Four Adult Development Theories and Their Implications for Practice

by Lisa M. Baumgartner

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What is adult development? What relevance do adult development theories and models have to the practice of adult basic education? Our philosophy of adult development informs our teaching. For example, if we believe that people mature by passively absorbing knowledge and reacting to their environments, our instruction differs from that of teachers who assume knowledge is constructed and that development depends on active participation with the environment.

In this article, I discuss several approaches to adult development and their related implications for instruction. Clark and Caffarella (1999) note, "Theories [serve] as a lens through which we view the life course; that lens illuminates certain elements and tells a particular story about adult life" (p. 3). The four lenses through which adult development will be seen are: behavioral / mechanistic, cognitive / psychological, contextual / sociocultural, and integrative.

The Behavioral / Mechanistic Approach

According to the mechanistic approach, people are machines whose response to external forces results in development (Miller, 1993). This approach asserts that past behavior predicts future behavior and that people's machine-like minds do not construct knowledge but instead absorb existing knowledge (Miller, 1993). Development can therefore be measured quantitatively (Wrightsman, 1994).

Behaviorism exemplifies the mechanistic approach. It is a science interested in predicting and controlling human behavior (Watson, 1930). People learn behaviors by responding to stimuli and by receiving positive or negative reinforcement or punishment. Positive reinforcement increases the likelihood that the immediately preceding behavior will be repeated (Shaffer, 1994). For example, if a girl receives praise (an example of positive reinforcement) for helping her sister, she is likely to repeat the action. In contrast, negative reinforcement occurs when a desired action results in the cessation of an unpleasant stimulus.

When a woman buckles her seatbelt to turn off the seatbelt alarm, she receives negative reinforcement (Shaffer, 1994). Punishment is a third kind of reinforcement. Instead of preceding the response as in the case of negative reinforcement, it follows the response and decreases the chance of the behavior recurring (Taber, Glaser et al., 1965). Scolding is an example of punishment.

Watson (1930), the father of behaviorism, believed that people were "an assembled organic machine ready to run" (p. 269) and that their personalities were a collection of complex habits. For example, he said that individuals develop a habit system, developed most during the teen years and set by age 30. Watson noted, "A gossiping, neighbor spying, disaster enjoying [person] of 30 will be, unless a miracle happens, the same at 40 and still the same at 60" (p. 278).

Instructors who favor the behavioral / mechanistic perspective provide students with plenty of opportunity for drills and practice. Using praise, grades, or some small prizes for their efforts positively reinforces learners. Students learn the appropriate response through reinforcement.

Programmed learning is one method of instruction used by teachers who champion the behavioral/mechanistic approach to development. This instructional technique, which was especially popular in the 1960s and 1970s (Green, 1963; Skinner, 1968; Taber et al., 1965), remains popular in the computer age (Kelly & Crosbie, 1997; Munson & Crosbie, 1998).
Programmed learning involves assessing a student's prior knowledge about a topic, then basing individual programs of instruction on the student's level of expertise, and leading a student through a program of instruction via a book, slides, or a computer program. The material is divided into manageable portions called frames (Taber et al., 1965). After each frame, a question is asked and the student responds and receives immediate feedback. For example, learners in a research methods course may be presented with the explanation of a particular experimental research design. Next, they are asked a question about the information in the frame. After a correct response, the computer program may respond "Great job!" An incorrect response may yield, "Nice try, but try again." This reinforcement results in retention of the information.

The teacher who embraces this paradigm sees development as correct behavioral responses. People's personalities are a series of habits and the teacher's job is to get the student to develop good habits. Learning is additive in nature. Each set of facts builds on previous knowledge and this addition of knowledge can be accomplished with various types of reinforcement.

**The Psychological / Cognitive Approach**

The psychological / cognitive perspective focuses on an individual's "internal developmental processes" in interaction with the environment (Clark & Caffarella, 1999, p. 5). Clark and Caffarella differentiate between sequential models of development and models based on life events or transitions (p. 5). Sequential models, also called stage or phase models, assume that development is unidirectional in nature, that present development is built on past development, and that there is an endpoint (Miller, 1993). In the life event or transition model humans are active participants in their development, actively constructing knowledge rather than simply absorbing it. For example, a chronically ill woman changes medication and becomes increasingly lethargic. She learns more about the new drug's side effects from friends, health professionals, and the Internet. She notices that when she eats certain foods in combination with the drug, it increases her fatigue. Her knowledge and personal experience help her realize she must change her diet to alleviate the lethargy.

One psychological / cognitive approach examines life events and transitions. Pearlin's (1982) model notes that anticipated life course role changes, such as getting married and having children, cause less psychological distress than unanticipated changes such as car accidents or the loss of employment. Pearlin maintains that social class, a person's coping skills, the social support networks available to a person, and the type of stress all have an impact on the individual route that a person's life course follows (Bee & Bjorkland, 2000).

The psychological / cognitive approach to development asserts that people reach more complex, integrated levels of development through active participation with their environment. Furthermore, individuals construct knowledge as opposed to responding to existing knowledge. In essence, adult development is a continuous journey toward increasingly complex levels of development. Hence, teachers taking this perspective favor ideas found in the transformational learning literature, such as critical reflection and discussion (Daloz, 1999; Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow (1990) asserts that through reflection, individuals often arrive at an "a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable and integrated perspective" (p. 14). To encourage critical reflection, instructors may have people engage in role plays. Role reversal activities help learners to explore and express views other than their own, which could encourage them to broaden their perspectives (Cranton, 1994). Another technique involves a method of journal writing, in which learners use one side of the page for observation and descriptions and the other side for thoughts, feelings, related experiences, or images provoked by the description (Cranton, 1994, p. 179).
Mezirow (1991) maintains that discussion with others is integral to adult learning and development. Instructors who champion the psychological / cognitive view provide discussion guidelines (Cranton, 1994) that ensure an atmosphere of trust, safety, and respect in which learners felt comfortable expressing their ideas. Instructors also allow for quiet time in the discussion groups.

Lastly, teachers recognize that learners' receptiveness to information may be based on their life stage or time of transition. People often return to the classroom during a time of transition (Daloz, 1986; 1999). Instructors holding the psychological / cognitive view watch for what Havinghurst (1972) has termed "teachable moments," in which people are ready to learn and apply a concept because of their life situation.

Teachers who champion the psychological / cognitive framework believe that knowledge is constructed and that adults are active participants in their development. Instructors encourage critical reflection and discussion through a variety of activities. They realize that learners often return to school during a time of transition and look for "teachable moments" in which learners are receptive to new ideas.

**Contextual / Sociocultural**

The contextual / sociocultural perspective on development works from the point of view that adult development cannot be understood apart from the sociohistorical context in which it occurs (Miller, 1993). Vygotsky (1978), a well-known proponent of the contextual approach, believed that people are not separated from the contexts in which they live, but are part of them. Vygotsky (1978) called this the child-in-activity-in-context. This developmental stance also asserts that culture influences what people think about, what skills they obtain, when they can participate in certain activities, and who is allowed to do which activities (Miller, 1993). Miller (1993) writes, "Different cultures emphasize different kinds of tools (for example verbal or nonverbal), skills (reading, mathematics, or spatial memory), and social interaction (formal schooling or informal apprenticeships) because of different cultural needs and values" (p. 390). This, in turn, influences who people become.

Sociocultural elements such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation influence adult development (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Cross, 1995; Kroger, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). These factors position people in relation to each other and in relation to a society that rewards those who fit the US "mythical norm," which Audre Lorde (1984/1995) defines as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure" (p. 285) (italics in the original). US society devalues those outside this mythical norm.

It is the intersection of these factors rather than a single factor that affects adult development and learning (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000; Etter-Lewis & Foster, 1996; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). For example, Johnson-Bailey (2001) examined the common experiences shaping the persistence in higher education of African-American women who enrolled at a non-traditional age. Through these women's stories, she poignantly demonstrates how discrimination based on race, class, and gender affects their educational journeys. Speaking about the influence of racism and sexism in their lives, Johnson-Bailey notes, "Racism and sexism impact the educational experiences of Black women in many ways. As Blacks, they are thought to be intellectually and morally inferior. As women, they are held to task for the alleged inadequacy of their gender's intellect" (p. 91). The contextual / sociocultural approach views individuals as inextricable from the society in which they live; they develop in ways intrinsic to themselves but molded by the discriminatory forces of society within which they function.

Instructors utilizing this framework may use Vygotsky's (1978) idea of guided learning. The teacher and learner are active participants in the learning process. Learning involves observation, collaboration, and "scaffolding" (Shaffer, 1994, p. 78). Scaffolding requires that the teacher adjust the instructional
level based on the learner's response. The learner is an apprentice who develops culturally relevant skills through thought and action (Vygotsky, 1978).

Teachers who adopt a contextual / sociocultural approach to adult development also focus on how social inequities based on various attributes including race, class, and gender affect adult development and learning. Like their colleagues who work within the psychological / cognitive paradigm, the instructors who believe in the sociocultural context are interested in having their students gain increasingly integrated and higher levels of understanding through critical reflection and discussion. However, they may take an approach that focuses on social justice, encouraging students to question critically why social inequities exist and how these inequalities remain part of the educational experience. For example, they may ask students to reflect on how school policies, procedures, and curriculum continue to privilege some while discriminating against others (Apple, 1996; Apple & King, 1983).

Educators who ascribe to the contextual / sociocultural view of adult development also recognize the importance of increasing students' cultural awareness. Sleeter and Grant (1988) write, "The ideology of multicultural education is one of social change - not simply integrating those who have been left out of society but changing that very fabric of society" (p. 139). Furthermore, these educators strive to introduce the idea of cultural pluralism, defined as "maintenance of diversity, respect for differences, and the right to participate actively in all aspects of society without having to give up one's unique identity" (p. 140).

These instructors infuse materials from different cultures into their curricula, perhaps gathering stories to demonstrate a particular concept through a variety of cultural lenses. For example, a teacher of GED students may provide reading materials that examine the institution of marriage through different cultural lenses. She might help her students analyze how various aspects of a person's identity affect marriage.

Teachers who choose this paradigm realize how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation influence adult development. They encourage students to question critically how societal inequities are reproduced in the classroom. Instructors who see adult development through this lens also work to increase people's cultural awareness.

**Integrated Approach**

The integrated approach to adult development takes a holistic view of adult development. This perspective is focused on how the intersections of mind, body, and sociocultural influences affect development (Clark & Caffarella, 1999). Spirituality is also sometimes included in the integrated approach (Dirkx, 1997; Tisdell, 1999).

Perun and Bielby's (1980) proposed integrated model of development suggests that the life course is composed of changes on several levels across time. Changes in each area follow their own timetables. Different types of changes include physical changes, changes in the family life cycle such as being married and having children, changes in work roles, and in emotional tasks (Perun & Bielby, 1980, p. 102). Stress results when the timetables are asynchronous (Perun & Bielby, 1980).

While others do not present a model, they draw attention to aspects of adult development that are not widely discussed, including spirituality. For Tisdell (1999), spirituality is connection to history, to others, and to moral responsibility (p. 89). Moreover, Tisdell notes the inextricable tie between culture and spirituality. All are interconnected and, maintains Tisdell, all are important for adult learning. Recognizing spirituality as an aspect of the adult learner's experience, realizing its importance in meaning-making, and understanding "spirituality as the grounding place for the work of many emancipatory adult educators" are important concepts for adult educators to grasp (p. 94).
Dirkx (1997) discusses "nurturing the soul" in adult learning (p.79). Instead of relying exclusively on logic, he invites educators to explore "ways of knowing grounded in a more intuitive and emotional sense of our experiences" (p. 80). In this type of transformative learning, students move beyond the rational to the extra rational. Images and symbols are important in this type of learning. Learning through the soul "has to do with authenticity, connection between heart and mind, mind and emotion, the dark as well as the light" (p. 83).

Teachers who espouse the integrated approach to adult development believe in the interconnection between mind, body, spirit, and sociocultural factors. They are interested in promoting students' growth intellectually, physically, emotionally, aesthetically, and spiritually (Miller, 1999). Encouraging students to connect to course content in a variety of ways requires myriad techniques. Instead of relying solely on class discussion and written work, teachers may encourage students to construct a learner's portfolio in which course content is addressed in a variety of ways including, for example, art music, poetry and fiction, or dance. Other techniques may include visualization and meditation.

Instructors who see adult development as an integrated process may be more sensitive to the idea of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). This theory notes that there are seven kinds of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. These teachers incorporate activities that address different types of intelligences into their teaching (see Focus on Basics Volume 3, Issue A, on how teachers use the theory of multiple intelligences in the adult basic education classroom).

Those who adopt the integrative framework of adult development may also be acutely aware of the teacher student interaction. They may simultaneously observe themselves and their students in interaction with each other. They may encourage themselves and their students to engage in an activity and then journal the physical feelings, emotional issues, and analyze the situation (Brown, 1999).

Those believing in the integrative approach recognize the intersection between mind, body, spirit, and sociocultural factors. They recognize the importance of connecting students to course content in a variety of ways to promote growth on several levels. Writing stories, discussion, drawing, other artwork, and engaging in visualization and meditation may be techniques used to encourage this development.

**In Conclusion**

In conclusion, each of the four lenses on adult development makes different assumptions. Recognizing these different outlooks on adult development broadens our perspective on adult development and its relation to practice. This awareness can lead to appropriate instruction for our students, which, in turn, will promote their development, whatever you believe it to be.

**References**


**About the Author**

*Lisa M. Baumgartner* is an Assistant Professor of Adult Education at Buffalo State College in Buffalo, NY. Her interests include adult learning and development, identity development, and qualitative research.

This article is summarized by Bella Hanson. This article is located at: [http://www.ncsall.net/?id=268](http://www.ncsall.net/?id=268)

**Questions for Self-reflection and/or Discussion**

1. Do you see yourself espousing one approach over another? If so, how do you feel this influences your instruction?

2. Is it evident that some of your learners enroll because of a life event or transition? Do they discuss this as a factor in their enrollment? How can they “construct knowledge” from this information about themselves?

3. Do you have learners who speak about the influence of racism or sexism in their lives? How can critical thinking activities be integrated into discussions around these influences?

4. If you use the integrated approach how do you integrate mind, body, spirit and sociocultural factors into instruction?