

research in brief

Social Network

Do we know enough about adult learners, their characteristics, and their habits to help them with their learning? Continuing the work started by Houle (1961) on the characteristics and motivations of those who enroll in our programs and by Tough (1965) who studied adult learners who don't enroll in our programs, Luikart determined the effects a person's social network has on the person's self-planned learning (a series of self-planned episodes adding up to at least seven hours).

He interviewed 64 noncollege bound young adults. Fifty (or 77%) of them had pursued 114 separate learning projects in the immediate past 6 months. The 77% was consistent with numerous studies showing that 55% to 85% of various types of people undertake 12 different teaching tasks on their own. These tasks include evaluating and deciding on goals, on specific activities to take part in, on resources, on progress, and on necessary new directions.

Luikart found that 514 people (about half of one's close acquaintances) helped the 50 self-learners with their projects. Sixty-four percent of these "helpers" helped at least three times with a project.

After finding out that the size of one's social network, its intimacy, and its composition affect the amount, source, and type of help received, Luikart made several suggestions for those practicing adult education:

1. Assess the mission regarding the independent self-learner.
2. Depending on the assessment, interview some non-participants to see how their goals and projects compare to what we in Extension are providing.
3. Identify "peer networks" and provide information for natural diffusion within those networks.
4. Incorporate more flexibility into program structure to allow for self-planning of learning.
5. Allow for various goals and criteria to be used for evaluations and decisions on program content and methods.
6. In counseling, use interviews as a way to create awareness of progress, barriers to learning, and possible new goals.

In summary, Luikart's research adds an important dimension to adult learners that Extension should consider in developing and appraising our programs.

"Social Network and Self Planned Adult Learning." Extension Bulletin, Vol. LVI, No. 2. Clark Luikart. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina, March, 1977.

Laverne Forest