

Adults Can and Must Learn

Society demands that adults believe in and become fully engaged in continuing learning

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Failure of adults to continue learning is due to reasons other than lack of ability. Much evidence points to this conclusion. Peculiarities about the adult's life suggest that his learning behavior may be somewhat unique from that of the young person. As a potential learner, the adult must consider a proliferation of non-student roles as well as the student role. His non-student roles are made more complex by characteristics of present-day society. These characteristics emphasize the necessity for the adult to continue "learning his way through life."

CONSTANT change in the world around us and discoveries about the learning ability and performance of adults strongly affirm the belief that adults are never too old to learn.¹ Two supportive arguments aid in our task of developing this proposition. First, we *can* believe it because an abundance of research findings support this belief. Secondly, we *must* believe it since such a belief represents a positive response to the demands of a rapidly changing world.

ADULTS CAN LEARN

Numerous studies have been conducted to determine the relationship between age and mental ability as well as between age and

¹ Advanced age associated with senility is not included in the time span covered by "never." This exclusion was made with the conviction that learning during "senility" veers quite sharply from the norm, both in nature and extent, and as such falls outside the scope of this discussion. Furthermore, the term "learning" will be used to refer to any behavioral origination or change which is not attributable either to temporary states of the organism (induced by such agents as drugs, alcohol, or fatigue), maturation, or native response tendencies. (See Ernest R. Hilgard, *Theories of Learning*, 2nd ed. [New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, Inc., 1956], p. 3.) Behavior as used in this context includes both observable (overt) and unobservable (covert) forms.

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classroom achievement. Although some disagreement in specific findings has occurred, one generalization has consistently reappeared in research reports—that the human organism can continue to learn effectively throughout life. If this be true, one may further ask: Why does the young person frequently appear to perform more effectively in an academic situation than the older person? The answer to this question may be secured by examining the peculiar physical, psychological, and social nature of adulthood.

Physical Declination

Our examination starts with the discovery that general reaction speed does decline with age as do visual and auditory acuity. These losses, in combination with decline in energy reserve, may explain the reduced learning performance of older persons in certain psycho-motor-type learning tasks. Physical declinations, however, do not apply equally well as explanation for what may be reduced performance in the cognitive and/or affective types of learning tasks.

Self-Underestimation

Adults learn much less than they might, partly because of a self-underestimation of their power and wisdom, and partly because of anxieties that their learning behavior will bring unfavorable criticism.² Many adults have internalized society's stereotype of them—that they are "old dogs and therefore cannot learn new tricks." Frequently, the general tendency to degrade oneself as a learner has been reinforced by some unpleasant learning experience during the formative years. The important thing to recognize is that the lack of learner confidence prevalent among adults may have a detrimental effect on learning performances. The detrimental effect appears to be irrespective of mental ability.

Conflict of Behavior Patterns

Another peculiarity which may be considered potentially detrimental to learning is the unusual volume and diversification of experiences the adult possesses. It should be recognized, however, that under certain conditions experience may be an asset to further experience or learning. These necessary conditions are a lack of at least total antagonism between the behavior to be learned and previous learned behavior. If new experiences are to be assimilated with the old (and thus learned), relevant and positive relationships

² Irving Lorge *et al.*, *Adult Education Theory and Method: Psychology of Adults* (Chicago: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., 1963), p. 7.

between the two must be perceived by the individual. Unfortunately, this is not always possible.

Frequently new learning has a negative relationship with previously learned patterns and must, therefore, be preceded by a process of unlearning the "old." Furthermore, unlearning for adults is usually no simple task. The behavior to be unlearned has in all likelihood been over-learned; that is, it has been practiced and reinforced several times over. Certainly, there is a greater probability that any behavior to be learned will find more opposition in the established behavior patterns of the adult, as compared to pre-adult. This is true simply because the adult has more and better-established behavior patterns. Children are continually collecting experiences and forming attitudes and values; whereas adults, to comply with the new learning situation, have to manipulate those they have already developed. The extra time and energy needed for such manipulation may be reflected in reduced performance.

Role Conflict

The volume and diversification of adult role expectations and behavior may be still another reason why adults appear to perform less well in certain learning situations than do youth. The typical middle-class adult may simultaneously be trying to fulfill the role expectations of husband, bank president, country club member, church deacon, and student. Making such an extensive and diversified effort may not only reduce the amount of energy he has available to expend on learning; it may also complicate the task itself. For instance, the results of decisions made during the accomplishment of a given learning task may potentially affect the lives of numerous people with whom the adult learner associates in performing other roles. The expectations of these "other people," contradictory though they may be, must be considered by the adult learner as he makes important learning decisions. The weighing and analyzing involved in such consideration may, in turn, delay or alter learning decisions and thereby affect learning performance. An uninformed teacher of adults may erroneously consider performance reduced in this manner to be evidence of an inherent decline in an adult's ability to learn.

Status Protection

Status achieved by the adult through the satisfactory performance of roles other than the student role may, in some instances, have a deleterious effect upon his learning performance. Thus, the practicing lawyer may resist the self-involvement necessary for

effective learning out of fear that such involvement will result in some loss of status gained as a lawyer.

Disuse of Learning Skills

Our discussion of adult roles thus far has focused upon the effect that the adult's non-student roles may have on the performance of his student role. Attention is now focused upon the student or learner role itself. Effective student role fulfillment, as in any other role, is dependent upon the acquisition of certain skills. The adult may have acquired the necessary learning skills earlier in life, but may have allowed them to fade through disuse. Consequently, he may perform less well initially than one who has been using his formal learning skills continuously. Furthermore, it is often necessary for the adult to acquire, for the first time, those learning skills specific to the adult student role. This may involve a simple process of assimilation, and in other instances involve the complex process of unlearning the "old" and learning the "new." Far too frequently, the adult who returns to the classroom is expected to rapidly cultivate (learn) large amounts of soil (content) with rusty or non-existent tools (skills).

Motivation

The term "motivation" may be used to designate the final collection of adult characteristics which may be related to adult learning performance. It is generally true that the adult is actively involved in the real world; he has real unsolved problems; he has responsibilities to himself and others; he, in all probability, has settled on and is actively pursuing specific professional and personal goals; he is more selective of elements in his environment than he was earlier in life; and he now recognizes that time is not infinite. These characteristics combine to result in a practically-oriented organism that is quite selective as to what it perceives, incorporates, and thus learns. Unless the content to be learned (as well as the process by which it is to be learned) is selected and ordered in a meaningful way for the adult, either reduced learning or no learning will occur. Content and method must be relevant to the adult learner's world as he perceives and patterns it.

The above-mentioned characteristics or peculiarities of adulthood have been presented as possible reasons why learning performance frequently declines with age, while mental ability generally does not. The happy note is that these reasons need not be viewed as insurmountable obstacles to continued learning. In most instances, a sound educational approach based on knowledge of these

reasons will erase any perceivable decline in learning performance associated with age.

ADULTS MUST LEARN

It may be assumed that all of us desire happiness, that happiness depends upon a degree of psychological and social adjustment, that adjustment depends upon a degree of consistency between ourselves (attitudes, capabilities, etc.) and the outside world (mores, skill demands, etc.), and, finally, that the outside world is continuously changing. It would therefore seem logical to conclude that we must change (learn) continuously so that consistency, adjustment, and thus happiness might become realities. Furthermore, since our learning depends, among other things, upon the confidence we have in our ability to learn, we must believe that we are never too old to learn.

Our generation is the first to live in a culture drastically different from the one in which it was born, and for which it was educated.³

A sense of evolution which our fathers gleaned from history books or from the tales of elders is being gained by our generation through first-hand experiences in mere decades. The reader needs but a moment of reflection to recognize the ways in which his patterns of behavior have changed over the past ten years as a result of broader changes occurring around him. The one broad category of change to which all other significant change can be traced is the field of knowledge and technology.

As knowledge increases and is applied, numerous alterations occur in the fabric of society. Three related discoveries emerge: (1) Alterations are inevitable; (2) they represent opportunities for either continued progress toward the "good life" or regression to a less favorable condition; and (3) the directional determinant (progression or regression) is the educational input and its output—learning.

Specific societal changes or alterations tend to lose their identity as they combine into clusters. Given adequate time and space, these specific alterations could be reisolated and discussed in their relationships to other alterations. We will, however, discuss five of the more significant clusters of alterations being generated by new technology.

Population

From 1940 to 1963 more people were added to the world's pop-

³The Commission of the Professors of Adult Education, *Adult Education: A New Imperative for Our Time* (Chicago: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., 1961), p. 5.

ulation (7 billion) than existed in 1800.⁴ This global explosion of population has been illustrated dramatically by the speculation that "if all of the United States' air and sea transportation potential were employed immediately to remove people from the mainland of China, the population of that country would still continue to grow." Although China and some other countries have experienced more rapid population increases than the United States, we too have noticed a marked increase.

From 1860 to 1960 our population density increased from 10.6 persons per square mile to 50.5 persons per square mile.⁵ Florida alone increased its population by 14.2 per cent from 1960 to 1963, exceeded only by Nevada (29.1 per cent) and Arizona (19.7 per cent).⁶ Closer examination of this overall population increase reveals that some segments are increasing at disproportionate rates. The young and old segments of society now represent a larger proportion of the whole than they once did. Likewise, women in our society are overly represented, particularly within the older age segments. The poverty-stricken strata of our society are reproducing at a more rapid rate than are the economically secure. If all of the above alterations are to result in progress rather than regression (as manifested by increased welfare rolls, health problems, slums, and general decline in the effectiveness with which institutions satisfy needs of society), then learning and change must take place.

Marketable Skills and Competencies

Technical innovations in production and marketing continue to result in progressive changes in the kinds of human skills and competencies that can be marketed. It has been predicted that by 1970, one-fourth of the nation's labor force will be employed in semi-professional and technical jobs that didn't even exist in the 1930's.⁷ In the presence of this progressive change in demands for skills and competencies, individuals must retrain (learn) or suffer the demoralizing influences of unemployment. The high positive relationship between education and employability is an indisputable fact.

Exposure

Newly-developed forms of communication and travel, as well as

⁴ Kingsley Davis, "Population," *Scientific American*, CCIX (September, 1963), 63.

⁵ *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1964*, 85th ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1964), p. 1.

⁶ *Florida Population*, Research Booklet No. 14 (Tallahassee: Florida Development Commission, 1963), p. 1.

⁷ Lester Velie, "Where the Jobs Are," *Reader's Digest*, XXCIV (January, 1965), 102.

more extensive and effective use of existing forms, have resulted in widespread and intensive exposure of individuals to new and often fragmented facts, concepts, and ideologies. The volume of stimuli bombarding the typical citizen of our affluent society is devastating. With such exposure, the individual must learn to be objectively selective; he must learn to critically analyze and, when necessary, to search for supplementary data; and finally, he must learn to broaden himself to the extent that at least a minimal level of understanding and acceptance of different "others" is possible.

Work and Leisure

Work roles are becoming increasingly specialized and depersonalized, making necessary the selection and learning of avocational behaviors as supplemental means of self-actualization. Furthermore, institutions are assuming more and more of those roles and responsibilities once reserved for the family or the individual. As a buffer against widespread surrender and apathy, the individual must learn to accept and execute those responsibilities most pertinent to the retention of his individual freedom. Work itself is beginning to consume a relatively smaller portion of the energies and time of the daily worker. His work week is becoming shorter and retirement is coming earlier. Under such circumstances, the individual worker and the people around him must learn to accept non-work activities as measures of personal worth and must learn to function effectively in such activities.

Geographic Mobility

There are two commonly accepted types of geographic mobility, both of which are significant to this discussion: Immigration refers to a so-called permanent move from one country to another; migration refers to permanent moves within a country. In 1963, this country admitted over 1.8 million aliens; approximately one-sixth became immigrants.⁸ The learning that must occur under these circumstances involves both new and old citizens, as they attempt to build on similarities and at the same time accept differences.

With the possible exception of the Cuban influx, migration has been a more significant trend than has immigration. In a single year 30,000,000 Americans typically change residence. About two-thirds of this number remain in their home counties; one-sixth change counties within their states; approximately one-sixth change states.⁹ A large portion of this movement, irrespective of geograph-

⁸ *Statistical Abstract . . . , op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁹ J. Walter Thompson Company, *Population and Its Distribution*, 7th ed. rev. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1951), p. xiii.

ic boundaries, has been from rural to urban areas. When such migration occurs, the individual finds himself moving from a rural social system which is typically stable, tightly controlled, predictable, and respectful of his particular skills and competencies, to an urban social system which is typically unstable, free, unpredictable, and perhaps quite indifferent to and unneedful of his skills and competencies. Under these circumstances, to suggest that the individual must continue to learn is, again, to suggest a truism.

SUMMARY

Assuming that sincere belief and conviction in one's ability to learn are requisite to full engagement in learning activities, it has been argued that contemporary man can and must believe that he is never too old to learn.

There are certain conditions associated with adulthood which may furnish rationale for the adult's unique learning behavior. These include physical declination, underestimation of self as a learner, repertoire of potentially antagonistic experience, role conflict, status protectiveness, accumulative disuse of learning skills and growing concern for immediacy of application. These conditions should not, however, be viewed as insurmountable obstacles to continued learning. Quite the contrary, they should represent a challenge which, when properly understood and accepted by adult educators, could very likely result in highly enriched continued learning experiences.

Conditions associated with adulthood must be viewed positively. Rapid advances in knowledge and technology in association with numerous clusters of societal changes (population, marketable skills and competencies, exposure, work and leisure, and geographic mobility) are collectively directing us to regard continued learning as a necessity of life.

UNIVERSITY TRAINING, to my mind, is merely an introduction to continued personal development towards wisdom. He who appreciates his own shortcomings after completion of that which universities can offer him by way of certificates and titles is a wise man. Over-confidence in university titles is a sure way to mental degeneration and the western world appears to be crowded with men whose mental labours stopped short on the day of their graduation and who suffocate in their own conceit. They are never heard of again, as they live in an atmosphere of honeymoon isolation with their loving titles. Extension has no room for such mental adolescence.

—F. F. H. KOLBE.