2002**, **Hansman & Sissel, 2001**, and **St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004**, for discussions of sociocultural and political contexts and their impact on adult learning.)

Further, exposure to other groups of people and cultures has been greatly expanded through travel, participation in the global marketplace, and technological wonders such as the World Wide Web. These changes afford all adults opportunities to learn from others and to expand their worldviews. Bateson (1994, p. 17) explains how this kind of exposure can lead to learning: "Each person is calibrated by experience, almost like a measuring instrument for difference, so discomfort [in encountering difference] is informative and offers a starting point for new understanding." She goes on to say that "it is contrast that makes learning possible" (p. 27). The inclusion in this edition of *Learning in Adulthood* of a chapter on non-Western perspectives on learning and knowing acknowledges the still-nascent but growing influence of other epistemological systems on our understanding of adult learning.

The Learning Process

Of the three areas of learner, context, and process, in the learning process there are fewer dramatic differences between adults and children. **Houle (1972)**, one of the field's most respected adult educators, maintained that the process of learning is fundamentally the same for adults and children. Research, however, has uncovered some differences—differences that when linked with context and learner help distinguish adult learning from child learning.

Two process factors in particular—speed and meaningfulness—have been shown to affect adult learning. Speed refers to the time a person has to examine a problem or respond to a situation. An adult's ability to respond slows with age, and time limits and pressures have a negative effect on learning performance. With regard

to meaningfulness, perhaps because an adult's learning is so closely tied to his or her life situation, adults are not inclined to engage in learning unless it is meaningful. Adults are thus likely to do poorly on recall of nonsense syllables, for example, compared with younger learners, who are more conditioned by school experiences to learn material that may not be immediately relevant. Linked to the meaningfulness of material is the variable of motivation. MacKeracher (1996, p. 80) defines motives as "the needs that learners feel when starting a learning activity. They may relate to unmet needs or unwanted conditions in life and to the pursuit of positive growth toward desired goals. As learners proceed toward meeting unmet needs, resolving unwanted conditions, or reaching desired goals, motives for learning tend to change in relation to any feelings and experiences of success/failure and satisfaction/ dissatisfaction." In summarizing the literature on motivation, MacKeracher observes that "the tendencies which are labeled 'motives' arise from within the learner. Despite encouragement from some writers to 'motivate learners,' facilitators cannot do this directly" (p. 79).

In addition, there are other age-related factors that may affect learning in adulthood. Adults are more likely than children to have health problems. Fatigue, medication, interference from previous learning, environmental conditions, and so on certainly affect new learning. Acquisition of information may become more difficult, because the rate at which working memory processes information seems to be slower with age. The point to be made here is that the nature of the learning process in adulthood is likely to be different from a child's because of the greater incidence of these occurrences and the greater impact of these factors on older learners.

By linking an adult's greater experiential base to learning, a case can be made that cognitive functioning in adulthood may also be qualitatively different from childhood. Recognizing that the prior accumulation of knowledge is crucial to the integration of new learning, and that adults have accumulated more knowledge than children, by extension, learning potential, at least in some areas, would naturally increase with age. Research on fluid and crystallized intelligence bears this generalization out. Other scholars, especially those writing from a transformational learning perspective, do not focus so much on the accumulation of knowledge as on the *transformation* of experience as a characteristic of adult learning.

Finally, it should be noted that those who posit stages of cognitive development in adulthood that are different from those unfolding in childhood contribute to our understanding of how the learning process may be different for adults. **Kegan (1994)**, for example, proposes a level of consciousness model in which dialectical thinking becomes the hallmark, or highest level, of mature adult thinking. Framed from the assumption that our postmodern world necessitates this form of thinking in order to respond effectively to the demands of adult life, Kegan asserts that adults rarely expand their thinking to this level until in their forties or fifties. As Kegan observes, "I suggest that we are gradually seeing more adults working on a qualitatively different order of consciousness than did adults one hundred years ago because we live twenty or more years longer than we used to" (p. 352).

The Configuration of Learner, Context, and Process

We believe that learning in adulthood can be distinguished from childhood learning by the way in which learner, context, and some aspects of the learning process blend in adulthood. The configuration looks different than it does in childhood. In our discussion of each component, we noted how adults are different from children, how the context of adult learning is different from the context of child learning, and how certain features of the learning process are unique to adults. Although we have attempted to discuss these components separately, our discussion reflects their natural interaction. An adult's life experiences, for example, are a function of the sociocultural environment and the learner's personality. We can think about this interaction with regard to an adult's work experiences. As everyone is aware, the context of work has changed dramatically with the emergence of a global marketplace, advances in technology, and the shift from an industrial to a service and knowledge-based economy. Some adults are training for jobs that did not exist five years ago, many are changing jobs often, and a growing number are experimenting with alternative job structures, such as consulting, telecommuting, and job sharing. Previous experiences as well as one's personality will determine how these changes are accommodated, which in turn affects both one's self-concept as a worker and notions of career development.

How an adult processes information from the sociocultural context, and even what an adult *attends* to in the environment, is wrapped up with the developmental concerns of the moment. A parent of teenagers, for example, is much more likely to notice and perhaps attend a workshop on teenagers and drugs than someone not involved with that age group. And the state of the economy is likely to be of great interest to someone nearing retirement, who might then design a learning project on the topic. In both examples, the sociocultural context, the accumulated life experiences, developmental concerns, and presumably the nature of ensuing learning experiences converge to make learning in adulthood qualitatively different from learning in childhood.

In summarizing the material on learning in adulthood, we also asked ourselves to what extent theory and practice might reflect this integrated perspective of adult learning. The work on self-directed learning or participation, for example, by definition focuses on a particular aspect of the phenomenon. The self-directed learning frameworks emphasize the process, and to a lesser extent, the context and the learner. Similarly, the research on participation does not deal with the learning process per se; rather, the context and the learner are the most important variables.

Some theories or models of adult learning focus on adult characteristics (for example, **Knowles, 1980**), some emphasize an adult's life situation (for example, **McClusky, 1970**), and others center on changes in consciousness (for example, **Freire, 1970**; **Mezirow, 2000**). These three emphases can be loosely equated with the adult, the context, and the learning process. **Knowles's (1980)** still-popular notion of andragogy is almost entirely focused on how the adult learner is different from a preadult learner. **McClusky (1970)** attends to the adult's life situation and social context from which the need or motivation to learn arises.

For both **Freire (1970)** and **Mezirow (2000)** learning in adulthood is a transformative rather than an additive process. It requires the ability to reflect critically on one's thoughts and assumptions—a particularly adult skill. Both theories also account for adult characteristics, and in particular, life experiences and developmental concerns unique to adulthood. And in both theories the sociocultural context is a critical component. It is in the sociocultural context that adults have experiences that must be processed. The two differ, however, in the notion of being emancipated through this

learning process. Mezirow, while not discounting social change as an outcome of perspective transformation, emphasizes personal psychological change. And while Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation perhaps comes closest to taking into account our notions of context, learner, and process, there are still some questions as to just how comprehensive his theory is. Is the process he outlines unique to adulthood? What about adults who do not reflect critically? Can transformations occur through other mechanisms? His theory seems most appropriate for informal, self-directed learning situations, although several have sought application in more institutionally based settings (Cranton, **1996**, **1997**; Mezirow & Associates, **1990**, **2000**; **Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000**).

For Freire, in contrast, being emancipated from false consciousness requires political action aimed at changing society. Critical theory and feminist pedagogy share with Freire their emphases on emancipation and empowerment. Further, both of these orientations begin with the sociopolitical context of people's lives. Critical theory attends to socioeconomic class as the major variable creating inequities and oppression, while feminists look to gender as well as the intersection of race, class, and gender. Both perspectives call for adults to reflect critically on power and oppression and engage with other like-minded adults in a radical restructuring of society.

How well does practice account for the uniqueness of adult learning? This question is difficult to answer without looking at a specific learning situation. Furthermore, it is basically a question of the relationship between theory and practice. To what extent is the knowledge that we have accumulated about adult learning—knowledge reviewed in this book—reflective of what actually happens in practice? Moreover, to what extent is the knowledge that we do have derived from practice, and to what extent does it inform our practice? **Cervero (1991)** has delineated four positions relative to the interaction between knowledge and practice, each of which can be applied to adult learning. His framework allows us to see how the knowledge presented in this book and practice are related.

The first position posits that the practice of adult learning has been carried out without reference to what is known about how adults learn. This position in fact characterizes much of adult learning, since only a small percentage of teachers, administrators, program developers, and others have had any formal training in adult

education. From this position, those working with adult learners rely on common sense and trial-and-error learning, a less formal but certainly no less valuable source of guidance for practice.

The second position is that a systematically collected knowledge base illuminates practice. It is thought that if this knowledge is disseminated through professional preparation, in-service staff development, and so on, practice will be strengthened. Lists of principles and guidelines, for example, such as those reviewed at the beginning of the chapter, are often disseminated through workshops and in-house publications, ostensibly to improve one's practice in adult learning. There are also numerous publications that attempt to show how knowledge about context, learner, and process could be put into practice. *Andragogy in Action* (**Knowles & Associates, 1984**), for example, presents thirty-six case studies of how characteristics of adult learners can be incorporated into the planning of learning activities in settings ranging from business and government to universities and volunteer organizations. In another publication, *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults* (1989), Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering show how adult life experiences and adult developmental theory can form the basis for programs and support services for learners in higher education. Finally, Cranton's *Transformative Learning in Action: Insights from Practice* (1997) and Mezirow and Associates' *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood* (1990) and *Learning as Transformation* (2000) review exemplary programs and suggest methods "for precipitating and fostering transformative learning in the context of the classroom, in special workshops, in informal group settings, in collective social action, in counseling sessions, and in the workplace" (**Mezirow & Associates, 1990**, p. xv).

The third position on the relationship between knowledge and practice is that educators operate intuitively with an understanding of adult learning whether or not that knowledge is articulated. This theory-in-practice position holds that "practitioners actually do operate on the basis of theories and knowledge" and that "theory can be derived from practice by systematically articulating the subjective meaning structures that influence the ways that real individuals act in concrete situations" (**Cervero, 1991**, pp. 26–27). This notion has been investigated with regard to professional practice (Schön, **1987**, **1991**, 1996) and is now being promoted in adult education, especially in the work of Cervero and Wilson (1994, 2005).

With regard to the learning situation and other aspects of adult education, the central task of this approach is to "describe educational practice and help practitioners become more reflective about their own individual actions" (**Cervero, 1991**, p. 29). The orientation of our book—in particular, our attending to context and exploring social issues—reflects the critical stance toward practice inherent in this position.

The fourth position on theory and practice is that they are indivisible. Here the focus is on "what counts as knowledge and how, where, and by whom this knowledge is produced" (**Cervero, 1991**, p. 31). Understanding the production of knowledge is emancipating. This perspective is best illustrated by critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist theoretical assumptions about knowledge and learning. More than the first three positions, this perspective—that theory and practice are indivisible—takes into account the political, economic, and sociocultural context in which learning occurs. Examples of adult education practice from this perspective are community-based literacy programs, feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, popular education programs and movements, and participatory research activities (**Merriam, 1991**). Participatory research "has faith in people's ability to produce their own knowledge through collective investigation of problems and issues, collective analysis of the problems, and collective action to change the conditions that gave rise to the problems in the first place" (**Gaventa, 1988**, p. 19). This method of producing knowledge, indeed this perspective on the relationship between theory and practice, makes space for alternative knowledge systems that have been excluded from the "official" body of knowledge. While we recognize that, for the most part, the material presented in this book is representative of "official" knowledge, we hope that some of the less mainstream information that we have included will stimulate further research to make such unconventional knowledge more visible.

Some Concluding Thoughts

In this final chapter, we have articulated our understanding of learning in adulthood and assessed how well learner, context, and process as a unique configuration in adulthood are reflected in theory and in practice. We conclude with some observations and

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