

THIRD UPDATE ON ADULT LEARNING THEORY: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION, NO. 119

Sharan B. Merriam (Ed.). Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2008, 96 pages.

The *Third Update on Adult Learning Theory*, the Fall 2008 issue of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, is an eclectic and accessible collection intended to summarize the latest research and thinking on adult learning. The template for the updates is well developed, and this third one, like the first in 1993 and the second in 2001, is edited by Sharan Merriam and features short articles written by prominent adult education scholars in their various areas of specialization.

As space is very limited (96 pages), every new topic introduced in 2008 necessarily means that an older topic present in earlier updates is gone, and it is the overall patterns of appearance and disappearance that makes examination of this third update such an interesting indicator of what is new and hot, and what is not. Topics in adult learning covered in 2008 include transformational learning (perhaps not precisely new, but updated with recent research findings), neuro-scientific and postmodern perspectives, as well as narrative, embodied, and spiritual learning. All of these areas were present in the 2001 update and are expanded and updated for the third. Workplace learning and non-Western learning theories appear for the first time in 2008.

In the not hot category, no longer receiving separate article-length examination in 2008 are situated cognition, andragogy, self-directed learning, emotions and learning, incidental learning, and critical and feminist approaches.

Another difference is that in the 2001 update, Merriam provides an introductory chapter briefly reviewing adult learning theory in a historical context. By 2008, no such overall historical or conceptual framing is attempted, and while Merriam explicitly states in both 2001 and 2008 that the update is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather a “snapshot as to recent developments” (2008, p. 93), I would have found it helpful to have some bigger-picture developmental and relational framings through which to view the disparate adult learning theories presented.

Some of the individual article writers in the most recent edition, notably Edward Taylor on transformative learning theory, Tara Fenwick on workplace learning, and Bob Hill on the “peri-postmodern moment” (p. 90), offer a much-appreciated historical overview of theory development intended “to bring the reader up to date” (Taylor, p. 7) before delving into newer thinking and research on their subject matter. Taylor is perhaps attempting to provide my desired bigger-picture framing when he asserts that transformative learning theory has replaced andragogy as “the dominant educational philosophy of adult education” (p. 12), and he places many topics in past and present updates in either the personal transformation/individual change camp (Mezirow, neurobiology, psychodynamic) or the emancipatory transformation/social change camp (cultural-social, race-centric, planetary consciousness). However, no explicit debate or discussion on Taylor’s assertion, or indeed any other perspective, is put forward. The articles sit side by side, aligned and otherwise.

Merriam says that the *Third Update on Adult Learning Theory* is intended for two primary audiences. First are adult educators, who already have a solid base in “old” adult learning theory but welcome the updates because they then “do not have to search myriad research journals to find out what’s new; the authors of each chapter have done that for us!” (p. 1). The members of this audience can, presumably, create their own historical and conceptual frameworks. The second audience is adult education students;

Merriam comments that the two previous updates were very popular “especially as companion books in adult learning courses” (p. 1).

Proving her point, I used articles from the *Third Update* as required readings in conjunction with a textbook in a recently completed upper-level undergraduate course on adult learning. While the class was about adult learning, the majority of the learners were not adult education students per se, but were taking the course because they needed the no-prerequisite, upper-level elective credits to complete their degrees in computer science, kinesiology, social work, general studies, and so on. About half the class comprised international students recently arrived from India, China, and Sri Lanka to study in Canada. My view of the *Third Update* has been quite influenced not just by my own interests and opinions, but by how these additional readers who were learning about adult learning theory for the first time responded to it.

The learners in my class really liked the publication because (in order of comments received) it was available online, the articles were short, and there was less academic jargon and more interesting stories than in their textbook. The articles were, therefore, more understandable, and (occasionally, at least) interesting and connected to learners’ life experiences. Their favourite articles were Freiler’s “Learning through the Body” and Merriam and Kim’s “Non-Western Perspectives on Learning and Knowing”. The Merriam and Kim article, in particular, served as a springboard for a whole class conversation on cultural backgrounds, migration experiences, and ideas about, attitudes toward, and experiences with education in different cultural contexts. I found it profoundly educational to listen to that conversation, and at least some of the learners are still talking about that class six months later.

The articles in the *Third Update on Adult Learning Theory* are all well written, eminently readable, and usefully and thoroughly referenced. However, they are presented, as Merriam says, as a snapshot, or more precisely to my way of thinking, as a handful of snapshots—pretty, but unconnected, unframed, and lacking a unifying narrative. In her closing article, Merriam does identify two themes emerging across the collection of articles as, first, “increased attention to the learning context” (p. 94) and second, “recognition that learning is a multidimensional phenomenon” (p. 95), but these seem both unarguable and somewhat vague. Context appears only to minimally and rarely reference what I would broadly call political context—relations of power and privilege. As a reader, I thought Tara Fenwick’s phrase describing much of the workplace training literature as “a depoliticized, morally infused prescription for what we ought to do to ‘promote learning’” (p. 25) could also arguably be used as an overall descriptor of much of the *Third Update on Adult Learning Theory*. However, as a teacher, my quibbles seem minor. Articles touched chords of experience and affirmation for many of my students, and that, in my fairly lengthy

experience in classrooms, happens all too rarely. I will, therefore, certainly and happily use the *Third Update on Adult Learning Theory* again in my classes.

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