

# ADULT LEARNERS

CATHERINE A. HANSMAN AND VIVIAN W. MOTT

**T**he U.S. Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2004, 2007) reports that participation levels in adult education activities have, for the most part, steadily increased over the past three decades. These participation increases can be seen in formal adult education programs, such as universities or community colleges, as well as nonformal or informal learning contexts, such as learning in casually formed interest or hobby groups. Because involvement in adult education is so broad and diverse, it is difficult to describe and define a “typical” adult learner. Race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, and other elements of human difference all influence who adult learners are and the learning activities in which they engage. Societal factors, such as the aging population, the influx of immigrants, increased numbers of women entering and staying in the workplace, along with shifting technologies, global economic instability, and accelerated knowledge obsolescence, have all contributed to escalated involvement in learning activities (American Society for Training and Development [ASTD], 2008; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001; Creighton & Hudson, 2001; Mott, 2009). Usher, Bryant, and Johnston further suggest that these rapid “developments within an increasingly diverse and uncertain world clearly influence the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values a citizen requires to participate in a contemporary democracy” (1997, p. 30). Literature and research concerning adult learners cover a wide range of issues concerning those who are already participating in educational activities, but adults who are not participants remain unknown because they are simply not present in formal educational institutions and often not documented in other learning contexts (Hansman, 2006). In summary, many complex factors must be taken into account when defining and describing who adult learners are, their motivation for learning, the nature of such learning, and the activities in which they engage.

All these issues lead to some intriguing questions, such as: What is the definition of an adult? What developmental and learning theories provide a framework for understanding adult development and learning? Who participates in adult educational activities? Who typically does not participate in educational opportunities, and why? Finally, what challenges do adult educators face to enhance and encourage learning in adulthood, and how can they prepare to better serve adult learners now and in the future?

These questions provide a framework for exploring a wide range of subjects concerning adult learners and learning in adulthood. The purpose of this chapter is to address these issues and promote both deliberation and discourse focusing on adult learners. Understanding the framework concerning adult learners’ involvement in formal and informal learning activities, as well as the barriers and incentives to their participation, will further enhance adult educators’ knowledge and abilities to work successfully with adult learners.

## DEFINING ADULT LEARNERS

What does it mean to be an adult? Should states and governments define when a person is considered an adult? Although the term *adult* may be used to define a “grown up person” (*Collins Webster’s Dictionary*, p. 7), Merriam and Brockett (2007) contend that the notion of adulthood as a stage of life is a “relatively new concept” (p. 4). Legal definitions of adulthood generally include some age guidelines that define when a person becomes an adult, such as the ages of 18 to 21 in most of the United States. Bjorklund and Bee describe the adult stage as “emerging adulthood (when adolescence is ending) to the end of life” (2008, p. 4). These authors also categorize adults into four major categories: early adulthood, 20–39; middle adulthood, 40–64; older adulthood, 65–74; and late adulthood, 75 and older. They further distinguish later life in three additional age categories of young-old (ages 65–75), old (ages 65–75), and oldest-old (85 and older), an important distinction given the rapid and consistent rise in the older population. Bjorklund and Bee maintain that as major life tasks, work and personal roles, and educational needs change throughout adulthood, learners of all ages differ in their motivations, access, and abilities to learn in a variety of venues.

Nevertheless, the definition of adult is for the most part culturally and socially derived. Researchers in other countries and cultures may capture ideas about adults differently than Western cultures, often including other factors besides chronological age in their understandings of adulthood, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, behaviors, and other cultural norms of any particular social milieu. Psychological maturity levels and social roles, as well as life situations, also define adulthood. For instance, persons younger than 18 who are parents or caregivers of others, or “traditional” age university students working full time to support themselves and pay tuition, may be considered adults. So in a real sense, and for the purposes of this discussion, persons may be considered adults when they have taken on the social, psychological, and/or economic roles typically expected of adults in their cultures and collective societies. Bjorklund and Bee (2008) clarify this concept with their caution that “age is just a number” (p. 13), that adulthood has several dimensions that affect

learning. While chronological age represents the literal number of years one has lived, biological or functional age (physical condition), psychological (developmental maturity), and social age (perception of roles and expectations at any given point in life) are different measures of age that may significantly impact an adult’s desire for and ability to pursue learning.

### Life Span and Life Expectancy

The maximum human *life span* is typically considered to be 110 to 120 years (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). In the United States, *life expectancy*, the “average number of years a person can expect to live, based on current age” (Mott, 1999, p. 9), for the total population is 78.1 years (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009), lagging behind the life expectancy of persons in other developed countries. Statistics show that women live longer than men. Although the gap in life expectancy between the Black and White populations has narrowed, it still persists, with life expectancy at birth for Whites 4.9 years longer than that of Blacks (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009).

As a result of longer life expectancy, the population of adults ages 65 and older is increasing at an unparalleled rate. Population projections predict that within the next 10 years, older people will outnumber children for the first time in history. Kinsella and He (2009) reported that “the world’s growth rate for the 80-and-over population from 2007 to 2008 was 4.3 percent, while that of the world’s older (65 and over) population as whole was 2.1 percent (compared with 1.2 percent for the total [all ages] population)” (p. iv). While the world’s population is aging, so is the workforce, which has particular educational implications for job training and development.

Older workers (ages 56–65), particularly those in developed countries, continue to participate in job training and job-related adult education, pointing to the continuing need for research concerning learning throughout the life span. Older women, in particular, are much more likely to remain in or return to the workforce—and therefore to need additional training and education—than is any other age group (NCES, 2007). However, since those between the ages of 25 and 44 have higher literacy

rates than the older population, illiteracy continues to “hinder older people’s social participation and contribution to social development” (Kinsella & He, 2009, p. 94).

### Adult Development

Change and development are integral to the human life span, and many development theories attempt to explain this process. Human development is recognized as a lifelong process, but as Jordan (1978) says “In our culture, adulthood as a condition used to be simply assumed; as a process, it now seems to demand an explanation” (quoted in Clark & Caffarella, 1999, p. 3). Clark and Caffarella classify perspectives of human development as biological, psychological, sociocultural, and integrative. The biological perspective acknowledges that the physiological changes in humans are driven by both primary and secondary aging. Biological aging may result in changes in vision and hearing, contribute to the onset of serious illnesses, and cause mobility issues, which may affect the capacity for growth and development as well as interest in learning.

The psychological perspective organizes human development into three categories: sequential models, life events, and transitions. Sequential models of development, such as those proposed by Erikson (1963), Kohlberg (1973), Levinson (1986), and Levinson & Levinson (1996), classify different phases or stages through which all adults travel; each theorist proposed different catalysts, such as age or resolution of key dilemmas in life, that signify when an adult moves to another stage or phase. In the second category, theorists such as Schlossberg (1984) propose that key life events, such as graduations, births, marriages, and job changes may shape personal development. The third category, relational, was first recognized by Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986). They viewed women’s development through the emerging “voice” and understandings of the relational qualities of learning. While their models initially referred to *women’s* development, these constructs soon became understood as ways in which development in both men and women could occur.

From a sociocultural perspective, Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2005) maintain that the social and cultural aspects of one’s life and environment fuel growth and development throughout

the life span. Included in the sociocultural view are considerations of how race, class, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual identity, and physical ability shape one’s growth and development throughout adulthood. Finally, integrative theorists suggest that models of development must be comprehensive and include psychological, sociocultural, and biological changes and interactions throughout the life span (Magnusson, 1995). Sociocultural and integrative perspectives have led to further expansion of theories regarding human development that take into account and honor the intersections and interactions of race, class, gender, ethnicity, ableness, and sexual identity.

As Merriam and her colleagues contend, “the concept of development is most often equated with change” (2007, p. 298), and theories of human development influence the ways in which adult educators may work with adult learners. Understanding these theories may help adult educators examine their role in the lives of their students in order to better facilitate programs and activities for adult learners that foster development.

### Adult Learners and Learning Activities

Adult learners are those adults who engage in learning activities that may promote “any sustained change in thinking, values, or behavior” (Cranton, 1992, p. 3). Adult learners participate in many types of formal and informal education activities that they hope will help them “function effectively in the changing world around them” (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000, p. 4), or “for the purpose of achieving some personal sense of fulfillment, for bringing about improvement in their lives, or even for the sake of leisure or recreation” (Mott, 2000, p. 335). Some of the first studies which examined the reasons adult learners participate in educational activities of any kind were conducted by Houle (1961) and Johnstone and Rivera (1965). Houle, in his interviews with 22 adult learners, found that they could be categorized into three groups based on their reasons for participation: (a) *goal-oriented learners*, who seek to achieve specific outcomes; (b) *activity-oriented learners*, who like to be engaged but did not necessarily care what the activity was; and (c) *learning-oriented learners*, who like to learn for learning’s sake. In their 1965 survey research,

Johnstone and Rivera discovered that 22% of American adults had participated in learning activities in the year preceding the survey, and that most of these activities involved learning new or practical skills rather than pursuing academic study.

Tough's (1979) research regarding adult participation patterns in learning projects showed that adults engage in a diverse range of learning activities to help them with their day-to-day needs and problems. These needs and problems are wide and varied and can include: training classes in the workplace in order to perform better on the job or achieve promotion, completing necessary coursework for a General Educational Development (GED) credential, learning English as a second language, returning to higher education to complete the classes required to earn an undergraduate or graduate degree, or successfully finishing continuing professional education classes to keep professional licenses or certifications current (e.g., in medicine, law, education). Other adults may engage in less formal and more self-directed activities to enhance their personal or spiritual growth, to take on hobbies, or to learn skills that may improve their daily lives. In short, the learning activities in which adults engage are as diverse as adult learners themselves. There are no "typical" adult learners. Instead, adult learners represent "a diverse set of individuals with distinctive demographics, social locations, aspirations, and levels of preparation" (Pusser et al., 2007, p. 4). As the sociocultural, demographic, technological, and economic shifts continue globally, and as learners continue to be differentiated, their needs and motivations for learning in adulthood will continue to change as well. Research will continue to add new dimensions to this long debated study of just who adult learners are, the motivations that prompt their learning, and the nature of their participation in adult learning venues.

### Generational Differences

Another factor facilitating our understanding of adult learners has to do with *generational differences*, an underresearched trend fueled by interest from practitioners in higher education and workplace training programs. Generational differences focus on the birth cohort, sociocultural factors, and historical influences in learners' lives. Lowery (2001) defines a *generation* as

"a series of birth cohorts who share a common location in history and a common peer persona that reflects a collective identity" (p. 72). Generations are frequently described with titles such as *Traditionals* (born prior to 1945), *Baby Boomers* (born 1946 to 1965), *Generation Xers* (born 1965 to the early 1980) and *Millennials* or *Nexters* (born mid-to-late 1980s to 2000) (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Because of their experiences and sociocultural influences, persons in different generations or birth cohorts may have wide-ranging values and belief systems, varied life experiences, widely dissimilar learning and work styles, and diverse perspectives on the use and creation of knowledge, technology, and learning. Further, each generation may be motivated by entirely different factors, benefit from support systems distinct from those of other generations, and employ varying strategies to respond to life's demands. Adult educators should consider that—for the first time in history—four distinct generations at once may be present in the workplace and adult education learning environments, potentially posing challenges to effectively serve all adult learners in the same learning context.

Currently, most of the literature on generational differences and its impact on learning and work styles are found primarily in the popular press, and additional empirical research concerning these ideas are needed. Missing thus far from the discourse concerning generations is considerations of how gender, racial, ethnic, class, and sexual identity may also influence individuals within each generation and therefore impact educational access and achievement in adulthood. Further development and empirical research on generational difference should include diverse groups in the research design to develop more accurate understandings of learning differences in and among generations (Hansman & McAtee, 2009).

### Concepts of Learning in Adulthood

Learning in adulthood can be "distinguished from childhood in terms of the learner, the context . . . and to some extent, the learning process" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 423). Individual understandings of learning dominated concepts of learning in adulthood until the late 20th century, when the context of learning and constructivist views of learning prompted new

knowledge of learning in adulthood. Malcolm Knowles's assumptions and principles concerning adult learners were widely adopted in the 20th century as helpful in understanding adult learners. *Andragogy*, defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43), and concepts of self-directed learning contributed to definitions of adult learners. Knowles proposed several assumptions regarding typical adult learners, declaring that adult learners are those who possess independent self-concepts and are capable of directing their own learning from a rich reservoir of their own life experiences; have learning needs prompted by their changing life roles; and are internally motivated toward problem-centered learning that has immediate application to their lives (Knowles, 1980).

Although Knowles's assumptions concerning adult learners are embraced by many adult educators, they are critiqued for not accurately portraying all adult learners and, further, for promoting generic and prescriptive ideas of typical adult learners. For example, contrary to Knowles's notion that adult learners are internally motivated, many adults are externally motivated to learn, striving to improve their employment opportunities, earning potential, and social capital. He also neglected social and learning contexts, which are currently regarded as central to learning (Hansman, 2001, 2008) and have become important in understanding learning in adulthood.

Self-directed learning—“adults assuming control of their learning” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 137)—is another commonly held assumption about adult learners, but one which varies widely among learners. Merriam (2001) describes the goals of self-directed learning from three perspectives: humanistic, transformational, and emancipatory. The first, from a humanist philosophical stance, posits that adult learners can develop their capacity to be self-directed. That is, depending on their life experiences, existing knowledge, and motivations, learners have varying degrees of self-directedness and can develop it further, motivated by self or others' direction.

A second perspective on self-directed learning is that it may facilitate adults to experience transformational learning through critical self-reflection (Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Taylor, 2008). Transformational learning attempts to explain how adults make meaning from their

lived experiences. Mezirow and his associates propose that the process of transformation is set in motion by a disorienting dilemma, such as a job loss, that may stimulate adults to reflect upon and examine their beliefs. This critical reflection may lead to reflective discourse with others, expanding adult learners' historical and cultural understandings of their needs, wants, and interests, which may lead to new self-knowledge and further, opening the door for future learning and development.

A third view of self-directed learning embraces the “promotion of emancipatory learning,” where learners are “positioned more for social and political action than individual learning” (Merriam, 2001, p. 9). Brookfield (1993, 2005) has long promoted self-directed learning from this perspective, arguing that “a view of learning that regards people as self-contained, volitional beings scurrying around in individual projects . . . works against collective and cooperative impulses” resulting in “an excessive focus on the self” (p. 84). Given that self-directed learning helps promote the constructivist and contextual nature of knowledge, reflection, creative problem solving, and critical thinking, proponents of self-directed learning advocate the importance of adults' self-directedness as a particularly critical skill for the global marketplace.

Understandings of adult learners have frequently focused on individual learners and psychological approaches to learning and development, but in the past 20 years, expanded understandings of learning have recognized broader contexts and structural factors that may impact learning (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). These structural factors include the role race, class, gender, ethnicity, ability, power, and oppression play in adult education programs and access to learning opportunities. Thus theorists such as Jarvis (1987) claim that “learning is intimately related to that world and affected by it” (p. 11), and further, that “we live and move and have our being in a social context” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 5). Clearly, the social context of learning has become increasingly important to understanding adult learning. Lave (1988) furthered these ideas, proposing that situated learning theory frames how adults learn. Hansman (2001) explains that context structures learning through the “interactions among learners, the tools they use within these interactions, the activity itself,

and the social context in which the activity takes place” (p. 45). Similarly, communities of practice, or CoPs (Wenger, 1998), engage learners in a process of learning constructed around “common interests, ideas, passions, and goals . . . the things that matter to people” (Hansman, 2008, p. 299). In CoPs, adult learners continuously negotiate and renegotiate shared knowledge and understandings; through mutual engagement, participants engage in collective processes and common activities designed to build a joint enterprise of a shared repertoire of knowledge and resources. In other words, learners co-create and share knowledge, framing adult learning as a social endeavor in specific contexts that is shared among learners who may be motivated by different purposes for learning yet joined together for mutual collaboration.

Other considerations of learning in adulthood have expanded to include new understandings of transformational learning (Taylor, 2008), spirituality and adult learning (English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; Tisdell, 2008), somatic/embodied learning experiences as a source of learning and knowledge (Freiler, 2008), critical theory (Brookfield, 2005), and understanding how the brain changes as adults learn (Taylor & Lamoreaux, 2008). These and other ideas and theories will be discussed in more depth in a later chapter concerning adult learning. However, the questions of who adult learners are and how adult educators can best serve them continue to be critical topics of study and discussion among adult educators that are closely connected to an expansion of the notion of adult learning beyond simply cognitive functions. A better understanding of who adult learners are can be seen through analyzing participation patterns in adult educational activities.

### **PARTICIPATION IN ADULT EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

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Adults may engage in learning throughout their lives in a variety of venues and formats, as participation pattern data inform us. Researchers for the Adult Education Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program (AE-NHES) found that in a combined sample of work-age adults from 2001 to 2005, 54% participated in at least one of the following

formal learning activities in the 12 months prior to the survey: English as a second language (ESL) classes; adult basic education/GED classes; apprenticeship programs; work-related or personal interest courses; and college, university, and vocational/technical degree or certificate programs (Kienzl, 2008). Other outcomes of the AE-NHES study showed that 72% of adults with at least a bachelor’s degree participated in formal education programs, while only 26% of adults with neither a high school diploma nor a GED credential participated in formal education. Adults with lower education levels also participated less frequently in work-related and personal interest courses, and when they did participate, they took fewer classes, making it less likely for their participation to result in upward mobility or potential personal gain (Creighton & Hudson, 2001; Kienzl, 2008; NCES, 2007). Women, those in rural areas, and those in underrepresented cultural groups remain particularly vulnerable to reduced and less mobility-producing workplace training opportunities (Mott, 1998, 2008). The cost of participation in educational opportunities may be an essential barrier for adults with less education and less than full-time employment, as adults employed full time may have employers who pay for at least some of their educational classes.

The desire for greater self-esteem and feelings of self-worth also factor into adults’ participation in formal learning opportunities, particularly in ESL and basic skills/GED preparation classes. O’Donnell (2006) found that “the majority of ESL participants reported having taken ESL classes to either improve the way that they feel about themselves (95 percent) or to make it easier to do things on a day-to-day basis (93 percent)” (p. 2). He also established that 78% of adults taking basic skills/GED preparation classes reported doing so to improve the way they felt about themselves, although 55% viewed the classes as a way to gain employment with a different employer. In addition, 45% viewed basic skills/GED classes as the means to gaining a raise or promotion, 28% found the classes helpful for assisting their children with their schoolwork, and 18% engaged in these classes to qualify for public assistance. These data show that adults recognize education as a path to advance their economic and personal lives as well as help them improve their own

feelings of confidence and self-worth, which may encourage them to participate further in other educational opportunities.

More in-depth analysis of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and Bureau of Labor Statistics data reveals some other interesting trends (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001; Creighton & Hudson, 2001; NCES, 2004, 2007; O'Donnell, 2006):

- Participation rates in formal education are highest in adults ages 16 to 24 years (53%), followed in order by those in the following groups: ages 25 to 34 (52%), ages 35 to 44 (49%), ages 45–54 (48%), ages 55–64 years (40%), and finally, ages 65 years or older (23%).

- Of respondents who reported participating in formal adult education activities, 46% were White, non-Hispanic; 46% were Black, non-Hispanic; 44% were Asian or Pacific Islanders; and 38% were Hispanic.

- Adult respondents earning more than \$75,000 had the highest participation rates, followed by adults earning between \$50,001 and 75,000. The group that reported the least amount of participation earned \$20,000 or less each year.

- The least participation in any formal adult educational activity was reported by those with less than a high school diploma or equivalent (22%), while those who reported participating the most (66%) already had earned graduate or professional degrees.

- Women participated in educational activities at higher rates than did men. Participation of women learners beyond the age of 35 increased 500% in last three decades.

- Of all adults surveyed, 21% reported participating in personal interest courses, but those with an income of \$75,000 or greater and the highest levels of education reported the most participation in this area. Only 16% of adults earning \$20,000 or less and 11% of those with less than a high school diploma took personal interest courses.

- Seventy percent of all adults participated in informal learning activities such as learning on computers; using the Internet, books, manuals, videos, or television; participating in clubs or groups; or attending conventions or conferences.

- Nearly half of new job growth in the first decade of the 21st century required college or other postsecondary education.

- Greater numbers of young adult learners (ages 18–24) than in the past share the characteristics of older adult learners in terms of family, work, and financial responsibilities.

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## FACING FORWARD: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LANDSCAPE OF ADULT EDUCATION

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As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the number of adults who participate in all types of adult education activities has continued to grow for the past three decades. However, along with this growth come continual challenges for adult learners, the adult educators who serve them, and the field of adult education as a whole. We conclude this chapter by discussing a few of these.

### Changing Workforce

The workforce is transforming in many ways, due to technological, economical, societal, and global alterations. Because of these transformations, jobs in some industries in North America, such as manufacturing, have been altered and downsized, while other jobs have been created and continue to develop in technology and other industries. The industrial economy of the early 20th century that created remunerative work for unskilled labor has given way to an information and service economy that demands higher levels of academic and technical knowledge, as well as other skills such as good communication and problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, major economic changes around the globe have resulted in the downsizing of the workforce, and in many industries, the seemingly permanent loss of some jobs (ASTD, 2008).

The transformation of the world economy over the past several decades has put a premium on an educated workforce. A more fluid and volatile global economy is characterized by more frequent job and career change, which is an important factor in the growing demand for continual learning and skill enhancement. Because of these changes, it is clear that current and future generations of adult workers seeking

employment and better quality of life will require more education credentials. Thus 2- and 4-year degrees, certificate programs, and work-force educational and training opportunities are becoming increasingly essential for all workers.

### **Diversity Challenges**

Just as the nature of work is changing, so too is the racial and ethnic composition of the workforce. For instance, “By 2020, the proportion of whites in the workforce between the ages of 25 and 64 is expected to have dropped 19 percentage points to 63 percent, down from its 1980 level of 82 percent. During the same period, the percentage of Hispanic residents aged 25–64 will nearly triple from 6 percent to 17 percent, and the proportion of African Americans in the U.S. population will grow by almost a third” (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2005, quoted in Kazis et al., 2007, p. 5).

Although the racial composition of the workforce reflects a diverse population, current patterns of participation in education point to less presence in educational settings by minority groups. Groups who have been historically marginalized by race or class continue the struggle to partake in educational opportunities and encounter many impediments, especially financial barriers, to participation. Race, gender, and previous education experiences continue to be accurate predictors of participation in education, even among older learners. Blacks and Whites have higher rates of participation than their Hispanic counterparts or those of other races; women continue to outpace men in both work-related and leisure learning (NCES, 2007). And although the need for education and training is essential in order to obtain a living wage, patterns of participation in education still show that what has been true in the past remains true: “participation reflects a predominantly white, middle-class bias, markedly skewed toward those who are already better educated than most” (Mott, 2006, p. 96). For instance, participation in work-related courses was 8 times higher among adults with a bachelor’s degree than for adults without GED/high school diplomas, and participation in work-related courses was higher for employed adults than unemployed adults (Kienzl, 2008).

For adults to remain employable in the current and future labor markets, it is clear that their capacity to learn new skills and adapt to new roles and work situations will be more crucial than ever before. Adult educators need to embrace their roles and responsibilities in facilitating educational opportunities that can help adults develop these aptitudes in various contexts.

### **Addressing Barriers to Education for Current and Future Adult Learners**

Adult educators must address barriers to adults’ participation in formal educational opportunities, such as the rising cost of higher education and certificate, vocational, and technical programs, place-bound learning venues, and dependence on technology which may limit many learners. Adult learners may be “institutionally invisible, marginalized, and taken for granted” (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p. 18), so research should include nonparticipating adults in an effort to better understand their reasons for their nonparticipation and to try to meet their needs as future learners. The difficulty, of course, is that researchers have little knowledge of or access to nonparticipating adult learners. Not only are researchers hampered by lack of ready access to such adults, but many adults who may have tentatively begun efforts in adult learning are often reluctant to discuss their perceived failures to persevere in the classroom or training context. Adult educators must not only strive to understand nonparticipation and lack of success in adult learning, but also be proactive in local, state, and national policy discussions concerning funding for all levels of adult education (Hansman, 2006).

### **Program Development for Future Learning**

Along with the changing workforce, the accelerated pace of technological change, knowledge obsolescence, social justice issues, and other factors require adult educators to engage in constant program planning and evaluation to meet the ever-changing needs of the content and the context in which adult learning takes place. Important, too, is the challenge of projecting new career fields and addressing the requisite skills and competencies that will present opportunities and challenges for future learners of all ethnicities and races.



With growing competition from private and for-profit educational providers and shrinking resources from local, state, and federal governments, public education programs should consider partnerships and collaborative endeavors, not only to better serve adult learners but to produce programs that are responsive to the ever-changing needs of learners. In addition, service learning and other programs, such as internships and formal mentoring programs for adult learners, which may provide role models and support self-esteem, confidence, and career-related help (Hansman, 2000, 2003; Mott, 2006), should be included in adult education programs to help students gain practical/real-world experiences.

### Challenging Perceptions of “Typical” Adult Learners

Adult educators should question “generic” and often stereotypical descriptions of adult learners, realizing that the diverse groups in formal adult education classrooms—different in age, race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability—have divergent learning needs to which adult educators must attend. Educators must find ways to reach adult learners “where they are” and promote critical reflection in learning situations to help further learners’ growth and development

in increasingly complex societies. Facilitators of adult learning must comprehend and continue to develop understandings of adult learning theories, bridging theory-to-practice barriers in learning contexts.

### Expanding the Field of Adult Education

How can adult education expand and gain recognition as a field? Should adult education remain true (or some would argue *return*) to its legacy as a field devoted to education for social justice and democratic action? Or should adult educators pursue the instrumentality and *how-to* nature of a discipline focused on production, pragmatics, and utility? Adult educators must struggle with their own answers to these questions while remaining engaged in policy discussions and developments that will enhance learning opportunities for all adult learners.

The challenges for adult educators and the learners they serve are many. However, there is also much potential for new research and developments in the face of swiftly changing learning contexts and global societies. Adult educators, through authentic practice, critical reflection, collaborative efforts, and continued research, can and must meet the needs of current and future adult learners.

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