

The Action Gap in Adult Learning: An Identity-to-Behaviour Framework for Translating Knowledge into Sustainable Change

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Abstract

Adult education frequently assumes that access to knowledge will produce corresponding changes in behaviour. Yet learners may understand what should be done, demonstrate conceptual mastery, and still fail to translate knowledge into sustained action. This conceptual paper examines the knowledge–action gap in adult learning and proposes an identity-to-behaviour framework for understanding why information acquisition alone is often insufficient for durable behavioural change.

The paper argues that learning outcomes are influenced not only by knowledge and motivation but also by the learner’s existing self-concept, internalised behavioural expectations, perceived capability, emotional meaning and habitual response patterns. New information that conflicts with these established internal structures may be intellectually accepted without becoming behaviourally integrated.

A staged framework is proposed in which sustainable learning transfer requires movement from awareness and cognitive understanding to personal meaning, identity-level integration, behavioural experimentation and repeated real-world enactment. Particular attention is given to the distinction between knowing a principle and incorporating it into the learner’s operational self-concept.

The framework has implications for adult education, professional development and transformational learning design. It suggests that educational programmes seeking behavioural outcomes should complement information delivery with structured reflection, contextual application, feedback and opportunities for repeated behavioural grounding.

The paper concludes by proposing directions for empirical research examining whether identity-level integration predicts learning transfer and behavioural persistence beyond conventional measures of knowledge acquisition and learner satisfaction.

Keywords: Adult Education; Behavioural Change; Identity; Learning Transfer; Professional Development; Transformational Learning