Adult Development

“It is hard to imagine the field of adult education apart from the literature on adult development; many aspects of our thinking about adult learners and the learning process are shaped by our knowledge of how adults change and develop across the lifespan” (Clark and Caffarella 1999a, p. 1). During the past decade, the literature on adult development, particularly as it relates to adult learning, has expanded. This Alert reviews some of the trends related to changing conceptions of adult development, highlighting connections to adult education.

Theories about adult development have been grouped into four models: biological, psychological, sociocultural, and integrative (Merriam and Caffarella 1999; Clark and Caffarella 1999a,b). Biological models—that those that are concerned with how physical changes affect development—and psychological models—that those that view development as either sequential, defined by life events or a series of transitions, or relational—have long been part of the adult education literature. Sociocultural and integrative models represent new ways of thinking about the influence of adult development on adult education.

Sociocultural perspectives of adult development have as their primary focus the social and cultural aspects of adult lives. Factors such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are considered important aspects of development in these models, including how these factors intersect and affect how adults develop (Clark and Caffarella 1999b). The book, Adult Learning and Development: Multicultural Stories (Baumgartner and Merriam 2000), is an example of how sociocultural perspectives of adult development can be highlighted in adult learning.

Integrative models examine how the biological, psychological, and sociocultural aspects of adult development intersect and influence each other, but models that consider all three perspectives are rare. Because of their recognition of the complexity of the factors that influence how adults learn and grow, integrative models seem to hold the most promise for understanding adult development (Clark and Caffarella 1999b). Rossiter’s (1999) use of a narrative approach as a way to understand development through stories is an example of the integrative approach, and other examples are contained in Clark and Caffarella (1999a).

The role of transformative learning in adult development is another area that has received a great deal of attention recently (e.g., Daloz 1999; Hobson and Welbourne 1998; Mezirow and Associates 2000). Transformative learning is about making changes through transforming one’s perspectives or meaning; making senses of these changes frequently involves development (Dirkx 1998). Daloz (1999) views education as a transformational process, suggesting it is a way that adults make meaning from their lives.

How adult educators can be more intentional in contributing to learner development is another trend. The most notable example is Developing Adult Learners (Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler 2000); the book contains strategies provided by practitioners, including their reflections about how the activity has worked. The ethics of being more intentional in the development of learners is an issue affiliated with this trend (Rossiter 1999). What should the role of an educator be in contributing to growth, for example? Is it appropriate to encourage learners to move forward in ways that could potentially disrupt their lives?

Adult development and adult education continue to be intertwined. The resources listed here can be consulted for more information.


The culturally diverse stories and poems in this compilation illustrate six themes of adult development: identity; the importance of work; intimacy; the family life cycle; physical development, health, and aging; and learning in adulthood.


Adult development is considered to be the transformation of individuals’ existing knowledge to construct new knowledge as well as the reinforcement of existing knowledge. Changes are individually, socially, and culturally determined.


A movement known as transpersonal psychology has developed over the past 30 years. This movement recognizes that a separate self-identity is only a partial vision of what it means to be human; being human also involves perceiving the unity and connectedness of all things, not just cognitively but in other ways as well. This chapter offers an explanation of the transpersonal as an organizing framework for the understanding of the maturing self.

Clark, M. C., and Caffarella, R. S., eds. An Update on Adult Development Theory: New Ways of Thinking about the Life Course. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 84. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999a.

Reviews recent work in adult development in four domains—biological, psychological, sociocultural, and integrated—and explores the implications of the work for adult education.


Discusses definitional issues and tensions around adult development theory. Presents a typology of developmental theories.


Explores the intersections of learning, mentoring, and development and how the mentor contributes to the learner’s development.


Links adult literacy learning to a philosophy of self-actualization, scaffolding pedagogy, and inclusion. Bases the discussion on John Dewey’s concept of growth and Myron C. Tumari’s developmental social theory.

Summarizes four theoretical perspectives on transformative learning as consciousness raising, critical reflection, development, and individuation.


A middle-aged teacher reflects on her career. Although she had expected that middle age could be a time of complacency and possibly boredom, she instead experiences it as a vital time as her relationship to teaching deepens and changes.


A study examined the workplace learning experiences of 17 women, using oral-history methods. Central to the experiences was exploration of self. Themes included recognizing and naming the self, confronting and breaking free of constraining workplace structures, and recovering an authentic self.


Reviews developmental perspectives on aging as well as strategies for successful aging and discusses problems unique to individuals in the latter part of the life cycle.


A study of the literature indicates that adult development, from a transformative viewpoint, is more than adjustment to a particular society. It is a qualitative change in how the world is viewed and involves productive tension and struggle.


Examines often unspoken assumptions about the concept of adult development held by the field of human resource development. Describes three alternative views, each rooted in different philosophical and political traditions: person-centered view, production-centered view, and principled problem-solving view.


Summarizes and discusses the conceptualized theories that are pertinent to the psychosocial development of culturally black adult students. Includes researchers who have provided alternative models and theories addressing the development needs of black college students.


Interviews with 78 Navajo grandmothers, midlife mothers, and young mothers examined their life course patterns in cultural and historical contexts.


Part two of this book focuses on adults’ developmental characteristics. Biological, psychological, age and stage models, cognitive development, and intelligence are covered.


Brings together the latest research and theory related to transformative learning, including implications for adult development. Contributors share examples from their own experiences as educators and assess the evolution of transformative learning in practice and philosophy.


Contrasts stage and phase theories of human development with a narrative approach. Suggests that such an approach holds rich potential for understanding adult learners and the roles of educators in learners’ developmental processes.


Perspectives on adult development and learning are presented by educational psychologists in order to contribute to adult education. Includes information on adult intellectual function, thinking, and problem-solving skills and research on adult learning domains.


Provides a conceptual framework linking intentions and development, dozens of proven activities framed by developmental intentions; and an examination of developmentally focused educational practices.


Presents four case studies of adult women from working class backgrounds who attended one of the “seven-sister” colleges during the early 1990s. The context of social class is explored, particularly as it relates to identity concerns of adult women college students.


Describes how Sarton’s book is used in gerontology classes as a text for studying human development by offering an opportunity to explore theory and research on aging.

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