

Critical Analysis of Knud Illeris' *How We Learn: Learning and Non-Learning in School and Beyond: A Look at Learning within the Diverse Realm of Education*

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Abstract

In this essay, Illeris provides his readers insight into the multifaceted levels of learning, which occurs across the broad range of educational, professional, and private settings that have become staples of the American education sphere. He challenges his audience to acknowledge not only the diverse settings in which adults learn, but also the unique and creative manner in which they learn, ultimately resulting in a high level of transformative learning among adults. Moreover, this essay also highlights the insightful theoretical perspectives of notable authors, educational theorists, and scholars of adult education and learning theory including Paulo Freire, Jean Piaget, Sharan .B. Merriam, Rosemary S. Caffarella, Kathleen Taylor, and Annalee Lamoreaux in an effort to provide a professional level of insight into the multifaceted levels of learning that dominates American culture, as well as the innovative research across the vast field of education that supports contemporary learning, and pedagogical practices within the diverse realm of education.

Keywords: Self-Transformation, Adult, Learning, Non-Learning, Piaget, Education

As adult learners, we learn in diverse settings by diverse methods. We learn at home, work, school settings, and in religious settings. One can be a virtual, visual, or a hands-on learner. Regardless of the setting or method of learning, adults acquire knowledge and develop intellectually and aesthetically in a manner that is unique and most appropriate to them. In Knud Illeris' book entitled *How We Learn: Learning and Non-Learning in School and Beyond*, we are introduced to the multifaceted capacities and settings in which we as adults learn. The primary purpose of the text is to provide a cumulative, thorough introduction to conventional learning theory, modern trends of learning, and the cutting-edge research that supports these trends:

My ambition has been to write a book that covers the field as widely as possible today in relation to the subject of learning, is up to date with the most recent developments in the area, and can be read and used by a circle of readers that range from students and future teachers at all levels to professionals in the fields of psychology, pedagogy and a broad range of education programmes. (Illeris, 2007, p. xi)

This passage clearly illuminates the intended audience for the text, which is students, teachers, and professionals in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, and andragogy. The purpose of the book is to provide educators and professionals in the field of diverse levels a valuable resource focusing on insightful, enlightening, and innovative perspectives on how the art of learning occurs among human beings. It encompasses a vast range of ideas that both students and educators can refer to in an effort to strengthen perception on learning on both a pedagogical, and andragogic level.

1. Synthesis of Content

“Knud Illeris is Professor of Lifelong Learning at the Learning Lab Denmark, the Danish University of Education with almost 40 years as a researcher, theoretician, writer, and debater in the field of learning and education” (Illeris, 2007, Forward).

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Illeris organizes the text into fourteen chapters that closely and thoroughly examines specific aspects of the learning process including reflective learning, the definition of learning, various dimensions of learning focusing on content, barriers to the learning process, and how the art of learning is perceived in the context of education and society as a whole. Three chapters in the book that strongly stood out in illuminating critical aspects of adult learning and development, and related very cohesively with selected literature in the field is chapter four entitled *Different Types of Learning*, chapter five entitled *The Content Dimension of Learning*, and chapter eleven entitled *Learning and Life Course*.

2. Piaget's Learning Theory

Chapter four discusses important theories and perspectives on adult learning and development including Piaget's theory of learning, comprehensive learning, and transformative learning which are all related to the concept of lifelong learning and adult education. In regard to Piaget, Illeris discusses his preference of Piaget's learning theory due to his learning styles of "assimilation" and "accommodation," which relates to *what* and *how* learning is acquired in relation to learning as a whole. An important aspect of Piaget's learning theory that aligns well with the methods of Pedagogy and Andragogy is Constructivism:

The constructivist approach holds that a person constructs his or her own comprehension of the surrounding world through learning and knowledge-which excludes any form of learning approach as a filling process, in which someone, a teacher, for example, transfers knowledge and skills, to others, for example, pupils [. . .] with his rejection of all that he calls "banking education." (Freire 1970, pp. 58ff). (Illeris, 2007, p. 35)

Here, Illeris illuminates an integral aspect of Piaget's theory that relates well to learning and development. Piaget celebrates Freire's concept of liberated, imaginative, and individualized learning, which asserts that true learning occur when the learner is able to interpret knowledge, ideas, and worldly issues independently through their own lens, rather than robotically absorbing information presented by a teacher, or other professional entity of authority. As adults, we learn in different contexts, settings, and acquire knowledge through diverse lenses, rather than a singular, narrow perspective. Overall, Piaget advocates for the growth and development of the "independent learner" who is free from the constricting, suppressive influence of the expert teacher:

The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable, or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the student. His task is to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration-contents, which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. (Freire, 2007, p. 68)

In this passage, Paulo Freire is highlighting the suppression of intellectual growth, imagination, and diversity of thinking that dominates both the adult and K-12 classroom setting, as well as the teacher-student relationship.

3. Adult Learning and Self-Transformation

In regard to adult learning and development, adults must be allowed to reflect upon their comprehensive life experiences and individual perspectives in an effort to engage in the learning that is best suited to their intellectual and psychological development. Only then will the highest levels of transformative learning take place. Sinnott (2009) presents a very unique, artistic, and insightful argument that illuminates how adult learning and adult cognitive development is symbolic of a "dance" that we as lifelong learners are continuous participants of, and how individual self-transformation is highly important in maintaining the "holistic uniqueness" of the dance:

The metaphor of self-transformation as a dance is important to this chapter. Picture a village circle dance, a traditional folk dance. These folk dances represent the dance of life (or some part of it) in which we all participate. In any circle dance, each of us in our uniqueness is important to the dance [. . .] We are each a part of this communal dance, but at no time does a self, one of the dancers, disappear. Paradoxically, the more a self learns to be balanced and interwoven and interconnected, the more that single self becomes important to the creation of the dance, perhaps leading other dancers. (p. 104)

Here, Sinnott provides us a unique, artistic image of how the art of dancing is analogous to the transformation of cognitive development, which we as adult learners experience. As transforming adult learners, we must be cohesive, equilateral participants in life. This means being able and allowed to "collaboratively" participate with teachers and other experts, yet remain unique in our ability to think freely and interpret ideas creatively.

What Sinnott challenges us to acknowledge here is that just as dancers are individual and unique in their dance steps, yet can cohesively perform with other dancers in a performance, adult learners are also individual and unique, yet can cohesively interact and collaborate with other teachers and experts within society when given the opportunity. Ultimately, just as a circle dance is a collaborative, participatory activity that requires a high level of unity and “connectedness” to be effective, learning also requires these traits in an effort to yield the most balanced and creative levels of learning. Adult learners and their teachers must learn to “dance” together to the “musical essence of learning,” yet remain mutually accepting to individual thinking, perceptions, and learning styles. Only then will the most creative learning experience emerge.

4. The Self as a Reflective Path to Knowledge Comprehension

Chapter five entitled *The Content Dimension of Learning* also illuminates key concepts related to adult learning and development. This chapter highlights the ideas of the self as learning content, transformation and critical thinking, and different types of learning experienced by adults. Illeris discusses the concept of “reflexivity and biographicity,” which is when one utilizes the self as a means of making sense of newly acquired knowledge:

In relation to learning and personal development, what the German and youth culture theorist Thomas Ziehe has called cultural liberation is central to this development. We – and particularly the young – have been liberated from all the old norms and traditions that previously controlled our lives, for good or bad, to choosing and forming our own lives to a far greater degree. This means that individuality has come into focus in a new way, and this involves one constantly putting what one learns in relation to oneself, i.e. to one’s understanding of oneself, and what meaning the influences one faces have for oneself. (Illeris, 2007, p. 69)

This passage illuminates how many adult learners learn and develop cognitively through placing knowledge in context of themselves in an effort to gain understanding. This also exhibits transformative learning in action as discussed earlier. Interestingly, this practice enables the self, the spirit, and the psyche to work collaboratively to become learning tools that enable an intimate level of knowledge to be born. Knowledge and the self are in a kind of “spiritual communion” with each other ultimately enabling the learner to experience an enlightened sense of learning, and wholeness:

Faith development theorist James Fowler (1981) emphasizes the significance of Image, symbol, metaphor, music, or kinesthetic sensory experience that is beyond the cognitive or rational realm as central to those meaning-making processes that people often connect to as the spiritual. A participant in my own study of adult educators’ spiritually described it as “a journey toward wholeness.” (Tisdell, 2008, p. 28)

Tisdell very cohesively relates to Illeris in this passage in regard to adult learner’s act of relating knowledge to the self in an effort to make meaning in the sense that this experience can also be very “spiritual” to the adult learner. For example, when exposed to new knowledge, the adult learner can also relate this knowledge to their spiritual sense of self by connecting with various symbols or imagery within the knowledge that represents their religious self. Many adult learners make meaning and sense of the world around them by viewing newly acquired information, social, personal, and political episodes in society through spiritual lenses. Many define themselves strongly through the inner essence of their spirituality rather than worldly established societal norms, and scientific factual data. Fite, Reardon, and Boon (2011) state, “Spirituality refers more to an inner state of being and existential meaning which focuses on the transcendence and connectedness of the universe” (p. 1). This suggests that one’s spirituality is a vital part of the soul, which acts as a vehicle that transports us aesthetically and intellectually to unique levels of knowledge and understanding, and independent levels of thinking within the universe. In this instance, the “spiritual” passion of the individual prevails over the “rational.” In this sense, the adult learner is connecting with knowledge on the innermost, intimate, most aesthetic level of the self and is thoroughly detached from any constricting, suppressing entities within society that frequently attempts to create meaning for us. Here, we see liberation and independence at its highest, most fascinating level. Knowledge becomes an extension or a mirror image of the learner. The adult learner is the “meaning maker” in its purest, most intimate form:

Our intentions for our adult learners go beyond mastering behavioral skills or informational content. We focus on what we consider meta-objectives of adult higher education, such as “the understanding that knowledge is neither given nor gotten, but constructed; the ability to take perspective on one’s own belief; and the realization that learning and development are worthy lifelong goals” (Taylor and Marienau, 1997, p. 233). (Taylor & Lamoreaux, 2008, p. 52)

Taylor and Lamoreaux interestingly echo Freire and Piaget here in the sense that they assert how learning surpasses the robotic act of merely absorbing knowledge and information provided by another entity. Once again, the idea of “liberation” is illuminated in this chapter as it is in several others throughout the text. The adult learner must begin to accept that knowledge is not stagnant, but constantly changing and emerging in an array of contexts. It is created independently and free from the suppressive “banking systems” that prevent learners of the opportunity to create original, imaginative, and transformative levels of knowledge.

5. Learning in Action from Birth to Death

Chapter 11 entitled *Learning and Life Course* presents intriguing discussions regarding how adults learn and develop as they progress through their lifespan in pursuit of specific goals. The core idea of this chapter focuses on how people learn as they progress through various stages of their life. Illeris (2007) states, “Although there might be differences in determining the exact transition points and other phase distinctions of interests, nevertheless there is a broad agreement on four main phases of interests with respect to learning, namely childhood, youth, adulthood and mature adulthood” (p. 198).

Adult learning occurs in stages throughout one’s entire lifespan. It does not begin at the adult stage in life, but rather, begins from the moment of birth and continuously develops through the point of death. Moreover, the vast range of life experiences that adults encounter throughout life greatly enhances their critical perspectives and ability to learn creatively:

Numerous adult learners have underscored the fundamental role that experience plays in learning in adulthood. For example, Lindeman (1961, p. 6) states that “the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience.” Experience then becomes “the adult learner’s living textbook [. . .] already there waiting to be appropriated” (p. 7). (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 161).

This passage very insightfully captivates the main idea of this chapter, which is that learning is not only a life course that remains in action until death, but also a phenomenon that transforms, inspires, and liberates like no other phenomenon. It establishes a unique level of empowerment within the adult learner enabling him or her to see the world, the andragogical perspectives of adult educators, and social and educational issues through diverse lenses:

As adults live longer they accumulate both a greater volume and range of experiences. Knowles also observes that adults tend to define themselves by their experiences, describing themselves as parents, spouses, workers, volunteers, community activists, and so on. Kolb (1984) states, “Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience. Knowledge is continuously derived and tested out in the experiences of the learner” (p. 27). (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 161)

This passage illuminates how knowledge and experience are in “parallel motion” to each other as adults progress through their life. As adults accumulate experiences, they become more enlightened and knowledgeable regarding not only life in general, but also specific aspects including the personal, social, professional, and educational realms of life. Moreover, adults see and understand themselves through the lens of the particular role that they portray in life. These roles are symbolic of the adult learner’s “textbook” in which they find a strong sense of identity and are tangible representations of their significance, and ultimate purpose as human beings.

6. Critical Assessment of the Text

Overall, I feel that this text is highly useful and valuable for the intended audiences, which are students and teachers within the vast range of the education field. The contents of each chapter present insightful, critical, and thought-provoking examples of how adult learners learn and develop through life. Diverse perspectives and analytical views are presented throughout the text in an effort to illuminate the multifaceted nature of not only the field of adult education, but also the experiences and cognitive levels of many adult learners. In regard to weaknesses of the text, Illeris tends to blur the line in selected areas between his discussion points on andragogy and pedagogy making it difficult to distinguish the specific audience his conversation is directed toward, but this occurrence is very minimal.

The text is very focused and clear in the presentation of ideas and vivid examples, and features an excellent range of professionals and theorists in the field of education. Moreover, Illeris uses the techniques of “application” and “implication” very well in the text. For example, the book applies excellent theories related to both pedagogical and andragogical perspectives of Freire and Piaget.

The book provides a high level of insightful clarity in its use of metaphors, imagery, and critical perspectives that illuminate clearly the ideas of liberation and emancipation in relation to the freedom and independence of learning experienced from childhood to adulthood. Illeris uses implication throughout the text as well. He implies a dominating idea that progresses and develops throughout the text, which is the idea of “continuous” learning. He presents compelling arguments that strongly assert that continuous growth and development of “original” knowledge and perspectives is the ultimate level of learning which transcends the intellect to unlimited levels of imagination and creativity. Regardless of age, learning is a continuous endeavor that continuously strengthens the innermost levels of liberation and self-efficacy:

As unfinished beings, conscious of our unfinishedness, we are capable of options and decisions that may not be ethical. The teacher of geography who truncates the curiosity of the student in the name of efficiency of mechanical memorization hampers both the freedom and the capacity for adventure of the student. There is no education here. Only domestication. (Freire, 1998, p. 57)

Here, Freire illuminates very clearly and dramatically the ideas of lifelong learning which Illeris presents in the book. Freire is asserting how as independent learners who utilize the imagination effectively and critically, we are capable of creating a vast range of perspectives and ideas that may possibly conflict with the conventional norms of society. Moreover, as educators, we must allow knowledge to blossom naturally, freely, and independently rather than force students to absorb preconceived knowledge and theories, which ultimately leads to knowledge becoming stagnant and unauthentic.

7. Conclusion and Personal Assessment of the Text

Overall, I was very pleased with both the informative and theoretical nature of this book. It provides very professional and insightful knowledge and teaching ideas that are strongly supported by well-known theorists in the education field. I was also highly pleased with how cohesively Illeris transitioned from one idea to the next throughout each chapter, and maintained a unique “connectedness” within the body of the rhetoric as a whole. Each of the ideas and perspectives presented in the text relates well to many of the issues that learners experience on multifaceted levels such as test anxiety, confidence issues, difficulty relating to specific teaching methods, and difficulty transitioning into various educational settings. The book also presents enlightening discussions on how teachers deal with the various cognitive levels of development that are commonly encountered in classrooms of all levels. Collectively, the knowledge and teaching insights presented within this text are a strong, professional resource for teachers on both the secondary and postsecondary level. Ultimately, many of the concepts presented are very versatile enabling a diverse range of educators to adapt to both their style, and overall philosophy of teaching and education as a whole.

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