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# **Adult Learning in Online Educative Spaces: A Constructive-Developmental Perspective**

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**Abstract:** This study explored how adults construct meaning, develop, and grow within the particular context of a structured, online, educative space and through the alone/together paradox.

**Keywords:** online learning, adult development, alone/together paradox

## **Introduction and Purpose**

Online learning, in its various forms, is swiftly transforming higher education. Colleges and universities currently are struggling to reconcile the tension between maintaining economic sustainability and preserving a commitment to quality and traditional academic values, particularly with regard to the advent of online learning. Meanwhile, for adults with busy lives and competing priorities, online learning offers many advantages over brick-and-mortar classrooms, promising to address issues of access, convenience, and economics. Adults are participating in structured online learning opportunities in ever-increasing numbers. Almost one-third of all higher education students now take at least one course online, and “distance education enrollments continue to grow, even in the face of declining overall higher education enrollments” (Allen & Seaman, 2016, p. 4). While online learning rises in popularity, this relatively new phenomenon also places novel demands on adults and their meaning making in these online educative spaces. The purpose of this study was to understand how adults construct meaning, develop, and grow within the context of an online, structured, educative space.

## **Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework**

A review and thematic analysis of the literature on online learning and meaning making revealed adults navigate new territories in their understandings of online learning in two distinct ways – ontological and epistemological.

The ontological nature of learning online may be understood by considering how adults relate to and with each other through technology. In a seemingly paradoxical situation, through technology individuals become accustomed to constant connection, and yet feel even lonelier in these virtual connections than when they are face-to-face (Turkle, 2011). Based on over fifteen years of research and hundreds of interviews, Turkle (2011) describes the phenomenon of virtual connectedness as being “alone together.” Learners may project deeply held issues and experience emotion within their interpersonal interactions online (Dirkx & Smith, 2009), while at the same time, technology offers them “the comfort of connection without the demands of intimacy” (Turkle, 2011, p. 10). The anonymity of the online context makes learning and relating together easier for some adults (Cranton, 2010). Those in an online class may experience elements of personal growth by being vulnerable, engaging in deep learning, and developing camaraderie through a sense of community (Barab, Thomas, & Merrill, 2001; Khoo & Forrett, 2011).

The epistemological nature of learning online may be understood by considering how adults construct knowledge and come to learn online. Self-directed learning as a concept has often been cited as one of the primary goals of educational institutions, that is, to build the

capacities and develop the mindsets of students to be lifelong, self-directed learners (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Two particular studies by Shapley (2000) and Lai (2011) illuminate aspects of autonomy and self-direction in the way that adults learn online that significantly influence their satisfaction and success with their online learning experiences.

Given the two types of demands specific to the online context, ontological and epistemological, meeting the challenges of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may require a developmental approach that specifically addresses these two territories of experience. However, the developmental perspective on online learning is scant. Mostly conceptual writings have focused on transformative learning in online courses (Merriam, 2004; Smith, 2012). Limited empirical studies present very specific pedagogic assignments and activities that promote transformative learning among adults in online classes such as using reflection, dialogue, and project implementation (Provident et al., 2015) and encouraging critical reflection and questions that encouraged in-depth analysis of one's own beliefs (Forte & Blouin, 2016). Despite these studies, none to date have explored how adults make meaning in an online context. In this spirit, I proposed considering the challenges of the online context from a constructive-developmental perspective in this study.

A theoretical framework that provides a lens for change and transformation of meaning making is critical when considering how adults experience the online learning context. The overarching theory for this research study was Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory, a stage theory of adult cognitive development. Kegan's theory is grounded in the developmental work of Piaget and brings to bear a structure of how adults construct meaning of their emotional, personal, and social worlds. According to Kegan, meaning is created and re-created through a process of subject-object differentiation and follows a sequential series of developmental stages numbered 0-5. Kegan's Stage 0 and 1 are most often associated with childhood, and development into adulthood typically beginning in adolescence with Kegan's Stage 2, also known as the self-sovereign stage (Berger, 2012). In this stage, individuals are oriented toward rules and regulations, subject to their own wishes and desires, and unable take the perspectives of others. Stage 3, the socialized stage (Berger, 2012), is characterized by an external sense of self; individuals in this stage are oriented toward the views and perspectives of others in order to construct their own value systems. While they can take perspective on their own needs and interests, they remain subject to relationships and the authority of individuals and systems. Stage 4 is also known as the self-authored stage (Berger, 2012). In this stage, individuals are oriented toward their own self-generated values and judgments. They are able to reflect upon the perspectives of others and authority is found in the self; however, they are unable to take perspective on the limitations of their own internally generated values and belief system. Most adults make meaning according to the structures of Stage 3 and Stage 4, or somewhere in transition between the two (Kegan, 1994; Torbert, 2004). Stage 5 is the latest stage of complexity according to Kegan's taxonomy and is also called the self-transforming stage (Berger, 2012). In this stage, individuals are oriented toward transforming their own self-systems and are able to take perspective on their own self-authored system. Very few adults make meaning at this stage (Kegan, 1994; Torbert, 2004).

In addition to and closely aligned with the process of adult cognitive development, transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) addressed the nature of such development specifically related to adult learning in this study. By examining the learning that enables forms of mind to transform (Kegan, 2000), transformative learning theory lended the means to explore

the “how” of developing capacities. These two mutually reinforcing theories framed this inquiry into adults’ online learning experiences.

### **Methodology**

Seven adult graduate students spanning socialized (Kegan’s Stage 3) and self-authored (Kegan’s Stage 4) ways of knowing participated in this qualitative inquiry. These adults were purposefully selected based on their participation in asynchronous online courses that employed transformative or developmental pedagogical structures. These pedagogical structures included, among others as determined by course instructors, critical reflection, reflective discourse, opportunities for action, focus on relationships and support, and the use of complex problems and issues (Henderson, 2010; Keegan, 2011; Merriam, 2004; Smith, 2012). The subject of these courses varied across fields, and participants referenced multiple courses during the interviews.

Collectivist case study methodology (Stake, 2006) guided data collection, which included Subject-Object Interviews, semi-structured interviews, and polarity mapping. The Subject-Object Interview (SOI) is a measure designed to assess an individual’s developmental stage based on Kegan’s taxonomy. Through an extended certification process, I became trained in the administration and scoring of the SOI and measured study participants’ developmental stages. I used semi-structured interviews, which included a visual component of polarity mapping (Johnson, 1992), to collect data on participants’ online learning experiences and their understanding of the alone/together paradox of technical connectedness.

Grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) guided data analysis, which included focused coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and member-check feedback. I took several measures to show quality in the analysis. I used triangulation through two interviews (the SOI and the semi-structured interview) in three parts (developmental assessment, learning reflections, and the polarity map) in order to gather data through multiple dimensions from each participant. I also used prolonged engagement, member checks, and thick, descriptive data to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Finally, I engaged in sound, ethical practices and protection of human subjects throughout the research.

### **Findings**

Three major findings emerged from data analysis in order to understand the developmental experiences of adults in the online learning environment. The first finding addressed how adults’ ways of knowing influenced their online learning experiences. The data revealed that there were indeed differences in how socialized and self-authored knowers related to particular elements in their online courses. First, socialized knowers valued instrumental learning and measurable outcomes in their online courses, while self-authored knowers valued learning for learning’s sake and did not ascribe expectations for their learning outcomes. Second, socialized knowers viewed their online instructors in a “guru” role fulfilling multiple directive functions, while self-authored knowers viewed their online instructors in a “Sherpa” role lightly holding and guiding them in their learning. Third, socialized knowers experienced uncertainty in particular structures of the online learning environment and mitigated that uncertainty through time, text, and their peers.

The second finding was that a distinction exists between how socialized knowers and self-authored knowers related to and within the alone/together paradox. Socialized knowers did not have a full awareness of the alone/together paradox, but they functioned within the context. They were subject to the state of being alone and being together, acting unaware along a spectrum of socialization. In contrast, self-authored knowers had an awareness of the paradox and understood their experience as simultaneously being alone and together. They navigated the

liminal state of alone and together by consciously constructing reality, practicing vulnerability, and recognizing limits.

The third finding was that the alone/together paradox is a holding environment for socialized and self-authored knowers by supporting and challenging their ways of being and knowing.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Adult Education**

I drew two main conclusions from this study. The first conclusion is that the online learning environment is a catalyst for growth and development, for those who are ready, by virtue of manifesting the alone/together paradox. As a holding environment, the alone/together paradox provides high support and high challenge for socialized and self-authored knowers. The paradox can be a transformative learning space that is unique to the online context and not necessarily available in traditional face-to-face classrooms. The potential for growth in the online environment exists in how adults can engage the paradox. For socialized knowers who are subject to the alone/together paradox, a frontier for grow is in how they can meet the challenge of *being alone*.

The online environment as a catalyst for growth and development, by way of the alone/together paradox, has implications for adult education practice, theory, and research. To date, practitioners of online teaching and learning have attempted to create the conditions for transformation by adapting face-to-face transformative pedagogy to the online environment (Merriam, 2004; Meyers, 2008; Smith, 2012). Smith (2012) encourages instructors to rethink their roles to deliberately take advantage of the online context in transformative learning. This study offers empirical evidence of the alone/together paradox as a developmental structure inherent in the environment of which online learning practitioners can take advantage. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to constructive-developmental theory by testing it in the online learning environment. The alone/together paradox of technical connectedness provided support and challenge to foster a shift from Stage 3 to Stage 4, from functioning within the system to seeing the system. The online learning environment as a catalyst for growth and development also opens new lines of inquiry for future research. How do online instructors experience the alone/together paradox, and how, if at all, does this translate into their online curriculum? What other structures inherent in the technical environment foster transformative learning and development? Paradox as a structure of development also warrants future research. Adults' experiences of paradox in other contexts and its role in their growth and development is a wide open and crucial area of inquiry that can aid adults in meeting the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and living.

The second conclusion is that *generative learning through knowing together* is a framework for self-authored knowers to engage the complexity of the alone/together paradox. Based on existing research and the findings of this study, online pedagogy successfully fosters instrumental and transformative learning. In addition, conditions in the online environment created by the alone/together paradox may be present for generative learning through knowing together for adults based on their capacity for complexity and their readiness and ripeness for transformation and development. This conclusion explores the growth edge of self-authored knowers with generative learning through knowing together.

The implications for generative learning through knowing together have significance for adult education theory, practice, and research. Generative learning through knowing together offers contributions to transformative learning theory by addressing the critique that it is too focused on individual transformation to the neglect of learning with others. Generative learning

through knowing together situates the potential for transformation in relationship with others. As a potentially new form of learning for the online environment and a growth edge for self-authored knowers, the implications for future adult education practice and research on generative learning through knowing together are exciting. Future studies that explore the conditions under which the alone/together paradox fosters learning online and the opportunities for adults to consciously explore generative learning through knowing together could offer findings that increase adults' capacities for meeting the demands of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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