Adults learning - some theorists’ perspectives


Having developed an approach to adult learning in the previous chapter it is now necessary to examine the fields of adult education and lifelong learning more broadly and to investigate some of the writings about adult learning that have been produced in recent years. This chapter, which is closely linked to the previous one, highlights the work of five major writers, each of whom, in their various ways, has examined different aspects of adult learning. Four of the writers concentrate on adult education and the fifth is an educational psychologist; three assume a psychological and the remaining two a sociological perspective. They are: Paulo Freire, Robert Gagné, Malcolm Knowles, Jack Mezirow and Carl Rogers; the main works of each referred to here are listed in the bibliography. These five have been selected because, in their differing ways, they have contributed to the theoretical knowledge of adult learning and their writings are examined here, comparing and contrasting their ideas to those presented in the previous chapters.

Paulo Freire

The writings of Freire are very well known among adult educators, even though some have confessed to finding him difficult to comprehend. Freire’s ideas emerged against the background of the oppression of the masses in Brazil by an elite, who reflected the dominant values of a non-Brazilian culture. His writings epitomized an intellectual movement that developed in Latin America after the Second World War, which was a synthesis of Christianity and Marxism and which found its theological fulfilment in liberation theology: its educational philosophy was Freire’s own work. From this background, it may be seen that at the heart of his educational ideas lay a humanistic conception of people as learners, but also an expectation that once they had actually learned they should not remain passive but become active participants in the wider world. Hence, for Freire, education could never be a neutral process; it is either designed to facilitate freedom or it is ‘education for domestication’ (Freire, 1973c:79), which is basically conservative.

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In a sense Freire never really distinguished learning from teaching and so we will briefly return to him two chapters from now when teaching theorists are discussed, but he is included here because of his emphasis on the learners and the ways that they can be emancipated from their socio-cultural milieu. This is only an implicit theory of learning throughout his work and it is this that we will try to focus on here.

In order to understand Freire's thinking it is helpful to recall Figure 1.1 in which it was suggested that objectified culture is transmitted to the individual through the lifelong process of socialization. Since the culture that was transmitted is foreign to the values of the Brazilian people, who were its recipients, Freire claimed that this was the culture of the colonizers and implicit in the process of the subordination of the culture of the indigenous people. He illustrated this in the following manner:

It is not a coincidence that the colonizers refer to their own cultural practices as an art, but refer to the cultural production of the colonized as folklore. Similarly, the colonizers speak of their language, but speak of the language of the colonized as dialect.

(Freire, 1973c:50–51)

Since a construction of reality is contained within language, the common people have a construction of reality imposed upon them that is false to their own heritage. Thus the idea of a false self-identify emerges, one that perpetually undervalues the indigenous culture and, therefore, native people come to see themselves as subordinate. Hence, the oppressed are imprisoned in a cultural construction of reality that is false to them but one from which it is difficult to escape, since even their language transmits the values that imprison them.

Through the process of literacy education Freire and his colleagues were able to design experiential situations in which the learners were enabled to reflect upon their own understanding of themselves in their socio-cultural milieu. It was this combination of action and reflection that he called praxis (Freire, 1972b:96). Herein lies the difference between human beings and the other animals, argued Freire: people are able to process their experiences and reflect upon them. Through the process of reflection individuals may become conscious of realities other than the one into which they have been socialized. Freire wrote that conscientization 'is a permanent critical approach to reality in order to discover it and discover the myths that deceive us and help to maintain the oppressing dehumanizing structures' (1971, cited in 1976:225). He then expressed it slightly differently: conscientization 'implies that in discovering myself oppressed I know that I will be liberated only if I try to transform the oppressing structure in which I find myself' (ibid.). Later, he claimed that he no longer used this term 'conscientization' and this may be because it

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had become too closely related to the Marxist idea of ‘false class consciousness’, which is much more restrictive than his understanding of the process. Nevertheless, Freire still regarded education as ‘the practice of freedom’ through which process learners discover themselves and achieve something more of the fullness of their humanity by acting upon the world to transform it.

In his later books, he continually returned to the themes of his earlier ones – in Pedagogy of Hope (Freire, 1996) he continued to insist that educators understand the language of the oppressed, that they denounce the dominant elite practices and they understand the immense resilience of the poor who need their voices to be heard in this capitalist world that continues to oppress them. Throughout his work, it is possible to detect ideas contained in Figure 1.2, where having received and processed inputs from the objectified culture that engulfs them, learners can externalize and act back upon their socio-cultural milieu. Implicit, therefore, in Freire’s formulation is a social theory of learning, although he never described it in this manner.

How do Freire’s ideas differ from those suggested in earlier chapters? Fundamentally, there is one major difference and some minor ones. In the first instance, the socio-cultural background from which his theory emerged has resulted in him depicting the objectified culture as being false and hostile to that of the indigenous learner, so that his approach was often viewed as being political rather than literacy education. However, this interpretation of culture is not something that was unique to Freire: many Marxist writers would concur that the dominant cultural knowledge and values, etc. acquired by most members of a society are the cultural perspectives allowed by an elite, so that some form of cultural hegemony exists. (See Westwood, 1980 for a discussion in which this approach is applied to adult education and Bowles and Gintis, 1976 for their analysis of American schooling from a similar perspective.) Thus, Figure 1.2 actually allows for such an interpretation to be assumed and, indeed, teaching might even be viewed as an activity that encourages it. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the model presented here and Freire’s thought: he incorporated two opposing cultures into his understanding of the process – that of the ruling elite and that of the oppressed. This is the crux of Freire’s argument that no education can be neutral since the culture of the oppressed is in opposition to that of the elite. Hence literacy education can only assume a political perspective. The model produced earlier has not sought to analyse the culture of the United Kingdom in this way, although some sociologists and community educators might consider that such an analysis is necessary, and this will be discussed below in relation to the relevance of Freire’s work for Western Europe and the United States.

Freire placed considerable emphasis on the teacher being a learner of
the culture of the learners so that he stressed the teacher-learner/learner-teacher dialogue. Thus, teaching and learning consists of a two-way model of human interaction. He recognized that the teacher may facilitate the experience on which reflection occurs, which thus becomes a learning process. Thus Freire regarded the role of the teacher as a facilitator who is able to stimulate the learning process rather than as one who teaches the ‘correct’ knowledge and values that have to be acquired. For him this was a fundamentally democratic and humanistic process – a theme he was to return to at the end of his life (Freire, 1998). However, this does not differ significantly from the model produced here since the teacher is regarded as either one who transmits cultural knowledge or one who facilitates learning. This distinction will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Freire’s approach is a model for teaching adults but it is also useful for teaching children. It concentrates upon the humanity of the learners and understanding their language so that they are able to learn from what is being communicated to them. It places great value upon the human being, the consequences of which are more structural and political in their emphasis. While he maintained that education could never be neutral, with which we agree, learning need not be understood in political terms even though we both locate learners in their socio-cultural milieu and regard them as recipients of cultural information and experiences transmitted through personal or impersonal means. Learners are also agents who are able to act back upon their environment in order to try to change it.

Having pointed to some of the apparent differences between Freire’s approach and that discussed in this book, it must also be recognized that there are many similarities, including: his emphasis on the humanity of the learners; his concern that learners should be free to reflect upon their own experiences and to harmonize their reflections and actions (he called this ‘praxis’); and to act upon their socio-cultural milieu in order to humanize and transform it; his connection between the socio-cultural environment and individual learners; his recognition that learners are able to create their own roles rather than become role players performing roles prescribed by others. As a result of all these aspects, Freire maintained that education is always a political process since it is a social institution controlled by the social and political processes, which almost automatically ensure that social pressures are brought to bear on learners in order to make them conform to what is socially prescribed in both cognitive and behavioural terms.

Out of the political condition of Latin America emerged a Christian-Marxist approach to education that is both humanistic and radical. Yet the term ‘radical’ is often the ‘kiss of death’ to innovative approaches, as was seen with the concept of recurrent education.

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However, if there is not something radical about the educational process, the question needs to be posed as to how it differs from socialization. If education actually provides people with an opportunity to process and to reflect upon their experiences, it must allow them to reach different conclusions about them and to choose whether, or not, they will behave in a conformist manner.

From his earliest writings, Freire continued to produce radical analyses of education, often writing with another author, in the form of dialogues, which he called ‘talking a book’. These books are of interest because they help introduce readers to Freire’s ideas and the way in which he developed them in discussion. There have been a number of books like this, one of the last being with Myles Horton from Highlander, a Folk High School in Tennessee (Horton and Freire, 1990). While they can be inspiring they also tend to confuse Freire’s reflections about his own previous writings and actions with the discussion ongoing in the dialogue. This is natural in discussion but it is difficult to trace the developments in his thought from his earlier writings. Perhaps these dialogues serve as a full introduction to Freire, his world and his thoughts.

Since Freire’s ideas emerged in Latin America, do they have any relevance for contemporary Western society? This is a most important question to pose, since he could be dismissed as someone whose views are of significance only within the context in which they emerged. Yet this approach would be quite wrong, since many dominant ideas and values in contemporary society owe their origins to historical cultural milieux completely different from this one. London reflected upon Freire’s work in the context of North America and he claimed that in that society adult education has adopted a ‘bland approach ... (a) non-controversial stance, and (b) safe and respectable perspective’ (London, 1973:59). But he maintained that a:

central problem for adult education is to undertake programming that will raise the level of consciousness of the American people so that they can become aware of the variety of forces – economic, political, social and psychological – that are afflicting their lives.

(London, 1973:54)

Hence, it may be seen that from the earliest time when Freire’s work became known in the USA, commentators were sympathetic to the adoption of his approach. At the same time there were some who felt that his work was insurrectionary and that he should be opposed (Berger, 1974). Perhaps his argument might have been even more compelling had he focused on the different cultures and subcultures in America as well, but his views emerged from the situation in Brazil, where the cultural and political power differences between rich and poor were much more
pronounced and which illustrated his understanding of teaching and learning extremely clearly. The conditions of the poor there are caused by global capitalism, just as they are elsewhere in the world. Clearly Freire's work is relevant throughout the world and even more so as globalization is widening the gap between the rich and powerful and the remainder of the world's population.

Not all educators recognize the political significance of their role, although in the United Kingdom, for instance, community educators, such as Lovett (1975) and Newman (1973, 1979), adopted similar perspectives, and Kirkwood and Kirkwood (1989) reported on a community education project carried out in Edinburgh using Freire's methods. However, a great deal of community education and literacy work has been much more instrumentalist and narrow, but it is still humanistic and valuable, although it has not assumed Freire's more radical approach. Indeed, it is possible to argue that many people in Western Europe and elsewhere are no more aware of the variety of forces that afflict them than are their counterparts in the United States. Consequently, it is important that the radical Christian perspective adopted by Freire is not lost from the world of lifelong learning as education and learning are being more closely related to employment.

Robert M. Gagné

Gagné (1977:284–286) developed a model for understanding a relationship between learning and instruction. He suggested that learning progresses through the following phases as the instructional process was undertaken. These stages are: expectancy; attentive; selective perception; coding; storage entry; memory storage retrieval; transfer; responding; reinforcement. In a later publication it was suggested that there are nine phases in instruction:

- gaining attention
- informing the learner of the objectives
- stimulating recall of prerequisite learnings
- presenting the stimulus material
- providing learning guidance
- eliciting the performance
- providing feedback about performance correctness
- assessing the performance
- enhancing retention and transfer

(Gagné et al., 1992:203)

Like with Freire, an emphasis on teaching as well as learning may be found here. Nevertheless, there is another element of his work that is also
may occur at any level. These are: signal learning; stimulus–response learning; motor and verbal chaining; multiple discrimination; concept learning; rule learning; problem solving.

He claimed that signal learning may occur at any level of the hierarchy and it may be understood as a form of classical conditioning, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Clearly this happens with both children and adults and it is one of the ways in which everyone acquires many attitudes and prejudices throughout the whole of their lives. The remaining seven types of learning are, according to Gagné, seven stages of a hierarchy and they are now discussed.

Stimulus–response learning is the same as operant conditioning in which the response is shaped by the reward. The following two types of learning, motor and verbal chaining; Gagné placed at the same level in the hierarchy: the former refers to skills learning while the latter is rote learning – both of which can be found in the model of learning discussed in the previous chapter. With both, practice is necessary to achieve correctness whilst reinforcement is necessary to ensure that the acceptable sequence is maintained. In multiple discrimination learning, Gagné moved into the area of intellectual skills; this, he suggested, is the ability to distinguish between similar types of phenomena, so that the learners themselves are able to decide which of similar types is correct for any specific situation. In contrast to discrimination is the ability to classify. Concepts are abstract notions which link together similar phenomena so that, for instance, friendship is a concept but individual friendships are actual occurrences, education is a concept but in actuality there are educational processes. Gagné suggested that the ability to learn concepts is the next order of the hierarchy and it may be recalled that developmental psychologists, such as Piaget (1929), would claim that the ability to think in the abstract commences mostly during adolescence, so that it is necessary to recognize that the education of adults may be different from the education of children, since the levels of conceptual thought in the various learning processes are different. This is implicit in Gagné’s hierarchy of types of learning but one that is important in relation to any consideration of adult learning. One particular type of classification is that of rules and he maintained that the ability to respond to signals by a whole number of responses is successful rule learning. At this level of thought it is clear that Gagné perceived the individual to be a little more free than some of the behaviourists and this is quite fundamental to seeing his work in the context of the education of adults.

Problem solving is the highest order of learning in Gagné’s hierarchy and this occurs when the learner draws upon his previously learned rules in order to discover an answer to a problematic situation. It will be
Problem solving is an approach to learning and teaching used frequently in the education of adults, so the problem solving sequence that Gagné proposed is quite significant for adult educators. He suggested that the following sequence occurs, in which the flexibility is apparent. Initially, a learner proposes one or more hypotheses concerning the problem and these are based upon the rules that have already been learned. These hypotheses are then tested against the actual situation and once an answer has been discovered to the problem the solution will be assimilated into the learner’s repertoire of rules, so that the next time a similar situation arises the learner will not experience it as a problem. There are similarities at this point between Gagné’s approach and that of Schutz and Luckmann (1974) mentioned earlier. Another psychologist whose analysis is similar to Gagné’s in this context is George Kelly (1955), who claimed that all behaviour may be regarded as a form of hypothesis testing to enquire whether the actual world is really like the perception of it constructed by the individual. If it is, then the experience merely reinforces the construct, but if it is not, then the construct (hypothesis) has to be modified in the light of experience. (See Candy, 1981 for a direct application of some of Kelly’s ideas to adult education).

The problem solving sequence has formed a basis of many learning exercises in adult education and in recent years a number of problem solving cycles have been devised which are similar to the learning cycles that were discussed in the previous chapter. Figure 4.1 depicts a problem solving cycle that combines the sequence proposed by Gagné with some of the ideas mentioned by Kolb and Fry (1975). Thus it may be seen that this type of problem solving cycle actually relates back to the learning cycle, but it also highlights some of the most important aspects of Gagné’s hierarchy of learning. Since Gagné started from a psychological perspective some of the wider cultural implications of learning, discussed in the previous chapters and in the work of Freire, are not so apparent. Indeed, Freire was more concerned about problem posing than problem solving, since more innovative and radical ideas were likely to emerge from it. Yet the learning process that Gagné has highlighted is significant for adult educators, so that educators of adults need to be aware of the wider literature on learning.

Malcolm S. Knowles

Knowles may almost be regarded as the father of andragogy because, while he did not actually invent the term, he was mainly responsible for its popularization in the USA and Western Europe. Indeed, the term derives from the Greek aner, meaning man, and it was first used in an educational
context in nineteenth-century Europe. Nevertheless, Knowles is most frequently associated with the concept, which he originally defined as 'the art and science of helping adults learn' (1980a:43).

Knowles (1978:53–57) initially distinguished sharply between the way in which adults and children learn and claimed that there are four main assumptions that differentiate andragogy from pedagogy. These are:

- a change in self-concept, since adults need to be more self-directive;
- experience, since mature individuals accumulate an expanding reservoir of experience which becomes an exceedingly rich resource in learning;
- readiness to learn, since adults want to learn in the problem areas with which they are confronted and which they regard as relevant;
- orientation towards learning, since adults have a problem-centred orientation they are less likely to be subject-centred.

However, in 1984 he added a fifth assumption about the motivation to learn (Knowles and assoc, 1984:12) and in his autobiographical book he added another one about the need to know (Knowles, 1989:83–85). Knowles had clearly given the idea a great deal of thought and has frequently reconceptualized it, demonstrating his own willingness to
rehink his position — a characteristic which is to be admired. However, the fact that he has reformulated the idea on a number of occasions illustrates the fact that each of the assumptions is open to considerable discussion. It might be asked, for instance, whether children are any less motivated than adults to learn about those phenomena that they regard as relevant and problematic to them, or whether Knowles had actually specified all the relevant points in any discussion about the differences in adults and children learning. The fact that Knowles had, to some extent, rethought his ideas is significant since the concept of andragogy has been, and is still being, accepted uncritically by many adult educators. Indeed, when Knowles’ work was first published in America it stimulated considerable debate in the American journals about its validity. Initially, McKenzie (1977) sought to provide Knowles’ pragmatic formulation with a more substantial philosophical foundation and he argued that adults and children are existentially different — a point with which Elias agreed, although he suggested that this was not necessarily significant since men and women are existentially different but no one has yet suggested that ‘the art and science of teaching women differs from the art and science of teaching men’ (Elias, 1979:254). To this point, McKenzie (1979) replied, without having undertaken the necessary research, that the differences between men and women, while pronounced, are not significant when related to their readiness to learn nor are they important in relation to their perspective of time. He also argued that andragogy is similar to but not precisely the same as progressivism. Yet McKenzie did not really focus upon the point that children might actually have the same readiness to learn as adults, and indeed probably do, when they are confronted with a problem the solution to which they wish to know.

Another set of issues arose in the debate about andragogy: Label (1978) suggested that the education of the elderly should be known as gerogogy, since education should recognize the phases of adult development; but are there only two phases in adult development? Knox (1977:342–350) suggested otherwise, so that to include gerogogy as a separate element in the art and science of teaching would be the ‘thin end of the wedge’ in a multiplication of terms, which prompted Knudson to suggest that all of these should be replaced by a single concept of ‘humanagogy’ which is:

> a theory of learning that takes into account the differences between people of various ages as well as their similarities. It is a human theory of learning not a theory of ‘child learning’ ‘adult learning’ or ‘elderly learning’. It is a theory of learning that combines pedagogy, andragogy and gerogogy and takes into account every aspect of presently accepted psychological theory.

(Knudson, 1979:261; emphasis in original)
makes humanagogy any different from the process of teaching and learning? It appears that Knowles has merely invented a new term for an old process, even though he has emphasized one aspect of the process that is regarded as significant to our understanding of the educational process: the humanity of the participant.

In 1979, Knowles chose to re-enter the debate, while he recognized that andragogy and pedagogy are not discrete processes he claimed that ‘some pedagogical assumptions are realistic for adults in some situations and some andragogical assumptions are realistic for children in some situations’ (1979:53), and that the two are not mutually exclusive. However, since the debate was prolonged in America and as a number of questions were raised throughout this discussion, it is worth enquiring whether Knowles’ formulation is actually correct.

Knowles placed a tremendous emphasis on the self, something with which many adult educators would agree. Knox (1977) pointed out that the self undergoes development throughout the lifespan and that some aspects of that development may be related to physical age. However, it will be seen from the discussion on learning as an existentialist phenomenon in the previous chapter, that to focus only on the self is too narrow; we would suggest here that the emphasis should have been on the whole person.

But other scholars, such as Riesman (1950), have pointed out that some adults are ‘other-directed’, so that when they come to the learning situation they may seek to become dependent upon a teacher. While it may be one of the functions of an adult educator to try to help dependent adults to discover some independence, it must be recognized that this may be a very difficult step for some learners. But the fact that there are other-directed people suggests that Knowles’ formulation was a little sweeping in this respect.

Knowles also claimed that adults have an expanded reservoir of experience that may be emphasized as a rich resource for future learning; but do not children and adolescents also have some experience that may be used as a resource in their learning? Do only adults learn from their relevant problems? What of those adults who study with the Open University or attend university extension classes? Once again, we see that because he differentiated between andragogy and pedagogy, he was forced into making rather difficult claims. Moreover, his treatment of the concept of experience is rather sketchy and yet it was a focal point for his theory of experiential learning.

It appeared that while Knowles focused upon something quite significant to adult learning, i.e. experience, his formulation was rather weak, not based upon extensive research findings, nor was it the total picture of
nor did it generate a learning sequence for an adult, so some of the claims that Knowles made for andragogy now appear to be rather suspect. It is not surprising, therefore, that in his later work he made less all-embracing claims for this concept, nor is it surprising that many scholars have been rather critical of it. Day and Baskett, for instance, concluded that:

Andragogy is not a theory of adult learning, but is an educational ideology rooted in an inquiry-based learning and teaching paradigm — and should be recognized as such. . . . It is not always the most appropriate or the most effective means of educating. This distinction between andragogy and pedagogy is based on an inaccurately conceived notion of pedagogy.

(Day and Baskett, 1982:150)

There have subsequently been many other criticisms of the concept of andragogy: Hartree (1984:209) concluded that while Knowles has done an important service in popularizing the idea . . . it is unfortunate that he has done so in a form which, because it is intellectually dubious, is likely to lead to rejection by the very people it is important to convince.

Tennant (1986:113–122), writing from a psychological position, also rejected many of Knowles’ arguments although he did not reject the ideas of individual autonomy, which underlie much of Knowles’ work.

Yet despite its apparent conceptual weaknesses and the many criticisms being levelled at the concept, it has become a popular term in adult education; so what are the strengths of the formulation that have resulted in its gaining support? Day and Baskett (1982) have perhaps located one of these when they suggested that it is an educational ideology, for clearly it is humanistic and liberal, which captured the frequently expressed beliefs among adult educators. It also focused upon the self-directed learner and emphasized the place of the self in the learning process, both of which are very significant to learning theory. One of the worrying features about this term was that, because of its huge popularity in the USA and Western Europe in the 1980s, it is still being accepted uncritically by others — especially in the emerging countries of Eastern Europe at the start of the twenty-first century, without reference to the wider debate, and often without reference to the long history of the concept in the former Yugoslavia, amongst other places.

Additionally, it arose in a period of history in the twentieth century, which L.C. Martin (1981) characterized as romantic, in which the value of
the individual was emphasized and the boundaries of the institutions of society were weak. These boundaries resulted in an increased emphasis on integrated approaches to academic study and a wider acceptance of the ideological perception of progressive education. Indeed, the popularity of the concept in the 1980s reflects the fact that the education of adults needed a symbol as it became differentiated from school education and so perhaps it is serving the same function at the present time elsewhere in the world.

Knowles’ emphasis on self-direction resulted in his (Knowles, 1986) book on learning contracts assuming considerable importance in many circles. The learning contract is one made between teacher and learner, for the learner to undertake specific work by a given date. In a tutorial that preceded it, there might also be discussion about how the work is to be undertaken, which experts should be consulted, how the work should be presented and also the standard that should be achieved. This teaching and learning method has assumed a great deal of popularity among some sectors of adult education, possibly because it encourages individual autonomy and, maybe, because it appears less time-consuming for the teacher. But this latter assumption probably belies the reality of the situation! Another reason why learning contracts are popular at present is because of the current emphasis upon correct performance rather than correct academic knowledge, and the learning contract can be utilized in very practical ways.

Andragogy, then, was a theory that grew out of a specific period (Jarvis, 1984) although Knowles emphasized certain values, such as individual autonomy, which were to transcend the 1960s when Knowles first formulated the idea. By 1986, however, the andragogical teacher had become the manager and designer of the learning process and the learning contract the agreement between the manager and the managed as to how the learning was to be undertaken. Knowles’ work remains popular despite all its failings and one of the main reasons for this is probably because it reflects popular ideological currents.

It may be concluded from this brief discussion that, despite the claims sometimes made on its behalf, andragogy is not a distinct approach to adult learning, but it does contain some elements of experiential learning theory. Neither is it a theory of adult teaching even though its humanistic perspective might provide some guidelines for an approach to teaching adults. Is it a philosophy? Certainly, it includes within it an ideological perspective that is both idealistic and humanistic, so that it is not surprising that it has been found by many to be acceptable. However, andragogy might also be employed as a term to denote the body of knowledge that is emerging about the education of adults, in the same manner as pedagogy might be used to describe the body of knowledge about the education of children.
Knowles was, therefore, an important practitioner in the education of adults, and some of the points that he raised are based upon the humanistic ideals of education itself. It is significant that these points are discussed within this theoretical context, since while andragogy is not a theory of adult learning, its implications are quite profound for the practice of teaching adults.

**Jack Mezirow**

The work of Mezirow on transformative learning has been well known in the USA for over twenty years now, although it is not as widely used elsewhere. Mezirow (1977, 1981) draws upon the insights of a number of established disciplines and synthesizes them in an original manner. This section summarizes some of the ideas that he presents, although the emphasis of his work has changed in more recent years as he has endeavoured to produce a more complete theory of learning. His early work will be discussed first and, thereafter, reference is made to his more recent publications.

Mezirow starts from the assumption that everyone has constructions of reality which are dependent on reinforcement from various sources in the socio-cultural world. He calls these constructions of reality 'perspectives' and notes that they are transformed when individuals' perspectives are not in harmony with their experience. In this situation of disjunction, the individual's construction of reality is transformed as a result of reflecting upon the experience and plotting new strategies of living as a result of their assessment of the situation. Mezirow notes that life crises are times when this occurs and his conclusion is both in accord with his own observations and those of Aslanian and Brickell (1980), who discovered that people tended to return to studying at times like this. Hence, the crux of Mezirow's analysis is that when a 'meaning perspective can no longer comfortably deal with anomalies in the next situation, a transformation can occur' (1977:157). He goes on to suggest that a learning sequence is established as a result of a discordant experience, which may be depicted in the form of a learning cycle (Figure 4.2).

In a later work, Mezirow (1981:7) extends this cycle to include the following ten stages:

1. A disorientating dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Critical assessment and a sense of alienation
4. Relating discontent to the experiences of others
5. Exploring options for new ways of acting
6. Building confidence in new ways of behaving
7. Planning a course of action
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8 Acquiring knowledge in order to implement plans
9 Experimenting with new roles
10 Reintegration into society

The extent to which this is actually a sequence is not clear since Mezirow suggests that there are two paths to perspective transformation – one sudden and the other gradual. However, he regards these transformations as ‘a development process of movement through the adult years towards meaning perspectives that are progressively more inclusive, discriminating, and more integrative of experience’ (1977:159). However, there are a number of points now that perhaps require additional evidence since not all people may develop as a result of their experience, nor may they necessarily learn from it. Additionally, should individuals’ universes of meaning necessarily change in the same direction as each others’ as they age? and do these processes not also happen with children?

It is this movement along a maturity gradient that Mezirow regards as a form of emancipatory learning and here he draws heavily upon the work of Habermas (Mezirow and assoc, 1990). In his latest work (Mezirow, 2000:8) he also stresses the difference between instrumental and commu-
nicative learning. Even so he had already used Habermas' third domain – emancipation – which is, according to Mezirow, "from libidinal, institutional or environmental forces which limit our options and rational control over our lives but have been taken for granted as beyond human control" (1981:5). Hence, perspective transformation is an emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting the structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings.

(Mezirow, 1981:5)

By the year 2000, Mezirow claimed that this related to both instrumental and communicative action. In this latest book, there is considerably more reference to the emotional aspects of living than in his previous work, although his (Mezirow, 2000:5) definition of learning as 'the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future action' focuses on the cognitive domain and is rather narrow. He (2000:19) claims that learning occurs in four ways:

• elaborating existing frames of reference;
• learning new frames of reference;
• transforming points of view;
• transforming habits of mind.

At the heart of Mezirow's work is meaning, which despite his references to emotional intelligence, and even to the spiritual, his is a rather restricted approach to learning. In addition, not all learning need result in 'future action', as he claims. Nevertheless, this is an important attempt to understand the cognitive domain of learning, and it is clear that there are certain similarities and some differences between Mezirow's work and that of other theorists who consider the wider socio-cultural milieu. Both he and Freire regard education as a liberating force: Freire views it as releasing the individual from the false consciousness in which he has been imprisoned as a result of the dominance of the culture of the colonizers, but Mezirow regards the freedom from a more psychological perspective; both Freire and Mezirow focus on the social construction of reality and regard learning as a method by which this may be changed. Like a number of theorists of adult learning, Mezirow focuses on the idea that learning occurs as a result of reflecting upon experience, so that much of his work is relevant to understanding the learning process in socialization.
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and in non-formal learning situations. However, he also suggests that there are different levels of reflection and he (1981:12-13) specifies seven of these, some of which he claims are more likely to occur in adulthood:

1 Reflectivity: awareness of specific perception, meaning, behaviour
2 Affective reflectivity: awareness of how the individual feels about what is being perceived, thought or acted upon
3 Discriminant reflectivity: assessing the efficacy of perception, etc.
4 Judgemental reflectivity: making and becoming aware of the value of judgements made
5 Conceptual reflectivity: assessing the extent to which the concepts employed are adequate for the judgement
6 Psychic reflectivity: recognition of the habit of making peripient judgements on the basis of limited information
7 Theoretical reflectivity: awareness of why one set of perspectives is more or less adequate to explain personal experience

The last three of these, Mezirow maintains, are more likely to occur in adulthood, but this claim might run into the same difficulties that Knowles ran into with his distinction between andragogy and pedagogy. Even so, the final one he regards as quite crucial to perspective transformation.

It was only in 1991 that Mezirow brought together thoughts that he had expressed in numerous articles and papers in Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning and he extended these in his more recent work Learning as Transformation (Mezirow, 2000). In both of these he sought to synthesize perspectives and research from different academic disciplines to demonstrate how adults learn. In the former, he suggested that learning is the process of making meaning from experiences as a result of the learner’s previous knowledge, so that learning is a new interpretation of an experience, which has not changed greatly in the ensuing years. He went on to show how people make meaning in a variety of different ways and he also analysed the distorted assumptions that stem from prior experiences. Making meaning is an important element in learning although, as we have pointed out, he restricts it to the cognitive domain, which is a pity since skills, emotions and even the senses are also learned from experience. This is an important study although it is not as unique as the publishers claim on the dust jacket (see, for instance, Marton et al., 1984 whose work Mezirow does not appear to know).

Indeed, there is a sense in which his approach is very similar to the phenomenological approach suggested in the previous chapters. He also focuses on disjuncture – that is if a person’s stock of knowledge is inadequate to explain the experience, then the questioning process is reactivated. Additionally, his emphasis upon reflection is important since he has
extended the analysis quite considerably by suggesting different forms. Here his approach is actually similar to that of Gagné but he concentrates
upon meaning and reflection as learning. However, his idea of progress and development during the ageing process requires some further evidence, but it leads logically to the idea of the 'wisdom of the elders' and to the notion that the self-knowledge of the elders is always more mature than that of younger people (Jarvis, 2001a). Furthermore, the influence of social change plays little part in Mezirow's analysis although sociologists of late modernity (Giddens, 1990, 1991) have written a great deal which would have enriched his analysis. Mezirow has, however, accepted some of the central tenets of Habermas' theory of communicative action without fully analysing the academic debate that the work has generated. Nevertheless, his approach is a significant contribution to recent literature on adult learning.

Carl Rogers

Carl Rogers is the final theorist to be discussed in this chapter: he was a humanistic psychologist who expounded this psychological approach in the fields of education and learning. Having this theoretical perspective, it is not surprising that he emphasizes the self-actualization of the learner and he (1969:279-297) argues that the goal of education is a fully functioning person. However, this orientation reflects the therapist in Rogers and the distinction between education and therapy is occasionally blurred in his writings. Indeed he uses therapeutic techniques for educational ends. His fusion of these two distinct activities is highlighted by Srinivasan's (1977:72-74) discussion of the curriculum distinctions between self-actualizing and problem-centred education, which are:

- emotional versus intellectual;
- involving the learning group in developing its own curriculum versus identification of appropriate subject matter;
- planning learning experiences so that learners can reassess their feelings versus building learning around a problem;
- support in active learning versus using prepared learning units;
- using a variety of audio-visual approaches versus standardized printed materials and group discussion;
- using the group's spontaneity versus a programmed learning text;
- decentralized educational opportunities versus formal educational provision;
- participatory techniques versus teaching; assessing personal growth versus assessing learning gains.

Clearly, Srinivasan has polarized the distinction since a number of the theorists mentioned in this chapter would focus upon the significance of
distinction in quite the way that Srinivasan has done but she has attempted to clarify an important conceptual issue. However, Rogers and Knowles are close in their emphasis on the self and the need for self-development and self-direction: indeed, Knowles acknowledged his debt to Rogers. Knowles (1980a:29–33) specifies fifteen different dimensions of maturation and he certainly regards maturity as one of the goals of education. Like Rogers and Knowles, it will be recalled that Mezirow was concerned about the maturation process of the learner, so for a number of theorists this plays a significant part in the education of adults.

Unlike some of the other writers discussed here, Rogers records the results of his approach to experiential learning in the context of graduate teaching in a university and he also records incidents of others in a formal setting who have attempted similar techniques. He suggests that experiential learning has a quality of personal involvement, but he recognizes that the teacher has a facilitating role; is pervasive in as much as it makes a difference to the learners; is evaluated by learners in terms of whether it is actually meeting their needs rather than in terms of its academic quality; has an essence of meaning. It is perhaps significant to note that while Rogers regards experiential learning as self-initiated, he does not actually dispense with the teacher although does claim that teaching 'is a vastly over-rated function' (1969:103), so that he is describing a different form of self-directed learning to that discussed by Tough. In the third edition of his book (Rogers and Freberg, 1994), there is both a greater emphasis on schooling and also on teaching – yet the emphasis on whole person learning still remains and the goal of learning is still a fully functioning person.

Like Srinivasan, Rogers (1969:157–164) regards experiential learning at one end of a spectrum but at the other he places memory learning. He claims that experiential learning is typified by the following principles:

1 human beings have a natural potentiality to learn;
2 significant learning occurs when the learner perceives the relevance of the subject matter;
3 learning involves a change in self-organization and self-perception;
4 learning that threatens self-perception is more easily perceived and assimilated when external threats are at a minimum;
5 learning occurs when the self is not threatened;
6 much significant learning is acquired by doing;
7 learning is facilitated when the learner participates responsibly in the learning process;
8 self-initiated learning involves the whole person;
9 independence, creativity and self-reliance are all facilitated when self-criticism and self-evaluation are basic.
may be incorporated into the self.

His approach is clearly based upon the idea that the learner is the agent, and that the social structure is not too oppressive to the learner. However, omission of any discussion about the wider socio-cultural milieu appears to be a weakness in this approach, so that while the above ten principles provide considerable insight into the learning process and offer some guidelines for the teacher, they do not present a comprehensive theory of individual learning in the wider socio-cultural environment.

Overall, Rogers' approach to experiential learning has much to offer and may provide inspiration for the teacher, as it did for Knowles, but it does not provide a comprehensive theory of adult learning. At its heart it reflects a humanistic belief system that has been quite fundamental to many individuals who work in adult education, but it also reflects the age in which he was writing when there were also a number of quite radical studies about schooling published as well.

Summary

The work of five major theorists has been briefly examined in this chapter and the intention has been to highlight some of the similarities and some of the differences between them. Both Freire and Mezirow consider the socio-cultural milieu as a significant factor in the learning process in common with the model presented earlier, although they treat culture in rather different ways: Freire has a two-cultures model of society whereas Mezirow is content to regard it as rather static and homogeneous. The process of reflection plays a significant part in the work of a number of these theorists, since they recognize that human beings are able to sift and evaluate the external stimuli received from their experiences. Experiential learning is quite central to all of the writers' considerations, since they recognize that the adult learns most effectively when the learning process is in response to a problem or a need. All of the writers, with the exception of Gagné, have placed considerable emphasis on the self and, although it is most exemplified in the works of Knowles and Rogers, it reflects the humanistic concerns of adult education. Even so, it is a much more debatable point as to whether the aims of education should be specified in terms of the development of the learner because the success of the educational process is then being evaluated by non-educational criteria. The cognitive dimension of the learning process is insufficiently emphasized in some instances while in others the practical and the emotional are under-played. The emphases that different writers put upon different elements of learning points to the need for a more
comprehensive and integrated theory of learning rather more like that offered earlier in this book.

Most of the theorists focus upon the human need to learn, Rogers being the most explicit about it being basic to humanity, but none of them sought to incorporate it into such a comprehensive theory of learning. Mezirow and Freire have both developed comprehensive theoretical perspectives but Knowles' andragogical approach appears to have achieved the status of a theory, without having been systematically worked out. In all cases there are similarities with the model produced earlier in this study but in each instance the theorists have emphasized those elements that are most central to their own concerns, so that there are naturally also a number of points of divergence.

Learning might have been more clearly separated from teaching in this chapter, but it is much more difficult to draw this distinction when examining the work of practitioners since while conceptually learning can be separated from teaching and teaching from learning it is much more difficult to do so in practice. Nevertheless, the following two chapters examine the teaching of adults.
Jarvis Adults learning...