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Chapter Title: Introduction to Adult Learning Theories

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# Part One: Adult Learning Theories



## 2. Introduction to Adult Learning Theories

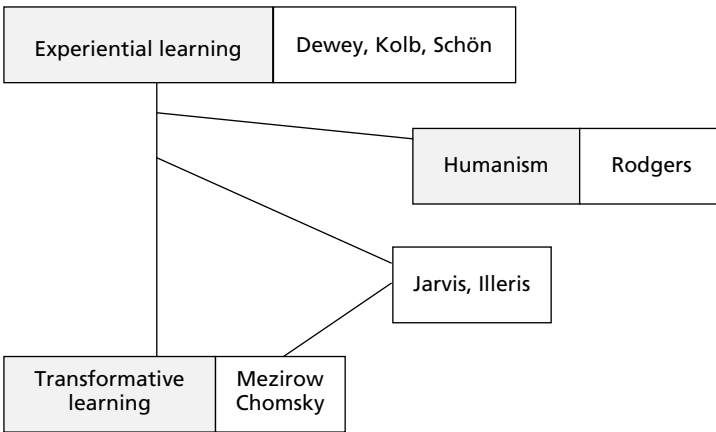
What does it mean to learn? What goes on in our minds when we acquire or mobilise new knowledge and skills? How do different environments influence learning aspirations and learning processes? What is the significance of past experiences and of informal learning? How do we interpret *learning mistakes* and their impact? How do we apprehend the various roles of teachers, trainers, facilitators, or mentors? More generally, what are the main driving forces in the learning life course and the various possible sequences in learning biographies?

Diverse interpretations and responses have been given to these questions. Various learning theories have proposed specific concepts to grasp the complex reality of human learning. Among these learning theories attempting to capture and systematise the learning process and its specificities, three major orientations have emerged and continue to evolve: \*behaviourist theory (Skinner, Thorndyke, Watson), \*cognitivist (Brunner, Gagné) and socio-cognitivist theories (Bandura), and \*constructivist (Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky) and socio-constructivist (Lave and Wenger) theories. Reviewing the literature on the learning process, one could of course find a much broader variety of theoretical frameworks. For this introductory section, however, we decided to focus on these three founding theoretical approaches and their subsequent development.

Inspired by these analyses or their critical assessment, other learning theories have been developed that are closer to the specific contexts of adult learning. We will go on by exploring three of these approaches: \*humanist learning theory (Rogers), \*experiential learning theory (Kolb and Schön, further developed in the adult learning field by Jarvis and Illeris), and \*transformative theory (Mezirow).

Figure 1: Learning theories and key authors

Behaviourism	Watson, Thorndike, Skinner	
Cognitivism	Bruner, Gagné	
	Social cognitivism	Bandura
Constructivism	Piaget, Vygotsky	
	Social constructivism	Lave, Wenger



Source: Author's own

## Exercises

### *Exercise 1*

To learn is to increase our internal capacity to act and express ourselves. But then, how do we learn? Look at our own experience.

What went on when

- you, as a young girl or boy, kept trying to lace your shoes until, all of a sudden, you were finally able to do so?
- you gradually improved your English as a Second Language skills? How did you progressively acquire new vocabulary?
- you developed a curiosity for, say, the geography of Central Europe and progressively increased your knowledge about it?

### *Exercise 2*

Reflecting on your educational life course, are there any specific conditions or contexts that, at some point, helped you to learn better or kept you from learning?

