

Engaging Adults' Experiences in the Learning Conversation

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In early 2015, one of us (Catherine) facilitated a session with participants in the Certificate Program in Adult Jewish Learning, organized around the theme of *making adult learning theory practical*. During that rich conversation, numerous issues and questions arose about adults as learners and how to create environments conducive to dialogue and learning. As long-time collaborators, we are now pleased to contribute our perspectives on how questions that stem from your experiences working with adult learners may be informed by theories and models of adult learning. Both of us have facilitated adult learning in university and other organizational contexts for many decades and are keenly interested in how adults learn and make meaning in their lives.

In this essay, we focus on three questions that center on bringing adults' experiences into the learning conversation. (Note: "we" sometimes means Catherine and Kathleen; at other times it means "we who facilitate adult learning," which includes many of you; at still other times, it means "we who have brains and engage in learning," which includes all people. We trust the context will make our meaning clear.)

Q. Why should we acknowledge adults' prior experiences in the learning setting?

Adults engage every new learning experience with brains chock full of prior experiences. (When we say "brains," we also mean "hearts." Emotions are always part of the engagement, too; more on that, later.) Our earlier experiences—as individuals, members of a family, and participants in various communities—have resulted in "filters" (neural networks or patterns of

thinking) that affect how we engage with new learning. We often don't know these filters are operating. Psychologists call them *identity*; sociologists call them *culture*. Educators recognize them as “knowledge” that can either promote or impede new learning. Because our prior experiences have shaped who we are and how we understand ourselves and the world around us, new learning that may contradict—or even just expand—our established ways of thinking and knowing can be uncomfortable and anxiety provoking. If we, as learning facilitators, remain unaware of the assumptions adults bring with them, and fail to acknowledge the discomfort that new understandings can engender, adults may emerge from our learning programs largely unchanged, operating on the same understandings they had when they entered. Even when the goal of a program in Adult Jewish Learning may not be to change people's minds, most people are likely to encounter ideas and perspectives different from their own that deserve consideration.

We will briefly refer to three notable theorists, John Dewey, David Kolb, and Jack Mezirow, at various points in this essay. Each has in a different way illuminated the importance of including adults' prior experiences in learning conversations. About a century ago, John Dewey, the well-known philosopher and progressive educator, famously claimed that although all learning begins in experience, not all experience results in real learning. Two conditions are necessary, Dewey (1938) surmised, for real learning to occur. First, there needs to be some *continuity* in a person's experiences so she can relate aspects of one experience to another. Second, there needs to be sufficient *interaction* between the person and her environment such that learning can occur.

Considered from a facilitator’s perspective, *continuity* and *interaction* can be woven into the learning conversation by asking participants questions such as “what does this teaching mean to you in your daily life?” Or, “have you had occasion in your life to question this (or some other) teaching?” Such reflective questions prompt awareness of experiences an adult learner has brought with her into the current learning environment.

More recently, David Kolb (1984) constructed a model of experiential learning that synthesizes and extends the brilliant insights of Dewey, psychologist Jean Piaget, and social scientist Kurt Lewin. For Kolb, an effective facilitator begins with what learners already know—in effect, their prior experiences—since doing so may enable adults “to re-examine and modify their previous sense-making in the light of new ideas” (2015, p. 297). From his perspective, learning is a process, not a product, and it does not start with the new program or session they are attending. Rather, the cycle of knowing (described below) is ongoing, being shaped and reshaped by the individual’s encounters with her environment.

Shortly after Kolb’s theory hit the educational stands, Jack Mezirow (1991; 2000), a long-time professor of adult education at Teachers College, Columbia University, proposed a theory of *transformative learning*. In his view, such learning “liberates adults from distorted perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions that effectively limit their freedom to be responsible actors in the world” (Taylor & Marienau, 2016, in press, ch. 9). He saw filters (described above) as restrictive, thus limiting adults’ capacities for action. Freedom from such limitations he therefore called *emancipation*. To engage in the challenging process of *emancipatory learning*, Mezirow

said, adults need to address *disorienting dilemmas*. Though life presents many of these, many people are adept at working around them, thus avoiding the implications of new learning. From a facilitator’s standpoint, appropriately introducing unexpected ideas or unfamiliar learning processes may help to overcome that avoidance. Successfully negotiating the discomfort that may ensue can lead to *perspectives shifts*—some aspect of our beliefs, perceptions, feelings, and/or understandings have been altered toward greater freedom and increased capacity.

Q. *What core elements are necessary for turning experience into learning?*

Kolb’s Learning Cycle is widely known and well-respected in the field of adult learning. In its most simplified form, the model describes the learning process as beginning with concrete experience, in which one or more of the five senses are stimulated, including feelings that may be aroused. That experience is transformed by reflecting on it, leading to a reframed abstraction—a “theory-in-use”—which is then further transformed by trying out that theory in a real-world application, leading to a new experience, and the cycle continues. What the image of this cognitively-focused model does not explicitly show is the effect of pre-existing knowledge, such as we described, above. Nor does it plainly acknowledge the role of emotions or feelings, which are an integral part of the link between experience and learning. Where Descartes famously said, 400 years ago, “I think therefore I am,” neuroscientists have more recently come to the conclusions, “We feel, therefore we learn” (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Nevertheless, Kolb’s basic learning cycle model is very much in line with how the brain learns.

Here (again highly simplified) is a description of the inner workings of the associated process in the brain. Every new experience is immediately categorized in terms of something the brain already knows. Because the brain wants to save energy as it seeks among existing neural patterns, the most frequently used patterns are “easier” to connect with and will likely take precedence, hence the tendency to default to what we already know (actually, assume). This response to experience goes on every minute of every day below the level of consciousness. In a learning situation, however, we attempt to pay attention to the kinds of connections that might otherwise go on unawares. Nearly all educators of adults agree that such reflection is essential for transforming experience into learning. With reflection, some of these connections can be made conscious (a lot still happens where we don’t have ready access). We can start to “make sense” of the experience; more specifically, start to develop an idea about what it “means” and how it fits into some more general idea. This is known as a theory-in-use, which is the fleeting tentative decision about the experience we make at that moment, subject to revision based on what happens next. What happens next is often some version of testing the theory. Can it stand up in historical context or once we try to apply it in the real world? The outcome of this experiment leads back to another experience, now informed by a lot of new data.

Emotion is always part of this cycle. When the initial experience (stimulus) is received in the body, the process of categorization includes the emotions connected to the exiting neural patterns. In everyday language, we tend to use “emotion” and “feeling” interchangeably. To a neuroscientist, *emotion* is a function of body-state, such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, hormonal changes, and so forth—things over which we have no control. *Feelings*, on the other

hand, are the *awareness* of those changes in body state. People may describe the same changes in body state quite differently, depending on their filters. For example, when cut off by a car swerving in front of them on the freeway, most drivers will experience a rush of adrenalin, increased heart rate, and other responses typical of a “fight-or-flight” response. They are likely to feel angry and fearful. A race-car driver, on the other hand, might respond to the same experience with the same *emotions* (body-state changes)—but a *feeling* of excitement and exhilaration!

Bottom line: emotions are always part of learning. In fact, according to world-renowned neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2000), we cannot think “rationally” without emotion, either. This is another instance where we, as learning facilitators, may be doing a disservice to our adult learners if we do not acknowledge and account for the effects of their emotions and feelings.

It is also important to acknowledge that adults grow increasingly different from one another as they mature, influenced by the nature of their experiences and the meanings they make of them; *adult learners* are not a homogeneous group. Adult learners are storehouses of unique experiences, different levels of capacity to reflect on those experiences, various attachments to already formed ideas and understandings, and differing abilities to communicate effectively with others. All adult learners bring experiences and interpretations of those experiences. Where they inevitably differ is the nature of and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences, and therefore how it might turn up in your program’s learning environment. This is

an elaboration of our response to the first question, about bringing adults’ prior experience into the learning setting.

Q. *What are common misconceptions about bringing prior experiences into a new setting?*

In considering how experience is related to learning, we probably think in terms of memories. Although it is true that the neural patterns describe above are the substrate of memories that may give a false impression of what memory, itself, actually is. When the brain connects some aspects of *this* stimulus to *that* neural network, if that connection rises to the level of consciousness, we have engaged in the *process* that leads to what we experience as “a memory.” In fact, there is no *there*, there. There is no specific place in the brain where the particular collection of images that move into awareness resides. Memory is not a *thing*; it is a *process*. Our impression is that we have “retrieved” a whole experience (often with lots of persuasive detail). What we have actually done is *reconstructed* the “memory” from many different bits and pieces of neural traces that are associated (to varying degrees) with the experience that we now “call to mind.” Even more interesting, without our knowing, that reconstruction is affected by all the subsequent experiences that have happened to us in the interim.

Even memories that are so sharp and clear they are known as “flashbulb” memories—often of some sudden, emotional, and socially-shared event, such as the Kennedy assassination or seeing the planes fly into the Twin Towers—are affected by subsequent experiences. This is

why adult siblings can describe an emotion-laden childhood incident entirely differently, and each of them is absolutely certain his or her version is correct.

Another intriguing aspect of the associative nature of memory is the experience of being asked to consider A, and all of a sudden we find we are thinking about Z—something that seems entirely beside the point. “Why on earth did *that* memory pop up?” we may wonder about. To the brain, it is not a random connection. The neural networks that include traces of A and those that include traces of Z have dendritic connections that are invisible to us. (Dendrites facilitate transfer of neural impulses; they contain dozens of branches, each of which can facilitate transfer to a *different* neuron.) Sometimes these unlooked-for memories seem irrelevant. However, they can also offer rich and innovative ways of thinking about a topic that.

The learning context is another major factor in memory construction. We generally think in terms of the *external* context: setting, facilitator, program expectations, learning materials, and so forth. We may fail to recognize that there is also an *internal* context. As described earlier, adults have prior experiences and emotions that are always present in the current learning environment. The filters built up over their lifetimes are often key to how people see and experience themselves and the world around them, and to how they respond to anything that might challenge those ways of thinking and points of view.

Returning to our three theorists, we see that pragmatist Dewey helps us understand the value of learning from experience; Kolb’s theory of experiential learning articulates links among experience, learning and knowing; and Mezirow’s theory of “transformative” learning explains

what conditions might provoke individuals to challenge their filters and accustomed ways of making meaning. Each has something important to say about the nature of learning from experience and helps us appreciate why adults' prior experiences belong in current conversations. It is also intriguing to note all three theorists' descriptions of how learning actually happens were amazingly accurate, each in its own way, given what neuroscientists have only recently discovered.

We now invite you to consider what meaning and applications the perspectives we have discussed might have in your setting.

- *How do you, as facilitators or program developers, acknowledge and invite participants' prior experiences into your program?*
- *How might the topic and/or purpose of a program influence whether participants' voices (experiences) are invited into the conversation?*
- *How do you see the role of emotion in thoughtful conversations?*
- *What kinds of individual and group reflections might enrich conversation and understanding?*
- *What default patterns do you tend to see expressed by participants during your programs?*
- *When one of the goals of a program is to inspire participants' curiosity and openness to learning, what helps this happen? What gets in the way?*

References

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