



Facilitating Learning with the Adult Brain in Mind: A Conceptual and Practical Guide

Taylor, Kathleen and Marienau, Catherine
Wiley, 2016

Book Review

Tags: adult learning theories | cognitive development | student learning | student learning goals

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Neuroscience is a burgeoning field, and Kathleen Taylor and Catherine Marienau mine it skillfully to craft *Facilitating Learning with the Adult Brain in Mind*. This book is not structured like many teaching books – it begins, after all, with a drawing of “The Theater of Knowing,” to which the authors refer throughout. But to write it off because it is unfamiliar would be a mistake – this is a valuable book for any teacher of adults, no matter the subject.

Taylor and Marienau had been searching for a book that would “describe in language accessible to non-neuroscientists... how the adult brain works and also how to use this understanding to construct more brain-aware approaches that help adults learn and perform more effectively in diverse settings” (ix). Eventually they discovered that “the book we wanted to read was the one we would have to write” (x). Readers are the beneficiaries here; the research is fresh, the applications diverse, and Marienau and Taylor model brain-aware approaches in how they structure the book.

Part One distills brain science for the lay reader. For example, we learn that anxiety and curiosity function simultaneously in the brain, and good teaching should both stimulate the curious brain and reassure the anxious brain. “The science in Part One is grounded in brain research; however, we frequently use stories and metaphors to illuminate technical ideas. In similar fashion, we often describe the brain and its functions in analogical rather than anatomical terms,” the authors describe (xv).

Part Two sets forth an array of practices – embodied, metaphorical, verbal, theoretical, and more – to enhance adult learning. Taylor and Marienau interviewed a number of practitioners

whose best practices are illustrated here. Part Three brings theory and reflection into dialogue with both the neuroscience from Part One and the practices introduced in Part Two. “Rather than begin our book with theory, which is typical, we first illuminate practice in part Two because... theories are more meaningful when the brain can connect them to concrete experiences” (xvi).

Key ideas are reviewed at the end of each chapter; visual illustrations and boxed examples enhance and expand on ideas introduced in the main text. The authors suggest additional reading at points, rather than devoting too much time to subthemes. They also provide opportunities for reflection at the conclusion of the chapters, encouraging readers to draw or sketch reflections as a way of accessing different brain functions. At various points, the reader will experience recognition: “Ah, that’s why this happens.” Other sections will inspire new approaches to try.

“Without necessarily identifying them as such, many experienced facilitators use embodied, analogical activities in their workshops, classes, or coaching and consulting settings because they have found them to greatly enhance adults’ grasp of key concepts as well as their own practice” (175). Many college and seminary professors, by contrast, were never trained in teaching. Sections on multiple intelligences and Kolb’s model of experiential learning, then, offer an added boon to readers with less experience in educational theory.

Parenthetically, reviewing this book was so influential that it has now become assigned reading for all adjunct faculty in a department to which I recommended it.

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