15 What needs to be done?

Though this book suggests a fresh approach to theory and practice in the field of adult learning, it is just one small step toward understanding and helping adult learners better. Our total understanding of adult learning remains far from complete, and our help for many learning projects is ineffective.

What needs to be done now? What are the next steps? What theorizing, empirical research, and pilot programs are most urgent? This chapter will list a few high-priority projects – action projects as well as theory, development projects as well as research.

Suggestions from Earlier Chapters

Several research and development projects have been suggested in previous chapters. Further surveys of the frequency and importance of learning projects were proposed in Chapter 3. The same surveys could collect additional data concerning each type of planner, as was suggested in Chapter 8. Needed studies of what and why people learn were outlined in Chapters 4 and 5. Some research and development projects dealing with two major decisions faced by all learners were suggested in Chapters 6 and 7.

Two major directions in which innovative practices for self-planned learning might move were suggested in Chapter 10. One involves better help and resources with both the planning and the actual learning. The other direction involves new ways of helping people become more competent as learners.

The need for further studies of autonomous learning groups was noted in Chapter 13.

Because adults carry on most of their learning outside of formal institutions, and because their helpers are found largely among their acquaintances, there is no organized corps of adult learners and no professional association of their helpers. A useful and revealing experiment might be to establish an association of learners and

helpers to decide what new services to seek from governments, universities, public libraries, and corporations. A corporation, such as an insurance company or automobile manufacturer, might simultaneously experiment with an emphasis on complete and accurate learning, perhaps with the following slogan: "We help you *learn* about our products and services, and then *you* make the decisions."

Other specific suggestions for research and innovation are scattered throughout the book. In addition, the creative reader will himself think of further possibilities.

Some Particular Fields

Most of the research and development projects listed above are comprehensive in scope. They include, for example, the entire range of subject matter that people try to learn.

Many readers, though, are primarily interested in a single cluster of subject matter, a specific target population, or one type of institution. Such a reader can consider the implications of this book for theory and practice in his particular field. As he does this, a significant research or action project in that field may begin to take shape.

Most of the comprehensive projects listed earlier can also be conducted within one particular field. During its pilot stages, for example, an attempt to provide better help for adult learners could focus on one sort of subject matter, population, or institution.

To demonstrate the endless possibilities, let us select a few particular fields as examples.

1. Some important innovations might be initiated within the *human growth* cluster of subject matter. At present the human potential movement emphasizes techniques centered in groups and growth centers. Long-term help for self-planned learning has been relatively rare so far.
2. *Parent education* is a second area in which self-planned learning could be fostered and aided more than it is now. Although many books are available for the parent, he may also want help in evaluating his performance, in setting goals, and in applying successfully the suggested principles.
3. *Policy-making* is another area in which research and development projects in adult learning could be especially beneficial. As was pointed out in Chapter 3, politicians spend a great deal of time at learning. How can we help them learn more effectively, and face the entire range of views on an issue? How can high-level decision-makers – politicians, public servants, and top executives – be encouraged to study all the long-term, far-reaching consequences of each major decision?
4. *Schools and colleges* are changing rapidly, but additional improvements are clearly possible. Chapter 3 pointed out that children and adolescents initiate many

learning projects outside of their required learning. Educational researchers, theorists, and innovators might study this out-of-school learning, and reflect on the implications for in-school learning. A series of specific steps that educational institutions might take was outlined in Chapter 14.

5. Learning related to *an occupation or profession* is common and significant in most societies. How do people learn a new occupation or job? What are the outstanding characteristics of the daily learning efforts of a lawyer, doctor, nurse, engineer, executive, architect, artist, musician, manager, foreman, writer, teacher, researcher? How can each person in an organization facilitate the learning of his subordinates and colleagues? How can a company foster effective learning projects among its managers? How do staff learning projects facilitate organizational development or change?

6. Further studies and experimentation may increase the effectiveness of our efforts to *reform or rehabilitate* certain individuals, including criminals, alcoholics, and drug addicts. Synanon and Alcoholics Anonymous have already adopted one basic principle of adult learning: dramatic improvement occurs only when the individual himself becomes highly committed to changing.

7. *Librarians and information specialists* are already experimenting with new forms of information storage and retrieval, including a liaison or intermediary person between the learner and the systems. As they study the needs of the adult learner, they may develop better help for his decisions about what and how to learn, as well as his decisions about specific resources.

8. As *social workers* come to regard their clients as potential learners, they may experiment with new ways of helping them set goals, plan learning, and actually learn.

9. *Counselors* have traditionally accepted much of the responsibility for planning and guiding a client's learning. They may increasingly try to help some clients become effective self-planners – dealing with their problems through reflection, reading, conversations with several individuals, and certain group experiences, rather than limiting their learning efforts to the counseling sessions.

A Personal Note

Many other directions could also be significant. I hope each reader will try to relate our approach and findings to his own field, to his own professional concerns and interests.

This is an open-ended book. It certainly does not present a complete and final picture of the adult's learning projects. Instead, it is designed to encourage a great

deal of further exploration, for both new practices and better theory are needed in the field of adult learning.

My hope is that this book will stimulate people to undertake research in many directions, not just the ones listed in this chapter. Mankind will benefit from a wide range of efforts to understand and foster human learning.

Adult Learning in the Future

What will all these research and development projects add up to? What might adult learning be like in 20 or 30 years?

First, the body of knowledge regarding human learning projects will be much more complete and accurate than it is at present. The comprehensive study of learning projects will be a well-defined field of research and theory, integrating the efforts of persons from various fields that are now widely separated.

Second, the man or woman of the future will have a high regard for deliberate learning efforts, and will perceive them as normal and significant. He will realize that each type of planner is effective and appropriate in certain circumstances. The adult learner of the future will be highly competent in deciding what to learn, and in planning and arranging his own learning. He will successfully diagnose and solve almost any problem or difficulty that arises. He will obtain appropriate help competently and quickly, but only when necessary.

There is another reason, too, for the speed and ease with which the adult learner of the future will obtain help. The help available to him will be greatly improved and readily available. New types of immediate, inexpensive help will be widespread. Helping individual learners will be regarded as an important responsibility of educational institutions, libraries, employers, professional associations, and sales persons.

All in all, in 20 or 30 years, the amount of appropriate knowledge and skill gained by the typical adult will be much higher than at present. His willingness to learn will also be stronger. Because of his competence at learning and the help that is available, he will select knowledge and skill that is especially relevant for his particular responsibilities and interests. He will learn the knowledge and skill efficiently, easily, and pleasantly – with a minimum of time, money, and frustration. Challenging, rewarding, effective, fun – the adult's learning projects will continue to be a significant and integral part of his total life.