

16

Postscript: Through the 1970s

In the years since this book was written, over 20 research projects have confirmed its general picture. In addition, some related or parallel changes have been developing in the *practice* of adult education. During the 1950s and 1960s, exciting innovations occurred largely in the realm of learning in groups, such as small group discussions, panels, student presentations, group dynamics, case studies, and the use of films and other visual aids. During the 1970s, though, much of the innovative practice focused on the person learning individually, with less reliance on a group or its instructor. Some examples are learning networks, learning contracts, independent study, individual self-planned learning as the primary approach within an academic course or a management development workshop, behavioral self-control, and commercially published books to help the individual learner plan and guide learning projects. Some professional development efforts with medical doctors, adult educators, mental health professionals, and ministers have recently experimented with procedures for helping individuals design and conduct their own learning. Public libraries and Cooperative Extension agencies have always been active in helping individual learners, and in the 1970s several public libraries joined together in a project to provide even more intensive help for the individual.

These examples all point toward a fundamental shift in focus. The traditional focus has been on providing education or instruction. The emerging focus is on facilitating relevant learning.

At this point, you may shrug and say, "That's all very fascinating, but it's irrelevant to me. My job is to run classes and workshops." Yes, but perhaps you could widen your horizons and consider another definition of your job: to foster and facilitate the entire range of adult learning. Then you might think of fresh services you could develop. Even limiting our thinking to classes and workshops, though, we can see some useful implications for practice. I, too, earn my living through classroom teaching, but I have found my methods changing dramatically as a result of listening to adults tell about the total panorama of their learning efforts. Their self-planned learning is so enthusiastic and successful that it naturally suggests new approaches to classroom teaching.

Postscript adapted by the author from "Major Learning Efforts: Recent Research and Future Directions," *Adult Education*, 1978, 28 (4), 250-263. Copyright 1978 Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. Reprinted by permission.

Basic Surveys

How many major learning efforts do people conduct in one year? What are they learning? How much time do they spend? Who plans and guides the learning sessions?

During the past few years, many surveys have studied these questions in various populations. Some of these surveys have sampled all men and women in a particular nation, state, or city. Others have focused on groups ranging from adult high school diploma students to university professors, from the unemployed to the retired, from factory workers and union members to college administrators and extension agents, from members of a literacy class in Jamaica to professionals in an affluent Canadian suburb. Several of the surveys were conducted in various parts of the United States and Canada, and one each in Ghana, Jamaica, and New Zealand.

The Summary Picture

The basic picture emerging from these surveys is remarkably consistent from one population to another. The numbers change a little, but the general pattern remains constant. In fact, the really large differences are within any given population, not between populations.

First, how many persons conduct at least one major learning effort during the year before the interview? The answer is probably 90%, though the range from one study to another is from 70% to 100%. Pat Coolican said in her 1974 report: "It appears the major question is no longer participation vs. nonparticipation. Almost everyone undertakes learning projects to some degree [p. 13]."

Now, if we look at the mean or median person among these men and women, two dramatic statistics emerge. The typical learner conducts five quite distinct learning projects in one year involving five distinct areas of knowledge and skill. And that person spends an average of 100 hours per learning effort—a total of 500 hours per year. Almost 10 hours per week!

Some populations yield lower figures, of course, while others are much higher. Also, in general, the less training the interviewers have in understanding the concept of the learning project and in probing skillfully for additional projects, the fewer learning projects they uncover. Even interviewers trained in depth, however, tell me that they are probably missing some projects because people cannot recall them after several months. Also, one experiment with daily learning diaries yielded higher figures than the interview technique, and Hiemstra tells me that rambling 2½-hour follow-up conversations with his interviewees yielded higher figures than his formal semi-structured interviews.

In whose hands is the day-to-day planning of what and how to learn? That is,

who is responsible for planning the detailed subject matter and learning activities from one learning session to the next? Every study of adults finds a similar pattern, although the exact figures vary a little. The composite picture emerging from the various studies is shown in Table 15.

Table 15 / Percentage of Learning Projects Using Each Type of Planner

Type of planner	Percentage of projects
Self-planned	73
A group	
Led by professional	10
Peers	4
A one-to-one helper	
A professional	7
A friend	3
A nonhuman resource	3

Note. -To retain clarity, projects without a single dominant planner have not been included in these calculations. All of the excluded projects involved some self-planning plus one or two other planners.

In summary, about 20% of all learning projects are planned by a *professional* (someone trained, paid, or institutionally designated to facilitate the learning). The professional operates in a group (10%), in a one-to-one situation (7%), or indirectly through completely pre-programmed nonhuman resources such as programmed instruction or a television series (3%). In the other 80% of all learning projects, the detailed day-to-day planning is handled by an “amateur.” This is usually the learner himself or herself (73%), but occasionally it is a friend (3%) or a democratic group of peers (4%).

Let’s imagine that the entire range of the adult’s learning efforts is represented by an iceberg. For many years we paid attention only to the visible portion of the iceberg, focusing our attention on professionally guided learning. We provided courses, classes, workshops, and other learning groups, plus apprenticeships, tutorials, correspondence study, educational television, programmed instruction, and so on. Virtually everyone still agrees that all of this professionally guided learning is a very important phenomenon in the world today. At the same time, though, it turns out to be only 20% of the total picture—only the tip of the iceberg. The massive bulk of the iceberg that is less visible, hidden below the surface, turns out to be 80% of the adult’s learning efforts. It consists largely of self-planned learning, though some is planned by other amateurs such as friends and peers. Seeing our professional efforts within this total context is useful: implications arise for fresh services and for our present professional practices.

The most common motivation for a learning project is some anticipated use or application of the knowledge and skill. The person has a task—raising a child, writing a report for the boss, handling a case, teaching a class, fixing or improving something around the home, sewing a dress—and gains certain knowledge and skill in order to perform the task successfully. A less common motivation is curiosity or puzzlement, or wanting to possess the knowledge for its own sake. Also rare is learning for credit toward a degree, certificate, driver's license, or other certificate: it accounts for about 5% of all learning projects, with the precise figure ranging from less than 1% to 15%.

Geographical Areas

Several surveys sought a basic picture of learning projects in one particular geographical area. In Tennessee, Peters and Gordon (1974) interviewed 466 adults in Knoxville and in one rural county. About 91% had conducted at least one learning project during the year. Most of their learning projects were job-related or recreational, with smaller numbers for personal improvement, religious learning, and family relations. Peters and Gordon found that their interviewees "needed more help in setting goals, locating expert assistance, finding information and materials, dealing with difficult parts of their projects, and finding sources to assist in evaluation [p. 29]" and that "the more highly educated interviewees were more likely to need additional help, as were professionals and males [p. 28]."

Field (1977) travelled to Jamaica to interview adults in a literacy class, and Denys (1973) and I went to West Africa to interview several groups of educated adults in Ghana. The general pattern of learning projects in these two countries is fairly similar to the findings in the United States and Canada. While training 10 interviewers in New Zealand, I also encountered learning patterns similar to North America, but the final data are not yet available.

Hiemstra (1975) and his students interviewed 256 adults, age 55 and older, in Nebraska. More than half of their learning projects were for self-fulfillment in such areas as the arts, crafts, recreation, and religion. Some were related to personal and family concerns such as mental and physical health, finances, homemaking. Fewer were job related, and only 9% were for social and civic competence.

In a study funded by the U. S. Office of Education, Penland (1976) studied the learning projects of 128 public library users in Pittsburgh.

For a national survey, 1501 adults across the United States were interviewed in November 1976. Penland (1977) reports a participation rate of 79%, but he included learning efforts of less than seven hours. If we eliminate these shorter efforts from his data, according to my calculations the participation rate falls to 70%. In any given year, then, at least 70% of American adults conduct at least one major learning effort. (Virtually all other studies report a much higher figure.

This puzzling mystery might be solved by several hundred slow-paced, probing, in-depth interviews focused intensively and exclusively on the basic characteristics of learning projects.) Again eliminating the shorter efforts, the mean number of major learning efforts per learner was about 4.1 according to my calculations.

The areas of life in which people used their learning were rank ordered in this way (Penland, 1977, p. 40): personal development, home and family, hobbies and recreation, general education, job, religion, voluntary activity, public affairs, and agriculture/technology. When asked where they preferred to learn, most respondents chose their home, followed by on-the-job training, outdoors, discussion group, classroom, library, and public events, in that order.

Penland was interested in the reasons people have when they choose to learn on their own instead of taking a course. The responses are quite different from the guess that many adult educators might make, and the traditionally cited factors of money and transportation were ranked last. Here is the rank order, beginning with the reasons most often selected as particularly important (Penland, 1977, p. 32):

1. Desire to set my own learning pace.
2. Desire to use my own style of learning.
3. I wanted to keep the learning style flexible and easy to change.
4. Desire to put my own structure on the learning project.
5. I didn't know of any class that taught what I wanted to know.
6. I wanted to learn this right away and couldn't wait until a class might start.
7. Lack of time to engage in a group learning program.
8. I don't like a formal classroom situation with a teacher.
9. I don't have enough money for a course or a class.
10. Transportation to a class is too hard or expensive

Because Penland's national survey drew a much larger sample than any other survey of learning projects, the effects of demographic variables are likely to be particularly clearcut. Penland used four dependent variables: probability of at least one self-planned learning effort; number of these efforts; hours spent at them; and probability of course-type learning. In general, these dependent variables tended to increase with younger age, higher level of completed formal education, higher income, higher social class self-identification, and among women (see Tables 50-53 in Penland, 1977). Blacks tended to be more involved in formal courses and whites in self-planned learning. Although most of these relationships were statistically significant at the .05 level, the magnitude of the difference was generally small. The demographic variables accounted for only a small portion of the variance in the dependent variables.

Penland also presents data for 24 independent variables (see Tables AA through AX), which further emphasize that differences between learners and non-learners are not particularly striking. There certainly are differences, but the magnitude of the difference is rarely very large. Participation in adult learning

efforts is not characterized by any large imbalance, any grossly underrepresented group, or any particular unfairness or injustice.

Occupational Categories

Several surveys have focused on the learning efforts of a particular occupational group.

Studying unemployed adults in New Jersey, Johnson, Levine, and Rosenthal (1977) found "a fascinating and rich range of learning activity among those who are out of paid work [p. 16]," with 86 out of the 100 interviewees recalling at least one learning project from the past year. This learning included new coping skills required by being unemployed, and efforts to find and prepare for a job, in addition to the usual range of learning.

A picture of the learning patterns of mothers with preschool children was provided by Coolican (1973). Almost half of their learning revolved around the home and family, another 18% around hobbies and recreation, and 11% was for personal development. Learning projects in the public affairs, general education, vocational, and religious categories were each below 10%.

A randomly selected group of professional men conducted a mean of 11 learning projects in one year, and devoted 1244 hours to them (McCatty, 1973). Their job-related learning (55% of the total) included generally keeping up with the professional literature and new discoveries, as well as learning in order to handle a particularly difficult case that was currently confronting them. An interesting variance, also noted in passing in some other surveys, occurs in the average number of hours per project: 148 hours for self-planned, as opposed to 48 for group learning and 79 for one-to-one projects.

McCatty (1973) also asked the reasons for choosing the type of planner. The most common reason for choosing self-planning was the desire for individualized subject matter: the person wanted some particular information or skill for a specific situation, not a general survey of a field. The most common reason for choosing a group or private instruction was the capability of the instructor. McCatty also found the percentage of projects using each type of planner varied sharply from one subject matter area to another. A group was especially common for religious learning (47% of all religious projects) and academic learning, one-to-one was common for personal development (29%), and self-planned for current events (96%) and vocational learning (79%).

Several researchers have studied school teachers as learners. In Canada, Fair (1973) interviewed beginning elementary school teachers. In the United States, Kelley (1976) compared beginning secondary school teachers with those who had taught 10-15 years and found that there were no significant differences in the number of learning projects, but that there were differences in reasons and

difficulties. Miller (1977) interviewed teachers in one non-urban area of upstate New York. In Ghana, Denys (1973) interviewed secondary school teachers. In Canada, McCatty (1976) surveyed physical and health education teachers. All found that teachers are just like anyone else when it comes to their own learning: their many major learning efforts are largely self-planned and noncredit. Of the 21 physical education teachers engaged in a fitness program for themselves, for example, none did so in a group. These studies all suggest the need for fresh approaches for facilitating the teacher's efforts at professional improvement. Teachers are receiving relatively little help now from employers and from faculties of education.

Other professionals, too, have been studied as learners. Miller and Botsman (1975) found that Cooperative Extension agents averaged 12 projects per agent. Unlike most populations, though, they turned to workshops and experts for over half of their learning, and planned only 40% themselves. Benson (1974) found that 84% of the learning projects by college and university administrators were job related. The parish ministers who kept learning diaries for Allerton (1974) devoted 62% of their projects to their vocation. In particular, they learned in order to deliver sermons or lessons; to prepare for administrative decisions related to program, membership, or professional staff of the church; or to perform committee responsibilities outside the local church. Johns (1973) found that pharmacists in Atlanta devoted 30% of their learning projects to vocational subject matter, 26% to hobbies and recreational learning, 14% to home and family, and 10% to public affairs.

Educational Level

Johnson (1973) studied adults who had just completed their high school examinations (including GED) in Fort Lauderdale. The typical interviewee had conducted 13 or 14 learning projects during the year; the range was 6-29 projects.

Armstrong (1971) found a remarkable amount of learning among unemployed adults of low educational attainment. His descriptions of their learning, and of how the high learners had at some stage been turned on, are particularly vivid.

Peer Groups

Much adult learning occurs in a group of peers with a common interest or problem, meeting without a professional or trained expert. Farquharson (1975) discovered a remarkable range of self-help groups. They were effective not only in helping the person deal with an immediate problem (such as drinking, gambling, weight, physical handicap, bereavement, child raising), but also in improving self-confidence and the ability to relate to other people effectively and helpfully.

Motivation, Tasks, and Help

Up to this point we have been looking at surveys that gathered data on such basic questions as the frequency, duration, and planner of learning projects. Besides these characteristics, many of these studies explored various other questions and aspects too numerous to be summarized here.

We turn now to a few studies that focused in great depth and detail on such aspects as motivation, the learner's planning tasks, and help.

Moorcroft (1975) probed into the origin of current learning projects, sometimes going back 20 years or more before the interview. These origins were usually recalled vividly. Most were pleasant, but some of the earlier childhood origins were unpleasant. The origins largely concerned family interrelationships or school experiences. Moorcroft points out that "the motivation path leading to an important learning project is a complex one [p. 172]."

Morris (1977) studied the learner's planning steps in great detail. He found that usually the first planning step was to clarify a general problem or issue. This was followed by an awareness of the need to learn or a decision to begin a learning project. The learner next established long-term objectives, and then identified and obtained resources. The steps beyond this point varied greatly from one person to the next.

According to Morris, the most common difficulties were "(1) in knowing how to start their learning projects (setting objectives); (2) in finding or making time to learn (setting objectives and scheduling) and (3) in knowing whether or not they were progressing or had accomplished what they had set out to do [p. 195]."

Another detailed in-depth study was conducted by Luikart (1975), who focused on the people (an average of 10.3) who provided help in self-planned learning projects. Almost two-thirds of these helpers provided *sustained* help, giving information or assistance three times or more. The amount, source, and type of help received by the learners was significantly associated with differences in the size, density, and composition of their personal social networks.

Future Directions

What else do we need to know about major learning efforts during adulthood? And what fresh practices should we be developing?

After reflecting on the recent literature, I conclude that the following research and development projects have the highest potential benefit as our next steps. By initiating and supporting such projects, governments and foundations as well as professional adult educators could move us toward a world of highly competent learners receiving very useful help with their choosing and guiding process.

1. We need an in-depth survey to collect accurate basic data from the men and women of various countries in the world. These surveys would use intensive semi-structured interviews, with highly skilled probing by interviewers thoroughly familiar with the concept of a learning project. Each interview would take up to one hour to collect basic data on exactly what knowledge and skill the person was trying to gain, the number of projects, their duration, and the planner. A supplementary data analysis could provide separate statistics for learning projects aimed primarily at personal growth, understanding the world, spiritual growth, and answering the basic questions in life. (This might help bring together the lifelong learning movement, the human growth movement, and spiritual growth.) Detailed information could also be collected on peer learning groups and self-help groups such as local historical and scientific societies, Bible study groups, garden clubs, consciousness-raising groups, and committees that learn intensively about a problem before making a decision.
2. Another possibility is an expansion of my recent survey of Metropolitan Toronto to a different geographical area. We asked interviewees to describe their largest intentional change of any kind over the past two years—not just learning projects, but also deliberate changes in activities, habits, job, relationships, or environment. We also asked about their planning/guiding tasks and the assistance with them, and the additional assistance and competence that would have been beneficial.
3. We know remarkably little about what motivates people to devote 100 hours to learning something. This is especially true when the main benefits are not highly practical and useful. Fascinating insights could emerge from an in-depth study of the adult's anticipated benefits from a major learning effort. We need to study the individual's significant goals and priorities as a context for our theory and practice.
4. We also must give a high priority to performing some detailed studies of unmet needs concerning peer self-help groups. Only after studying these groups sympathetically and insightfully will we be able to develop better help for them or for people who are seeking them. Farquharson, for example, after studying such groups in Toronto, developed a directory of local groups for distribution by the Red Cross.
5. I strongly believe that governments and other public institutions should actively initiate and support the other seven priority areas in this section. In addition, they could explore the implications of the recent fresh picture of adult learning for other areas of legislation and programs. Example: the dramatic and important implications that Ziegler's final report (1977) spells out should be taken seriously, studied, tested, and perhaps extended. Example: because professionals already spend an enormous amount of time at learning, perhaps they should retain their licenses by periodic testing of their knowledge and skill, whereas the present tendency is to legislate *how* they must learn.

Example: for achieving certain goals of government, it might be much less expensive to facilitate self-planned or peer-group learning than to provide instructional programs.

6. To foster the development of effective public policy and fresh services, we urgently need further in-depth studies of four intertwined phenomena: the choosing, planning, and guiding steps that learners perform at the early stages and throughout their learning; how help from books and individuals fits into these steps; what goes wrong with the person's efforts to get help; and what kinds of additional help and competence would most benefit learners. Such insights would help us make better decisions about just what fresh services, books, programs, and help would be most beneficial and cost-effective.
7. Adults want additional help and competence with planning and guiding their learning. Adult educators will, I hope, respond by adopting a fresh, broader purpose: to foster the entire range of major learning efforts, not just group instruction and preprogrammed courses. One especially useful service would be to produce and distribute printed tools that help adults clarify their needs, choose their learning goals, plan their overall strategy, and guide the learning process. Government printers, public libraries, and bookstores handle countless books and booklets on how to grow vegetables, care for children, repair your home, and cook—but not on how to choose and guide your learning. Useful printed tools for adults could be produced (and given, lent, or sold) by virtually any adult education institution, counseling or educational brokering center, staff development department, government department, professional association, or graduate program. Printed tools can make adults aware of countless opportunities and resources for self-planned learning as well as opportunities for group instruction (as the Metropolitan Toronto directory of continuing education does each fall) and for one-to-one instruction (as local skill or learning networks do).
8. Similar functions can be performed not only through print, but also through groups and one-to-one counseling. Again, the purpose would be to foster the entire range of learning, whether it occurs through a group taught by an instructor, a group of peers, or a self-planned effort. The counseling or groups would be designed to help each person (a) clarify problems, needs, wants, interests, or options; (b) gain self-insight or an accurate self-assessment; (c) examine a variety of options, both self-planned and professionally planned; (d) set priorities and choose one or two particular directions for learning; (e) choose the general overall strategy, including the type of planner and the particular resources; (f) perform the various tasks required for guiding the learning effort through to a successful conclusion. In addition, we could try to develop counseling or groups or print that would increase the individual's *competence* at the steps just listed, and at choosing various methods and media. As a result, more and more learners will combine the delightfully effective qualities of Margaret Mead, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, and a cross-country runner.

Postscript

Anyone engaged in research or innovative practice related to the focus of this book is urged to let me know. I can then refer other readers to your work in my future writing. Please write to me at the Department of Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Canada M5S 1V6.