

Book Review

Making Sense of Adult Learning (2nd ed.).

Dorothy MacKeracher. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 315 pages.

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Introduction and Content Overview

This second edition of Dorothy MacKeracher's introductory survey of adult education theory and practice is a reorganization and update of the earlier work published in 1996. In the preface, MacKeracher notes her intentions to improve the earlier work by offering more practical examples from experience. Several chapters have been reorganized, new material on gender and culture in learning has been included, and a chapter on situated/contextual learning has been added.

The first two chapters provide effective introductory materials and conclude with helpful charts that synthesize key ideas. They are lengthy and introduce understandings of learning in general (Chapter 1) and adult learning in particular (Chapter 2). MacKeracher organizes these chapters according to her own "assumptions about learning," which she supports with literature and further explanation and exploration. The organizing principles here produce mixed results. On the one hand, it makes sense for the author to be up-front about her own beliefs and in keeping with her constructivist philosophy, to represent these beliefs as her own perspective on adult learning. And her beliefs and assumptions are conventional enough that readers will not be lost or confused by what she presents. On the other hand, the more autobiographical approach taken can at times push the reader out of the picture. Furthermore, given the stated philosophy, it strikes me as odd that MacKeracher does not encourage the reader to consider his or her own beliefs and assumptions in relation to what is presented.

Chapter 3 presents three cyclical models of learning: MacKeracher's own representation and those of Marilyn Taylor (1979, 1987) and David Kolb (1984). MacKeracher's own "basic learning cycle" is complex and causes the reader to move back and forth between diagram and text. Phases of the latter two models, however, are clearly explained, and Kolb's model receives particularly detailed treatment in both Chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 4, "Styles in Learning," provides a variety of perspectives on learning styles including the field independence/dependence model (Witkin & Goodenough, 1977) and analytic versus holistic styles (Entwistle, 1981, Miller, 1991). Cognitive, affective, physiological, and interpersonal differences are compared in a helpful chart. The chapter concludes with a detailed description

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of Kolb's learning styles along with a well-written passage that coaches readers through the model to identify their own learning styles. MacKeracher rounds out the model with valuable suggestions for structuring learning activities to meet varying learning styles.

Chapter 5 covers "Brain and Mind in Learning." Here MacKeracher reviews the physiology of the brain and describes characteristics and learning activities associated with right- and left-brain functions. Perception and memory strategies are outlined along with Bruner's (1984) distinction between paradigmatic and narrative thinking. The chapter concludes with brief considerations of measured intelligence (IQ) and aspects of cognitive development that appear particular to adult or later-life learning.

Chapter 6 examines the role of emotions in learning and motivational theory. MacKeracher looks at how emotional arousal is triggered and describes the physiology of arousal and stress responses. These are considered for their effects—either positive or negative—on learning. The second half of the chapter focuses on motivation for learning. A variety of models convey the complexity and range of motivations learners can bring to a learning situation. MacKeracher includes advice for facilitators based on this information. Finally, emotional intelligence is briefly described.

Chapter 7, "Skilled Performance in Learning," focuses more on the mastery of physical task performance: a field that the author notes has a dearth of literature, yet is of great importance for much workplace learning, adult recreation, and arts learning. A brief review of situated learning is followed by a clear discussion of learning physiology that pushes beyond introductory overviews that, in my experience, are usually limited to the brain and nervous system. The chapter concludes with a phase model of skill mastery.

Chapter 8 reviews types and roles of relationship in learning focusing on dichotomies, tensions, and concepts that consider both autonomy (individuality) and relationship in adult learning. The bulk of this chapter focuses on the concepts of "self-system," "voice," and "ways of knowing" to describe the intricate relationships between self-concept, knowledge construction, and knowledge representation. Belenky et al.'s (1986) *Women's Ways of Knowing* is explained in detail including critiques and extensions of the model. This chapter is more complex than many others.

Chapter 9 covers the emerging field of spirituality in learning. A brief foray into Jungian psychology is followed by an eclectic mix of perspectives, which MacKeracher synthesizes into a descriptive list of conditions that foster spiritual learning. The loose structure of this chapter probably reflects the relative newness of spiritual learning as an area of study. The roles of reflection, creativity, and narrative are considered. Transformative learning receives a passing mention. The chapter concludes with a rather puzzling account of MacKeracher's own experience with a dream as a form of spiritual learning, the point of which is not entirely clear.

Chapter 10 is thematized as "Environment and Context in Learning" and includes fairly commonsense advice about physical learning environments followed by far more complex material about positionality, power, and antiracist education. The latter topics are theoretically "thick" compared with other areas, which reflects MacKeracher's interests in the more social and

subjective aspects of learning. The chapter also touches on practitioner learning, situational learning, and technology in learning. The scant information provided about technology in adult learning represents what is perhaps the one major gap in this book given the enormity and momentum of instructional technology and distance learning as fields of study and pedagogical considerations.

Chapter 11, "Strategies and Styles in Facilitating," provides a good overview of major perspectives in learning and might well have been introduced more toward the beginning of the book rather than as its conclusion. "Directing, enabling and collaborating" styles are described along with specific facilitation strategies that match these approaches. Her "theoretical models of facilitating" reviews information processing, critical and humanistic perspectives, and is the book's clearest representation of the major paradigmatic distinctions in learning theory. These reviews are also accompanied by helpful general advice for facilitation. A brief review of additional facilitation style models completes the chapter and ends the book.

Strengths

This book is directed to the adult educator who has some practical experience, but lacks theoretical background in adult learning principles and practices. It is not difficult to read and has wide applicability for facilitators or instructors in many settings. Most concepts are explained clearly; MacKeracher seems to appreciate that some practitioners may not be familiar with the theoretical jargon, which can be a real challenge for students new to a field. MacKeracher also consistently seeks ways to provide implications of any theory presented for facilitation, providing many helpful suggestions for understanding adult learners and responding to their varying learning needs.

MacKeracher seems comfortable breaking from structures that might be imposed by a more formally theoretical orientation and thus modularizes the content into chapters like "The Brain and Mind in Learning" and "Emotions and Motives in Learning" that make sense to a reader. She does not shy away from the use of bullets and numbers to describe and highlight key points. This contributes to cogent explanations of the many models of facilitation and learning presented. Synthesis of key ideas in charts is a real strength of this book, as are clear and well-laid-out model diagrams.

The book is well researched and presents up-to-date research and theory on adult learning, covering major areas of study like learning styles, diversity in learners, motivation psychology, learning physiology, and situated learning along with some lesser explored areas like physical learning ("skilled performance" in Chapter 7) and spirituality in learning (Chapter 9). The author balances her work by providing critiques and extensions of proposed concepts and models. MacKeracher's inclusive approach recognizes the richness and diversity of adult learning, from her attention to the needs of older adult learners, to recognition of the needs of nonvoluntary learners, to recommendations for facilitating in culturally complex settings.

Summaries of research are well interspersed with summary information and the author's more narrative passages. This strategy prevents the presentation of literature review from becoming dry and monotonous. MacKeracher is careful to guide the reader, providing frequent references to material in other

chapters and generally solid introductions to each chapter and section. “Learning and Facilitating Principles” are summarized in text boxes throughout the book and provide a quick reference to key concepts and applications.

Limitations

MacKeracher works to make her personal biases and assumptions clear throughout the book. In theory, outlining one’s subjectivity is a way to avoid illusions of objectivity, hence in turn freeing the reader to construct his or her own knowledge. In practice, however, this poststructuralist stance can exclude the reader. The effect is sometimes one of talking *at* readers instead of inviting them into conversation about their own assumptions and experiences. Autobiographical asides and passages were no doubt intended as helpful illustrations for the reader, but instead I found them distracting and in many cases too particular to the author’s own voice to allow readers to connect with them.

MacKeracher’s assumptions about learners and learning might have benefited from more overt representations of her theoretical orientations. For example, her approach is strongly influenced by feminism, subjectivism, and poststructuralism, positions she does not clearly explain in her introductory assumptions about learning. Yet these form major themes in the book. Thus adult educators whose work does not fit easily in these perspectives, for example, those teaching technical or content-oriented classes, may find that these orientations do not meet their needs and experiences and might be offered more alternative epistemologies in a less marginal manner. It is not that MacKeracher does not provide for more objective, rational, and practical knowledge orientations, just that her preference for their alternatives is quite evident.

Some difficulty lies in the uneven thrust of the content. At times the book does not seem to know what it wants to be. The body text provides background knowledge, but sporadically veers into specific practitioner advice that disrupts the flow of the overview. The advice provided is helpful and relevant, but would be less jarring if offset in sidebars or included as a feature using a consistent format in each chapter. As could be expected with a more thematic presentation of material, some chapters contain material that does not flow easily. Chapter 10 on learning contexts, for example, includes a commonsense piece on physical learning environments alongside far more complex and theoretical material about race, class, and gender in learning and research on situational learning. Some concepts are treated in a straightforward manner; others, like the material on “ways of knowing,” may bog the reader down with their length and complexity.

Although the book as a whole is sensibly organized, chapter organization is plagued by layout considerations. Headings and subheadings do not stand out well, and readers will need to keep the “big picture” in mind as they may find themselves wandering through the longer chapters. Textboxes throughout the book that summarize “Learning and Facilitating Principles” are inconsistently formatted and rendered less effective by a combination of Roman and italic type. Although these considerations are far less important than the content, they do detract from readability.

Because the book is thematically organized and (understandably) emphasizes current thinking, the reader may not gain a sense of the significance of some major influences and lines of research in the field. Third-force psychology (Rogers), critical/radical pedagogy (Freire), andragogy (Knowles), and transformational learning theory (Mezirow) are adult education movements and research areas that could provide a more solid historical sense of adult education and could receive added attention.

Despite these problems, I would emphasize that the book's strengths far outweigh its limitations. The reference list is extensive, and the content efficiently surveys the field of adult learning in an approachable format and manageable length for students new to adult learning theory. The book is a "keeper" as a reference and a good departure point for further reading.

Applications and Summary

Adult educators will find this book a helpful addition as a class text. The chapter lengths and thematic presentation make this book easy to develop in a course schedule and/or course modules. Chapters are self-contained, so may without difficulty also be used alone as individual readings. Students seeking more practical, technical knowledge for program and lesson planning may find that the more theoretical emphasis does not entirely meet their needs. However, the good advice for practitioners that MacKeracher does weave through the book can easily be supplemented with more practical how-to material from other sources. Facilitators using this book may also wish to seek how to help students connect the theory presented in the book with their own experiences and practices.