



## **Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition**

S. B., Caffarella, R. S. & Baumgartner, L. M. Jossey-Bass, 2007.

*Reviewed by Barbara J. Millis, Director, Excellence in Teaching Program, University of Nevada, Reno*

This 513-page book has what a friend of mine termed “heft.” Its chief value lies in its broad scope and the authors’ ability to summarize, synthesize, and point out differences. It will be primarily useful as a textbook for those in the field of adult learning. Although the authors are conscientious about relating theory to practice whenever possible, the book remains at a fairly abstract level: your local YMCA director is not likely to dip into its pages for inspiration. Therefore, this is not a practical “How to Teach Adult Learners” primer. Having said that, perhaps because I have taught adults for most of my academic life, I personally found the book, as the authors hoped, “readable, thorough, and up-to-date . . .” Let’s look first at the book’s overall scope, then at chapters and findings of particular interest, primarily because of the authors’ emphasis on thoughtful overviews and insightful syntheses, and then at organizational strategies.

The book is in four parts, composed of multiple chapters. Part One, “Adult Learning in Contemporary Society,” looks at the context of adult learning with three chapters discussing forces such as demographics, globalization, and technology; the environments where learning occurs, including educational and noneducational institutions; and the nature of adult learning, including who these learners are, why they participate, and what they opt to learn. In Part Two, “Adult Learning Theory and Models,” four chapters review the voluminous literature in the field, including theorists such as Malcolm Knowles (andragogy), and Jack Mezirow (transformational learning) and the theories themselves, such as self-directed learning and experiential learning. Part Three, “New Approaches to Adult Learning”—three chapters—go into more holistic theories including spiritual learning, non-Western perspectives, and feminism. The final part, Part Four, “Learning and Development,” offers five chapters that integrate “material from philosophy, psychology, sociology, biology, and so on, that has a bearing on adult learning.” I found particularly interesting the chapters on “Intelligence and Aging” and “Memory, Cognition, and the Brain.” A final chapter, “Reflections on Learning in Adulthood” gives the authors’ own synthesizing thoughts on the vast range of literature on adult learning.

The strength of the book lies in the authors’ deep immersion in all aspects of a vast field and their ability to help the reader make sense of the theories, theorists, and implications for practice are. For example, I was interested in their positive assessment—particularly in the assumption about “self-directed learning”—of the work of Malcolm Knowles, whom I had hosted for workshops in the 1980s, and the fact that Allen Tough, building on the work of Cyril Houle, “provided the first comprehensive description of self-directed learning . . .” Another fresh insight occurred when the authors placed in the same transformational learning “camp,” scholars as seemingly diverse as Paulo Friere, Stephen Brookfield, and Jack Mezirow.

Despite its broad scope, the book is clearly organized. The authors have been careful to provide “hooks” or mini-outlines for readers with clear subheadings. Chapters often open with an anecdote, such as the one beginning Chapter Twelve, “Adult Development, about eighty-year-old man, suffering from cataracts, who was called ‘Eagle-Eye Johnny’ in his youth, and who now looks backwards to the “good times” and reflects on ways he has changed or remained the same or the beginning of Chapter Seven, “Experience and Learning” with the positive reaction of Aaron, a psychologist with 20 years experience, to an interactive workshop on new treatments for depression. His experience is contrasted with Gloria’s, who was disappointed in a workshop on the same topic conducted by lecture and a short question-answer exchange with the “expert” at the end. The authors generally explain in the opening paragraphs what each chapter will cover and then provide a concluding summary (The “tell ‘em what you’ll tell ‘em, then tell ‘em, then tell ‘em what you told ‘em approach”). I found this repetition and the many passive transitions a little annoying, but other readers may appreciate the transparent clarity.

The authors’ deep knowledge is evident in the way many topics are outlined with clear subheadings. Chapter Nine, for example, “Learning and Knowing: Non-Western Perspectives” is very clearly organized, beginning with a section on why such studies are valuable and then moving to discussions of four non-Western approaches to adult learning: Confucism, Maori, Islam, and African. The chapter concludes with four features common to non-Western adult learning: (1) interdependence, (2) the communal nature of learning, (3) holistic approaches (integration of spirit, mind, body and emotion); and (4) informal and life-long learning. Frequent figures and diagrams make many complex theories more understandable.

In short, *Learning in Adulthood* is a definitive, well-organized and well-thought-out summary of research on the vast and complex field of adult learning. I commend the authors for a significant contribution to scholarship.

[Table of Contents](#)

[Issues](#)

[Credits](#)

[NTLF.com Home](#)

© Copyright 1996-2007. Published by *James Rhem & Associates, Inc.*

(ISSN 1057-2330) All rights reserved worldwide.

Web Weaving™ By *InfoStreet, Inc.*