

# 1 Focusing on highly deliberate efforts to learn

Are highly deliberate efforts to learn very common? Why and what do people learn? How much time do they spend at learning? Is their learning self-planned, or do they go to classes and groups? Can we provide better help for individual learners?

During the past few years, these questions have led to several studies with which I have been associated. From the findings of these studies, the following general picture of adult learning emerges.

Almost everyone undertakes at least one or two major learning efforts a year, and some individuals undertake as many as 15 or 20. The median is eight learning projects a year, involving eight distinct areas of knowledge and skill.

A learning project is simply a major, highly deliberate effort to gain certain knowledge and skill (or to change in some other way). Some learning projects are efforts to gain new knowledge, insight, or understanding. Others are attempts to improve one's skill or performance, or to change one's attitudes or emotional reactions. Others involve efforts to change one's overt behavior or to break a habit.

It is common for a man or woman to spend 700 hours a year at learning projects. Some persons spend less than 100 hours, but others spend more than 2000 hours in episodes in which the person's intent to learn or change is clearly his primary motivation.

Many learning projects are initiated for highly practical reasons: to make a good decision, build something, or carry out some task related to one's job, home, family, sport, or hobby. Adult learning is also motivated by curiosity, interest, and enjoyment. A few projects are motivated by credit toward a degree or certificate.

About 70% of all learning projects are planned by the learner himself, who seeks help and subject matter from a variety of acquaintances, experts, and printed resources. Other learning projects rely on a group or instructor, on private lessons, or on some nonhuman resource.

This picture of adult learning has emerged from a series of recent studies, many of which were developed by graduate students and staff members in adult education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Some members contributed through their own research projects; others played a major role in studies that I initiated.

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This book attempts to report and integrate the outcomes of all these efforts. In addition, it incorporates some highly relevant contributions to the field of adult learning made independently by other researchers in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

### The Central Focus: All of the Adult's Learning Projects

In the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, Cyril O. Houle (1969) has identified five possible starting points for studying adult learning. One can begin with (1) one or more institutions of adult education; (2) the needs and characteristics of a community or society; (3) the individual learner; (4) a philosophical position; or (5) one or more methods of learning or teaching. An additional starting point could be a body of knowledge and skill to be disseminated to a certain target group.

The starting point of our approach is the adult learner. In particular, we focus on his major efforts to change himself – to learn better ways of doing things, to gain new information and knowledge, to change his perception, behavior, or performance. Our focus includes only highly deliberate learning efforts, not the multitude of phenomena and forces that produce changes in a person without his strong *desire* for learning. Many changes occur in the adult as a result of developmental changes within him, factors beyond his control, his social and physical environment, his casual conversations and television viewing, and his recreational reading. These changes are important to the adult, but they are not the focus of this book. We study only the person's *efforts* to learn: the episodes in which his desire to learn or change is stronger than all his other motivation.

This book encompasses *all* of the adult's learning projects, regardless of what he is trying to learn, why, how, and where. Because we are interested in obtaining a complete picture of the person's total learning effort, we do not restrict our focus to certain methods or places of learning, certain reasons for learning, or certain subject matter.

We do not start, for example, with the notion that learning guided by an instructor or group is somehow better than all other forms of learning. Instead, we have included any learning efforts in which the learner himself does most of the day-to-day planning. We have also included learning that is guided by a set of recordings or printed materials, a correspondence course, or a series of television programs. Learning guided by another person in a one-to-one relationship has also been included, for example, driving lessons, private music lessons, counseling and individual psychotherapy, and some athletic coaching. In addition, of course, we have included classes, conferences, meetings, sensitivity groups, and discussion groups.

Some of these may be organized by an adult education agency or extension service, others by a professional association, and others by a service club or church group.

Men and women learn in many ways: by reading books, magazines, and newspapers; by watching television and movies; by seeking subject matter and advice from friends, relatives, neighbors, or fellow workers; by consulting a doctor or lawyer, a salesman or librarian, an extension agent or financial expert. They may also attend discussion groups, lectures, and private lessons.

Sometimes the adult sets out to gain certain knowledge and skill because it will be highly useful in the very near future. At other times he simply wants to possess the knowledge and skill for its own sake, perhaps to have a broad understanding of the world around him. Occasionally the main reason for a learning project is the desire for credit toward some degree or certificate. This book includes all of these reasons for learning and deals with both vocational training and the liberal arts – practical training, and learning for its own sake.

Adults learn a wide range of knowledge and skill. An individual may set out to increase his own self-understanding and self-acceptance, or he may simply want to learn how to refinish a coffee table. He may want to learn about some area of history, philosophy, economics, current affairs, natural science, or social science. He may want to gain more knowledge before making an important decision on the job, or about his own financial affairs. He may learn to play a musical instrument, or to play golf or bridge. He may want to increase his skill in teaching, raising children, supervising, or in some other major task. He may learn in order to plan a trip, buy an appliance, operate a ham radio, deal more effectively with people, or develop a philosophy of life.

Some efforts to learn are relatively brief or superficial. Learning about washing machines in order to buy the best model, for example, hardly seems to involve fundamental changes in personality or behavior. Other learning efforts are aimed at changing one's self-concept, perception and understanding of others, deep feelings, or creativity. Some efforts are aimed at modifying overt behavior, such as a habit, an addiction pattern, or a shoplifting tendency. Some learning projects are primarily cognitive or intellectual, some are aimed primarily at attitudinal and emotional change, some are designed to develop physical skills, and many are a mixture. The term *knowledge and skill* is a convenient way of referring to the entire range of desired changes.

## **How Common and Important are These Learning Efforts?**

Highly deliberate efforts to learn take place all around you. The members of your family, your neighbors, colleagues, and acquaintances probably initiate and complete

several learning efforts each year, though you may not even be aware of it. When asked about their learning efforts, many of our interviewees recalled none at first, but as the interview proceeded, they recalled several recent efforts to learn. Perhaps this book will open your eyes to some of your own learning efforts, as well as those of your co-workers, your spouse, your students, your colleagues, your political representatives, or your friends.

Highly deliberate learning is a pervasive phenomenon in human life. The 700 hours a year devoted to learning efforts are enormously significant for the adult himself, and for the organization, family, and society in which he works and lives. Although 700 hours constitutes only 10% of an adult's waking time, surely this small percentage affects his life nearly as much as the other 90%. It is during these 700 hours a year, when he sets out to improve his knowledge, skills, perceptions, attitudes, habitual reactions, insight, and perspective, that the adult develops and changes. He resembles an organization that maintains and increases its effectiveness by devoting 10% of its resources to research and development.

Learning projects by members of a society are a means to a better future for that society. When politicians, corporation presidents, and heads of state spend some time learning before making major decisions, their decisions are more likely to be sound. The learning efforts of researchers, journalists, parents, artists, and teachers are clearly important to a society. Several writers have pointed out that adult learning is a crucial factor in achieving peace, reducing poverty and discrimination, increasing the effectiveness of the consumer's decisions, reducing pollution, and reducing population growth.

The individual as well as society benefits from his successful attempts to learn. He gains new abilities and competence, new strength and confidence, an enlarged understanding of the people and environment around him. He can cope better with changes in job, technology, values, and consumer products.

Continuing learning is itself becoming a goal of human life. In advanced nations, more and more men and women are moving beyond material goals, as their lower-order needs such as food are satisfied relatively easily. They are setting a new goal for themselves: self-actualization, the realization of their enormous potential. They are seeking the higher joys of gaining new knowledge and skills, of achieving better self-understanding, of learning to interact more sensitively and honestly with others. The incredible expansion of human growth centers and other means of maximizing human potential is one sign of this shift.

## Children and Adolescents

Although this book is concerned primarily with adults, we have also interviewed 10-year-olds and 16-year-olds. Their out-of-school learning is extensive, and is

similar in some ways to adult learning. Schools and colleges are increasingly recognizing and fostering such learning, thus preparing their students to be competent adult learners.

## **The Scope of the Book**

One emphasis throughout the book is on the *deciding* and *planning* aspects of learning. The learner first has to decide whether and what to learn (and even why). Then he must decide whether to plan most of the learning episodes himself, or whether to select some individual, group, or other resource to perform that responsibility. If he decides that his learning project should be self-planned, as the majority are, he is then responsible for countless detailed decisions and arrangements. In addition, regardless of who is planning the learning, the learner must decide occasionally whether to stop or continue.

Another theme throughout the book is the *help* that the learner seeks and obtains with the various preparations for learning. Often the help available to him is unsuitable or inadequate. Consequently, several chapters suggest innovative programs and procedures that various agencies or institutions may want to experiment with, in order to provide better help for the adult learner, or to develop his competence in making plans and arrangements for learning.

Related topics such as the following have already been discussed by several authors: the various methods of learning; how to teach adult groups; the social psychological processes in those groups; the structure and administration of adult education institutions and growth centers; the detailed cognitive processes during the learning episodes; the effect of certain variables on the behavioral outcomes of the learning episodes; and psychological development during adulthood. Consequently, this book moves on to tackle some other aspects of the adult's learning efforts. In turn, these insights suggest various implications for theory and practice in adult education (including training and development, the human potential movement, extension, and mass media), library science, self-directed change, schools and colleges, and teacher training.

The approach in this book may also contribute to the new conception of man being developed by certain social scientists, who view man as a self-directing organism with initiative, intentions, choices, freedom, energy, and responsibility. This strongly positive view of man's potential sees him as capable of achieving fundamental and far-reaching changes – in his feelings as well as his cognitive knowledge, in his self-insight and relations with others as well as in his physical skills and aesthetic awareness.

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According to this view, at times man is a creature pushed and pulled by his environment and by unconscious forces within, but at other times he can effectively develop plans for changing himself and his environment. At times he changes because of coercion, manipulation, or subtle techniques of control and persuasion by others. At other times, though, he detects and resists those forces, and sets his own directions and goals for change.