

Adult learning: Salient Conditions and Non-traditional Approaches

Aprendizaje de adultos: Condiciones sobresalientes y enfoques no tradicionales

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Abstract

Learning in adulthood constitutes a process that is shaped and influenced by the societal group in which adult learners share, work, live, grow, experience, fail and achieve success. Comprehending and appreciating the historical and sociocultural ways of understanding and being represent an endeavor on which adult learners need to embark in order to grasp the nature and purpose of learning within particular milieus. The aim of this paper is to explore salient conditions and non-traditional approaches through an adult learning lens so as to offer an overarching panorama of the field. These salient conditions are globalization, technology, population growth and economic factors. The non-traditional approaches discussed are embodied learning, narrative learning, spiritual learning, transformative learning theory, indigenous knowledge and pedagogy of solidarity. Finally, the conclusion highlights the relevance of adult learning for societies. The last twenty years have brought a much-needed recognition that adult learning is multidimensional. This constitutes a relevant takeaway. Moving away from the vision that cognitive processing is the unique and most important element when acquiring knowledge has brought thought-provoking constructs such as spirituality, feelings, environmental awareness, emotions, fears, and experiences to a more holistic, in-depth vision of learning. As a result, the field of adult learning is influenced by the sociohistorical context where it takes place. Learning in society provides broader concepts where the current realities of the workplace, educational systems, economic vicissitudes and life situations directly impact the status quo of learning in adulthood. It is precisely this richness in the diversity of contexts that makes the field of adult learning a multidimensional phenomenon.

Keywords: Adult learning, learning conditions, non-traditional approaches, multidimensional

Resumen

El aprendizaje en la edad adulta constituye un proceso moldeado e influenciado por el grupo social en el que los estudiantes adultos comparten, trabajan, viven, crecen, experimentan y fracasan. Comprender y apreciar las formas históricas y socioculturales de entender y ser representa un esfuerzo en el que los estudiantes adultos deben embarcarse para comprender la naturaleza y el propósito del aprendizaje dentro de entornos particulares. El objetivo de este trabajo es explorar condiciones sobresalientes y enfoques no tradicionales con un lente de aprendizaje para adultos para ofrecer un panorama general del campo. Estas condiciones sobresalientes son la globalización, la tecnología, el crecimiento de la población y los factores económicos. Los enfoques no tradicionales discutidos son el aprendizaje por medio del cuerpo, el aprendizaje narrativo, el aprendizaje espiritual, la teoría del aprendizaje transformador, el conocimiento indígena y la pedagogía de la solidaridad. Finalmente, la conclusión destaca la relevancia del aprendizaje de adultos para las sociedades. Los últimos veinte años han traído consigo un reconocimiento muy necesario de que el aprendizaje de adultos es multidimensional. Esto constituye una conclusión relevante. Alejarse de la visión de que el procesamiento cognitivo es el único y más importante elemento a la hora de adquirir conocimientos, ha mostrado conceptos interesantes como la espiritualidad, sentimientos, conciencia ambiental, emociones, miedos y experiencias, para una visión más holística y profunda del aprendizaje. Como resultado, el campo del aprendizaje de adultos está influenciado por el contexto sociohistórico donde tiene lugar. El aprendizaje en la sociedad proporciona conceptos más amplios donde las realidades actuales del lugar de trabajo, los sistemas educativos, las vicisitudes económicas y las situaciones de la vida impactan directamente en el status quo del aprendizaje en la edad adulta. Es precisamente esta riqueza en la diversidad de contextos lo que hace del campo del aprendizaje de adultos un fenómeno multidimensional.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje de adultos, condiciones de aprendizaje, enfoques no tradicionales, multidimensional

For the Kunas Indigenous people, learning is embedded in the roots of their community (Ventocilla et al., 1995). It is a sociohistorical process with a deep connection and respect for the environment, soul, body, mind, and emotions. Therefore, learning is a personal and social construct that constitutes the underlying basis of society and life in general. Non-traditional approaches must be considered in the general outlook of adult learning. In doing so, we are not only enriching the tenets of modern adult learning theories, we are also respectfully acknowledging ancestral and successful learning constructs that have undoubtedly thrived through human history and have been pivotal for the metanarratives and development of our societies. Likewise, learning in adulthood constitutes an ongoing process that reflects the interaction of a myriad of social aspects with learners. The different social contexts and their nuances within a society are critical for the teaching-learning processes. They help ensure social justice, peacemaking, economic progress, wellbeing and raise awareness of the national identity and idiosyncrasy. Framed within a general perspective of learning, adult learning emerges as a process that is shaped and influenced by the societal group in which adult learners share, work, live, grow, experience, fail and achieve success (Merriam et al., 2007). Comprehending and appreciating the historical and sociocultural ways of understanding and being represent an endeavor on which adult learners need to embark in order to grasp the nature and purpose of learning within particular milieus.

The aim of this paper is to explore salient conditions and non-traditional approaches with an adult learning lens so as to provide an overarching panorama of the field. It comprises two sections containing generalities and perceptions. At the same time it is a discussion to synthesize and assess major theories, concepts, insights, interpretations and implications. The sections of this paper are entitled as follows: Salient conditions of adult learning and non-traditional approaches. Finally, some conclusions are provided. These summarize the main aspects of the conditions and approaches.

Salient Conditions of Adult Learning

This section examines the sociocultural environment that outlines the adult learning process in societies. The importance of these conditions to the field of Adult Learning is also established.

Globalization. Globalization is present in every layer of

our day-to-day contexts. It is a construct that encompasses economy, tourism, national and local identities, socio-historical mindsets, business and cultural exchanges. The complexity of the interconnection among these aspects is remarkable basically because it enhances new ways of understanding what impacts adult learning. For instance, exchanges with different realities and forms of being from nations and groups give rise to ways of approaching education processes, which is the case in some developing countries of Latin America and Africa. Particularly, andragogy has had an important impact on adult and continuing education (Merriam et al., 2007).

Likewise, globalization has established a need for connectivity and communication that enhance more general, job-associated requirements and ongoing training for both professionals and adults. In exemplifying the connection between adult learning and economic tendencies caused by globalization, Merriam et al., (2007) commented that “adult education and human resource development, in particular, have responded with broad-based workplace literacy programs and training and development packages designed to address a wide range of economy-driven needs” (p. 13).

Furthermore, an interconnected world demands technical skills that also shape the needs, wants and lacks of adult education. For example, producing goods and providing services usually require low-skilled workers. On the other hand, training professionals require extensive and high-quality preparation. All of these considerations need to be carefully weighed in with an economic approach in the so-called information society. A caveat, it comes as no surprise that globalization entails unforeseen challenges to the groups involved. What is potentially harmful is the influence of external systems of beliefs on the identity and idiosyncrasy of nations that serves as the basis for educational systems. Understanding, preserving and celebrating the sociocultural traits that identify a nation or group constitute a must to avoid the exacerbation and resentment that might be caused by globalization. Policy-wise lawmakers and societies must reflect on how globalization influences adult education and the nations’ best interests.

In addition, the relevance of globalization to the field of adult learning lies in the fact that we live in an interconnected world where languages, worldviews, mindsets, identities, aspirations and cultural beliefs are inevitably intertwined. To me, adult learning is multifaceted. It is

multifaceted because globalization establishes different paradigms within cultures and at the same time create new ways of approaching things. This amalgam of factors relates to the multiple possibilities and realities that globalization offers. Now, the implications for adult learning include a concept of education, where national and international realities are explored and the implementation of educational and training programs that enhance learning capabilities to cover specific needs, wants and lacks. In addition, globalization poses both threats and opportunities that must be taken into consideration in adult education. The positive points of globalization outweigh the negative aspects. Globalization provides opportunities to explore different ways of thinking and doing. Thus, the consideration of new options when facing particular educational problems might enrich the ways of approaching a situation for both cultural groups.

Technology. Technology has had an impact on societies and education as well. The computer is a good example of the technological influence on adult education (Mitra, 1998). Concurrent with the shift to a globalized economy is the shift to a fast-changing technological society where adults need to be prepared to function properly with the state-of-the-art technology and wizardry that have invaded modern societies. This shift has given rise to a new era of teaching-learning processes whereby adults need to internalize the possibilities that computers promote: artificial intelligence, applications, education software and massive production. Moreover, the information society establishes challenges to our highly-computerized societies where information access and storage is no longer an issue. From takeaway food to phone calls to the other side of the world, almost anything is virtually accessible with a click of the mouse. In this sense, adult education is evolving so as to foster thinking and problem-solving skills. Problematizing, criticizing and assessing have become paramount in the digital era.

Likewise, technology has also created non-traditional spaces for working and learning. Asynchronous platforms and tools offer training possibilities in which adults can participate according to a schedule appropriate to their working responsibilities. Interestingly, synchronous conferences might also promote higher thinking skills through forms of training and telecommuting. Technology influences what, how, when, and why adults are learning what they must know to function accordingly in technologically-driven scenarios. Take the example of computers software used to conduct statistical analysis.

The workers who do not receive proper and on-going training are likely to be outpaced.

Finally, technology indeed provides elements to cover a whole variety of needs when it comes to adults and their learning processes. In this regard, Merriam et al., (2007) posited that “computer-assisted instruction, teleconferencing, interactive videodisk, the Internet, and the World Wide Web are expanding the possibilities of meeting the growing learning needs of adults” (p. 20). When analyzing this concept, it can be concluded that technology not only influences adult learning, but it also dictates norms in the field. Technology should be incorporated into educational processes as it has become an undeniable part of our educational reality. Online learning environments with synchronous and asynchronous activities represent a clear example of the impact of technology on the field of adult learning. Technology plays a relevant role in the shift to a society of information and knowledge. This is important, as major breakthroughs in technology are changing the way adults learn and communicate. The best example is mobile technology. According to the Costa Rica’s National Statistics Institute (2017), 95.80 % of Costa Ricans have a cellular telephone. Mobile technology allows easy access to websites and applications that foster learning processes from a holistic perspective. Finally, it is also relevant to mention that technology *per se* does not constitute an end by itself, rather a means to be used to accomplish particular objectives. A solid pedagogical mediation must be implemented to generate interaction among adult students, technological devices and class materials.

Population growth. Changing demographics constitutes a reality in our countries. Statistics show that adults outnumber other segments of the population. According to the Costa Rica’s National Statistics Institute (2014), this social reality has become a trend in the last few years. Remarkably, this is also a reality in other parts of the world. Populations continue to age thanks to medical and scientific breakthroughs that support the establishment of national and local policies for the general wellbeing of citizens. This reality has implications within the field of adult learning. It has resulted in shifts to approach learning and education from an adult perspective. For example, the provisions of educational services for adult populations has been consolidated with the increasing number of particular needs and lacks that adults face in an ever-changing society.

Furthermore, one has to admit adult learning represents an ongoing business that has transformed adults' interests into a profitable enterprise (Merriam et al., 2007). This focus might influence adult learning from an unhealthy financial perspective in which pedagogical decisions are informed by economic nuances. This situation might be a real conundrum for adult learners and educators as it poses moral issues. Additionally, the cultural variety represents a significant feature of changing demographics. Like many other countries in our continent, Costa Rica is a cultural melting pot where several ethnic groups coexist. Immigration indeed plays an important role in this socio-historical reality. The composition and interaction of these elements have had implications for adult learning where teaching methodologies must be adapted, assimilated and implemented. This combination of elements poses a set of challenges where passions and nationalistic traits must be considered. From my viewpoint, this represents a positive challenge as long as newcomers and locals consider new ways of being. Tolerance and respect are necessary in the field of adult learning. I believe that immigration processes strengthen the formation of societies and play a seminal role in the development of a country. Notably, Costa Rica has become a receiving country of immigrants especially from Nicaragua, Colombia and China (Costa Rica's National Statistics Institute, 2011).

Economic factors. "... [E]conomic factors are shaping the nature of our society, and by extension, the nature of learning that adults are most likely to undertake" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 17). Being an adult educator myself, I align with this concept. Not only does the economy shape the nature of adult learning, it also establishes its own rules when it comes to the provisions and administration of adult education. The economic context of nations dictates what, how, why and when adults are to learn. Let us consider the example of countries that are economically dependent on particular activities such as services. These nations elaborate education programs to fulfill specific job-related needs. These stem from contexts where specific training programs and skills are required. It is evident that these contexts are influenced and determined by economic constructs. Much of this influence portrays the dilemma of foreign intervention in the sovereignty of nations. Economic factors are shaping an unstoppable economic globalization that is market driven. Noticeably, this reality is becoming a menacing reality for academia, universities and their impact on societies. In illustrating this concept, Giroux (2014) has observed that

"central to this neoliberal view of higher education is a market-driven paradigm that wants to eliminate tenure, turn the humanities into a job preparation service, and reduce most faculty to the status of part-time and temporary workers..." (p. 139).

It is worth noting that adult educators should incorporate meaning-making processes and reflexive mechanisms to determine when these economic factors go too far and jeopardize the nations' identity and worldwide vision. With that in mind, societies need to be wise enough to pinpoint such elements along a continuum. Nevertheless, this does not mean that foreign investments should be automatically sanctioned or rejected whatsoever. As an immigrant myself, I understand the relevance and influence of economic aspects in the multilayered realm of adult education. As adult educators, we need to foster procedures that guarantee equality and a fair distribution of resources. Economic threats and inequalities tend to trigger social movements and revolutions. Intolerance, injustice and fear must be eradicated from our mindsets if we intend to advance as a society. This is paramount as economic factors shape and influence the nature of adult learning. Moreover, adult learning and education in general entail serene moments for reflection and transformation. The lack of educational opportunities tends to bring further upheaval to countries already struggling with social injustice and intolerance.

Finally, the relevance of reflection concerning these aspects is explored. In Ellen Rose's *On Reflection* I came upon sound concepts to justify the importance of reflection. First, I share the idea that reflection is closely aligned with creativity (Rose, 2013). Reflection can be conceptualized as a creative process that takes place naturally and purposefully at the same time, those 'aha' moments that trigger periods of deep reflection. Here we must be careful with the inclusion of rationality and critical thinking when discussing reflection. Even though reflection might be considered as a synonym of rationality, it is important to mention that rationality entails a more systematic and analytical process (Rose, 2013). Likewise, critical thinking is closely intertwined with reflection mainly when (de)constructing ideas with critical theory (Rose, 2013). Now, why does reflection matter? To answer this question, Rose (2013) posited that:

It is only by opening ourselves to reflection, according [*sic*] it value as a way of thinking and being, that we can counteract the prevailing in-

fluence of the technical mindset, with its privileging of efficiency and instrumentalism, and thus achieve balance and fulfillment in our lives. (p. 35)

To avoid the influence of this technical mindset that globalization, economic factors and technology have in learning process in the field of adult education, a solid and ongoing process of reflection must be instituted at all levels of the education systems, particularly with teachers, professors and students. Based on this idea, it is clear that different levels of implementation are required – that is, reflection and action are vital constructs when discussing these conditions. “Making time for reflection-then-action in classrooms, workplaces, and elsewhere expresses a commitment to slow, silent thought as a way of deepening our engagement...” (p. 32).

Non-traditional Approaches

This section covers some non-traditional approaches and my perception of their implications on adult education. Likewise, the main reasons and purpose in choosing these approaches are analyzed.

Embodied learning. Almost seventy percent of communicative acts are non-verbal. In other words, the body plays a major role when it comes to communicating as people use gestures, signs, emotions, feelings, interpretations, and meaning-making. Non-verbal communication and the role of the body in second and foreign language settings must be considered to make informed pedagogical decisions when teaching and planning – it also has to be considered in other educational fields. Consider the following conversation.

friend 1: monopoly?

friend 2: nope

friend 1: a movie?

friend 2: naaaahhh

friend 1: a snack?

friend 2: oh goody, goody

friend 1: tacos or burritos?

friend 2: burritos... yummy, yummy!

Now, picture the following scenario with the same conversation.

friend 1: (mind-numbingly bored) monopoly?

friend 2: (careless) nope

friend 1: (less bored) a movie?

friend 2: (yawning) naaaahhh

friend 1: (rubbing her belly) a snack?

friend 2: (excited) oh goody, goody

friend 1: (looking hungrily) tacos or burritos?

friend 2: (really excited and clapping) burritos... (rising intonation) yummy, yummy!

One can conclude that the second description provides a more detailed picture of the conversation and somehow feel what the friends are going through basically because of the bodily descriptors available. Linguistically speaking, the conversation above does not depend on verbs in order to convey meaning but rather on body expressions. This is perhaps an irrefutable language class argument according to which reclaiming the body in learning settings constitutes a must. From my language teaching perspective, it is a much-needed endeavor. Cultural traits and their meaning are embedded in reactions, gestures, movements, and facial expressions.

It is true that formal and scientific schooling has narrowed learning to a mental construction and disregarded the body, emotions, soul, and feelings as part of the communicative process. To confirm this idea, Merriam et al., (2007) have observed that “the whole person is made up of mind, body, and spirit. Rarely, however, are the body and spirit taken into account when we talk about learning” (p. 189).

Likewise, when reviewing the concept of embodiment, Freiler (2008) highlights that this construct “...involves a sense of connectedness and interdependence through the essence of lived experiencing within one’s complete humanness, both body and mind, in perceiving, interacting, and engaging with the surrounding world” (p. 40). Generally speaking, one can argue that in Western societies the body and its connections have been systematically neglected. Additionally, educational systems need to pay more attention to the role of the body and its impact on learning. The rationale behind this statement is that human beings are a combination of body, mind, spirit, and emotions. Then why are such pivotal elements of

human beings kept away from the learning process according to Western perspectives? Teachers, professors, administrators, and curriculum designers are indeed accountable for the promotion of a holistic view of learning which encompasses all these elements. Finally, Merriam et al., (2007) considered a four-part model of embodied learning. This model includes the following concepts: kinesthetic, sensory, affective, and spiritual. Finally, it can be said that learning is a social manifestation that takes into account body, soul, mind, emotions, feelings, nature and the educational setting. In other words, learning is not confined or exclusive to mental processes.

The dichotomy mind versus body has been evident in Western models of education. Reality dictates human beings are made of body and mind, some even advocate for soul. Drawing on this fact, (re)claiming the body in learning entails a perspective where non-cognitive stages of knowledge convey new degrees of relevance for adult education. Generally speaking, education needs to move away from the mind-body connection to focus on a holistic perspective of learners who are formed and influenced by a myriad of factors. It might be obvious to pinpoint that learning through the body could be considered the threshold for particular disciplines that tend to favor bodily expressions such as acting and dancing. Interestingly, other more cerebral disciplines also depend on the body to establish communicative processes conducive to learning, which is the case in education and medicine.

Problematizing the far-reaching implications of embodied learning constitutes a major challenge for adult educators and researchers. Nevertheless, examples of embodied learning do provide significant hints on the importance of reclaiming the body in learning. One of the most significant is that of the tsunami in Thailand where gypsies 'felt' a premonition that directly impacted their survival possibilities (Freiler, 2008). "... [E]mbodiment needs to be viewed within a broader movement toward holistic, integrative learning approaches wherein the body is made more visible as a source of knowledge and site for learning through objective and subjective realms of knowing" (Freiler, 2008, p. 44). When analyzing this idea, it is evident that learning takes place in societal scaffoldings with a diverse variety of elements that influence adult education.

The nature of embodiment and learning is an interrelated and complex construct. One can say that there is a strong connection between embodiment and learning and

the potentiality of learning through the body. Based on this connection, I consider that bodies (not just minds or souls) are the vehicle for learning. Mostly, this is relevant to adult learning as adult learners have developed an awareness of the functions of the body and its readiness to construct meaning in learning. Next, there is a deep connection between the body and learning (Freiler, 2008). Learning considers the body, feelings, emotions, gestures, and expressions. Learning is not limited to mental processes whatsoever. Additionally, there is a high degree of orality in these conceptions. For instance, storytelling plays a significant role in the identity construction of these societies. Furthermore, informality represents a key consideration. This informality does not belittle the quality of social manifestations. Later, the respect for the elders' wisdom constitutes a fundamental feature, especially from Indigenous perspectives.

With that in mind, the reasons of the inclusion of embodied learning in the paper are now reviewed. The most important argument is that there is no mind without a body. Although it may sound obvious, the dichotomy body-mind is evident in some learning environments (Leavy et al., 2009). (Re)claiming the body constitutes a vital endeavor for adult educators. In addition, I also align with the concept that the body represents a source of knowledge (Merriam et al., 2007). Understanding the subtleties of how the body works and its influence on the teaching-learning process is a must. Finally, an important reason emerges from the connection of embodied learning to adult learning as it contributes to meaning-making processes (Merriam et al., 2007). The value of embodied learning is undeniable to adult learning contexts. "Learning occurs in social contexts and bodies, not just in minds" (Freiler, 2008, p. 45).

Narrative learning. Narrative learning forms part of a long-standing tradition of learning among our cultures, particularly the Indigenous and First Nation groups. This oral tradition constitutes a learning method by itself in which elder members of the community explain their world view and their implications to societal groups (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Likewise, narrative learning represents a major asset in modern disciplines which are based on oral traditions: psychology, teaching, medicine and social work (Hopkins, as cited in Merriam et al., 2007). Adult education also benefits from different forms of narrative learning. Storytelling, biographies and autobiographies, historical events, and cultural narratives are examples of narrative learning.

In a way or another, societies are immersed in the telling and hearing of all kinds of stories: movies, news, social media, formal and informal settings. Closely related to Indigenosity (and to spirituality if we see that a tenet of spirituality is interconnectedness) is the construct of narrative learning. This narrative perspective offers both, a methodology to promote learning and a framework to classify the learning process. Human beings and societies, in general, find themselves constantly resorting to storytelling as an effective way to convey meaning and perpetuate their existence in time. Life itself is a construction of a social and personal metanarrative where meaning is essential to the learning process. On this matter, Clark and Rossiter (2008) have mentioned that “in narrative learning theory, we argue that there is an even closer connection between learners and experience” (p. 64). In essence, narrative learning draws on constructivism and experiential theories (Clark & Rossiter, 2008).

Next, learning through storytelling is a multilayered three-step method: stories that one hears, stories that are told, and recognition of these stories (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). I certainly agree with this idea suggesting that it is through the narration of a story, the meaning attached to it, and the links to previous knowledge that learning is constructed via significant experiences. Finally, Clark and Rossiter provide specific practices of narrative learning: learning journals, autobiographical writing, and case studies (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Here other constructs must be included so as to strengthen narrative learning: storytelling, critical writing, and reflective verbalization. To conclude, Merriam et al., (2007) established that “narratives are also windows into development and transformational learning. They enable us to make sense of our experience, which is what adult learning is all about” (p. 215). In this statement, a new element is considered. Mezirow’s framework of transformation theory, which essentially assumes a constructivist orientation, provides spaces for reflection so as to transform meaning structures. Finally, Merriam et al., (2007) point out that “stories can be used to understand content, ourselves, and the world in which we live” (p. 215). There is something about good stories that lures people. It is within narrative learning that all human beings can find similarities and important degrees of universality.

“Cultural narratives or myths are those that define the sociocultural milieu in which we live; they form the taken-for-granted assumptions on which we live our lives in the way that we do” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 208). Raising

awareness and understanding the elements that define the idiosyncrasy and identity of a nation or a group constitute a must for meaning-making processes. Such elements are imbued with cultural narratives. On a personal note, I cannot forget my great-grandfather’s invaluable stories where elements of social justice, freedom, wellbeing, democracy and integrity were internalized.

Narrative learning is included in this paper as I have always understood the world through powerful stories and colorful narrations. Learning through orality has provided different ways of being, understanding, thinking and learning (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Storytelling and stories represent vehicles for sociocultural awareness and lifelong learning. In one way or another, all human beings relate to stories that convey reflection, analysis, learning and growth possibilities, meaning, knowledge and idiosyncrasy. Likewise, a strong reason comes from the fact that narrative learning draws on tenets of constructivism and has links to transformational learning. To support this idea, Merriam et al., (2007) observed that “narrative learning is the use of stories in the construction of meaning, whether the meaning-making has to do with the self, with the content of instruction, or with the world around us” (p. 216). Furthermore, Merriam et al., (2007) established a connection between constructivism and transformational learning when they stated that “aspects of constructivism can be found in self-directed learning, transformational learning, experiential learning, situated cognition, and reflective practice” (p. 297). Finally, a significant reason relates to my research interests. I believe that narratives provide genuine opportunities to engage in meta states of consciousness and awareness to fully understand the idiosyncrasy of nations and societal groups. “A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character” (Freire, 2018, p. 71).

Spiritual learning. For our very first vacation in Costa Rica (we come from Panama), my mother decided we were to visit a representative place of the country. Because of its beauty, unique waves, and majestic views, Jaco is considered one of the most beautiful beaches in Costa Rica. My cousin and new best friend decided to go for a swim – there we were having fun, enjoying nature, bonding, and swimming. Suddenly and to my horror, my cousin was beginning to drown. I can still remember that day. It was a sunny Tuesday and the beach was absolutely empty – we were literally by ourselves in that little piece of paradise. Desperate and not knowing what to do or how

to react, I swam back to the shore crying for help. Out of nowhere a surfer with a huge board skillfully reached my cousin and literally saved him from a horrible death. Pandemonium reigned in that moment – friends and relatives were angry, excited, frightened, and nervous. At that moment, nobody was really sure who was the hero that had rescued my cousin basically because that person disappeared, he simply vanished. After years of insightful consideration and rationalization, there is no doubt in my mind that person was an angel sent by a superior entity. Arguably, one can say that such a manifestation could be explained as nothing but a miracle. Moreover, this experience triggered spirituality in my life.

Now, what is spirituality and how is it related to adult education? This is a thought-provoking question, indeed. First, it is necessary to clarify that spirituality does not represent an outbreak of radicalism, bigotry, or extremism in learning settings. It is not a group of weirdoes with candles, soft music, or naïve concepts of relaxation practices either. When defining spirituality, Tisdell (2008) states that "...in contemporary literature spirituality is about an *individual's* personal experience with the sacred, which can be experienced anywhere. Religion, on the other hand, is about an *organized community of faith*, with an official creed, and codes of regulatory behavior" (p. 28). From this definition, one can tell that religion and spirituality are intertwined and the continuum that separates both concepts is somehow blurry. From my viewpoint, spirituality involves a more personal and insightful perspective. On the other hand, religion constitutes a social and group experience that is nurtured from each person's spirituality. Next, it is evident that spirituality has had a tremendous impact on adult learning. Despite, an initial degree of marginalization, spirituality has positioned itself as a current topic with solid connections to adult learning. In this regard, Tisdell (2008) argues that "in more recent years, this implicit influence of spirituality in adult education has become more explicit in that there's more direct discussion of it" (p. 30).

Additionally, it is the professor's responsibility to create a non-threatening environment and the conditions conducive to spirituality. To support this idea, Merriam et al., (2007) have observed that "a sacred space allows for dialogue where one listens to others' experiences without judgment. The teacher is accountable for designing a learning experience that both supports and challenges the learners" (p. 204). From this statement, one can conclude that teachers are accountable for creating

pedagogical conditions in the classroom. Building on this concept, I am not saying that such an environment will automatically lead to spirituality. If spirituality does arise, teachers and professors need to be ready to let students make connections on their own so as to facilitate the meaning-making progress. In other words, it is relevant to give students time and space to digest, understand, internalize, and benefit from the spiritual moment that will be conducive to learning. Next, spirituality does inform learning processes. Some experiences are reported here: First, the universality of spiritual involvements in different cultures, impressions, and concurrences in times of struggle and festivity, activities attained to meditative states or in natural settings, and finally experiences related to the ontogenesis of identity traits (Tisdell, 2008). Finally, taking into account the premise that the teachers' role is to enable learning by empowering students, spirituality needs to be understood as a personal and inner process – shimmering and significant occasions where spirituality might contribute to learning.

Spirituality is an inner process about meaning-making that is invariably affected by social beliefs and traditions. The connection between spirituality and meaning-making implies a positionality in adult learning (Merriam et al., 2007). Research indicates that spirituality informed the professional practice of adult educators. Tisdell (2008) reports on the universality of human experience, dreams, meditation moments and identity development as significant spiritual experiences connected to adult education (Tisdell, 2008). Attending to spirituality goes beyond a set of candles and a romantic idea of a shimmering moment, it deals with creating safe, non-threatening environments for deep connections. "There is power in trying to engage people in spiral learning opportunities that draw on multiple realms of being, including the rational; the affective; and the symbolic, imaginal, and spiritual domains" (Tisdell, 2008, p. 34). Closely related to this concept is the belief that empowering learners is to provide a sense of security conducive to spiritual growth.

The reasons for including spiritual learning in this paper are now examined. To me, spirituality is paramount in every field – I consider myself a spiritual person. Even though spirituality might be difficult to explore in the more rational and cerebral mindset of academia because of its nature, its connection to meaning-making establishes a basis to be considered within the realm of adult learning (Merriam et al., 2007). The connection between spirituality and meaning-making is a reason to consider

spiritual learning as a relevant approach conducive to learning. A caveat, throughout my considerations, I took the position that spiritual learning is basically about meaning-making. Noticeably, it could be argued that spirituality relates to religion or other types of practices. It is not the case here.

Transformative learning theory. “Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). Drawing on experiences and inner interpretations, transformative learning aids to understand and clarify the processes of transformation that adults go through in a lifetime, both socially and personally. Personally, the main takeaway from Mezirow’s theory of adult learning revolves around the concept that learning is conceived as a social construct where the previous understanding of a situation provides a solid basis for an original perspective – that is, this line of reasoning and inquiring advances knowledge with a new vision. Mezirow advocates for a theory that provides the tools and necessary environment to acquire capabilities that help them function properly according to their field of expertise (Mezirow, 2003). I too believe this is a must for any theory or approach that deals with adult education. Additionally, Mezirow implies the idea that transformative learning may go beyond the provision of particular skills when suggesting that acquiring critical skills in order to exercise reflective assessment also constitutes a possibility (Mezirow, 2003). Building on this concept, one can say that acquiring and developing critical skills represents the essence of adult education. Additionally, I do believe that action in transformative learning goes beyond the class. It is a theory that impacts the holistic process of learning. Now, the constructivist nature of the theory fosters opportunities for learners to (re)interpret their learning. Delving into the basis of our frames of reference to develop deep awareness stages constitutes a real challenge. To me, transformation also implies elements of change to improve current conditions of societies.

Central to the theory of Transformative Learning is the concept of experience (Merriam et al., 2007). Now, it is relevant not to idealize the construct of experience. A naive and romantic idea of experience does not constitute any legitimate learning per se whatsoever (Brookfield, 1998). Engaging in critical reflection processes through

a critically reflective lens that fosters transformational stages is within adult educators’ purview. “Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object intermediates the cognitive actors – teacher on the one hand and students on the other” (Freire, 2018, p. 79). As a social constructivist, I believe that knowledge is context bound and students construct social meaning-making processes based on experience and critical reflection.

Finally, I explore the reasons why I chose this particular theory. Transformative learning lures educators mainly because of its possibilities to change mindsets and impact societies in the long term. Moreover, I consider myself a social constructivist. I believe that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction with the environment, materials and different stakeholders of the learning process. Social reflective practice is essential within this approach. To me, transformational learning is essentially a process to construct meaningful learning. This meaningful learning that is fostered by transformational learning enables a state of consciousness conducive to processes of analysis and learning. Additionally, I align with the idea that transformative learning is based on a particular philosophical worldview (Taylor, 2008). For both, my professional practice and research interests, a sound worldview that shapes and informs pedagogical decisions is paramount.

Indigenous knowledge. From an Indigenous perspective, learning implies a holistic approach where body, soul, mind, feelings, nature, and the sociocultural environment interact in order to create a context for learning to flourish. Likewise, storytelling and orality represent cornerstones as traditions and identity traits are celebrated and passed on from one generation to another – learning is established at a community level. In other words, learning is conveyed through stories and elders’ wisdom. It is evident that learning is heavily rooted in social and group interactions with a profound connection to nature and the environment in which societies develop. All of the above are some underlying cornerstones of Indigenous knowledge (Native Americans, Kunas, Bri Bris, Aztecs, Métis, Ngäbes, First Nations, Mestizos, Gauchos, among many others).

Now, how are these perspectives connected to adult education? First, it is necessary to clarify that there is a clear tendency to administer, provide, and engage in learning

systems mainly from the Western pedagogical outlook. To exemplify this idea, Merriam et al., (2007) point out that "...Western notions of adult learning dominate is evidenced by the use of Western textbooks, journals, and conference proceedings in academic adult education programs not only in North America but in Asia and Africa" (p. 218). Moreover, Merriam et al., (2007) offer general guidelines to connect these perspectives with adult education that also contradict Western interpretations. These concepts can be abridged as follows: interdependence of learning, communal nature of learning settings, holistic approach conducive to learning, and informality deeply entrenched in day-to-day circumstances.

I do believe Indigenous knowledge to be organic, generated by and from locals which provide a sense of identity and empowerment since knowledge is being socially constructed with an important degree of righteousness and paying close attention to the connection with nature, not exported or imposed by external forces or entities whatsoever. Furthermore, I have always been a fan of a popular story told by elders in Limon and Colon (Caribbean coast of Costa Rica and Panama), about a spider who teaches kids and teenagers the value of cleverness and cunning.

Anancy is a Spider. Anancy is a Man. Anancy is West Indian. Anancy is African. Brotha Anancy is to teach you right! Popular saying

Further to the discussion on Indigenosity, Sears and Cairns (2010) attempt to extend basic concepts by considering the following core characteristics of Indigenosity: fosters a pleasant harmony between living creatures and their habitats, recognizes the relevance of traditional knowledge through storytelling, art, music, traditions, and celebrations, considers spirituality to be an important element of life, informs community and its members, and constitutes a force to fight back against Western impositions. Then again, orality, informality, a profound respect for elders and the environment, spirituality, and storytelling are favored over written, scientific, and formal ways to understand learning. It is a way to interpret and convey knowledge and learning over generations.

Pedagogy of solidarity. Being a radical and a disguised constructivist, Paulo Freire argues that pedagogy of solidarity seeks for a bigger dream, a fair society where one must pursue justice and equality. From my viewpoint, the pedagogy of solidarity draws on some basic tenets.

First, humans are historical human beings. As sociohistorical beings, we find ourselves constantly defining and re-defining our existence (Freire, 2014). Next, education responds to a sense of imperfectness. To this end, Freire (2014) stressed that "I am sure that from a metaphysical point of view what explains the reason for the existence of education is fundamentally the fact of being an uncompleted being and having the consciousness of this uncompletedness" (p. 16). Later, one can conclude that there is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to education. Educational systems respond to political paradigms and economic forces not to diverge from the mainstream. Educational practitioners need to be reflexive so as to question the implications of established curricula. Additionally, identity is pivotal within Freire's discourse. There is no construction or exchange of knowledge without a solid and profound respect for one's identity. To exemplify this concept, Freire (2014) commented that "...if you follow me, you destroy me. The best way for you to understand me is to reinvent me and not to try to become adapted to me. Experience cannot be exported, it can only be reinvented" (p. 17). Finally, the concept of respect also constitutes an underlying tenet of this pedagogy. For Freire, respect is the cornerstone of any educational exchange. The Pedagogy of Solidarity does revolve around the idea that respect, identity, consciousness, and social justice must be observed in educational systems.

Salient Conditions and Non-traditional Approaches

Adult education influences and is shaped, at the same time, by the social context and idiosyncrasy of nations. The sociocultural reality is directly related to the provision and promotion of adult education. Globalization, technology, economic factors, environmental awareness, demographics, geographical aspects and mindsets play a significant role when it comes to the organization of adult education and its subtleties. Engaging in reflection on how non-traditional approaches inform adult learning is a necessary and ongoing process in this field.

Additionally, when one considers a perspective, other viewpoints are not necessarily taken into consideration – that is, when possible solutions, theories, allegations, and conceptions are appraised, other equally relevant or perhaps even better inferences, attitudes, tenets, and explanations are not pondered and these choices have attached implications for specific conditions and approaches.

Likewise, a brilliant concept that is sitting with me is the fact that categorization implies important degrees of abstraction (Sears & Cairns, 2010). The example provided by these authors is the South-Up Map. There is an inherited and sociocultural tendency to see and organize things in a way, usually the dominant perspective and the master narrative's way. Sears and Cairns stressed the concept that there is no up or down in the space and proposed the idea of an inverted map of the world, another way of seeing things and considering other social, economic, and political perspectives, learning included. It is necessary that the political, cultural, and educational implications of such a view in the societies' status quo be pondered.

Moreover, it is necessary to go over general characteristics that can be implied from these salient conditions and non-traditional approaches and their connection to learning. First, learning is multifaceted. A myriad of cultural, economic, and political elements is intertwined and has a direct impact on where, how, when, why, and what is learned. Additionally, learning is holistic. In that sense, it looks for an in-depth understanding of learning processes while taking into account all its nuances – there is a sense of interdependence that involves several stakeholders in learning contexts. When referring to this, Merriam et al., (2007) have said that “identity, self-concept, and self-esteem are developed and enhanced only in relation to others” (p. 237).

Conclusion

This section goes over the conclusions. One has to recognize that potential critiques to non-traditional approaches include the conception that most of these learning viewpoints could not be considered formal theories per se. Sears and Cairns developed a five-step process of formal theorizing. These can be summarized as follows: logical rigor, empirical rigor, conceptual rigor, second-order questions, and relation to existing knowledge (Sears & Cairns, 2010). Compared to this framework, some perspectives discussed above might not be considered formal theories – perhaps from the western perspective – and yet they provide thought-provoking elements and implications to be considered as formal theories.

There is also a caveat. A significant limitation of this paper is the fact it contains omissions that might have resulted in a different construct. Relevant perspectives that were not considered for this discussion include Feminism Perspectives, Web-Based Learning, Queer Theory, Con-

fucian Way of Thinking, Hindu Perspectives, First Nations Treaties, Maori Concepts, Islamic Perspectives, Critical Race Theory, and Aztec Perspectives among many other perceptions and learning beliefs. Best-known for his awe-inspiring poetry, Ruben Dario formed part of leading educational philosophers in Latin America who advocated for full inclusion and consideration of different perspectives in the realm of education. With this in mind, it is relevant to consider the concept of strengthening learning theories, approaches and tenets by including other perspectives. The consideration of different perspectives will not only enhance non-traditional approaches themselves; it will also provide diverse knowledge and implications that might lead to new information and ways to implement professional practice and internalize schemata. In this regard, Merriam et al., (2007) have commented that “what is important is that by becoming acquainted with other ways of learning and knowing we enrich our understanding of learning, and ultimately our practice with adults” (p. 225). Delving into and considering salient conditions and non-traditional approaches constitute a must in the field of adult learning.

In addition, meaning making is built up through personal and social experiences closely tied to the community and its context. Meaning making is a social construct and, at the same time, a personal attempt to purposefully understand life within a community and its subtleties. Building on the relevance of community for these perspectives, Merriam and Kim (2008) posited that “from this communal perspective, learning is the responsibility of all members of the community because it is through this learning that the community itself can develop” (p. 73). Also, creativity and motivational aspects are important to learning, primarily to spirituality (Merriam & Kim, 2008).

The last twenty years have brought a much-needed recognition that adult learning is multidimensional (Merriam et al., 2007). This constitutes a relevant takeaway. Moving away from the vision that cognitive processing is the unique and most important element when acquiring knowledge has brought thought-provoking constructs such as spirituality, feelings, environmental awareness, emotions, fears, and experiences to a more holistic, in-depth vision of learning. As a result, the field of adult learning is influenced by the sociohistorical context where it takes place. Learning in society provides broader concepts where the current realities of the workplace, educational systems, economic vicissitudes and life situations directly

impact the status quo of learning in adulthood. "... [I]t appears that adult learning research and theory building are expanding to include more than just an individual, cognitive understanding of learning... [L]earning occurs in their intersections with each other [mind, body, soul, emotions and fears, among others]" (Merriam, 2008, p. 97). It is precisely this richness in the diversity of contexts that makes the field of adult learning a multidimensional phenomenon.

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