

Adult Learning as a Transformative Experience

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Introduction:

My contribution today is based on my own individualized understanding of studying and working with adult learning processes. My insights are based on theories developed by Coenraad van Houten, Jaak Hillen, Otto Scharmer and others who all have used the archetype of the 7 life processes to develop pathways of learning through transforming past and present beliefs and knowledge into new ways of thinking, feeling and willing to help us embrace in trust what comes to us from the future.

Today I will limit myself to give some examples how this 7-fold pathway can be used in adult education.

What are the learning processes of adults based on?

The archetype of a 7-fold learning path was already used in ancient times. Rudolf Steiner describes in his karmic lectures how in the school of Chartres, the seven liberal arts were still used to give access to the students to spiritual knowledge (GA237, lect.VI). Linked to the seven planets, they each carried their own source of knowledge. Adelard of Bath, the important translator of Arabic scientific texts, describes in his treatise "de eodem et diverso" ("Of the same and the other") how,

"the soul originates from the world of light and that the seven free arts are able to raise the soul, which is entangled in the body, to the spiritual heights in which it lived before birth."

Though the old mystery schools no longer exist, this 7-fold path endures as an archetype for adult learning. Today, learning has shifted and is no longer revealed through divine inspiration. Instead, it can emerge if we awaken the life processes within us. In his lecture "Riddle of Humanity" (GA170, lect. VII) Rudolf Steiner compares the 7 planets that circle the 12 signs of the zodiac with the inner human planetary system of the 7 life processes that nourish and maintain the 12 senses which as we know are the portals through which we can learn about Ourselves, the World and the Other.

When we try to understand how learning at all is possible, we can draw on one of Rudolf Steiner's most important insights namely that the thinking forces that children use to learn are in reality transformed life forces that are partly released from their formative work on the physical body around the 7th year of life. Coenraad van Houten researched for many years what happens to those life forces when a human being's physical, etheric, astral, and ego aspects are fully developed during the first three seven-year cycles of life and whether these forces can also be harnessed for conscious learning in adulthood? He found that the seven life processes that shape us from birth continue to influence us throughout life. By around age twenty-one, these early formative processes become well-established. At this stage, they can be consciously transformed,

creating an opportunity for intentional learning through the sevenfold processes. This transformation opens a pathway to profound self-knowledge and personal growth.

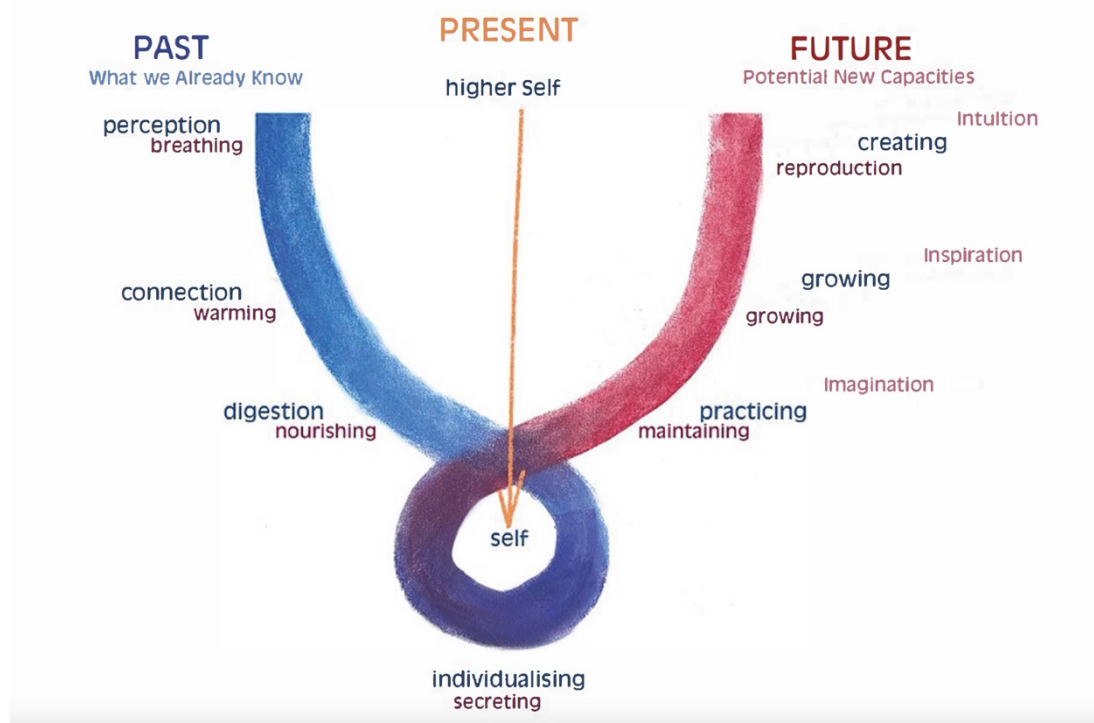
New Adult Learning

In New Adult Learning, 3 pathways of learning are distinguished: vocational learning, destiny learning, and spiritual research. Each is structured in 7 steps of transformative learning that follow a 3-fold path.

- Vocational Learning: Learning to learn- learning for life
Awakening the will for independent learning - relation world/Self
- Destiny Learning: Learning through life
What have I come to transform of my Self - relation self/Self
- Creative Spiritual Research: Learning to collaborate with the spiritual world
What is my inner Quest? What is it that I am asked to contribute to the world – relation Self/World

In all 3 learning paths we follow a sequence of working with knowledge from the past, transforming understanding in the present and developing new skills into the future. In these learning paths we are supported by awakening the 3 drives that lay dormant in each person: the drive for knowledge (past), the drive to develop (present) and the drive to improve (future). The learning process that runs through these 3 phases goes through 7 steps.

7 steps in learning process based on the 7 steps in the life processes



1. Breathing - taking in -perception (e.g., postcards – artistic exercise: soulscape opening your mind)
2. Warming - interest- connecting (e.g., exchange – knowing yourself through the observation of the other/feeling seen – opening your heart)
3. Nourishing- breaking down- digesting (e.g., offering of content: what resonates, what is important to me, what do I want to know more of... - individual work, team work, research...opening the will)
4. Secretion-sorting- individualizing (e.g., Artistic activity: opening inner space – inviting images from the future lying dormant in the sleeping realm of the will – observation of the other)
5. Maintaining-holding- practicing (e.g., nurturing new thoughts – developing ideas of how to bring them into reality – group work: presenting – listening – observing – feedback)
6. Growth-trying out-growing (e.g., trying out the new idea in different contexts so that it becomes a skill that can be used in various situations – ex. ...)
7. Regeneration -realization- creation (e.g.; Putting the new into the world in such a way that it can be of service to others – sharing with colleagues, network....)

The steps of this path work in a lawful order, much like the life processes, but they are also dynamic and flexible, adapting to the needs of the group or individual learner. Unlike intellectual reasoning, this process asks us to use trust and intuition—to remain open and responsive. When we practice the first path of learning, awareness and transformation are cultivated through conscious engagement with the learning process that links to the function of the corresponding life process. The tools or practices we use include the following:

- Observation
- Independent Judgment
- Awareness of Encounters
- A Seven-Step Process
- Day and Night Learning

Vocational learning or learning to learn, awakens the will for independent learning, to learn consciously and develop the impulses to know, develop, and improve. This is our earthly reality.

Integration of all 3 learning paths

All 3 learning paths can be taken on individually and build upon each other. Although we focus in our teaching training seminars on the first learning path (vocational learning), we need to also find ways how to integrate the 2 other learning paths of destiny learning and creative spiritual research. If we don't make time or space also for parts of these, all learning will be limited to the timeframe given by the training, incomplete and will not be a transformative experience awakens the will for an independent learning, that will continue also beyond our trainings.

As adult educators we need to realise that adults (learners and educators) are constituted and shaped in very diverse ways. As a result, we have different ways of meeting and understanding the world, the other and ourselves, different ways of acquiring knowledge and learning. Getting to know our natural affinities and barriers in learning and finding ways to overcome them is

crucial for learning to become truly transformative. Rather than giving a lot of content the more important task of the adult educator is to help the adult learner in recognizing and finding ways to transform their barriers. This will only be possible if adult educators have also done this work of self-transformation themselves and continue to do so.

3 learning barriers that push transformation

- Thinking: Closed mind (fixed concepts, prejudice, quick speculative thinking...) support: nurturing 12 senses (e.g., artistic exercises 3-fold, 4-fold...objective observation) – opening fixed concepts and prejudice (e.g., finding new understandings via creating a group mind map...) – also see Steiner's *Practical Training in Thought* (GA108, lecture 16, e.g., cloud exercise)
- Feeling: Closed heart (anxiety and cynicism - indifference, already know it, insecurity...) support: exercises that support the understanding of unconscious feelings (e.g., artistic exercises using colour and shades to give expression to feelings- group work 3-fold, 4-fold observation – evolving drawings: 1 barrier – 2 new ability - 3 transformation needed)
- Willing: Fear of failure - Closed will (mental laziness, keeping it in the head, fear of destroying the content, fear of new things that might change our present convictions.... support: formative force of artistic activities, group work, project work, the structure of the learning process...

Coenraad van Houten (*Awakening the Will*, 1999) speaks about a deep-rooted fear that he observes in many adult learners: before it was the fear of death, then it became the fear of life and now it is more and more the fear for the future. Today almost a quarter of a century has past and if I look around, this fear for the future has only increased and if we are not careful also passed on as a burdening legacy to our children and youth.

As we dive deeper and deeper into an age in which our human faculties are increasingly given over to digital technology and artificial intelligence, we are creating the perfect soil for a paralysis of any self-steered action, and inner growth. The nurturing of our soul capacities and the transformation into a new thinking, feeling and willing becomes therefor ever more essential. If our trainings and courses can become places of inner growth for those who will educate and teach future generations, then they in turn can offer to create for those in their care places of health and growth. In doing so we have a chance to develop our hearts as a new organ of thinking to build a bridge over the abyss of increasing polarizing times.

Resources:

New Adult Learning movement <http://nalm.net>

Steiner, Rudolf. (1909). *Practical Training in Thought*. GA108, Lect.16

Steiner, Rudolf. (1916). *The Riddle of Humanity*. GA117, Lect.7

Steiner, Rudolf. (1924). *Karmic Relationships III. The School of Chartres*. GA108, Lect.6

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Van Houten, Coenraad. (2000). *Practicing Destiny: Principles and Processes in Adult Learning*. Forest Row, UK: Temple Lodge Publishing.

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Van Houten, Coenraad. (2011). *Creative Spiritual Research*. Forest Row, UK: Temple Lodge Publishing.