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New Interest in Functional Context Education (FCE) Part 3: Two New Online Resources for Educators and Technologists

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Earlier I indicated how new interest in FCE was showing up in adult education in the UK and in community colleges and high schools in the US. Now the concepts of Functional Context Education (FCE) , developed within the field of adult literacy education are being more widely disseminated on the internet. Two online encyclopedias, one for psychology and the other for educational technologists provide a wide range of resources for adult educators and others and include information about Functional Context Education.

1.The Encyclopedia of Psychology facilitates browsing in psychology. There are two paths for this purpose, one providing original information generated by respected researchers and practitioners in various fields of psychology and the other providing a hierarchical database of links to web sites providing information about scientific psychology. The site aims to create a set of links that represent the best available sites organized in a manner that furthers the understanding of Psychology as a science.

An entry in the Encyclopedia of Psychology about FCE can be found at
http://www.psychology.org/links/Environment_Behavior_Relationships/Education/

It includes an Overview of FCE stating (abridged here):

The functional context approach to learning stresses the importance of making learning relevant to the experience of learners and their work context. The learning of new information is facilitated by making it possible for the learner to relate it to knowledge already possessed and transform old knowledge into new knowledge. By using materials that the learner will use after training, transfer of learning from the classroom to the "real world" will be enhanced.

The model of the cognitive system underlying this approach emphasizes the interaction of three components: (1) a knowledge base (i.e., long term memory) of what the individual knows, (2) processing skills including language, problem-solving, and learning strategies, and (3) information displays that present information. The performance of a task requires knowledge about what one is reading or writing, processing skills for comprehension and communication, and displays of information to be processed.

The functional context approach also proposes new assessment methods. Instead of using grade level scores, tests should measure content knowledge gained and distinguish between functional learning and academic learning. For example, an assessment of reading should measure both reading-to-do (e.g., looking up information in a manual) and reading-to-learn (e.g., information needed for future decisions).

Functional context theory shares a similar emphasis with Situated Learning theory which also stresses the importance of context during learning.

Scope/Application:

The functional context approach was developed specifically for adult technical and literacy training (reading/writing/mathematics) in military programs, but it has implications for learning of basic skills in general (e.g., Sticht, 1976) and reading in particular (Sticht, 1975). Sticht's functional context framework has been the basis for major workplace training and literacy programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor and Department of Education.

References:

Carnevale, A., Gainer, L. & Meltzer, A. (1990). Workplace Basics: The Essential Skills Employers Want. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sticht, T.G. (1975). Applications of the audread model to reading evaluation and instruction. In L. Resnick & P. Weaver (Eds.), Theory and Practice of Early Reading, Volume 1. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

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Sticht, T. (1988). Adult literacy education. Review of Research in Education, Volume 15. Washington, DC: American Education Research Association.

Sticht, T., et al. (1987). Cast-off Youth: Policy and Training Methods from the Military Experience. New York: Praeger.

For a more complete list of Sticht's publications, see
http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/sticht/jan02/11.htm

2. The Encyclopedia of Educational Technology (EET) is a collection of short multimedia articles on a variety of topics related to the fields of instructional design and education and training. The primary audiences for the EET are students and novice to intermediate practitioners in these fields, who need a brief overview as a starting point to further research on specific topics. Authors are graduate students, professors, and others who contribute voluntarily. Articles are short and use multimedia to enrich learning rather than merely decorate the pages.

An entry in the Encyclopedia of Educational Technology about FCE is at
http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/articles/functionalce/index.htm

It includes an introduction to FCE stating (abridged here):

Functional Context Education

LITERACY and other basic skills are effectively integrated with content learning through the Functional Context approach to education. This provides a valuable

framework for the development of effective instructional materials for many adult learners.

Overview

The principles behind Functional Context Education (FCE) emerged during World War II as a result of training programs designed to prepare marginally literate recruits in the most efficient manner possible. Over time, the theory underlying this practice has more fully developed out of the field of cognitive science. The research and writings of Thomas G. Sticht have had a significant impact on how this theoretical basis has been implemented into more recent efforts in adult literacy instruction.

General notions in education have traditionally held that literacy is a skill one must learn in one setting, then apply in others. The primary focus of FCE has been to promote improvement in literacy, as well as other basic skills, within instructional contexts that are highly relevant and useful to the learner. This allows for teaching methods that are optimal for adult learners; most adults are not motivated to learn if the content of instruction is not meaningful.

FCE differs from traditional adult education philosophies and practices in that it grew out of and concepts of human information processing. Research in this field has shown that people acquire new knowledge and skills by building upon their own existing knowledge base. Through FCE, these findings have led to literacy programs that hold a strong job-related focus and strive to improve transfer of learning from literacy programs to job training.

Most adult learners are highly unlikely to invest time in educational endeavors unless beneficial outcomes are very apparent. This factor is coupled with the reality that social stigmas are commonly associated with 'remedial' literacy programs. FCE provides opportunities for adults to improve reading and other skills within contexts that are conducive to their career and social goals