

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281842672>

# CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF ADULT LEARNING/Pieaugušo mācīšanās mūsdienu teorijas

Conference Paper · May 2012

---

CITATIONS

0

READS

33

1 author:



Ludmila Babajeva

6 PUBLICATIONS 0 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

# CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF ADULT LEARNING

## Pieaugušo mācīšanās mūdienu teorijas

**Ludmila Babajeva**

University of Latvia, Latvia

E-mail: ludmila.babajeva@lu.lv

**Abstract.** *Due to the adult learning theory transition from cognitive to comprehensive aspects, this article analyses contemporary theoretical notions about adult's learning. In order to characterise the modern view on adult, the most recent insights into the education of whole adult person (P. Jarvis), three dimensions of learning (K. Illeris) and the critical theory contribution (S.D. Brookfield) will be discussed. All of mentioned, globally-renowned theorists are of the same opinion and contribute to the general adult learning theory – P. Jarvis pictures the learning process from a viewpoint of a human as holistic organism, K. Illeris develops his theory in relation to the pedagogical conditions of learning, whereas Brookfield discusses an adult in the context of social, political and democratic concept.*

**Keywords:** *adult learning, Brookfield, Illeris, Jarvis, learning theories.*

### Introduction

Over the last decade, one may observe a considerable shift of focus in terms of learning theory away from cognitive concepts towards comprehensive ones. An increasing amount of theorists and practitioners consider the complex nature of adult learning process whilst keeping in mind that it is not the final result and new data will further complement the understanding (Jarvis, 2006).

M. Knowles already observed the extent of difference between an adult learning process and child's activities at school. He attempted to provide criteria that could explain internal processes of an adult, which in turn could facilitate the understanding between an adult and an androgogist. Later transformations of the theory (Kolb, Merriam, Mezirow and others) in their essence complemented the understanding of the adult learning process; however, it was done more from the viewpoint of cognitive aspects – as changes in experience and restructuring.

21<sup>st</sup> century is the right time to see an adult in a holistic manner – as a uniform manifestation of body, soul and mind. In the aspect of learning this uniform manifestation represents itself as a transformation of person's experience while being exposed to various contexts. Nevertheless, at the social level adults are expected to reflect on their experience – appear flexible, as well as flexible and ever open to new challenges.

### Adult learning in the Critical theory by S.D. Brookfield

To think critically, as emphasised by Brookfield (1987) on numerous occasions' means to be aware of one's assumptions, which we base our lives upon, think an act. The assessment of such assumptions and seeing alternatives allows us to turn our narrow consciousness and takes us into the world of adults. Author shows how critical thinking serves as a base to grow up on, because it provides an opening manner of thinking, flexibility and an ability to connect one's life to broader social forces.

S.D. Brookfield (1987; 2005) explains the critical theory approach within adult education. The author goes into in-depth analysis about the postulates of critical thought arriving at a set of conclusions that enables him to implement the idea in various contexts of adult life that are different from school, where kids and adolescents experience their learning processes. With regards to adults, authors deem it necessary to separate *4 contexts of daily life*, which would assist in achieving a better understanding of adult daily contexts: relationships with relatives/partner, career/work place, political environment and the world of media.

In this approach an adult is viewed holistically, emphasising emotions as a central part to all processes of critical thinking. Changes in a person takes place upon reassessing existing values, an understanding of oneself, work and political environment, which results in a positive set of changes, relief and broadening of self-confidence.

Later Brookfield (2005) even pointed out that adult learning results' assessment is implicit to the critical theory. The following question is highlighted in the perspective of critical theory – how do people learn to identify and later confront ideological forces and social processes that oppress themselves (Brookfield, 2005, 31).

Very interesting lines interweave the link between critical thinking and conditions of creating a democratic and liberal society. Critical thinking enables adults to reflect on their life experience, recent events, change comprehension of oneself and the world one lives in, as well as not to get stuck in the stages of crisis and change. It is an opportunity to be flexible and able to promptly respond as a citizen to the needs of the country.

The concept of liberalisation emphasises the freedom of creativity, setting the man free from the requirements of capitalism. Individual freedom in this concept exists in close relation to the collective. It means a collective and individual revolution. Individual revolution is a new sentiency, aesthetical impulses and an imaginary power bound to the collective – new forms of social, economic and political organisation (Brookfield, 1987; 2005).

According to Brookfield (2005), the emergence of such society requires a capability to pursue the following *learning objectives*: reorganise and challenge the existing ideology whilst learning, in the meantime fight the hegemony, expose the existing rule whilst learning, learn to overcome estrangement and thus achieve freedom, learn to promote liberalisation, learn to demand a reason and to practice democracy.

Upon mastering these methods of structuring one's life, the adult learns to challenge the existing ideology, thus not allowing the minority rule the majority against its will. Everyone has a right to unlimited access to evidence and criticism of arguments. Everyone has a right to oppose the logic of capitalism.

Partitioning of democratic values means to express one's ideas not harming others, self and the world. It enables a right to unlimited criticism towards the existing rule and an opportunity to be a part of such rule, not its servant. From the perspective of aesthetics, this could translate into a right to act in fields that provide

one with sense of fulfilment, based on one's desires and interests (Brookfield, 2005).

Hegemony emphasises the maintenance of the existing political power. This theory argues that people may be taught to accept and obey by natural means in accordance to the interest of the power, even if it is not in line with one's concepts. Critical theory allows one to understand and to confront this oppression – allows one to review ideas that have seemed natural and acceptable, but in their true natures, these ideas have served the needs of others.

Upon exposing the existing rule, an adult learns to recognise the existence of power in one's life and the cases in which such power was used for good, and in which – for bad. Only then adults will learn to see the individual power as being implacably included with the collective power, at this point essential changes in social context are rendered possible. However, everything starts with an individual, each of us must understand that the power is inscribed (according to Foucault terminology) in our daily words and ways (Brookfield, 2005).

Finally, by overcoming the estrangement from oneself we acquire a personal freedom. We become ourselves and we may work in a field that releases our entire creative potential instead of feeling tired and empty. In this aspect, critical theory invites adults to return to themselves and find their place within this world. Through reflection and criticism world must become our own, being a complete opposite to the estrangement.

### **Comprehensive learning model or the three dimensions of learning by K. Illeris**

Illeris (2002) notes that education plays an increasingly important role in the modern society. But does it mean that an equally large amount of attention is being paid to teaching or a study of what really adults are, their needs and what does education really mean to them?

Contemporary education and its initial orientation to increased competence were prompted restructured to suit narrow economic requirements. It decreased person's changes to use competences (at an individual and social level) as a mediator between social challenges and individual's capability to manage such challenges (Illeris 2004).

Author reviews the existing trends and upon returning to the adult as a person, he presents the following comprehensive theory of learning – “*learning is any process in a living organism that leads to permanent capacity changes, but is not merely a biological maturation or aging*” (Illeris, 2007, 3). *Capacity changes* may be physical, cognitive, skills-orient, emotional, opinion orient and social in their respective nature (Illeris, 2004).

Learning within this concept is characterised with two main processes – interaction and acquisition as well as *three learning dimensions* – content, stimulus and environment (See Figure 1).

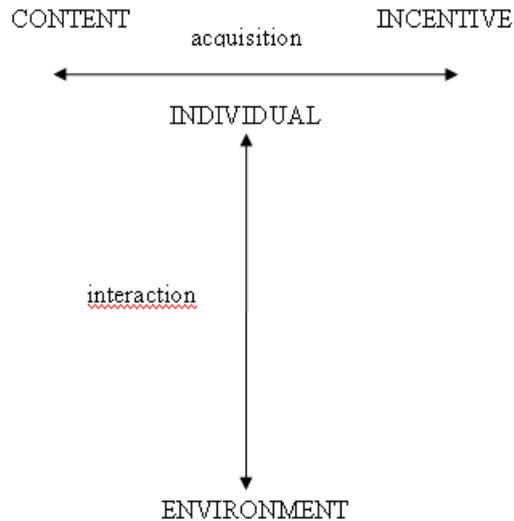


Figure 1. **Fundamental learning processes** (Illeris, 2009)

As pictured in the figure above, learning process takes place in two mutually related directions – through external interaction between adult and social, cultural or material environment and through internal processes of psychological experience acquisition. Both of these processes are equally important in every learning process and they may even take place at the same time.

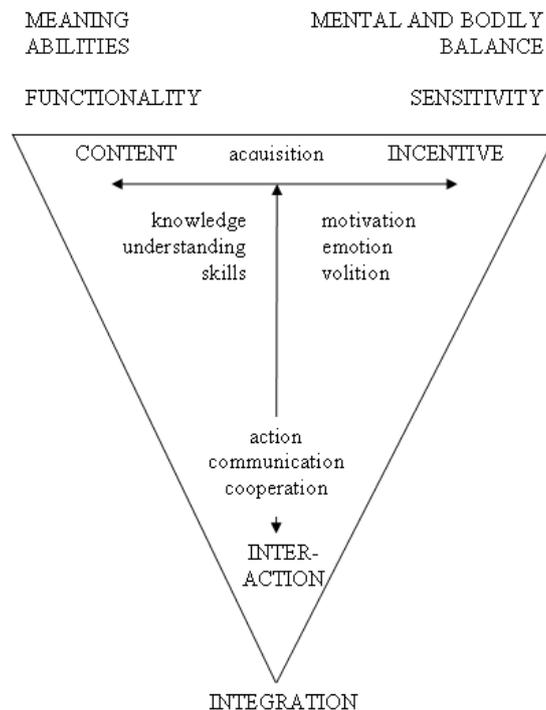


Figure 2. **The three dimensions of learning and competency development** (Illeris, 2009)

The two main learning processes form corners at the end of the arrows, which outlines the three-dimensionality of learning - content, stimulus and

environment. Content dimension reveals what the adult is learning – it is the exact content, education programme. This dimension is characterised by knowledge, understanding and skills. An adult learns to structure knowledge and acquire an ability to apply such knowledge in daily situations, thereby developing one's overall functionality.

Stimulus dimension ensures and directs mental energy that is necessary in every learning process. This emotional dimension involves feelings, motivation and will. The purpose of this dimension is to maintain adult's mental balance and thus develop one's sentiency.

Dimension of interaction provides impulses that initiate learning processes. These impulses may be expressed as perception, transmission, experience, imitation etc. This dimension supports integration in the existing society and thus builds the socialisation of an adult.

The comprehensive learning model best suits the concept of contemporary competency. Such model involves all aspects of learning, including personal development, socialising and qualification (Illeris, 2004). Thereby the new postulate of "*learning as the development of competency*" (Illeris, 2007) may be understood through these three dimensions – human functionality, sentiency and creation of socialisation (Illeris, 2009, 11).

### **Adult person's development within the existential learning theory by P.Jarvis**

After more than 30 years of research and a discovery that in reality *a man is who learns*, in 2006, Jarvis put forth a statement that a man learns holistically and that means learning within a social situation, however, in 2009, the author postulates that "It is a man who learns and it is a changed man as a result of learning" (Jarvis, 2009, 24)

Human personality and human learning must be always understood as interaction between person's internal and external world, in the course of which experience is gained, changed/structured and reassessed. By applying these principles to the creators of adult politics, Jarvis emphasises that any life-long education guidelines that do not involve a person as a whole are incomplete and do not take into account all processes.

As a result of continued research and understanding transformation, Jarvis (2010, 81) achieves a following learning definition – learning is an existential phenomenon, a combination of process in which a person holistically as a body (genetic, psychic and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs and feeling) find themselves in a social situation and structure an experience which will later transform in a cognitive, emotional or practical way (or in any combination of the said) integrating into individual's biography.

Most importantly the learning process of a person starts by a person itself – "embodiment of person", "embodiment of I" (Jarvis, 2004, 68). We have only one body, but there may be multiples "I". A body provides biological knowledge on the various activities of mind (e.g. Multiple Intelligence theory by Gardner). Brain is the biological vault of experience.

Whereas “I concept” as the central element to the learning theory may be considered as the personal and social identity. Furthermore, multiple social “I” are possible, depending on the specific social context. Jarvis (2004), referring to Apter (1989) speaks of the possible “I 1” – awareness of self, “I 2” – awareness that we have various qualities that we adopt while learning from others and “I 3” – a belief of oneself that is create upon a realisation of us by other people.

A person is always located in a social situation, always interacts with others, always exists, grows and develops in a biological, psychic and social dimension. Jarvis (2005) compares learning and thus the development *to becoming a more and more intelligent person in this world.*

Jarvis (2009) asks adults and their teachers to think of the central questions in life – “Who am I?” and “Who will I become?”, “What is the society I live in?”, “What does it mean to exist and become?”

All the above questions may lead an adult to awareness that the existing experience has its gaps and shortcomings that are referred to as interruptions by Jarvis. It is learning, human’s learning, and which in author’s opinion begin with interruptions – a gap between the time lived and experience accumulated (See Figure 3). A gap or dissonance between the existing and necessary experience is the driving force within persons learning and changing processes (Jarvis, 2006).

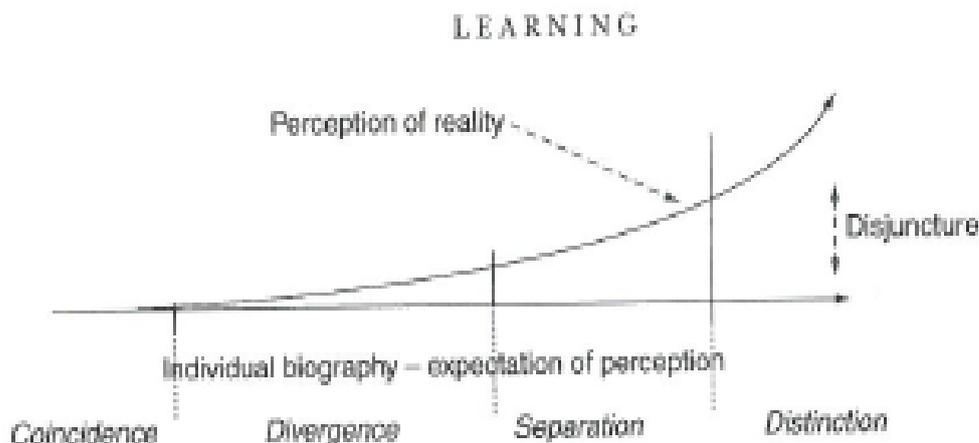


Figure 3. **Interruption – a distance between the vision of reality and individual biography** (Jarvis, 2010, 84)

This illustration demonstrates regularity between the existing experience and the respective ability to act in a certain situation and the notion of reality. The larger the gap, provided that the man thinks critically, the bigger is the necessity to improve the existing experience i.e. involve into learning activities. The smaller the gap without consideration, then life remains without changes and the necessity to learn.

Already in 2004 the author comes to a conclusion that one must change focus from experience based learning concept to existentialism. Existential learning as being a driving force of human’s development. In this learning process the mind, “I” and identity acquires knew knowledge through experiencing life and its

understanding in a holistic manner. Thus learning is based on experience; nevertheless it must be fitted into the existential frame (in relation to oneself).

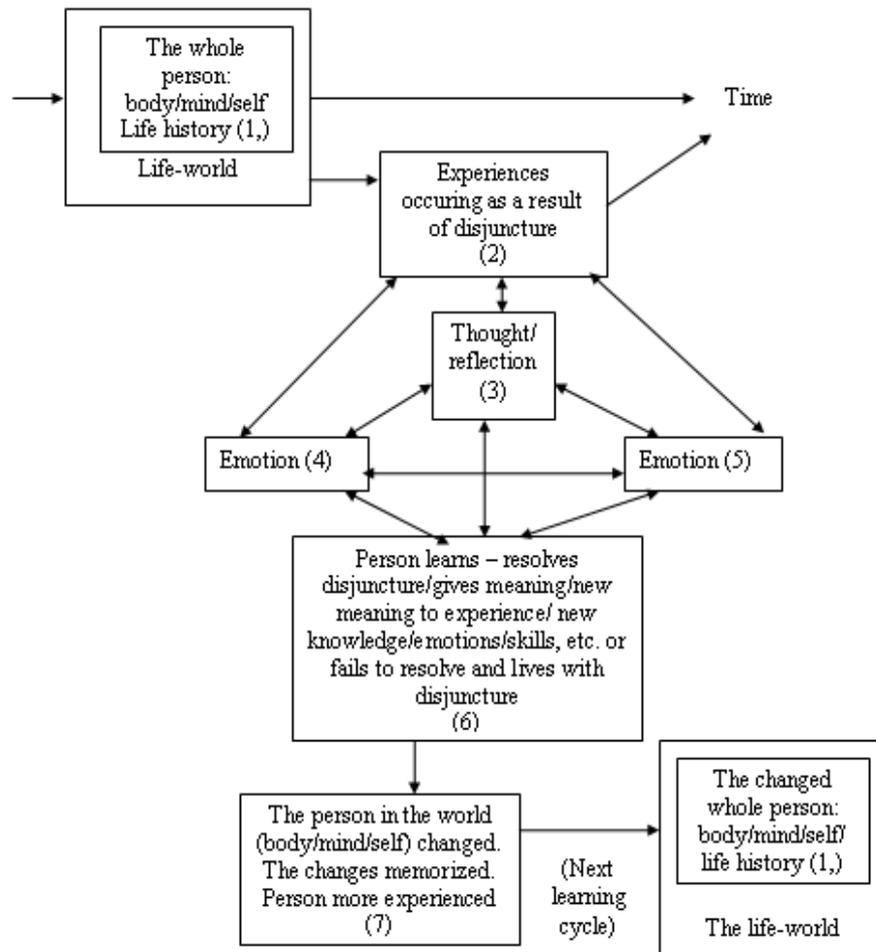


Figure 4. **Person’s transformation during learning process** (Jarvis, 2010, 81)

Within the existential model, a whole person structures own experience, in the result of which one grows and develops. Thus, in accordance to the terminology used by Jarvis (2004), learning process is a changed person or put more precisely – a changed whole person – Jarvis (2010). Upon facing a real situation, a whole person feels the lack of experience and gains it from emotions, thinking and actions (Jarvis even goes on to mention with reference to O’Loughlin 2006 that our experience begins exactly with the experience of feelings). During the learning process the whole person changes in terms of body, mind, “I” and life’s history in world (as well as soul –Jarvis (2005)). (See Figure 4)

### Conclusions

Without a doubt the shift of learning theory focus from cognitive to holistic approach requires a development of a new concept within adult learning. An adult must be seen as a whole that learns by transforming experience into bodily feeling, soul emotions and ideas of mind. This transformation of common experiences

provides a larger understanding on how to help an adult to gain new competences and adjust oneself in this ever changing world.

S. Brookfield, upon reviewing an adult that learns within the boundaries of critical theory, outlines the characteristics of a modern adult as an active and honest individual within the society, which not only governs active processes but also is able to successfully form a democratic society around oneself.

P. Jarvis and K. Illeris both see adult learning process as a comprehensive and holistic unit. Within this approach, a human constructs one's experience through the activities of mind, body, feeling and society among content, androgist and context.

A person who learns, becomes and changes is in the centre of learning in line with existensional theory by P. Jarvis. It is improvement and the holistic nature of learning processes that defines person's changes within the course of education.

However, in the three-dimension context by K. Illeris, the main interaction and acquisition processes are displayed; these processes define the improvement of person's functionality, sentiency and in the dimensional entirety.

All three authors provide an invaluable contribution to the understanding of adult learning processes from the viewpoint of comprehensive aspects enabling to understand an adult who learns at the individual and social level.

*This work has been supported by the European Social Fund within the project «Support for Doctoral Studies at University of Latvia».*

### **Bibliography**

1. Brookfield, Stephen. (1987). *Developing Critical Thinkers. Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting*. England: Open University Press.
2. Brookfield, Stephen. (2005). *The Power of Critical Theory for Adult Learning and Teaching*. England: Open University Press.
3. Illeris, Knud. (2004). *The Three Dimensions of Learning*. Florida: Krieger Publishing Company.
4. Illeris, Knud. (2004). *Adult Education and Adult Learning*. Denmark: Roskilde University Press.
5. Illeris, Knud. (2007). *How We Learn: Learning and Non-Learning in School and Beyond*. London, New York: Routledge.
6. Illeris, Knud. (2009). A comprehensive understanding of human learning. In: *Contemporary Theories of Learning*. Ed. By K. Illeris. London and New York: Routledge, pp.7-20.
7. Jarvis, Piter. (2004). *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning*. New York: Routledge.
8. Jarvis, Piter. (2005). *Human Learning: an Holistic Approach*. London: Routledge.
9. Jarvis, Piter. (2006). *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning*. London: Routledge.
10. Jarvis, Piter. (2009). Learning to be a person in society: learning to be me. In: *Contemporary Theories of Learning*. Ed. By K. Illeris. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 21-34.
11. Jarvis, Piter. (2010). *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<b>Ludmila Babajeva</b> University of Latvia
--

Jurmalas gatve 74/76, Riga, LV-1083, Latvia  
E-mail: ludmila.babajeva@lu.lv  
Phone: +371 26791238