



## Learning with Adults: A Reader

Mayo, Peter, ed.  
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Book Review

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*Learning with Adults* begins with the following assumption: adult learning is central to the flourishing of a democracy, a democratic world, and practices of justice and peace. The volume borrows the foundations of Paulo Freire, Jürgen Habermas, John Dewey, Theodor Adorno, Jack Mezirow, and other critical theorists and democratically-minded educators and philosophers to develop a substantial discourse around adult learning. This volume is a companion to the original, *Learning with Adults: A Critical Pedagogical Introduction* (2012, Sense Publications) and is volume 13 in a series committed to the expanding field of adult learning centered in emancipatory, democratic, and critical studies.

This second volume developed as a multi-authored extension of the initial volume. The authors of the initial volume understood that more work needed to be completed around adult learning as it relates to sexual orientation, disability, literacy, and consumer rights. The authors extended this initial plan to include chapters on relating adult education to poverty, libraries as learning sites, social creation, aesthetics, and media. Unlike traditional reader-companion volumes, this reader does not provide the foundational texts for the initial volume but provides amplifying essays brought together by contemporary authorities in adult learning and outside scholars, including Zygmunt Bauman.

This is an interesting collection as it lays out essays toward an emancipatory vision for adult learning and away from the consumerist or compliance categories of training and education. The volume has five parts, beginning with the learning society and moving through questions of identity, instruments of practice, and learning in everyday life. The final section is on policy and context, which connects to an important literature on citizenship education for adult learners.

The volume makes a contribution to the definition and scope of adult learning. In sum, adult learning, throughout the volume, is best understood from Oscar Negt. In his essay, "Adult Education and European identity," he says adult learning is "learning processes that are determined by people's own interests and horizons of perception, so that general relationships are made comprehensible" (126). The assumption throughout the volume is that adult learning is dynamic and that the methods, processes, and outcomes constantly shift as people's own interests and horizons of perceptions shift. D.W. Livingstone outlines how adult learning that is emancipatory extends the scope of education and reverses the trend that "we may becoming increasingly willfully ignorant societies rather than learning ones" (33). Each of the chapters offers models for adult learning, some better than others, to increase critical thinking and to challenge societal norms.

Several of the essays highlight the social inequality evident in access to formal education and claim that social and economic class status continue to be roadblocks in granting access to transformational learning. Adult learning, for these authors, is an invitational practice for all people and is, in itself, emancipatory. The authors continually highlight how the history of education (à la Meyers [1960] and Smith [1955]) is in need of ongoing critique if education, specifically adult education, is going to move beyond compliance and consumerist practices.

These essays press against dominant ideologies, namely that "the dominant tendency in contemporary thought has been to equate learning with the provision of learning opportunities in settings organized by institutional authorities and led by teachers approved by these authorities" (37). Adult education has rarely moved beyond this dominant trend and has mostly accentuated it, which limits transformative learning for marginalized adult communities. The essays engage in a clear critique while also offering models for emancipatory and transformational adult learning processes (see Livingston's and Cranton's chapters).

These models are the take away gifts from the volume. The models fall into three categories. The first set of models are site-based learning models, where the locations of everyday life are taken up as locations for learning. The second set of models arise from within the institutionalized practices of societies, where social and economic practices invite critical questions and transformative learning opportunities; and the third model is rooted in the ideologies of *good* education, namely processes to enact justice and peace.

Overall, the volume holds education for adults as a learning paradigm for its own consideration. The site-based learning discussion recognizes that learning spaces are most often beyond the classroom and are found in the student's everyday experiences. However, adult education that occurs in a classroom then becomes, itself, a site of the everyday

experience. Additionally, this volume is a model for how the liberal arts tradition is a common practice in adult learning, whereby multiple disciplines make intersections around a common question. There is broad range of voices from education, philosophy, economics, sociology, and elsewhere included, yet all are committed to common questions of lifelong adult learning.

Finally, the volume in itself is an adult learning model; the renaissance feel to the book results in unexpected points of informational learning for the reader. For example, on the topic of capitalism's impact on the labor force and access to education, D.W. Lingston highlights that in 1983 only 28 percent of workers needed a college degree; by 2004 this figure rose to 45 percent. What is important is that over this same time period, degree attainment increased from 22 percent (of the population) to 54 percent, which is an increase of 34 percent (46). The data assists the reader in understanding how formalized processes of education result in trends toward underemployment. The point of information locates the implications of economics on the practice and process of adult learning.

The volume, however, falls short of expectations. I was expecting the inclusion of several foundational texts in relationship to the field of adult learning. Also, several of the essays trail away from the central argument around learning with adults into diatribes on the respective intellectual agendas of each author; this is both a gift and burden. Each of the diatribes is not unimportant yet limits the volume's coherence toward detailing models and processes for adult education amidst diverse populations. The positive aspect of this is mentioned above.

I recommend this volume to curious readers. *Learning with Adults* assists its readers in understanding the complexities of learning with adults and makes clear that the field of adult learning is underdeveloped and misunderstood when connected to the traditional avenues of education. If a reader is looking for a more basic and invitational text on the topic of adult learning, I recommend purchasing the first volume in this series (English and Mayo, *Learning With Adults: A Critical Pedagogical Introduction*, 2012).

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