



Image from: [In the USA over a quarter of all young people go... in Geography of the World](#)

Summary Article: **Adult Learning Theory**

From *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*

The body of knowledge that comprises what is known about how adults learn. In the 1970s, those involved in the education of adults sought to separate their field of work from that of learning in general, which had previously been researched mainly by psychologists and educational psychologists. Adult learning theory differentiates between itself and other areas of education as well as between how children learn and how adults learn.

Knowles's (1980) concept of andragogy (the art and science of helping adults learn) is among the better-known models in adult learning. The essence of Knowles's model lies in the following assumptions about adults: (a) they are more self-directed than dependent; (b) their accumulation of experiences is a rich resource for learning; (c) their readiness to learn is directly related to the tasks required in their social roles; (d) they are more subject centered than problem centered in learning; (e) they find internal motivations more powerful than external ones; and (f) they need to know why it is important to learn something. Knowles viewed these assumptions as critical to the design of educational programs for adults.

Other theories of adult learning include Illeris's (2002) three dimensions of learning model, Jarvis's (1987) model of the learning process, McCluskey's (1963) theory of margin, and Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning. Illeris's three dimensions of learning are cognition, emotion, and social context, among which learning continually interacts. Jarvis holds that change occurs in a person as a result of the person having experienced dissonance, which led to learning. Adult development and the timing of learning are central to McCluskey's theory of margin, while Mezirow's transformative learning occurs as a change in the adult's consciousness through the process of learning. For more information, see Illeris (2002), Jarvis (1987), Knowles (1980), McClusky (1963), Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), and Mezirow (2000) in the bibliography.

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