Chapter 9
Assessing Adult Learning and Learning Styles

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ABSTRACT

Adults have different learning styles which can either enhance or deter their learning. In the conversation that follows, I discuss the utility of assessing adult learning and the diversity of learning styles. Adult education literature is replete with discussions on characteristics of adult learners and adult learning and development. But how do we actually know if adults gained the knowledge they set out to learn? We know that there are several factors that should be taken into consideration when facilitating adult learning, but as adult educators and practitioners of the field, it is equally important that we learn and/ or know how to deploy various approaches in assessing adult learning. In this chapter are brief discussions on adult learning, learning styles, and learning assessments.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Adults have long engaged in learning activities. However as humankind developed, so did a more formal means of education. Adults continue to participate in adult education for a number of reasons; most notably, job enhancement (Fujita-Stark, 1996; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The motivation to participate is as diverse as the learners themselves. Adult learners each bring to the learning activity or program differ-

ent approaches to learning and different learning styles. Interconnected to the diversity of learning styles and motivations for learning, adult educators should be able to assess the outcome of the learning activity in order to determine if learning goals and/or objectives have been achieved. In such instances, a variety of learning assessments or instruments can be utilized. There are a number of reasons why adults engage in learning activities, such as learning a new hobby or for the social interaction it allows. Regardless of adults' motivations to learn, it is important to assess what they learn. How do we, as adult educators, know adults have

acquired the knowledge they needed or sought; or if they met our learning objectives? More often than not, a learning assessment is used. Many assessments take the form of a test, presentation, or a portfolio. Additionally, in an effort to enhance adults' learning, some instructors use a variety of instructional strategies to attend to the different learning styles of the students in the classroom. Therefore, instructors might use a learning styles instrument to assist students in understanding and maximizing their learning potential.

In this chapter, I will explore methods to assess adult learning and preferred modes of learning. First, we begin with a brief examination of adult learning. Next, we turn our attention to learning styles. Finally, we examine assessment of adult learning and learning styles.

9.2 ADULT LEARNING

Teaching should facilitate the personal and professional growth and development (Galbraith, 2004) and possibly the transformation of learners. In order for this to occur, significant learning must take place. Learning is a fundamental and basic characteristic of humans (Long, 1985, 2004). Adults must often engage in learning activities to gain new knowledge or develop skills for professional or personal benefits. Adult learning has been examined from a variety of aspects including aging and development (Clark & Cafferalla, 2000), participation, motivations, barriers (Boshier, 1991; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Isaac, Guy, & Valentine, 2001), and spirituality (English & Gillen, 2000; Tisdell, 2003; Vogel, 2000), just to name a few. Despite the fact that numerous studies exist to broaden our understanding of adult learning, there is no single theory that fully explicates our knowledge of adult learners or their learning processes (Merriam, 2001). Merriam further indicates we have a "mosaic set of theories, models and sets of principles and explanations

that, combined, compose the knowledge base of adult learning" (p. 3).

According to Long (2004), any discussion of learning should indicate whether or not the learning activities are sponsored by a group, are a non-group sponsored activity (i.e., self-directed learning), or a combination of the two. However, one common theme among definitions of learning includes a process. For example, Long (2004) defines learning as a cognitive process that is influenced by a variety of methods which include "(a) existing or prior knowledge that the learner has; (b) attitudes and beliefs, held by the learner, toward the source, content, topic, and mode of presentation; and (c) the state of the learner" (p. 31). This suggests that adults engage in learning in a variety of settings including both formal and informal.

Formal learning is generally associated with a university or college, or some institutional type of environment, whereas informal learning can be any learning activity which occurs outside the curricular constraints and structure of formal settings (Livingstone, 1999; Mündel & Schugurenksy, 2008; Shrestha, Wilson, & Singh (2008). Livingstone states that the "basic terms of informal learning... are determined by the individuals and groups that choose to engage in it" (p. 51). Generally speaking, no external criteria or authorized instructor exists in informal learning (Livingstone). For purposes of our discussion, the focus will be formal adult education and learning. This encompasses post-secondary education as well as adult basic education and literacy, ESL, and ESOL.

Knowles (1980) provides five assumptions of adult learners through andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn. He believes (a) adults are intrinsically motivated to participate in adult learning activities, (b) they bring a wealth of experience to the learning environment, (c) their readiness to learn is related to a developmental task or social role, (d) they are problem-oriented, and (e) their self-concept moves from one of de-

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