

***Adult Learning
Linking Theory and Practice***

Sharon B. Merriam and Laura L. Bierema
Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. 2014. \$45.20 USD
and

***Planning Programs for Adult Learners
A Practical Guide (3rd ed.)***

Rosemary S. Caffarella and Sandra Ratcliff Daffron
John Wiley and Sons, San Francisco, 2013. \$46.00 USD

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Sharan B. Merriam is an accomplished and award-winning author in the field of adult education. She currently holds the position of professor of adult education and qualitative research at the University of Georgia, Athens. Dr. Merriam has written or contributed to more than twenty-six books. She has earned the Cyril O. Houle Award for Outstanding Literature in Adult Education on multiple occasions.

Coauthor, Laura L. Bierema, is likewise a noted author and professor of adult education and human resource and organizational development at the University of Georgia. Her previous works include *Implementing a Critical Approach to Organization Development* and *Philosophy and Practice of Organizational Learning*.

The subtitle of *Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice* describes the aim of the book by Merriam and Bierema precisely. A deliberate and delicate balance of principle and practice permeates the text. The authors' intended to present the "major theories and research in adult learning in a language that those new to adult education can understand and at the same time points out applications of these ideas to practice." (xii). Their articulated aim was met clearly.

Three specific audiences targeted intentionally through this book include the academic instructor, the adult education curriculum guide, and the curious adult learner. The attention given to theory and emerging practice offers the reader a solid foundation. Practitioners will find valuable insights and suggestions useful for constructing efficacious adult learning programs. Finally, individuals pursuing personal understanding and growth can benefit from the relevant information.

Merriam and Bierema present their content in twelve independent chapters. Each chapter can be read autonomously or used collectively as an overview and guide for comprehensive adult education. Demonstrating educational practicality, the book includes an element entitled "Linking Theory and Practice: Activities and Resources." The supplemental resources located at the end of each chapter transitions the core content to personal application.

Merriam and Bierema acknowledge, in the opening chapter, what many, including this writer, sense innately: “Change is at such an accelerated pace that even some of the routine tasks of daily living require new learning.”(5) The authors give particular attention to the sociological and demographic changes in the adult population. As internet access by adults increases exponentially and information spreads globally the nature and scope of education moderates. They have observed a proportional shift from formal to informal learning. (18)

An overview of both traditional and contemporary learning theories including, Behaviorism, Humanism, Cognitivism, Social Cognitivism, and Constructivism in chapter two offers an excellent introduction of the primary theories for the neophyte. For the accomplished student or teacher the review serves as a beneficial refresher.

A central idea of the book is the essence of and approach to adult education. Malcom Knowles’ androgogical assumptions are presented with a complementary question: “Are andragogy and pedagogy different? If so, how?” The contemporary adult educator’s style and perspective reflect a personal position. Implied in the preferred approach is that andragogy either expands the pedagogical progression or stands alone as an educational design. A reference to Conti’s Principles of Adult Learning Scale (PALS) (59) is an example of cited practical tools to enhance the educator’s skill.

Adult students have embraced a personalized approach to study and learning. Grow’s Self Directed Learning Stages (70) illustrate a new paradigm of adult learning. Self directed learning can be found in a variety of contexts including professional development, online learning, and higher education. According to Merriam and Bierema, assessment is a challenge. Additionally, “SDL tends to be a Western teaching method that may be culturally at odds with some learners.”

Perhaps the most significant chapter focuses on transformative or transformational learning featuring Mezirow. The authors’ summarized this learning approach as “essentially a learning process of making meaning of one’s experience.” (84) Interest and study of transformational learning has grown and now has expanded beyond cognitive development-- traditionally the primary domain of learning, and supports the inclusion of “soul work” in the learning process.(86) This chapter highlights important implications for educators in religious and sociological studies.

Experience as learning and learning activity is assumed in androgogical practice. In chapter six Merriam and Bierema advance the models of Jarvis and Kolb, Tennant and Pogson, as well as Fewick to illustrate the nuances of experiential learning. Together the three models exemplify the connection between experience and learning.

In one of the most fascinating chapters of the book, “Body and Spirit in Learning,” the authors present the nascent field of study, with neither definite parameters nor exact title: “There are several terms used somewhat interchangeably in the growing literature in this area--embodied learning, embodiment, somatic learning, and embodied cognition.” (130) Educators are seeking to discover how individuals gain understanding or awareness of tacit or intuitive knowledge. The author’s define embodied learning as “seeing our body as an instrument for learning.” (132) Merriam and Bierema appear to hold a dichotomistic perspective. They also note the importance of spiritual learning. They conclude, “If spirituality in the learning environment is thought of as in [sic] integral part of meaning-making for many adults, then our task as educators is to promote the conditions where it can happen.” (142)

The chapter entitled “Motivation and Learning” incorporated significant implications for education and ministry education. Citing McClusky’s barriers to learning and “Theory of Margin” as well as the observations of Hiemstra and Sisco, the authors’ caution against “instructor behaviors that contribute to learner load,” such as “disorganization, distracting mannerisms, inappropriate assignments, or unclear evaluation guidelines.” (155) Wlodkowski’s motivational framework noted reinforces learning itself motivates adult learners. His entire framework is included for review.

Brain research has increased significantly in recent years. The body of knowledge is expanding rapidly. Merriam and Bierema synthesize contemporary and pertinent findings in the chapter entitled “The Brain and Cognitive Functioning.” In addition to the familiar Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence and Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence theories, the authors’ present Steinberg’s Triarchic Theory of Intelligence which “consists of three components of intelligence—analytical, creative, and practical.” (180) Specifically, they note that adults often learn and deal with everyday problems based on knowledge gained outside the formal educational approaches.

The impact of online and digital learning is inescapable and must be embraced by contemporary educators. The authors raise valuable questions regarding the symbiotic relationship between technology and learning. Increasingly adults are incorporating technology into their learning experiences. Interfacing with technology, alters the way adults learn. (6) The flexibility and individualization of digital learning is attractive. “Today, people work, learn, and study whenever and wherever they choose.” (205) Technology is not a substitute for all learning and its use generates other learning challenges. Specifically, the subsequent chapter addresses the need for learners utilizing technology “to critically assess the value and relevance of new information.” (199)

In a time of transitional traditions, mutable mores, and shifting social structures, critical thinking skills are imperative. Merriam and Bierema offer a number of potential approaches to serve as part of a framework in which to address the issues. They suggest a three-step process to facilitate critical thinking: (1) Fostering Critical Reflection, (2) Building a Learning Community, and (3) Practicing Dialogical Conversation. Merriam and Bierema conclude, “Moving into mindful and timely intervention is key to critical thinking that matters.” (232)

In the final chapter Merriam and Bierema, explore educational dynamics within culture and contexts. They define culture as “a set of shared, yet often unarticulated assumptions that permeate thought and action. Culture deeply affects social context.”(241) Expressly the role of teachers, expectation of learners, educational environment and process of teaching and learning are determined by culture and must be accommodated in the context. The authors’ conclude, “Although Western educational theories and practices have dominated, our increasingly global, multicultural world is creating opportunities to design and facilitate more holistic teaching and learning.” (254) Educators must consider the complexities of the changing world.

Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice should find its way to the desk and shelf of every person responsible for adult education. The authors Sharan B Merriam and Laura L Bierema accomplish their stated goal. Chapter summaries, “Highlights”, and “Linking Theory and Practice” make this a functional resource for all educators.

Somewhat surprising to the reviewer, was a chapter on spiritual intelligence and learning. The affirmation of spiritual learning elevates the field to which many have devoted their lives and

careers. Still much can be learned about the process of “hidden learning” and transformation. The discussion on this matter is or should be particularly interesting and relevant to theological and Christian educators.

One of the strengths of the book is also its greatest liability. The authors consistently embed additional resources including websites related to chapter topics. The reviewer conducted an internet search for many of the resources. Some of the websites and links were no longer operable or current. Changing affiliations between publishers and technology would necessitate such resources be incorporated in a supplemental appendix rather than embedded in the content. Doing so would inconvenience the reader but would allow the authors to include a disclaimer regarding accuracy of peripheral and auxiliary materials.

Several themes recur throughout the book but seem more pronounced in the final chapters. The authors accommodate feminist thought, multiculturalism, and diversity in the context of privilege. While the writers are careful to avoid direct criticism of white male, dominance in education an implication is evident.

Christian ministry often finds opposition with secular humanism. The text’s authors observe, “The three major adult learning theories (or models, as some call them) of andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformative learning all have roots in humanistic psychology.” (31) A conscientious Christian educator will need to discern the philosophical foundation of the adult educational program they champion and assure that it is consistent with the philosophy and goals of the organization or institution they serve.

Caffarella and Daffron assembled in *Planning Programs for Adult Learners* a comprehensive guide for the foundation, design, implementation, and assessment of adult educational programs. The guide, constructed around the Interactive Model of Program Planning (27) combines eleven elements of program design and five areas of foundational knowledge (Adult Learning, Cultural Differences, Relationship Building, Power & Interest, and Technology.) The model and format provides specific actions necessary for developing an adult program. The text features chapters defined by educational principles coupled with pragmatic suggestions and an easy to follow process. Each unit incorporates a variety of charts with examples, activities, exercises and techniques supporting the central theme.

A unique style of the book is the use of scenarios. As the authors’ present each step of the planning process, specific and relevant scenarios allow the reader to consider the possible reaction and response in this collaborative approach. To enhance a reader’s interaction with this manuscript further, highlights, resources, and application exercises conclude each chapter.

Marketing and budgeting recommendations commensurate with continuing education or training programs suggests the intended use of this guide obviously extends beyond the college classroom. Nevertheless, it has value to the adult educator in multiple venues. In light of the increasing emphasis on program goals and assessment, this text serves as a valuable resource.