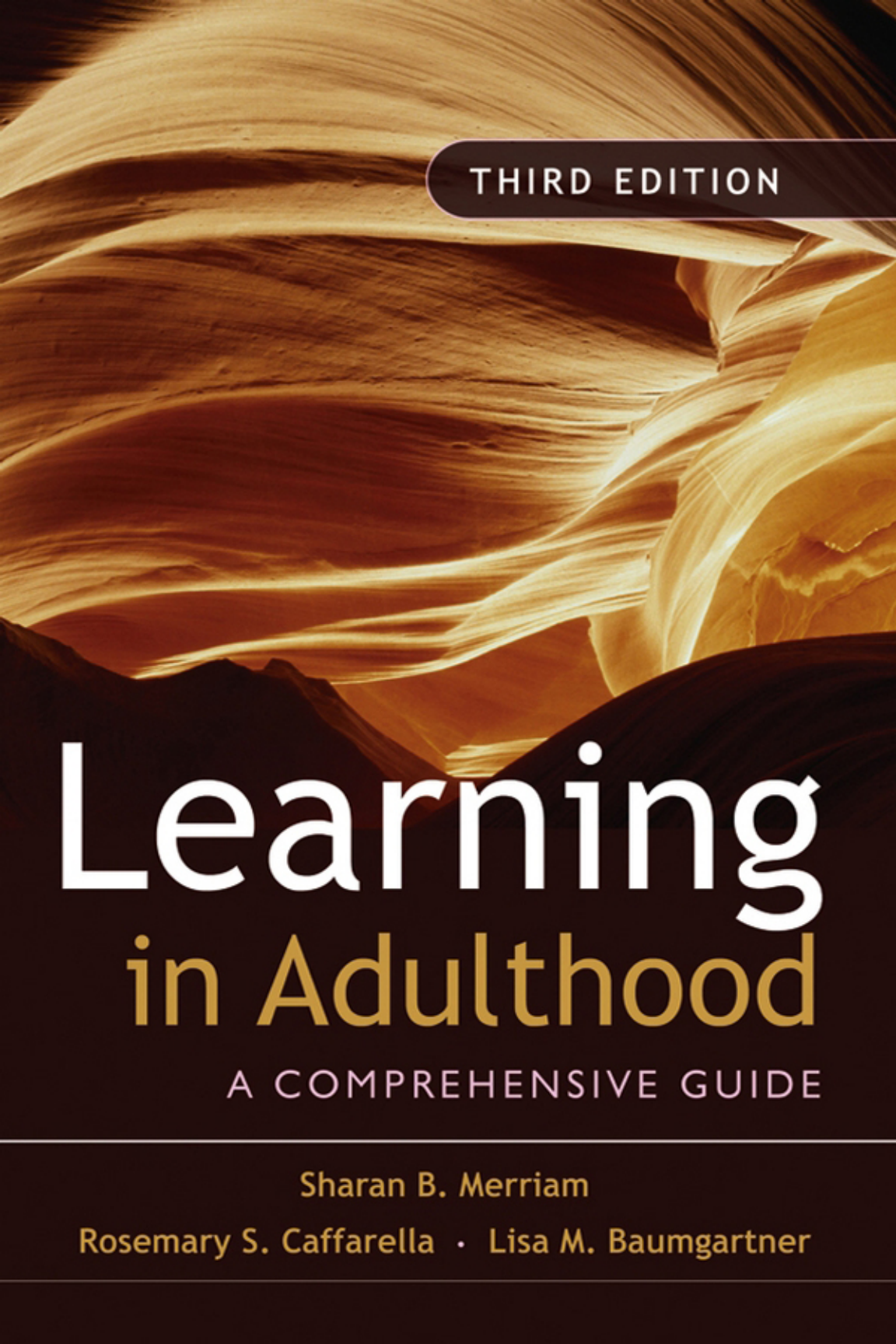
THIRD EDITION
Learning
in Adulthood
A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE
Sharan B. Merriam
Rosemary S. Caffarella · Lisa M. Baumgartner

Learning in Adulthood

JOSSEY-BASS

Learning in Adulthood

A Comprehensive Guide

Third Edition

Sharan B. Merriam
Rosemary S. Caffarella
Lisa M. Baumgartner

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Published by Jossey-Bass
A Wiley Imprint
989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 www.josseybass.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Merriam, Sharan B.
Learning in adulthood : a comprehensive guide / Sharan B. Merriam, Rosemary S. Caffarella, Lisa M. Baumgartner. — 3rd ed.
p. cm. — (Jossey-bass higher and adult education series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-7879-7588-3 (cloth)
ISBN-10: 0-7879-7588-5 (cloth)
1. Adult learning. I. Caffarella, Rosemary S. (Rosemary Shelly), 1946- II. Baumgartner, Lisa, 1964- III. Title.
LC5225.L42M47 2006
374—dc22
2006019145

Printed in the United States of America
THIRD EDITION
HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published by Jossey-Bass
A Wiley Imprint
989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 www.josseybass.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Merriam, Sharan B.
Learning in adulthood : a comprehensive guide / Sharan B. Merriam, Rosemary S. Caffarella, Lisa M. Baumgartner. — 3rd ed.
p. cm. — (Jossey-bass higher and adult education series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-7879-7588-3 (cloth)
ISBN-10: 0-7879-7588-5 (cloth)
1. Adult learning. I. Caffarella, Rosemary S. (Rosemary Shelly), 1946- II. Baumgartner, Lisa, 1964- III. Title.
LC5225.L42M47 2006
374—dc22
2006019145

Printed in the United States of America
THIRD EDITION
HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

The Jossey-Bass Higher
and Adult Education Series

Preface

Learning in adulthood is an intensely personal activity. Yet at the same time, a multibillion-dollar enterprise has arisen in response to adult learning interests—an enterprise that spends more dollars than elementary schools, high schools, and postsecondary schools combined. Indeed, the field of adult and continuing education is characterized by a bewildering array of programs, agencies, and personnel working to assist adults in their learning. It is precisely the focus on adults as learners, however, that unites an otherwise extraordinarily diverse field. It is also the life context of adults and some of the distinguishing characteristics of the adult learning process that differentiate adult education from other kinds of education. To facilitate the process of learning, it is especially important to know who the adult learner is, how the social context shapes the learning that adults are engaged in, why adults are involved in learning activities, how adults learn, and how aging affects learning ability. *Learning in Adulthood* addresses these topics, among others.

There is a voluminous literature on adult learning, ranging from technical articles on various aspects of adult learning to handbooks, guides, and pamphlets summarizing material for the new instructor of adult students. If one goes to a database such as the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), which catalogues journal articles, monographs, conference proceedings, papers, and so on, or does some random exploring on the World Wide Web, one encounters thousands of citations under the topic "adult learning." Further, there are dozens of books with either a central or secondary focus on adult learning.

For this third edition of *Learning in Adulthood* we have paid particular attention to work published since the last edition of the book. This third edition of *Learning in Adulthood* builds on material in the 1999 edition, bringing together the important contributions

of the past decade to our understanding of adult learning. While we have preserved important foundational material (such as a discussion of andragogy), we have also brought to bear the most recent thinking and research. We have strived to put together a comprehensive overview and synthesis of what we know about adult learning: the context in which it takes place, who the participants are, what they learn and why, the nature of the learning process itself, new approaches to adult learning, the development of theory in adult learning, and other issues relevant to understanding adult learning.

The book also takes into account recent work in sociology, philosophy, critical social theory, and psychology. In most writing on adult learning, the sociocultural perspective has been widely neglected in favor of the predominant orientation to the individual learner and how to facilitate her or his learning. In addition to the focus on the learner, we attend to the context in which learning takes place and to learners' interactive relationship with that context and with the learning activity itself. We look at how the social structure influences what is offered and who participates, how the sociocultural context creates particular developmental needs and interests, and how social factors such as race, class, and gender shape learning.

This book is intended primarily for educators of adults. We have organized the material so that it will make sense to readers who are new to adult education and at the same time will challenge those who are already familiar with the knowledge base of the field. The organization and presentation of this material reflect our efforts over the years to find the best way to organize courses, workshops, and seminars in adult learning and development for audiences with varying levels of expertise. We have endeavored to put together a book that is at once readable, thorough, and up-to-date in its coverage. In particular, the book is designed for use in courses in adult learning. In addition to those associated with the field of adult education itself, however, those in counseling, health, social work, human resource development, administration, and instructional technology and in such institutions as libraries, churches, business and industry, and higher education often deal on a daily basis with adult learners. We also intend this book to be a resource for practitioners in these fields who would like to know more about adult learners and the learning process.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

This third edition of *Learning in Adulthood* is substantially reorganized from the previous edition. We realized that in most courses using this text, the chapters specific to adult learning theory and models were read before chapters on traditional learning theory, cognition, and psychosocial developmental frameworks. We have organized accordingly. This edition is divided into four parts. Part One describes the context of adult learning. Part Two focuses on theories and models of adult learning. The chapters in Part Three address newer approaches to adult learning, and those in Part Four present material on topics that intersect with adult learning, such as memory and cognition, adult development, and so on.

The chapters in Part One, "Adult Learning in Contemporary Society," focus on the context of adult learning. Chapter One sets the sociocultural context for adult learning in North America. In it, we discuss three forces—demographics, globalization, and technology—that have shaped adult learning today. It is important to understand how the interaction of those three factors has led to changes in both what adults want to learn and the learning opportunities provided for them. Directly related to the sociocultural context of adult learning are the environments where learning takes place, the subject of Chapter Two. These range from educational and noneducational institutions, such as hospitals and government agencies, to nonformal and community-based agencies, to incidental and informal learning that is more self-directed than structured by others. New in this edition is the online environment, which interfaces with formal, nonformal, and informal modes of learning. Also in this chapter we explore the concepts of organizational learning and the learning organization, and lifelong learning and the learning society. Chapter Three summarizes the literature on who participates in primarily formal adult learning activities, why people participate, and what they choose to learn. We also take a critical look at key questions of access and opportunity, and examine the gaps between the rhetoric and the reality in the provision of formal and nonformal learning activities in our society.

Part Two, "Adult Learning Theory and Models," builds on foundational material in adult learning, material that is at the heart of our field of adult education. The topics covered in these

chapters represent the field's efforts in distinguishing itself from the education of children. We begin Chapter Four with a description and critique of the best known of these theories: Knowles's (1980) concept of andragogy. Based on five characteristics of adult learners, andragogy focuses on the adult learner as distinguished from preadult learners. In this chapter we also cover three other models of learning, two of which are fairly recent additions to our literature. McClusky's (1970) theory of margin, which has great intuitive appeal to adult learners introduced to it, is explained first. This is followed by Illeris's (2004a) three dimensions of learning model, and the most recent iteration of Jarvis's (2006) learning model. In Chapter Five we explore the rich array of work that has been completed on self-directed learning. Addressed are the goals and processes of self-directed learning, the concept of self-directedness as a personal attribute of the learner, recent approaches to self-directed learning, and some suggestions for building research and theory in this area. Currently, transformational learning has taken center stage in research and writing. Chapter Six summarizes the development of transformational learning, reviews the recent research in this area, and examines unresolved issues inherent in this approach to adult learning. In Chapter Seven, the last chapter of Part Two, we look closely at the role of experience in learning: both how adult learning builds on prior experience and how experience shapes learning. The concepts of experiential learning, reflective practice, and situated cognition are also examined in this chapter.

Part Three, "Newer Approaches to Adult Learning," contains two totally new chapters. We felt that the burgeoning interest in embodied or somatic learning, spirituality and learning, and narrative approaches to learning warranted a chapter (Chapter Eight) in this edition of *Learning in Adulthood.* We uncovered so much recent material in these areas that, had space allowed, we could have devoted more than one chapter to these topics. Chapter Nine on non-Western approaches to adult learning is also new. Although the great majority of the knowledge base represented in *Learning in Adulthood* is from a Western perspective, representing cultural values of privileging the individual learner and cognitive processes over more holistic approaches, we wanted to introduce readers to

other epistemologies, other ways of thinking about learning and knowing. We hope we have done that through brief introductions to five non-Western perspectives. The final chapter in Part Three is an update of critical theory, postmodernism, and feminist pedagogy. These three perspectives draw from literature outside the field of adult education. Scholars have applied these perspectives to our field, enlarging our understanding by inviting us to question how the structural inequities based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, and so on affect learning.

Part Four, which we have titled "Learning and Development," brings together material from philosophy, psychology, sociology, biology, and so on, that has a bearing on adult learning. In Chapter Eleven, on traditional learning theory, we review five traditional theories about learning—behaviorism, humanism, cognitivism, social learning theory, and constructivism—along with their implications for adult learning. Where one aligns oneself with these theories manifests itself in the view of the adult learner, the role of instructor-facilitator, and the goals of the learning transaction itself. Chapter Twelve focuses on adults' developmental characteristics. Beginning with biological and psychological perspectives on adult development, we move to sociocultural and integrated perspectives. The work on adult development in recent years places less emphasis on age and stage models and more on the effect of such factors as race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Much has been written lately about cognitive development in adulthood, and so this is treated separately in Chapter Thirteen. Here we review several theoretical models of cognitive development as well as present the concept of dialectical thinking. Chapter Fourteen reviews the work on intelligence, especially as it has been studied from a developmental or aging perspective. Drawing on several disciplines and summarizing recent work on memory and aging, expertise, cognitive and learning styles, and brain-based research, Chapter Fifteen is one of the few compilations of its kind in an adult learning textbook.

Finally, in the last chapter we step back from the accumulated knowledge base to summarize and integrate the material on adult learning presented in earlier chapters. Chapter Sixteen also reflects how we ourselves have come to think about learning in adulthood.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This third edition of *Learning in Adulthood* is a direct response to the field's burgeoning literature base on research and theory in adult learning and the need for a single, comprehensive, up-to-date textbook to use in our adult learning classes. In a very real sense, it has been the students in our programs and the participants in our workshops and seminars who have challenged us to revise and update the previous edition of the book. We were pleased that Lisa Baumgartner agreed to join our team for this edition. Her fresh perspective has undoubtedly made this edition of *Learning in Adulthood* the best yet! Others, of course, have been of invaluable assistance at various stages of the project. David Brightman, our editor at Jossey-Bass, was enormously supportive in assisting us through the process. Colleagues Ralph Brockett, Carolyn Clark, Bradley Courtenay, Ed Taylor, and Libby Tisdell unselfishly provided us with updated materials and took time out from their own work to read and critique draft chapters. Their comments, insights, and suggestions considerably strengthened this book. A special thanks goes to Young Sek Kim, Ph.D. student and graduate research assistant at the University of Georgia, for tracking down references, assisting in editing, and seeing to the technical matter of getting the book ready for the publisher. To all of you we offer our heartfelt thanks. Finally, we thank our family members and friends for their support and patience over the last year.

Athens, Georgia — SHARAN B. MERRIAM
Ithaca, New York — ROSEMARY S. CAFFARELLA
DeKalb, Illinois — LISA M. BAUMGARTNER
June 2006

The Authors

Sharan B. Merriam is professor of adult education at the University of Georgia. Merriam's research and writing activities have focused on the foundations of adult education, adult development, adult learning, and qualitative research methods. She has published more than twenty books and dozens of chapters and articles and held major editorship roles over the past twenty-five years. For five years she was coeditor of *Adult Education Quarterly,* the major research and theory journal in adult education. Currently she is coeditor for the book series Professional Practices in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. She has won the Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education for three different books. Various of her books have been translated into Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and French. Based on her widespread contributions to the field of adult education, Merriam has been inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame and was the first to receive the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education's Career Achievement award. She has served on steering committees for the annual North American Adult Education Research Conference, the Qualitative Research in Education Conference held annually at the University of Georgia, and the Commission of Professors of Adult Education. She has conducted workshops and seminars on adult learning and qualitative research throughout North America and overseas, including countries in southern Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. In 1998 she was a senior Fulbright scholar to Malaysia, and in 2006 a visiting scholar to South Korea.

Rosemary S. Caffarella is professor and chair of the Department of Education in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University. Her research and writing activities have focused on adult learning, program planning, and designing culturally appropriate programs for adults. Caffarella has authored or coauthored seven books—two of which have been translated into Chinese and one into Japanese—and numerous book chapters and articles. She received the prestigious Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education for *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (2nd ed., 1999), coauthored with Sharan Merriam. Her most recent book, *Planning Programs for Adult Learners* (2nd ed., 2002), is a detailed guide for adult educators and trainers working in a variety of settings. In addition, in 2003 she was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from the College of Lifelong Learning in the University of New Hampshire system. She has conducted workshops and presented papers and lectures throughout the United States, Canada, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Australia. Her current project, in partnership with the Universiti Putra Malaysia and a number of other Malaysian organizations and individuals, is educating Malaysian women, their families, and health care professionals about breast cancer treatment and prevention. The project highlights working in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner in a multicultural nation.

Lisa M. Baumgartner is an associate professor of adult education at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb. Her research and writing focus on adult learning and development and women's contributions to the field of adult education. A recipient of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Cyril O. Houle Scholars Research Grant for Emerging Scholars in Adult Education, she completed a study on civil rights activist Septima P. Clark's lifelong contributions to social justice adult education. In addition, she coedited *Adult Learning and Development: Multicultural Stories* with Sharan Merriam (1999). She has served on the steering committee for the annual North American Adult Education Research Conference. She is a consulting editor for the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* and the *Qualitative Report*. In 2004, she received the Commission of Professors of Adult Education Early Career Award, which honors individuals in the early stages of their academic career who have made significant contributions in scholarship and service to the field.

Learning in Adulthood

Part One

Adult Learning in Contemporary Society

It is very much the perspective of this book that learning is a personal process—but a process that is shaped by the context of adult life and the society in which one lives. Compare how industrialization of the early years of the twentieth century affected what an adult needed and wanted to learn with the knowledge economy of the early twenty-first century. This learning in turn affects the social context. For example, as we become more technologically savvy, businesses respond by developing more sophisticated systems and gadgets that then require us to keep learning. It is indeed an interactive process between the learner and the social context. The three chapters in Part One explore the sociocultural context of the United States, the range of learning opportunities available to adults in this context, and who takes advantage of these opportunities and why.

Chapter One describes three factors characteristic of American society today that affect what adults want to learn. First, dramatic changes are occurring in the demographic base of our society. Adults outnumber those under eighteen years old for the first time ever. Moreover, the percentage of the population over age sixty-five continues to grow, commanding the attention of policymakers, businesspeople, and educators alike. Our population as a whole is also better educated than ever before, and there is more cultural and ethnic diversity. Therefore, there are simply

more adults seeking learning opportunities, as well as more groups of adults with particular learning needs.

The second and third factors shaping the learning enterprise are globalization and technology. These are very much interrelated, of course; technology has had an enormous impact on the economy. Robotics and automation displace production workers but create other jobs; technology has fostered whole new work structures, such as job-sharing and telecommuting. The effect of the global economy and technological advances on the nature of adult learning is staggering. Adults find that they must continue their learning past formal schooling in order to function at work, at home, and in their communities. The need for new knowledge, for updating old information, for retraining, has resulted in a multibillion-dollar educational enterprise.

Some of this learning takes place in formal settings sponsored by myriad institutions and agencies. As might be expected, business and industry and educational institutions offer a large number of adult learning opportunities, but so do the military, cooperative extensions, churches, hospitals, and other institutions. Chapter Two explores how the context of formal institutional settings influences the learner and the learning process. Also reviewed are learning opportunities that are nonformal, such as those offered by community-based agencies, and informal, incidental, and self-directed opportunities, as might happen in the course of the workday or by watching a television program. In addition, we discuss online learning, a fourth environment for learning that overlays formal, nonformal, and informal modes of learning. In the second half of this chapter, we explore the interrelated concepts, first, of organizational learning and the learning organization, and second, of lifelong learning and the learning society.

Chapter Three profiles who participates in adult learning, why adults participate, and what an adult chooses to learn. Most of this information on participation and motivation is in reference to formal learning, such as that provided by educational institutions and employers. Estimates of the percentage of the adult population that participates in learning have steadily risen over the past forty years, with the most current study suggesting that approximately 46 percent of all adult Americans participate. Studies of self-directed learning and other nonformal types of education put the

percentage even higher. Clearly, adult learning is an important activity for today's adults. What motivates adults to participate and what deters participation is important information, especially for program developers. This chapter also reviews motivational studies.

The final section of Chapter Three "problematizes" the concept of participation. By examining the assumptions that underlie participation we squarely confront the issues of access and opportunity in adult education. The gap between the better educated who seek out continuing education and those who do not continues to widen. Adult learning seems to have become a vehicle for solidifying a socioeconomic structure that limits access and opportunity, contrary to the stated goal of equal access to education in our society. We examine the rhetoric, which espouses one set of values, and the reality, which demonstrates another, in the provision of adult learning opportunities.

Chapter One

The Social Context of Adult Learning

Learning, even self-directed learning, rarely occurs "in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives; . . . it is intimately related to that world and affected by it" (Jarvis, 1987, p. 11). What one wants to learn, what is offered, and the ways in which one learns are determined to a large extent by the nature of the society at any particular time. Contrast the young male apprentice of colonial times learning to be a blacksmith with today's middle-aged woman learning a new software program, or the preparation needed to become a medical doctor at the turn of the twentieth century—less than a high school diploma—with today's long and specialized training.

It can also be argued that the nature of society at any particular point in time determines the relative emphasis placed on adult learning. In preindustrial societies, the rate of change was such that what a person needed to know to function as an adult could be learned in childhood. In societies hurrying to catch up, however, and in our own society with its accelerated rate of change, the urgency of dealing with social realities is felt by adults. Society no longer has the luxury of waiting for its youth. As Belanger (1996) notes, "The question is no longer whether adult learning is needed, and how important it is. The issue today is how to respond to this increasing and diversified demand, how to manage this explosion" (p. 21). Youth, in fact, "who are sent out into life with a dwindling sackful of values, . . . face a situation in which they have to keep filling up their sack. This leads adult education to take 'lifelong learning' as its motto." Further, "the hole in the ozone layer

provides the stimulus for courses to which people turn for advice, mad cow disease pushes up the numbers attending vegetarian cooking courses, and backache creates a need for posture classes" (Geissler, 1996, pp. 35–36).

While adult education is responsive to the context in which it takes place, it also in turn affects that same context. Take, for example, enormous changes in our society brought on by computer technology. Auto mechanics must now be trained to diagnose engine problems using computers; you can save time at the local grocery by doing your own scanning, bagging, and checkout all by computer; airline boarding passes can be accessed at home; and so on. Adult education has responded to this computerization of our world by offering courses—courses where we can learn this technology so that we can better function in our digital environment. But the fact that millions of adults have become computer literate interacts with our environment in that we now *expect* to use our skills in an ever-widening range of applications—forcing institutions and agencies to adopt and expand these technologies.

Although the preceding are particularly contemporary examples, historically there has always been an interlocking of adult learning needs with the social context in which they occur. The skills needed in colonial America reflected the agrarian context; further, since early settlers were fleeing religious persecution in Europe, there was a moral and religious imperative in learning to read so that one could study the Bible. After the revolutionary war, the newly independent nation needed leaders and informed citizens to build the democratic society. Eclipsing religious education, civic education, which included learning about philosophy, science, and politics, became paramount in the education of adults.

With the Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, industry-based skills training became a necessity. Also, because of the massive influx of immigrants to the United States at this time, "Americanization" and citizenship programs became a prominent form of adult education. It was felt that these immigrants needed to learn the ways of their adopted country so that they would "melt" into society. Interestingly, immigrants themselves organized their own schools to maintain their culture, but these were largely invisible to society at large.

Although a major thrust of adult education at any particular time reflects the sociohistorical context, varied purposes and learning

interests coexist. We might argue that technology is a major thrust of learning today, but there is still job-training, literacy, civic education, liberal (such as Great Books clubs) and leisure learning, along with community-based social-action initiatives. As Stubblefield and Keane (1994, p. 312) observed from their survey of adult education from colonial times until the present, regardless of the historical era, "Americans learned because there was knowledge to master, technology to adapt, and life's uncertainties to be resolved."

Thus, to a large extent, the learning that goes on in adulthood can be understood through an examination of the social context in which it occurs. How is learning in adulthood shaped by the society in which it takes place? How does the sociocultural context determine what is learned and by whom?

This chapter explores three conditions characteristic of the current sociocultural context that are shaping the learning needs of adults in today's world: changing demographics, the global economy, and information and technology. Although we present each of these separately at first, these three factors are very much interrelated, and thus their convergence and subsequent impact on learning in adulthood are discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Changing Demographics

Changing demographics is a social reality shaping the provision of learning in contemporary American society. Demographics is about people, groups of people, and their respective characteristics. For the first time in our society, adults outnumber youth, there are more older adults, the population is better educated than ever before, and there is more cultural and ethnic diversity. For various reasons, individuals and groups of people seek out learning experiences; for other reasons, society targets learning activities for certain segments of the population. Thus, certain learning activities are learner-initiated and others are society-initiated in response to the changing demographics. The field is concerned with the growth and development of adult learners, while at the same time, there are emerging groups of learners with special needs.

To begin, there are simply more adults in our society than ever before, and the population will continue to age. In comparison to colonial times when half the population was under age 16, in 1990,

fewer than one in four Americans were under age 16 and half were age 33 or older. The median age of the American population of 36.0 years in 2004 is expected to increase to 39.1 in 2035 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004b). The so-called baby boomers—the seventy million people born between 1946 and 1964—are a contributing factor to this change in the population. Bills (2004, p. 122) notes that "the baby boom has influenced all American social institutions—health care, housing, consumerism, retirement, even death and the projected 'tomb boom'—but none more than education and work." Although we might hear more about youth, they have less of an impact on the economy than the boomers. "In America, they [over-50s] control four-fifths of the money invested in savings-and-loan associations and own two-thirds of all the shares on the stock market" ("Over 60 and Overlooked," 2002).

The shift from a youth-oriented to an adult-oriented society is solidified by the increasing numbers of older adults in the population. In 1987, for the first time ever, Americans over the age of sixty-five outnumbered those under twenty-five. Furthermore, the oldest old, those over eighty-five-years old, are the fastest-growing segment of the older population. As of July 1, 2004, there were more than four million eight hundred thousand adults over eighty-five-years old, an increase of 13.4 percent from the 2000 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). The number of adults over age eighty-five is expected to increase to about seven million in 2020 and to twenty million in 2050 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004b).

Today's older adults are also increasingly better educated, in better health, and economically better off than previous cohorts. Society is already heeding their learning needs with policies like tuition waivers for higher and continuing education programs and specially designed programs, such as the popular Elderhostel program and learning-in-retirement institutes. There has also been a subtle change in the philosophical rationale—at least among those working in the fields of gerontology and educational gerontology—underlying the provision of education for this group. Along with an economic rationale (the better educated need fewer social services) and a social stability rationale (millions of healthy retired people need something to do) is an awareness that older adults as well as younger ones have an unending potential for development. Williamson (1997, p. 175) suggests that our culturally endorsed notion about what represents "appropriate" learning over the

course of the life span tends to "reinforce prevailing myths about retirement and aging as processes of withdrawal and decline." This mindset ignores the exciting possibilities for personal growth and societal contributions among older members of the population. As Thomas (2004, p. 31) observes, "There is great power hidden with old age, but we will remain ignorant of the depth and breadth of that power as long as we insist on simply comparing youth to age."

Thus, more adults and an increase in the number of older adults are two demographic factors influencing the provision of learning activities in our society. So, too, is the rising level of education characteristic of our population. This is dramatically illustrated by the fact that 83 percent of today's twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-olds have completed high school compared with 65 percent of adults age sixty-five and over (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Since previous education is the single best predictor of participation in adult education, the rising educational level of the adult population is a contextual factor of considerable import. Participation data from the Center for Education Statistics show, for example, that 22 percent of adults with fewer than four years of high school participate in organized adult education, while 34 percent of high school graduates and 66 percent of college graduates do (Kim, Collins Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004).

Nevertheless, even as the educational attainment level of the population as a whole continues to rise, an alarming number of high school students drop out before graduating. And "as a high school education becomes the minimum educational standard, those who drop out are more likely to become members of an educational underclass, from which adult education (especially in the form of adult basic and secondary education) may be the only hope of escape" (Rachal, 1989, pp. 10–11). Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, adults with less than a high school diploma are least likely to participate in adult education activities overall, with only 6 percent in work-related courses, 7 percent in basic skills education, and 1 percent in vocational or technical diploma programs (Kim et al., 2004).

Another demographic characteristic of the social context is the growing cultural and ethnic diversity of America's population. In contrast to the influx of European immigrants at the end of the nineteenth century (which continued into the middle decades of the twentieth), today's immigrants are more likely to come from

Asia and Latin America. In 2002, for example, 52 percent of U.S. immigrants were from Latin America, 25 percent from Asia, and only 14 percent from Europe (Alfred, 2004).

If current trends in immigration and birthrates persist, it is projected that between the years 2000 and 2010, the Hispanic population will account for 34.1 percent of the total population growth, Asians about 33.3 percent, and African Americans 12.9 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004b). In 2001, Hispanics became the largest minority group in America, with African Americans the second largest (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005).

Furthermore, the average age of minority populations is decreasing, while the majority population is growing older. For example, in 2004 the median age of Hispanics was 26.9 years whereas that of the White population was 40.0 years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005).

Not only is the composition of the minority population changing, so too are the overall numbers. In 2000, minorities made up 31 percent of the population; by 2050, minorities will account for nearly 50 percent of the overall population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004b).

The socioeconomic and cultural diversity of today's immigrant population presents special challenges to adult educators. As Alfred (2004, p. 14) observes:

> Today's immigrant population reflects a pattern of demographics that reveals deep polarization between the most educated and wealthiest and the least educated and poorest. This emergent pattern of immigrant adaptation seems to follow a new hourglass segmentation found in the U.S. economy and society (Sparks, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Noticeably, there are those immigrants who are quickly achieving upward mobility, primarily through education and high-tech jobs, while on the opposite end of the hourglass, large numbers of low-skilled workers find themselves locked in low-wage service jobs. Those in between approximate norms of the majority culture and disappear into U.S. cultural institutions without much notice (Sparks, 2003). This polarization in the composition of the immigrant population suggests that planners of adult and higher education programs face a challenging task as they attempt to meet the variety of needs and expectations that immigrants bring to the new country.