

## The Integrated Process of Engagement in Adult Learning

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the role of engagement in adult learning based on Illeris' three dimensional model of learning and Yang's holistic theory of knowledge and learning. Engagement and learning are integrated processes by which adult learners gain a deeper understanding and make meaning of the activities he or she is exposed to in a given learning environment.

In today's fast-paced environment, highly demanding jobs and personal responsibilities force adults to compress learning into their lives (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Learning is an integrated process that merges the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of being (Illeris, 2002). The ability of an individual to learn is an integral part of human life. Learning includes many activities, particularly for the adult learners, that both involve change, and are primarily concerned with the acquisition of habits, knowledge, and attitudes (Knowles, 1973). Learning is the interaction that occurs between the learner and their environment to help the learner become more capable of dealing adequately with their environment (Goffman, 1959).

Engagement is defined as a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward identified outcomes (Shuck & Wollard, 2009). Adults who are engaged become emotionally connected and cognitively vigilant in the pursuit of their goals (Batista, Shuck, Gutierrez, & Baralt, 2008; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Engagement is an emerging motivational variable commonly linked in studies of workplace learning to increased participation in learning-related activities (Czarnowsky, 2008). When viewed as synonymous with motivation, increased engagement in educational pursuits leads to improvements in learning and personal development which, in turn, leads to satisfaction, persistence, and growth (MacKay & Kuh, 1994).

Research on adult learning and engagement suggests that an adult's engagement in learning activities could increase persistence and involvement (Czarnowsky, 2008). Studies pertaining to pedagogical engagement could inform adult learning scholars and practitioners about the role of engagement in adult learning. Secondary education students who are engaged (i.e., motivated cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally) were found to be more persistent in the face of barriers and have higher rates of graduation (Knowles, 1968). Adults also bring prior knowledge and experiences to their learning environments, but this is not taken into account by research on primary and secondary education.

Engagement seems to be a promising variable for adult educators to harness in both theory and practice but is rarely examined through the lens of adult learning theories. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of engagement in adult learning using Illeris' (2003) three-dimensional model of learning and Yang's (2004) holistic theory of knowledge and learning. This paper is presented in four sections: (a) engagement theory, (b) adult learning theories (c) implications for theory and practice, and (d) conclusion.

### Engagement Theory

Khan's (1990) theory of personal engagement provides a unique context in which to understand why adults decide to engage in learning-oriented activities. Adult learners often engage in a variety of activities and situations in which they are presented opportunities to grow and develop (Wlodkowski, 2008). While engagement is a multi-faceted variable, adults express

themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally when personally involved in activities that engage them (Khan, 1990; Shuck & Wollard, in press). Three constructs are important to understanding why an adult may or may not engage in learning: (a) meaningfulness, (b) safety, and (c) availability (Kahn, 1990, 1992).

Meaningfulness is defined as a feeling that working towards an activity, such as a project, an assignment, or completing a degree program, is worthwhile (Kahn, 1990). Meaningfulness from this perspective is a reciprocal model whereby adults feel as if their involvement in a learning activity adds value and significance to their lives and promotes further engagement in learning. When adult learners do not feel that progress or involvement in a particular activity adds meaning or value to their lives, they may become confused, feel rejected, or discount their involvement by thinking that it was not that important anyway—all of which eventually lead to disengagement (Maslow, 1970).

Safety is defined as the ability to be one's preferred self without fearing "negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). This theory posits that adults need to trust their environment, including their learning environments, in ways that allow them to be their authentic selves. Safety is often associated with a degree of emotionality; emotions are part of both the learning process and adults' everyday experiences (Dirkx, 2006; Reeve, 2001; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). The expression of safety in a learning context suggests deep psychological involvement, manifested behaviorally through engagement in a specific activity (Dirkx, 2006). Often focused on as a physical variable, an adult's perception of safety is just as much about fearing emotional and psychological harm (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Kahn, 1990).

Availability is defined as having the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary for the completion of an activity (Kahn, 1990). For engagement to develop, adults must feel that they have or are able to obtain the tools to complete a project in a given learning context. Tangible availability of resources includes items such as supplies, sufficient budget, and manpower to complete a task (Harter et al., 2002; Wager & Harter, 2006); intangible availability of resources includes skill development (Czarnowsky, 2008) and the belief that a task can be completed (Britt, Castro, & Adler, 2005). Availability of resources necessary for completion of a given task frees an adult learner to focus on the task rather than worry about lack of resources.

In conclusion, adults who feel both that their involvement is meaningful and safe and that they have the resources to complete their task are more likely to be engaged. Furthermore, adults who feel this way are likely to express their engagement cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally (Khan, 1990). Engagement is strongest when all three dimensions are used (Khan, 1990). Two adult learning theories that provide insight into the role of engagement in adult learning are discussed next.

### **Adult Learning Theories**

#### *Illeris' Three Dimensional Model of Learning*

Illeris' (2003) three-dimensional model of learning combines a variety of learning theories into one comprehensive framework. This model is based on three dimensions of learning: (a) cognitive learning, (b) emotional learning, and (c) social learning. The cognitive dimension of learning is defined as the learning content element, which is described as knowledge or skills that build up the learner's understanding and ability to construct meaning in his or her world (Illeris, 2003). The emotional dimension of learning is defined as the component, which encompasses mental energy, feelings, and motivation. It also provides a balance between affective and cognitive dimensions. The social dimension of learning is defined as the external interaction, which is reflected through participation, communication, and

cooperation. This dimension builds up the sociality of the learner in his or her community. According to this model, learning takes place when the individual demonstrates all three dimensions of learning.

Two processes of interaction occur within the context of the three learning dimensions: (a) external interactions between the learner and his or her social, cultural and material environment; and (b) internal psychological processes of acquisition and elaboration (Illeris, 2003). An individual's interaction process for comprehending the learning experience is divided into various categories (Illeris, 2002). The learner's interaction and learning process begins with the raw material. First, perception takes place when the surrounding world comes to the individual as a totally unmediated sense impression. Second, transmission occurs when someone else transmits specific sense messages. Third, experience occurs, presupposing a particular activity; it may include perception and transmission. Then, imitation occurs when the learner attempts to mimic someone else's actions. Finally, activity or participation occurs when the learner is engaged in a goal-directed activity (Merriam et al., 2007).

Altogether, human learning is a multifaceted process that encompasses three different dimensions at all times. Although cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions are separate, they may be viewed as a single learning event when combined. Both an external interaction between the learner and his or her social, cultural, and material environment and an internal psychological process of acquisition and elaboration must be active for learning to occur (Illeris, 2003).

#### *Yang's Holistic Theory of Knowledge and Learning*

Yang's (2004) holistic theory of knowledge and learning posits that knowledge consists of three inseparable components: explicit, implicit, and emancipatory. It presents an integrative theoretical framework to study the mechanisms of interaction among types of knowledge within learning (Gallagher, Rocco, & Landorf, 2007). It is important to analyze the active interactions among the three components in order to enhance the understanding of the adult learning process. The collective concepts of knowledge and learning play increasingly important roles in today's learning environments (Yang, 2003). Knowledge has become one of the crucial resources for wealth, and learning has become an integrative component of the workplace (Yang, 2003).

The holistic theory describes knowledge as three different and interconnected learning facets for being able to obtain knowledge through personal experience and emotional affection (Yang, 2004). First, the explicit knowledge refers to "clear and certain mental apprehension that is transmittable in [a] formal and systematic format" (Yang, 2003, pg. 108). Explicit knowledge is expressed by the recall of information that is tied to a context. Second, implicit knowledge is generated from one's behavior, actions, and accumulated experiences (Yang, 2003). Implicit knowledge is expressed through prior behavior that is improved without having to recall from the task before. Finally, emancipatory knowledge deals with understanding based on emotional affection (Yang, 2003). Although the facets are seen as different parts of understanding knowledge, each facet necessarily supports the others (Yang, 2004).

Yang's (2003) holistic theory of knowledge and learning suggests that learning is an individual activity as well as a social event, such as group learning. Group learning is a process of change within the dimensions of collective belief relating to explicit knowledge; social norms as it relates to implicit knowledge; and shared values as it ties to emancipatory knowledge. For instance, an individual acquiring new knowledge in the classroom is going through a process of change in thought. At the same time, social norms and shared values, such as respect for others, are taken into consideration. The role of engagement in adult learning consequently entails a

holistic approach to learning. This approach is sensitive to the learner's desire to learn by addressing what is most fundamental in learning.

### **Engagement and Adult Learning in Theory and Practice**

Adult learning can lead to an extensive, enriching development for individuals (Illeris, 2003; Wlodkowski, 2008). Adult learners learn best when their involvement with activities are expressed physically, cognitively, and emotionally. An engaged learner feels their involvement in an activity brings significance to their lives while feeling emotionally secure. Moreover, the adult learner should feel safe having all the resources necessary to learn to avoid disengagement. In order for cognitive, emotional, and social development to occur, the adult learner must have a positive, motivational attitude, and the learning activity must meet the expectations of the learner (Illeris, 2003a). Using Illeris' three dimensional model of learning and Yang's holistic theory of knowledge and learning to examine the role of engagement in adult learning provides a new lens through which to better understand an adult learners' motivation to learn. First, Illeris' model merges the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning into an integrated process (Illeris, 2002). Second, Yang's holistic theory of knowledge and learning integrates the explicit, implicit, and emancipatory knowledge into inseparable components of learning. As shown in Figure 1, engagement plays a stronger role when all three dimensions of learning are in place.

Additionally, the combination of Illeris' three dimensions of learning supports the development of engaged learning as an effective process, resulting in increased retention (Wlodkowski, 2008). Within Yang's holistic theory of knowledge, engagement is an act whereby the learner actively uses the information learned. The information needs to be clear and explicit to the learner. To ensure that knowledge transfers, it must be viewed from the learner's perspective and understood through their experience. Further, knowledge must be accessible to the learner (Kahn, 1990) and in a way that the learner both understands the information provided and sees the significance of the information to his or her particular life. This emancipatory approach is value driven from the adult learners' unique experience. Once the learner is engaged, he or she uses information to construct his or her own knowledge, or truth. Yang's holistic theory of knowledge and learning engages individuals in adult learning by providing an understanding of various knowledge facets. Knowledge as it relates to engagement can only be acquired through experiences and direct engagement in practice (Yang, 2003).

Learning has no meaning without engagement (Wlodkowski, 2008). The role of engagement in adult learning is important to the retention of information as well as the transfer of knowledge. Educators need to concentrate time and effort to construct meaning for what individuals are learning; otherwise, individuals may not be engaged or motivated. For instance, an instructional designer may use Illeris' three dimensional model and Yang's holistic theory of knowledge and learning in order to engage the learners in a learning activity. During the development process of an instruction, the designer may use implicit knowledge by incorporating activities in the instruction. Implicit knowledge helps learners create schemes of interrelated concepts to be transferred across situations. During the activity, the instructor may ask the learners to recall specific situations in the past that could be useful to remember information that the learners will be using during the activity. In addition, learners may create these schemes by using explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge ties information to learners' direct experiences and/or involvement. The learners will most likely recall past experiences or involvement in situations similar to the one they are currently experiencing during the activity. Finally, the activity may involve emancipatory knowledge to assign individual sentiments that the individual has already attached to certain objects. If the experiences recalled are positive or

negative, the learner will attach positive or negative emotions to the activity. Furthermore, through this process, individuals undergo cognitive, emotional, and social involvement. First, the cognitive dimension of learning engages adult learners by making meaning of what the learner is exposed to during the activity. Simultaneously, the emotional dimension makes meaning through feelings experienced during the activity. Last, the social dimension engages individuals through participation, communication, and cooperation with other learners. The learner will be able to make meaning and add value to the learning process through activities and/or instructions designed with these components in mind.

### **Conclusion**

Engagement plays an important role in assisting adult learners to make meaning of what they are learning. The examples provided in this paper illustrate the influence of Illeris' three-dimensional model of learning and Yang's holistic theory of knowledge and learning on adults' experience of learning. When combined, the resulting framework provides a powerful lens in which to view adult learning. These theories are powerful tools for instructors when shaping an instructional design. Many cognitive learning strategies emphasize how learners reflect on the material, recite, and review the information learned in order to store it in their long-term memory (Slavin, 2009). Yang's holistic theory of knowledge and learning allows learners to create schemes (implicit knowledge) that help them recall previous information (explicit knowledge) and attach sentiments (emancipatory knowledge) to the information. This process eases the storing of information in the learners' long-term memory. Additionally, when learners go through the process of recalling information, they are engaged cognitively by thinking back to many experiences in the past. The recollection of experiences also engages the learner emotionally by thinking whether the experience(s) was positive or negative. Finally, recalling information engages the learners socially when the learner is asked to share the experience(s) with the instructor and other learners.

In summary, adult learners should integrate Illeris' learning dimensions and Yang's knowledge facets presented in this paper to achieve a higher level of engagement during learning activities. Combining both theories allows instructors to engage their learners through various avenues, resulting in a more productive and efficient instruction. Subsequently, adult learners will both encounter a more meaningful and valuable learning experience and increase the chances of remembering the information at a later time. Knowledge is power and integrating learning dimensions eases the process of obtaining knowledge.

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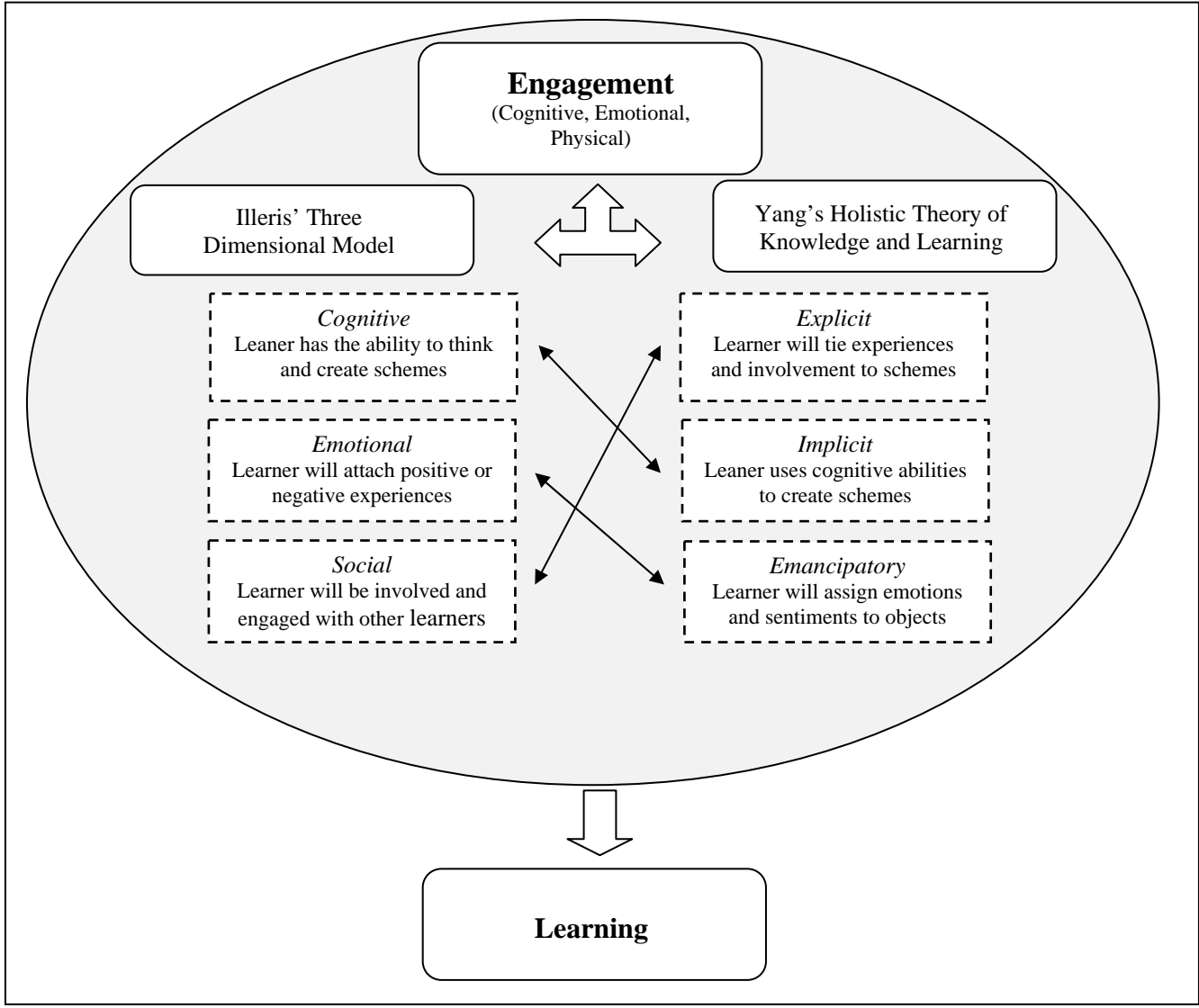


Figure 1. Relationship between the integrated process of engagement and adult learning based on Illeris' three dimensional model & Yang's holistic theory of knowledge and learning.