# Creating Novel Strategies: Understanding Theory Development in Adult Learning

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***Abstract:*** *There are a numerous "theories" associated with adult learning and adult education. However, to date, there is not one single theory that adequately describes adult learning. Rather there are several theories, models, and frameworks used in advancing the ideologies of adult learning and the characteristics of the adult learner. This paper advances and table presentation advances the discussion about the elements of good theory development in the practice of adult education.*

## Adult Learning Theories: A Dynamic Narrative

The development of adult learning theories enjoys a dynamic history; it parallels the history of the field of adult education. In an attempt to create the knowledge base for adult learning and education several scholars and practitioners have attempted to proffer strategies and models about adult learning. Scholars have borrowed philosophies, values, and principles from fields such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and the pedagogy of learning to create a theoretical base for adult learning and education. These contributions have shed much light on the process of adult learning (Merriam, 2003). Paradoxically, the need to make use of these various perspectives extends an understanding of the complex nature of adult learning. Enthusiasm to professionalize the field, to afford adult education its own knowledge base, lead to efforts in the development of two of the most prominent and important models or theories of adult learning, to date. These are andragogy and self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975; 1980). Since the 1970s other theories, frameworks, and models have emerged. These include transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). These works can be classified as perhaps the second phase of understanding and knowledge development in adult learning. In the 1990s and 2000s other contributions emerged and paradoxically scholars have been returning to *their roots*—psychology, philosophy, and sociology and to "other fields and disciplines to illuminate their understanding of adult learning" (Merriam, 2003, p. 208). This third period of adult learning theory development focuses on contextual based learning, critical perspectives, and emotive dimensions of the connections of mind-body-spirit. What is the future of adult learning theories? It is anyone's guess, but one thing is certain, there is need for understanding the elements of good theory development.

## Importance of Filling the Void

Regardless of the contributions, the field of adult learning remains lucrative, for scholarship and theory development. The adult learner is a complex human being; no single theory will fully capture the complexity of our learning abilities. The future of adult learning and adult education calls for an extension of multiple theories, frameworks, and models. The theory-building process in adult learning is dynamic and evolving (Merriam, 2003, p. 216). However, mediocrity is not an acceptable approach in developing these theories. As adult learning has struggled to advance its value, richness, and perspectives, the importance of good (solid) theory

building strategies cannot be overstated. Some of the models mentioned above will fade away, carried by the winds of dynamism; others will remain and will help to transform the field. As a result, there is the needed to investigate the underpinnings of good theory building strategies in an effort to expand our understanding of such a multifaceted phenomenon. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to offer novel insights—a "model" for solid theory-building concepts in the field of adult learning and adult education. The need to offer this novel insight into theory-development is based on three important dimensions. First, the criticism, doubts, and debates as to whether several of the theories described above are really "theories" still remain. For example, the "pillars" of adult learning theory as they are often referred to, andragogy and self-directed learning, are still very often not regarded as theories at all (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Pratt, 1993). Second, a review of the literature in adult learning offers cursory glimpses into theory-building. There is much debate as to what models are theories, but none have offered a concrete set of steps and or procedures of how to develop high-quality theories. Third, the criteria for evaluating high-quality theory-development are important to extend empirical research in our field, not through *gaps* in the literature but through an *engagement* with the problems in the field that we hope to solve.

## Assumptions and Elements of Good Theory-Development

In an effort to derive the various elements of high-quality theory development, ideologies from various disciplines including psychology, philosophy, sociology, qualitative research, and business management will be used. In addition, a review of the meaning of theory is important to understanding the underpinnings of good theory development. This model draws on the works of many scholars of theory development including Argyris & Schon (1977); Blalock (1969); Dubin (1969); and Nagel (1961). It relates closely to other well known models that have augmented and or criticized the issues and debates surrounding the question, what constitutes good theory development? For example, grounded theory, which is big in the field of adult education and adult learning, models of organizational theories, and criteria for evaluating theories all offer models of theory development. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is often used in adult education to inform qualitative research inquiry, design, and analysis. Grounded theory has many sub-elements, for example, constant comparative analysis, a general approach to qualitative data analysis and ideas of transferability of findings to other contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). In addition, there is much written about theory development and evaluation in the organizational literature (Bacharach, 1989; Kilduff, 2006; Wieck, 1989; Whetten, 1989). The following six major elements, each having several sub-elements, will be used to in the discussion and are the basic elements for developing the model: (a) what is the meaning of theory; (b) what theory is and what it is not; (c) basis for theory development; (d) theory construction and design; (e) building blocks of theory development; (f) fundamentals of a substantive theory.

## Conclusion

The model presented is in no way a panacea for adult learning theory building. Rather, it is a humble attempt to provide a concrete set of practical steps which students, new scholars, and seasoned scholars of adult learning and adult education will find useful in defining the necessary components of good theory and for theory construction and evaluation in their future endeavors. The ideologies surrounding adult learning is dynamic, and the debate continues as new theories,

concepts, and perceptions evolve. Adult education needs good theories, models, and concepts about adult learning to inform the practice of the field. Even though it is a huge challenge, an attempt must be made.

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