Making Sense of Adult Learning is a comprehensive text of how adults learn, and what those who teach adults need to understand. I am not familiar with the first edition, but for those who are, the author reports that some chapters are thoroughly revised, all material has been updated, and a new chapter on contextual (situational) learning has been added.

Mackracker writes in a style that engages the reader. This presentation is one of the clearest and most current I have found. I particularly appreciate the explanation of the differences between adults as learners and children as learners, as too often teachers of adults are not aware of how these differences influence the educational context and need to be taken into account. As the author moves into cycles of learning and styles of learning for adult learners, she emphasizes the diverse ways in which adults learn. The presentation of learning styles is very helpful, as is the author’s clarification that “each adult has personally preferred strategies for processing information and learning. These strategies determine how the learner goes about learning tasks, but not how well the learner learns” (pp. 78-79, emphasis mine). Those with a superficial acquaintance with learning styles often misunderstand this and Mackracker’s presentation is helpful.

I found the chapter on brain and mind in learning to be most informative and challenging. I have read other accounts of this research but her presentation, although dense, is the clearest and most usable I have come across. It challenges how we think of adult learners in a deep way, as we consider how cognitive development continues into adulthood. I encourage educators who are wondering how adult brains and minds work to tackle this chapter, but be aware it may change how you understand who you are teaching!

Adult motivation is always a challenging topic, so I approached this material with anticipation. I was not disappointed, as Mackracker presents ways in which adults need to be aroused by learning to be engaged. If we accept the research that adults have not fewer but more emotional associations than do children (pp. 125-26), then we need to consider a more holistically engaging way of helping adults learn. The author presents various approaches to motivating adults, allowing the reader to consider one’s own context and approach.

As one who is engaged in theological adult education, I appreciate the inclusion of the work done on ways of knowing and a synopsis of the critiques of this work. I am sorry that in a chapter on relationship in learning Mackracker does not address learning in teams or groups. I am also disappointed that in neither this chapter on relationships nor the later chapter on contextual learning does the author seem to take gender differences as seriously as she does other topics in the book. She briefly addresses them, but a more in-depth presentation seems warranted. The work she has added on how the environment influences learning is helpful but, as with gender, the other topics in this chapter (especially culture, race, and power) could have been more fully addressed.

Mackracker has not written a text specifically for theological educators, but her engagement of the spirit and soul in learning is true to her concern for holistic adult learning. "The integrity of soul is essential if one is to look outward with any sense of self-extension; the possibility of spirit is essential if the individual wants to resolve conflicts within the soul” (p. 172). I encourage those of us engaged in theological adult education to take this chapter as a catalyst through which to engage the rest of the book. It challenges us to ask ourselves what we are about, as we facilitate adult theological education in holistic and passionate ways.

The final area of Mackracker’s text I wish to highlight is the emphasis on group facilitation as an effective approach to adult learning. Not only is this the topic of the book’s final chapter, but there are presentations woven throughout the book on how to facilitate discussions of topics. Presented in boxes throughout the text are “learning and facilitating principles” that encourage the reader to approach the book as both learner and teacher. It is a text I will use with students, and will share with seminary colleagues who desire to help adults students learn.

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Leon McKenzie’s book, The Religious Education of Adults, was published in 1982. At the time, it was considered a foundational work in the field. In the meantime, according to the new book cover, it has acquired the status of a classic. This revised version of the book, co-authored with R. Michael Harton, attempts to update and expand the original. It does this by incorporating some recent writings and research, and by expanding and adding a few chapters. Whereas the earlier work comprised of an introduction and seven chapters, this edition has ten chapters with an introduction. One of the new chapters is an elaboration of a theory of adult religious education based on McKenzie’s later writings. The final two chapters replace the previous appendices with revised material on evaluation and curriculum and program models.

Mckenzie and Harton are upfront with their thesis: adult religious education in most local churches is largely ineffectual (p. 1). Adults do not see parish/congregational education as a credible provider of quality education (p. ix). The thinking that controls the doing of adult religious education must be confronted and deconstructed. They propose to do this through the prism and principles of (secular) adult education. The intention of the book is to improve the practice of adult religious education. The authors make no claim to rare insight (p. 1), yet the text reads like the latest book of revelation offered to Christian churches.

McKenzie and Harton’s new edition is unabashedly philosophical. They seek to probe the foundational issues underlying the enterprise of adult education. Their proposal is a paradigm of the philosophical framework of adult education today. It is on this level and, on those terms that I will briefly attempt to engage the book in this review.

McKenzie and Harton set up the problem by postulating a set of nine beliefs currently controlling the education of adults in our churches. They proceed to offer a set of eight counter beliefs to “solve” the problem (pp. 2-26). The conventional beliefs, the authors claim, expose five problem areas in church education. First, program
content is determined exclusively by a priestly caste without any suggestions from the learners; second, programs focus almost solely on formation rather than critical education; third, they are fixated on theological content to the exclusion of all other adult concerns; fourth, programs are conducted by religious educators who are academically prepared in theology but minimally prepared in adult learning principles; and fifth, the programs are conceived in a research vacuum.

Churches, no doubt, suffer from poor educational practices. However, the set of conventional beliefs and problem areas postulated by the authors seem to set up a straw man for easy dismantling. Their counter proposal and “new perspectives” usher us into the enlightened world of adult education. In the limited space available, let me raise up three philosophical problems with McKenzie and Harton’s text—and by implication with the contemporary adult education project.

First, adult education intentionally defines itself over against the child, the school and the teacher. This creates crude stereotypes of the “adult learner” and “the child learner” that are a disservice to both. It leads to conceptual and practical age segregation—with the child and adult simplistically opposed and locked into different worlds.

From its earliest years, the adult education movement has grasped the inadequacy of equating education with teaching children in school. People of any age, it claims, can learn from a wide range of experiences. However, the tragic turn and flaw in much of the literature on adult education is its anti-schooling rhetoric (p. 166) and its stereotypes with the child and adult simplistically opposed and locked into different worlds.

Second, “The Post-Twentieth-Century Adult” is the title of McKenzie and Harton’s third chapter. In their words, this adult is “protean” (p. 74), “beholders to no one for the values he espouses” (p. 87), “refuses to surrender to the tutelage of other” (p. 86), and “is secular, sophisticated, individual, and free” (p. 78). This adult is the product “of the central values that flourished in the eighteenth-century philosophical Enlightenment” (p. 76). I find it shocking that anyone could write such statements in 1982 and reiterate them in 2002, apparently oblivious to feminist, ecological and some psychological criticisms of this Promethean ideal. This modern ideal of becoming rational and independent still largely permeates the field of adult education literature. It is an ideal in crisis and out of touch with postmodern sensibilities.

Finally, McKenzie and Harton’s conceptualization of adult education is reductionist. “The term,” they claim, “should be applied only to programs in which an educator brings a degree of expertise to the task of structuring and facilitating learning” (p. 166–67). This is elitist and fosters a cult of professionalism. It does, however, enable us to understand the theoretical and philosophical moves taken by theorists of adult education which function to separate adult education off from the rest of education and underlie its claim to be unique.

Our churches need all the educational help they can get. However, they ought not to take over uncritically the literature and practices of the adult education movement and its modern secularist ideal of adulthood. Religious traditions have deep wisdom with regard to the meaning of education, teaching and the paradox of adulthood. The time has arrived for churches to retrieve that ancient wisdom and incorporate it into their educational life forms, processes and practices.

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This festschrift written by former students of James Loder is stunning in the range of topics it addresses. The power of the Holy Spirit to transform human beings and all creation, the central theme in Loder’s work, is used as a basis for challenging and academically rigorous discussions on aspects of ecclesial practice (Part One), on the nature of practical theology (Part Two) and on the relationship of the “science of practical theology grounded in the Holy Spirit” (p. 407) to other disciplines—specifically philosophy and mystical spirituality (Part Three).

Loder was a teacher at Princeton Theological Seminary until his death in 2001. Introductory biographical details reveal a spiritual and learned man who sought to integrate “the life of the mind and the love of God” (p. x): a person able “to connect the highest levels of intellectual pursuit to the experience of salvation without destroying the integrity of either” (p. 2). The essays, described by the editors as “a work of love” (p. 40), nevertheless avoid the potential danger of uncritical agreement with Loder’s thought. Nor is appreciation dependent on acquaintance with his earlier work. Rather, the book strikes a good balance between detailed outlining of Loder’s ideas and using them, particularly in Part One, to develop fascinating and scholarly contributions to contemporary and relevant debates in the church. For example, essays discuss, amongst other issues, the nature of baptism, the doctrine of the real presence, models of leadership in the church and the potential creativity of “borderland” encounters. (“Transforming Encounter in the Borderlands: A Study of Matthew 15:21–21,” pp. 116–32).

Drawing on a number of theological disciplines, these earlier essays would make valuable reading and discussion material for students in theological training for ministries in the church. Their presence within a volume whose primary commitment is to honour the work of a practical theologian might mean that they are not as widely read and used as they might be if they appeared in works dedicated to the specific themes they address.

Essays in Part Two and Part Three are more explicitly committed to detailed discussion of Loder’s understanding of the nature and scope of practical theology. The editors hope that the book will stimulate a “comprehensive critique” of Loder’s entire corpus “by practical theologians and religious educators and by those involved in the reconstruction of public life in postmodern culture.” (p. 24). Loder’s uncompromisingly Christocentric and confessional approach to theology and Christian education will undoubtedly be controversial: firmly rooted in the reformed tradition his approach is unhesitant and certain, giving little space for standing outside the Christian tradition in order to offer critique. Yet the essays give space for dialogue and invite reflection. The authors often display awareness of potential controversies both in relation to their own arguments and to the ideas of Loder. For example, Boyd-MacMillan, in a chapter entitled “Loder and Mystical Spirituality Particularity, Universality and Intelligence” (pp. 373–400), discusses the accusation of “christological imperialism” (p. 385) that can be directed towards Loder’s work, quoting and testing out Loder’s conviction that his approach “enables direct relationship between seemingly polarizing disciplines and approaches” (p. 383). In a final essay the citing of Loder’s definition of love as “the non-possessive delight in the particularity of the other” (p. 429) highlights the complexity and subtlety of Loder’s thought in this area and invites further reflection and engagement.

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