

**Making the Invisible Visible:  
A Model for Delivery Systems in Adult Education**

Jennifer L. Alex  
R. Eric Platt  
Deidra M. Gammill

Elizabeth A. Miller  
John R. Rachal

**Abstract**

Delivery systems are not well defined in adult education. Therefore, this article reviews the multiple components that overlap to affect the adult learner and uses them to create a model for a comprehensive delivery system in adult education with these individual components as sub-systems that are interrelated and inter-locked. These components are philosophy, theory, method, need, educational entity, influence, outcome, and assessment. By combining these, the adult educator has access to a delivery system consisting of a full spectrum of opportunities by which the learner may realize an optimal educational experience within a learning environment. The model provides the components that can make visible this invisible system.

**Introduction**

Literature in the field of adult education commonly uses the term “delivery system,” yet no consistent definition or model of what a delivery system actually is seems to exist. Models exist for program planning as do model-like typologies for adult education, so is a delivery system simply a synonymous term for multiple types of learning opportunities? Is a delivery system a way to plan programs? Is it a process and procedure? Or perhaps is it an approach to classroom activities and participation? Is it some of

---

Jennifer L. Alex, R. Eric Platt, Deidra M. Gammill, and Elizabeth A. Miller are graduate students at The University of Southern Mississippi. This article was developed in a class with John R. Rachal, Professor.

these things, all of these things, none of these things? In its current usage, the term “delivery system” seems to be an invisible mantle cloaking a myriad of adult education scenarios. An attempt to make visible this invisible system led to a thorough review of the multiple components that overlap to affect the adult learner and the creation of a model for a comprehensive delivery system in adult education that takes these individual components and sees them as sub-systems that are interrelated and inter-locked. The model attempts to articulate the components of what we as adult educators actually do, perhaps without thinking about the underlying assumptions and process—in other words, it attempts to make the invisible visible (see Figure 1).

A delivery *system* in adult learning, as used here, is a set of overlapping components (specifically philosophy, theory, method, need, educational entity, influence, outcome, and assessment) and sub-components, which interact with each other and revolve around the learner and the learning environment to maximize adult learning through the combination of selected subcomponents. This delivery system model differs from a program planning model in that it takes into account components and sub-components that deal with the facilitator’s philosophical and theoretical orientations, as well as how all parts of the model overlap and influence each other in order to affect the learner as who is situated within the learning environment. The facilitator’s conscious utilization of the following model’s components and sub-components creates an interface between the learner and the educational experience.

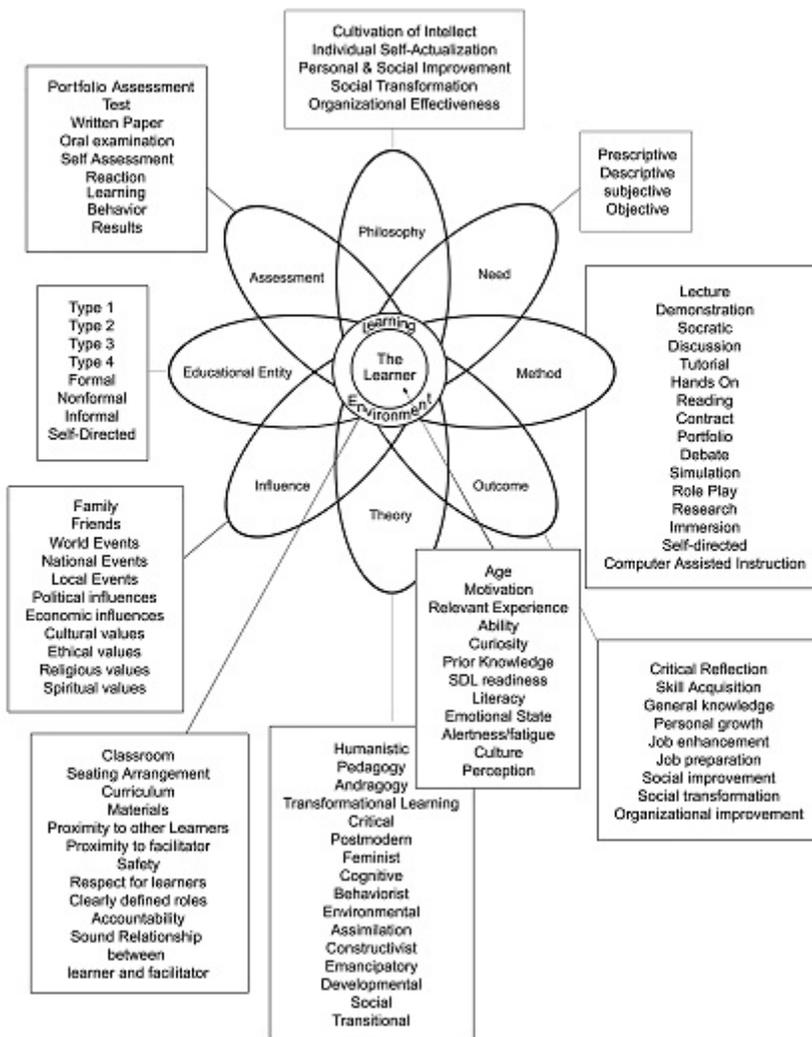
## **Components and Sub-components**

### **The Learner and the Learning Environment**

The learner, surrounded by the learning environment, becomes the hub of this model. The learner brings to the educational experience, among other things, age, gender, prior knowledge and experiences, cultural values, perceptions, motivation, cognitive abilities, skills, and curiosity. Being observant of these traits and nuances allows the facilitator to better mold the delivery system and accommodate the learner’s specific needs such as a degree, occupational pay raise, or personal gratification. For optimal learning to occur, the learner needs to be acknowledged as an individual.

Vella’s (2002) book, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, lists 12 major steps that should be covered when directing learning towards adults.

Figure 1: A Delivery System Model for Adult Education



These include a needs assessment of what is to be learned; a feeling of safety for the learner within the environment; sound relationships that are established between the facilitator and the learner; the sequence of the content presented and its reinforcement; the use of praxis; the establishment of respect for learners as decision makers; the understanding of the learner's ideas, feelings, and actions; immediacy of the learning; clear established roles on the part of the facilitator and the learner; the use of teamwork; the engagement of learners; and accountability.

The learning environment must be examined as well. All other factors of the delivery system model converge upon the learner and the learning environment to affect both. Examples of learning environments include classrooms, the workplace, religious institutions, and other physical surroundings. Some characteristics of the learning environment that the facilitator should be aware of are size, lighting, décor, furnishings, ventilation, climate, sound projection, technological capabilities, and seating arrangement (Caffarella, 2002). No matter where the learner is or where learning is taking place, it is impossible to remove one from the other. Like learners, no two learning environments are the same. The learning environment increases or decreases the potential for learning. When preparing to engage learners, the facilitator needs to ensure that the learning environment is conducive to creating a positive learning experience.

## **Philosophy**

According to Darkenwald and Merriam (1982), there are five basic philosophical positions in the field of adult education: self-actualization, organizational effectiveness, cultivation of the intellect, social transformation, and personal and social improvement. Self-actualization regards adult education's purpose as fulfilling the needs of the individual learner. Organizational effectiveness emphasizes the training of people in an organization to increase the organization's efficiency and effectiveness. The cultivation of the intellect philosophy views adult education as a means to train the intellect through critical inquiry into the themes that have occupied humanity for millennia, such as liberty, justice, beauty, ethics, and theology. Social transformation, as advocated by Friere (1970) and Horton (1998), is based on the premise that the dominant society and culture are fundamentally oppressive and through adult education a more just society can be created. The philosophy relating to personal and social improvement

advances the dual and reciprocal goals of improvement of the self as well as improvement of the society at large such that these two interact to improve both.

## **Theory**

There is a plethora of theories surrounding adult learning such as andragogy, transformational learning, post-modernism, behaviorism, cognitivism, humanism, and constructivism. Andragogy, according to Knowles (1980), is “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43). Knowles maintained that adults learn differently than children and therefore the methods and materials used with adults must differ as well. First introduced in 1978 by Jack Mezirow, transformational learning is “dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 318). Post-modernism operates on the premise that there are no absolutes and that there is no one right way to do things. When applied to adult education, this theory focuses on the diversity of learners and their needs. Behaviorism defines learning as something that occurs in response to external stimuli; education serves to shape desired behaviors. Cognitivism was the first to challenge behaviorism. This learning orientation claims that learning is an ongoing mental process that draws from schemata and thinking rather than a response to stimuli; therefore, the purpose of education is to create lifelong learners. Humanistic theory focuses on the potential of the individual for personal growth. Humanist theorists see education as a tool for self-actualization. Theories of andragogy and self-directed learning are rooted in the humanist learning orientation. Constructivism pulls from many theories but emphasizes that individuals make meaning from their experiences; thus education helps individuals create knowledge and meaning based on experience.

## **Method**

The methodology represents an array of approaches from which a facilitator may choose to impart information for learning. Equally for the self-directed learner, methodology denotes the opportunity and freedom to choose the means of acquiring knowledge that is best suited to each learning style. The key element for maximizing the effect of one instructional or learning method over another is based upon the instructor’s

and the learner's knowledge of themselves.

No less important is the learner's awareness of personal expectations from the learning experience and one's learning style preference. James and Maher (2004) noted that it is incumbent upon the learner to analyze expectations and to "complete the tasks necessary to accomplish the learning goal" (p.120). Some of the most recognizable and frequently utilized methods for facilitating the teaching-learning experience include lecture, experiential learning, discussion group, demonstration, computer-assisted learning, and self-directed learning.

## **Need**

The delivery systems model approaches need not from the perspective of determining what type of program should be offered, as in the Pearce four stage process of formal needs assessment (Caffarella, 2002), but rather from the perspective of what brings adults to education. The Mocker and Spear (1979) descriptive-prescriptive needs model is a more appropriate lens for examining what leads adults into an educational setting. Descriptive needs are those determined by the learner while prescriptive needs are those determined by external forces such as a manager. Needs can further be classified as subjective or objective with subjective needs established by "soft data" such as feelings or perceptions and objective needs determined through some form of "hard data" such as a test. Thus, needs can be classified into one of four general categories: descriptive-subjective, descriptive-objective, prescriptive-subjective, and prescriptive-objective.

## **Educational Entity**

There are four types of agencies that provide adult education (Schroeder, 1970). Type I agencies are focused exclusively on adult education and are few in number. Examples include "proprietary schools and independent residential and nonresidential adult education centers" (p. 37). Type II agencies first serve the educational needs of youth and have as a secondary function the education of adults. Public schools with adult programs such as GED and post-secondary learning institutions offering programs like continuing education fall into this category. Type III agencies have as their focus both the educational and non-educational needs of the community and include such organizations as libraries and museums. Type

IV agencies are those agencies in which adult education is designed and offered in order to further some other goal. Examples include for-profit organizations with HRD departments, churches, and government agencies.

In addition to these types of agencies, there are also further classifications of the kinds of adult education: formal, nonformal, informal, and self-directed. Formal learning encompasses the learning that happens inside of an educational institution, such as a university or a technical program. Informal learning is defined as the learning that occurs through the course of living one's life, and nonformal learning occurs in an organized program, outside of the formal education system (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). According to Tough (1979) and Livingstone (2001), most adults are engaged in self-directed or informal learning activities with more formalized learning experiences contributing "only a small percentage of the total learning of adults" (Gouthro & Plumb, 2003, p. 2). Potentially, an educational entity is anything as diverse as a university that targets adults, the local YMCA offering an exercise course, or the individual reading a book on home repair.

## **Influence**

No education is immune to external influences. Perhaps the most intense influences are those derived from family, friends, and the immediate environment. Nevertheless, local, national, and global events also influence the educational context. Thus, these influences can vary from a family member's encouragement to learn to global economic factors requiring a worker to retrain. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) note that "demographics, the global economy, and technology are three forces affecting all of society's endeavors, including adult education" (p. 22).

Thompson (2005) notes that many forces, among them citizenship, diversity, social justice, and human rights, have deep roots in lifelong learning. These forces provide a stimulus for adult educators as they plan programs, develop program assessments, and give consideration to much larger concerns such as organizational mission and vision. Thompson further suggests that these challenges and others of this epoch provide many opportunities for learning which in turn shape individuals and communities. Rose (1999) notes that

Educators of all populations are constantly confronted with how to help individuals make meaning of their experience, both in informal and non-formal settings. Adults bring to their learning

situations complex and varied experiences that have both a positive and negative impact on their learning. Part of our task as educators is to provide a context for learning, so that new information and new concepts can be understood. (p. 30)

## **Outcome**

The outcomes are the end result of participating in an adult education experience. For some learners, personal growth or the mastery of a newly acquired skill is the primary goal. For others, the engagement in an activity that will make a significant difference in society or the culture at large is of utmost importance in the learning experience. For still others, the learning itself is inherently satisfying and pleasurable. For some, awareness that their learning experience has made a difference in an organization is fulfilling. Job enhancement is also a valid and compelling outcome for many learners.

## **Assessment**

Kirkpatrick's (1994) four-level evaluation model serves as an effective tool for assessing adult learning. Reaction is the foundational form of evaluation, assessing the learner's reaction to and satisfaction with the learning. The assessment is subjective, dependent on the learner's perceptions. The second level of evaluation is learning. Here the learner is evaluated using some type assessment strategy to show that learning has occurred. The third level of evaluation is behavior. This level measures the learner's utilization of the content in a real-world setting as evidenced by changed behaviors. Results, the fourth level, provide measurable outcomes for the learning that has occurred, such as declining accident rates after a safety program.

## **Conclusion**

The uses of this model are as diverse as the model itself. Whether the learner is seeking to acquire information about cooking a favorite dish or a facilitator learning in an academic environment, the model can be applied and used effectively. When using this model it is important to note that there is no single point of entry; indeed, the facilitator can utilize any combination of the sub-components to develop a course-specific delivery

system that will be effective in promoting learning. All of these components are used, whether consciously or unconsciously. Personal philosophy may be embedded while methodology and assessment may be intentionally chosen.

The use of this model can assist in creating a productive learning environment that takes into account the complete ecology of the learning experience. Through the combination of philosophy, theory, method, need, educational entity, influence, outcome, and assessment, the facilitator is given access to a full spectrum of opportunities by which the learner may realize an optimal educational experience within a learning environment. Equally, the learner is the recipient of a full array of offerings that can provide opportunity for personal discovery, life enrichment, and skill attainment.

The anticipated use of this model is for the educator to take into account the combination of various components that affect the adult learner. Just as inquiry led to a fuller awareness of the elements that create an effective learning experience for adults, the use of a model such as this one can heighten the consciousness of the symbiotic nature of the learner with the various components that have a role in adult education, thus making the invisible visible.

### References

- Caffarella, R. S. (2002). *Planning programs for adult learners: A practical guide for educators, trainers, and staff developers* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Darkenwald, G. G., & Merriam, S. B. (1982). *Adult education: Foundations of practice*. Philadelphia: Harper & Row.
- Friere, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing.
- Gouthro, P. A., & Plumb, D. (2003). Remapping the tripartite register: Moving beyond formal, nonformal, and informal learning. In *Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education-Online Proceedings 2003*. Retrieved from [http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2003/2003\\_papers/gouthro\\_plumbCAS03.pdf](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2003/2003_papers/gouthro_plumbCAS03.pdf).
- Horton, M. (1998). *The long haul: An autobiography*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- James, W., & Maher, P. (2004). Understanding and using learning styles. In M. W. Galbraith (Ed.), *Adult learning methods: A guide for effective*

- instruction* (3rd ed) (pp. 119-139). Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Kirkpatrick, D. L. (1994). *Evaluating training programs: The four levels*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Cambridge Books.
- Livingstone, D. W. (2001). Adults' informal learning: Definitions, findings, gaps, and future research. In *New Approaches to Lifelong Literacy Working Papers*. Retrieved from <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/21adultsifnormallearning.htm>.
- Merriam, S. B., & Brockett, R. G. (1997). *The profession and practice of adult education: An introduction*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S., & Caffarella, R. (1999). *Learning in adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mocker, D. W., & Spear, G. E. (1979). Needs assessment. In P. D. Langerman & D. H. Smith (Eds.), *Managing adult and continuing education programs and staff* (pp. 93-134). Washington, D.C.: National Association for Public Continuing and Adult Education.
- Rose, A. (1999). Which way adult education? The complexities of culture and action. *Adult Learning*, 11, 30+. Retrieved April 19, 2006 from EBSCO Masterfile database.
- Schroeder, W. L. (1970). Adult education defined and described. In R. M. Smith, G. F. Aker, & J. R. Kidd (Eds.), *Handbook of Adult Education* (pp. 25-43). New York: MacMillan.
- Thompson, P. (2005). Learning in a global society. *Adults Learning*, 16, 23+. Retrieved April 11, 2005 from EBSCO Masterfile database.
- Tough, A. (1979). *The adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Vella, J. (2002). *Learning to listen, learning to teach*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.