Applications of adult learning theory to learning society

Critically examine the concept of adult learning theory and its applications in a learning society

This essay will be critically examining Adult Learning Theory and how it is applied in society. The essay will discuss the difficulties when some theories are not compatible to others and how these impact on those who are managing or funding the learning. Adult learning is defined as all learning that takes place by an adult whether it be formal, non-formal and informal learning. Adult learning is the acquisition of new knowledge and skills.

The current model of adult learning that is being used is that of a neo-liberal market model. Murphy (2000) stated that there is a clear link between the economy and adult education; this is not just linked to the funding of programmes that run. Fleming (2010) stated that adult learning as a concept, or lifelong learning, connects traditional fields of adult education (in either conservative, humanistic or radical forms) with political and economical interests for the global economy. Buber (1958) stated that individuals start with the proposition of relationships and that individuals must learn in order to become social individuals. He also stated that as humanity evolves, individuals change and develop to become the human beings they are today and their recognition of this affects their understanding of their learning, thus representing their place (ego) within the wider society.

The Council of Europe in 1970 and UNESCO (Faure, et al, 1972) noted that it was important to keep up to date with learning; this is important because of the rapid social and technological changes that exist and is forever growing

in this technological age. Education needs to be up to date with these changes for individuals to succeed. However, the OECD (1995) stated that education today is deficit as it is unable to meet individuals needs whilst in education.

The term ' Lifelong learning' was adopted by UNESCO in 1970 to provide people with the ability to make informed choices. Although initially a good concept, it has some negative aspects due to the inequalities in terms of lack of access to knowledge depending on the economic status of the individual (Faure et al, 1972). Lifelong learning was adopted by post-modernism. There are implications within lifelong learning, these consist of the performance of knowledge based of social norms. Harvey (1989) views post-modernism as the globalization of capitalist economy. Lermert (1997) perceives post-modernism as a theory that instils certain thoughts and actions into individuals. Lifelong learning promotes social and economic regeneration (DfEE, 1998). The European commission (2003) supported lifelong learning locally and regionally. Field et al (2000) stated that lifelong learning is about social capital and not human capital.

Adults learn differently to children, as they already have built up schemas. Piaget defined schemas as building blocks that help form an individual's intelligence and while children are born as blank slates that must learn in order to build up their schemas, adults have already gained experiences through their everyday life.

There are many learning perspectives that link to adults. These perspectives contextualize the learning process undertaken by adults. They deal with the general attitudes towards learning and the learner. They also deal with issues such as purpose, processes, outcomes and socio-political fairness in accordance with ontological and social models of thought. An increased percent of adult theories surrounds basic behaviour changes and experiences. Knowles (1980) theory was based on andragogy and was primarily a scientific discipline, however, andragogy's systematic nature is a result of other theatrical deliberations. Knowles (1980) (1984) stated that educators needed to focus on what interested the learners in order to succeed. He also stated that education needed to guide the learners into developing their own potential. Knowles (1980) (1984) stated that there were five assumptions into the concept of andragogy; the five assumptions are that adults are self-reliant learners, adult learners bring personal experiences to the educational environment, adults come into the education environment ready to learn and an adult's motivation to learn is increased by internal factors (Knowles 1980). Andragogy is built upon adult learners having a self-concept to learning and also the concept of linking new knowledge to previous experiences. Knowles (1980) stated that adult learners have an innate motivation to learn and that they learn while juggling the demands of their daily life.

Knowles (1980) stated that adult learners are interested when expanding their knowledge and acquiring a specific skill, thus taking responsibility for their own learning. Adult learners have both an external and internal motivation to learn. The external motivation to learn is usually to gain a high

salary or a better job. An internal motivation to learn is usually for self-esteem or job satisfaction. It is believed that adult learners achieve better when learning is connected to the individual values and beliefs, making them more motivated to learn. Knowles (1980) viewed adult learners as facilitators of their learning, he did this through defining the learner in social and psychological terms. Knowles (1980) theory of andragogy relied on group discussions and collaborative assignments. At first, Knowles stated andragogy was from pedagogy, until 1984 when he stated that it was a form of both andragogy and pedagogy (Knowles 1984). Knowles (1980) stated that educators need to follow seven steps for his theory to work effectively. The seven steps are made up of cooperative learning, planning goals, the learners need and interests, learning objectives, activities to achieve objectives and by using methods, materials and resources to meet objectives and evaluation. These seven steps would achieve a process-based curriculum to meet the individual's needs. Robinson (1992) and Burge (1988) both supported Knowles assumptions to how adults learn.

Behaviourists view adult learning as skill developing and behaviour changing. They highlight the importance of environmental manipulation and behavioural change as essential characteristics within adult learning. Adult learning has clear links to discovery, transformation and making their learning more meaningful. Behaviourists say that the educator needs to set specific expectations and monitor the adult learning progress. They also know how important it is that the adult learner has clear objectives and specific strategies in order to achieve their desired learning goals. The educator can help by giving positive reinforcement and frequent feedback.

Marriam and Cafferella (1991) stated the behaviourist's position to adult learning was fundamental to educational practices. Skinner sees behaviourism as important in order for survival in all aspects; saying that the educator's role is to eliminate unwanted behaviour and instil desired behaviour. Behaviourism explains some of the outcomes of the learning process, which are measurable. Currently where qualifications are important, behaviourism retains its attraction. Behaviourism points out the outcomes of the learning processes, however, it struggles to explain what the processes are.

Cognitive and constructivist perspectives of adult learning highlight the importance of seeing the learning process from the learner's point of view. Several cognitivist theorists, including Paiget and Bruner, highlight how important it is to consider the learners mental processes. Piaget (1929) stated that adult learners think in different ways and these can range from sensor motor to formal operations. Kelly (1955) developed a theory of personal constructs and viewed the individuals as scientists. Kelly (1955) stated that teachers need to establish activities that enhance the learner's mental processes. Kelly's theory gives the learner deeper levels of understanding new material, this is done through critical reflection, questioning and discussion. However, Briggs (1988) stated that for Kelly's theory to work, firstly, the learners need to be aware of their motives and intentions to learn and secondly, the learner needs to be in control of their learning as well as monitoring their learning. Briggs also stated that learners need to have the ability to understand the information given to them and put it into their own words to be able to develop questions about their learning.

Cognitive and constructivists state that learners need to build upon prior knowledge to be able to construct meaning from new information.

Social learning theory incorporated various ideas from a behavioural and cognitive view on adult learning. Bandura's (1977, 1986) social learning theory includes motivation, cognition and learning ideas. Bandura's social learning theory highlights the importance of the learner's environments around them; it also considers the learner's attention to what they are learning. Bandura (1977, 1986) stated that for his theory to work the learner's self-beliefs of their ability to learn and achieve outcomes need to be considered. He also stated that educators needed to be able to understand their learners. Bandura (1977, 1986) stated that learners needed to be aware of social awareness and social experiences for them to make informed choices in their decision making and social behaviour.

Humanists say that adult learning in neither a behavioural or cognitive process; it is to do with personal growth and development. Humanist psychologists Maslow and Rodgers highlight the importance of choice, freedom, creativity and self-realization for the learner to learn adequately. Humanists consider the learner's complexities and perceptions that enable the learner's experiences to learn. Maslow (1954) developed a theory called hierarchy of needs that highlights the need for the learner to adopt self-actualization for them to reach their full potential.

Transformational learning highlights the importance for the learner to change their existing values, attitudes, beliefs and actions. Freire's (1970) critical education theory, Mezirow's (1978, 1981) transformation theory and

Daloz's (1984) holistic perspective have all incorporated literacy education, social change, environmental factors and critical media literacy. Mezirow's (1978, 1981) transformational theory highlighted the importance of critical reflection for the learner to transform their learning experiences. His theory was based on andragogy.

However, in the UK, the purpose of adult learning is to educate individuals above the age of 18 to a specific standard set by the government and, as such, this education is free in certain subjects such as maths and English " Maths and English are important foundation skills for everyone in life and employment. Because of this, the Government will fund any individual to gain their first qualification in Maths and/or English, up to level 2"(City and Guilds, 2018). This is due to the governments aim to ensure that the workforce is sufficiently qualified to be able to contribute towards the society in which they reside.

Adult learning currently is a system of marketisation that has been driven by government policy, however, due to funding restrictions it has " inadequate and overly bureaucratised funding, target driven management, an over emphasis on economic instrumentalism and subservience to inappropriate determination by market forces", which has led to courses that do not link directly to qualifications required by the government being cut (UCU, 2009). Due to the government policies that influence what is being taught, maths and STEM subjects are valued, and funding is being taken from other areas of education, such as art and music. Art, textiles and other practical courses are seen as a lesser qualification with some subjects are being classed as more important than others.

Coombs and Ahmed (1974) tried to differentiate between formal education, informal education and non-formal education. They applied this to adult learning. They stated that there are six different learning situations that occur in adult education. The first is formal education and training; this type of learning happens within an educational institution and bureaucratic organisations. The second is non-formal education, which happens in the workplace and the community. The third is learning in everyday life and self-directed; it can be individual learning or as part of a group. The fourth is incidental learning; this is a type of learning within formal learning situations. The fifth is incidental learning this can happen in a non-formal and informal way. The sixth is learning in everyday life to pre-conscious and pre-cognitive learning.

Within adult education there a two view points; these are liberal and neo-liberal, and both promote a particular model of learner. A liberal view point to adult learning is to view the individual as separate from society; recognising that they learn because they want to learn, that they do things for self-gain and it doesn't have to mean anything to society. Adult learning in a liberal society is about choice and opportunity. The learner can be themselves and learn just for self-improvement. Liberal education is economically driven. However, a neo-liberal view of adult learning is if the learner learns for social value; meaning it has personal value to themselves and that they learn for the outcomes. The learner must learn for economic purpose and is all about skills-economic worth. Neo-liberal is outcome dominant; where the learner must learn to be valuable to society. Adult learning in a neo-liberal society is offered by work-based learning programs

and distance learning programs. Due to neo-liberal economics, new knowledge and skills, which are deemed appropriate to the market, have a huge impact on the education that is being delivered today; this has led to subjects being deemed not relevant to the global capitalist world. The neo-liberal economics has led to many of the liberal adult education subjects being cut or priced so high that individuals struggle to afford to enrol on them. Neo-liberal education has a need for individuals to learn to be useful members of society, thus directing the educational system having to respond to the market needs.

Thus, in conclusion, behaviourism and social constructivism fit in with all neo-liberal educational policies. However, cognitive constructivism and experiential fit in with liberal but can fit in with neo-liberal if the processes are built upon. There are many different theories in adult learning, which all have negative and positive aspects to them. Neo-liberal education offers core subjects, making education a market. Behaviourism is the most used theory within education today, as the focus is on qualifications and outcomes. Adult learning is complex, it must factor in many aspects which children haven't had to face yet. Not one learning theory can be applied to all adults, each adult will identify with different theories thus meaning teacher have to be adaptable to the individual.

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