Chapter 1
The Social Context of Adult Learning

Learning, even self-directed learning, rarely occurs “in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives; . . . it is intimately related to that world and affected by it” (Jarvis, 2012, p. 11). What one wants to learn, what is offered, and the ways in which one learns are determined to a large extent by the nature of the society at any time. Contrast the young male apprentice of colonial times learning to be a blacksmith with today’s middle-aged woman learning a new smartphone app, or the preparation needed to become a medical doctor at the turn of the twentieth century—less than a high school diploma—with today’s long and specialized training.

It can also be argued that the nature of society at any point in time determines the relative emphasis placed on adult learning. In preindustrial societies, the rate of change was such that what a person needed to know to function as an adult could be learned in childhood. In societies hurrying to catch up, however, and in our own society with its accelerated rate of change, the urgency of dealing with social realities is felt by adults. In this global, increasingly technologically interconnected world, “the context for adult learning is growing more complex” (Nicolaides & Marsick, 2016, p. 9). The challenge for learners and adult educators is to understand the learning context whether it be “simple, complicated,
complex [or] chaotic” and to adapt our learning and teaching (p. 10). Further, social issues such as immigration and climate change and individual concerns such as those related to health or family or finances often result in individuals attending courses or learning informally about these issues.

Although adult education is responsive to the context in which it takes place, it affects that same context. Take, for example, enormous changes in our society brought on by advances in technology. Advances in telemedicine mean doctors can diagnose patients who live at a distance using increasingly sophisticated web-based communication and patients can use smartphone apps to monitor their health. Auto mechanics must now be trained to diagnose engine problems using computers; auto manufacturers tout self-driving cars; a smartphone can be turned into a 3D printer; misplaced items such as keys, wallets, and backpacks can be located via smartphone. Adult education has responded to these technological advances by offering courses to learn this technology so that we can better function in our digital environment.

Although the preceding examples of learning are particularly contemporary, historically there has always been an interlocking of adult learning needs with the social context in which they occur. The skills needed in colonial America reflected the agrarian context; further, since early settlers were fleeing religious persecution in Europe, there was a moral and religious imperative in learning to read so that one could study the Bible. After the Revolutionary War, the newly independent nation needed leaders and informed citizens to build the democratic society. In this new world, civic education, which included learning about philosophy, science, and politics, eclipsed religious education and became paramount in the education of adults.

With the Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, industry-based skills training became a necessity. Also, because of the massive influx of immigrants to the United States at this time, “Americanization” and citizenship programs became a prominent form of adult education. It was felt that these immigrants needed to learn the ways of their adopted country so that they would “melt” into society. Interestingly, immigrants themselves organized their own schools to maintain their culture, but these were largely invisible to society at large.

Although a major thrust of adult education at any particular time reflects the sociohistorical context, varied purposes and learning
interests coexist. We might argue that technology is a major thrust of learning today, but there is still job training, literacy, civic education, liberal (such as Great Books clubs) and leisure learning, along with community-based social-action initiatives. As Stubblefield and Keane (1994, p. 312) observed from their survey of adult education from colonial times until the present, regardless of the historical era, “Americans learned because there was knowledge to master, technology to adapt, and life’s uncertainties to be resolved.”

Thus, to a large extent, the learning that goes on in adulthood can be understood through an examination of the social context in which it occurs. How is learning in adulthood shaped by the society in which it takes place? How does the sociocultural context determine what is learned and by whom?

This chapter explores three conditions characteristic of the current sociocultural context that are shaping the learning needs of adults in today’s world: changing demographics, the global economy, and information and technology. Although we present each of these separately at first, these three factors are very much interrelated, and thus their convergence and subsequent impact on learning in adulthood are discussed in the final section of this chapter.

**Changing Demographics**

Changing demographics is a social reality shaping the provision of learning in contemporary American society. Demographics is about people, groups of people, and their respective characteristics. For the first time in our society, adults outnumber youth, there are more older adults, the population is better educated than ever before, and there is more cultural and ethnic diversity. For various reasons, individuals and groups of people seek out learning experiences; for other reasons, society targets learning activities for certain segments of the population. Thus, certain learning activities are learner initiated and others are society initiated in response to the changing demographics. The field is concerned with the growth and development of adult learners, while at the same time, there are emerging groups of learners with special needs.

To begin, there are simply more adults in our society than ever before, and the population will continue to age. In comparison to colonial times
when half the population was under age 16, in 1990, fewer than one in four Americans were under age 16 and half were age 33 or older. The median age of the American population was 38 years in 2017 up from of 35.3 years in 2000 and this figure is expected to increase to 43 by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b). The so-called Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are a contributing factor to this change in the population. The Baby Boomers started turning 65 in 2011 and by 2056 those over age 65 will outnumber individuals under 18 (Ortman, 2012, U.S. Census Bureau, 2017b).

The shift from a youth-oriented to an adult-oriented society is solidified by the increasing numbers of older adults in the population. In addition to an increase of persons over age 65, the oldest old, those over 85 years old, are the fastest-growing segment of the older population. The number of people age 85 and older is expected to grow from 5.8 million in 2010 to 19 million in 2050. This age group is expected to comprise 2.3% of the population in 2030 and 4.3% in 2050 (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). In addition, the population over age 65 is expected to become increasingly racially diverse and the life expectancy gap between men and women is expected to narrow (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010).

Today’s older adults are also increasingly better educated, in better health, and many are economically better off than previous cohorts. Society is already heeding their learning needs with policies like tuition waivers for higher and continuing education programs and specially designed programs, such as the popular Road Scholar program and learning-in-retirement institutes. There has also been a subtle change in the philosophical rationale—at least among those working in the fields of gerontology and educational gerontology—underlying the provision of education for this group. Along with an economic rationale (the better educated need fewer social services) and a social stability rationale (millions of healthy retired people need something to do) is an awareness that older adults as well as younger ones have an unending potential for development. The stereotypical idea of retirement as a time for cognitive decline and withdrawal seems to be slowly changing as an increasing number of individuals are reaching retirement age and the media, although still promoting some stereotypes, is showing older adults actively engaged in a wide variety of activities. Additionally, retirement communities arrange learning opportunities for their residents including lectures, travel, concerts, and discussion groups.
Thus, more adults and an increase in the number of older adults are two demographic factors influencing the provision of learning activities in our society. So, too, is the rising level of education characteristic of U.S. citizens. This is dramatically illustrated by the fact that 90% of the U.S. population age 25 or older has completed high school or higher levels of education, which compares with 24% in 1940 (Schmidt, 2018). Because previous education is the single best predictor of participation in adult education, the rising educational level of the adult population is a contextual factor of considerable import. For example, 66% of U.S. adults 26–35 years old participated in adult education activities compared to 49% of those 56–65 years old (Desjardins, 2015). In adults age 16–65 (excluding individuals from 16 to 24 in formal studies), 31% with less than a high school education participated in adult education activities whereas 79% of those with a high school education or higher participated in adult education activities (Desjardins, 2015).

Participation in adult education is also affected by literacy and economics. In the United States, 27% of low-literate adults said they had participated in adult education within the last year, while 84% of those with higher levels of literacy participated (Desjardins, 2015). This pattern is seen in other countries as well. In Korea, the respective figures are 13% for low-literates and 77% for those with higher literacy rates, and Cyprus’s figures are 24% and 51%, respectively (Desjardins, 2015). Participation rates for U.S. adults ages 16–65 whose parents had not graduated from high school was 39%, while individuals where at least one parent completed high school was 72%.

Another demographic characteristic of the social context is the growing cultural and ethnic diversity of America’s population. Roughly 13.4% or 43.7 million people residing in the United States are foreign born (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2018). Twenty-six percent of those who are foreign born and living in the United States are from Mexico (OECD, 2018). Applications for asylum in the United States have risen especially from citizens from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (OECD, 2018). Although immigration rates are expected to slow somewhat in the short term due to U.S. governmental policies enacted in the late 2010s, (OECD, 2018), starting in 2030, “net international migration is projected to become the largest driver of population growth” (Vespa, Armstrong, & Medina, 2018, p. 12). Immigration combined with birthrate
projections in the United States mean there will be an increase in the Latinx, Asian, and African American populations with a decrease in Whites. In 2016, non-Hispanic Whites comprised 61.3% of the population and by 2060 they will make up 44.3% of the population. In contrast, the Latinx population is expected to increase almost 10% from 17.8% of the U.S. population in 2016 to 27.5% in 2060. The African American population is projected to increase almost 2% from 13.3% in 2016 to 15% of the population by 2060. The Asian population is expected to grow from 5.7% to 9.1% of the population. The percentage of those of two or more races is expected to expand from 2.6% of the population in 2016 to 6.2% in 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017c). By 2045, people of color will account for 51.3% of the population (Frey, 2018).

The socioeconomic and cultural diversity of today’s immigrant population presents special challenges. In 2016, 30% of the foreign-born population age 25 or older possessed a bachelor’s degree or higher and 29% lacked a high school diploma or GED (Zong, Batalova, & Hallock, 2018). Fifty-two percent of the immigrants in the United States over age 5 are English proficient (Radford, 2019). Immigrants’ income varies with education level, occupation, industry, and geographic region, but immigrants tend to earn less than their native-born counterparts although the gap is small for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). Hence, immigrants’ income and opportunities can vary depending on their education level and language proficiency, with the less educated and less English proficient “concentrated in trade and labour professions and confined mostly to general education programmes” (Calvo & Sarkisian, 2015, p. 1044). Courses for immigrants include English as a second language courses, adult basic education (ABE), and other community-based courses in “nutrition, parenting, immigration issues and other informal education opportunities” (Larrotta, 2017, p. 67). Typically, churches, libraries, social service centers, and community centers are places where immigrants engage in adult education (Larrotta, 2017).

In summary, the composition of society is an important factor in the provision of learning opportunities for citizens of all ages. In the United States, there are more adults than youth, the number of older adults is growing, the population as a whole is better educated, and more diverse—racially, ethnically, and culturally—than ever before.
Globalization

Globalization is an overarching concept encompassing changes taking place worldwide. But globalization is not a new concept because it can be argued that the world has always sought to connect through travel, trade, and cultural exchange. (For a brief overview of the history and various definitions of globalization see Gulmez, 2017) Since the 1980s, the term has more frequently been used to reflect the increasing integration of economies around the world, particularly through trade and the flow of finances. Globalization includes the flow of “goods, services, people, knowledge, ideas, information and financial capital across borders” (Desjardins, 2013, p. 184). An incredibly complex and controversial phenomenon, we can only try to convey some of its essential characteristics and some of the issues and speculate as to how it is shaping adult learning in our context.

Neoliberal ideas of free trade, privatization, and “reduced capital controls on cross-border flow of finance” fuel the images most associated with the economic view of economic globalization (Desjardins, 2013, p. 183). These images include the loss of low-wage manufacturing jobs to less developed corners of the world, with transnational companies operating in a space outside national boundaries and control, with consumerism and commercialism supplanting other interests. Those opposed to the neoliberal agenda say that the costs of globalization include the loss of human rights including poor working conditions, although proponents indicate that globalization promotes economic growth (Richards & Gelleny, 2016). Although the market economy is clearly a driving force in globalization, so too is information technology. Technology has changed the way we work in that individuals can work from anywhere in the world. Changes in information technology have changed the teaching/learning transaction. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), synchronous and asynchronous distance courses, communication tools such as Skype, Zoom, and Google Hangouts, and the plethora of web-based resources including LinkedIn Learning, and YouTube have affected the way individuals learn alone and in groups.
But globalization is not only about economics. Brysk (2003, p. 22) contends that it is a combination of four elements:

- **Connection** means greater traffic in bodies, goods, services, and information across borders.
- **Cosmopolitanism** describes the growth of multiple centers of power and influence above, below, and across national governments: international organizations, grassroots groups, and transnational bodies from Microsoft to Greenpeace.
- **Communication** is an increase in technological capacity that strengthens transnational networks of all kinds (from multinational corporations to nongovernmental organizations [NGOs] to terrorists) and diffuses ideas and values more quickly and broadly.
- **Commodification** is the expansion of world markets, and the extension of market-like behavior across more states and social realms. Increases in global capital flows, privatization of formerly state-owned enterprises, and increasing employment of children are all examples of commodification.

Brysk goes on to show how these elements of globalization are both a plus and a minus for human rights issues:

Connection brings human rights monitors to Chiapas, but it also brings sex tourists to Thailand. Cosmopolitanism creates a U.N. Human Rights Commission and countless NGOs to condemn China’s abuse of political dissidents and religious minorities; yet commodification makes China the United States’s second-leading trade partner. (p. 22)

Part of the controversy surrounding globalization has to do with economics. Those countries that can be competitive are already better off and become even richer through globalization. Critics of neoliberal policies observe that more wealthy countries hurt less developed countries because richer countries “extract more money from developing countries than they invest, displace local capital, and add to unemployment by promoting capital-intensive production rather than labour-intensive activities” (Richards & Gelleny, 2016, p. 219).

What does all this mean for adult learning? Walters (2014) asserts that globalization “has been a driving factor in the commodification of learning” and that learning has become individualized and more expensive, widening the gap between the rich and the poor (p. 186).
She argues that global economic changes that build on capitalism drive down labor and production costs. This means that skilled labor is under-utilized and that people are being deskilled. An alternative view is that the business world is increasingly responsible for education. Increased worker responsibility for their learning and teamwork approaches are necessary in this global economy. Adult education and human resource development (HRD) have responded with broad-based workplace literacy programs and training and development packages designed to address a wide range of economy-driven needs (Finger, 2005b). Indeed, HRD and corollary concepts such as organizational learning have become a parallel adult education system, one lodged in the workplace where responsiveness to globalization is paramount.

The global economy is having an impact on learning in broader ways too. Education is viewed as a service (Guilbault, 2018). Some argue that students are consumers, and faculty and staff are customer service providers in this market-drive economy (Guilbault, 2018). As Koris and Nokelainen (2015) state, “Students expect to be treated as customers in terms of student feedback, classroom studies, and to some extent in terms of communication” (p. 128). Interestingly, they did not see themselves as customers when it came to grade expectation or curriculum (Koris & Nokelainen, 2015).

This shift to the marketplace as the primary site of adult learning has caused some adult educators to discuss the effect of neoliberalism on adult education. Neoliberalism is “a global system of political economy with interests in protecting and expanding the hegemony of private markets,” which ultimately results in less funding for social services and increased benefits to the wealthy (Abendroth, 2014, p. 18). Adult literacy programs grounded in Freirean concepts such as problem posing have closed as the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) meant federal funding for literacy was tied to workforce initiatives and “ABE [Adult Basic Education] instructors . . . felt pressure to become technocrats who provide a linear instruction for passing a high-stakes test” (p. 19).

Intertwined in globalization is a shift from a society employed in producing durable goods to one employed in providing services. Given the United States’s aging population, it is not surprising that health care is one of the top five industries driving the economy (Deutch, 2018). Healthcare sector jobs increased 20% since 2008 and they are expected to grow another 18% by 2026 (Deutch, 2018). The top job sector in the United States is retail (Deutch, 2018). Business and professional services
are also expected to continue to expand into the 2020s as they have in recent decades (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The brisk growth of the service sector is paralleled by rapid growth in professional and related occupations.

The important thing about these projections is that these two occupations are at the opposite ends of the education and earnings distribution. That is, professional occupations require extensive educational preparation and are generally well-rewarded. Service jobs require lower educational credentials, with corresponding lower job rewards. (Bills, 2004, p. 97)

Concurrent with the shift to a service economy is the shift to what has been called the information society—a shift that has had a major impact on workers as economic units. Skills learned in preparation for a job or career cannot keep pace with the demands of the world of work, the ability to learn becomes a valuable skill in and of itself. This factor is underscored by the fact that a skill’s half-life is 5 years—that is, a skill learned 5 years ago is half as valuable as it was when it was learned (Kasriel, 2017); in high-tech areas software engineers may need to upgrade their skills every 12 to 18 months (Gurchiek, 2017).

In this fast-paced tech world, trainers are wondering how to best serve workers. “Micro-learning” or providing workers with short learning sessions when they need the skill is one method that is being used (Gurchiek, 2017, para. 10). Other suggestions for those in business settings include centralizing training, using text messages to encourage workers to complete their training, and delivering training in classrooms, on computers, and via cell phones (Gurchiek, 2017).

In the future, jobs will be increasingly automated, and more positions will be taken by robots. There is concern that technology will usurp the jobs of those who drive cars and trucks, workers in middle management, and even stock market analysts. How will educators, trainers, and workers need to adapt? Findings from a Pew Research study reveal that respondents believe that job education will be accomplished in multiple ways on multiple platforms from in-person training to self-directed learning, to engaging in virtual reality scenarios. Workers will be encouraged to gain skills in things that are less likely to be replicated by artificial intelligence. Such skills as creativity, collaboration, “complex
communication” and the “ability to thrive in diverse environments” will be stressed (Rainie & Anderson, 2017, para. 14). They predict that mentoring and apprenticeships will be increasingly used in the workplace (Rainie & Anderson, 2017). Leadership and conflict resolution skills will still be in demand (Rainie & Anderson, 2017). Although college degrees will still be important, employers may accept other forms of credentialing, such as digital badges, and competency may be measured in “real world work portfolios” (para. 20). Some fear that training will not meet the needs of those seeking employment in the near future because of a lack of funding, jobs changing too quickly, and the challenge inherent in teaching soft skills (Rainie & Anderson, 2017).

Developing simultaneously with the emphasis on learning to learn is the notion of the learning organization (see Chapter 2). To survive in the global economy, organizations must learn quickly (Serrat, 2017). The growing body of literature on the learning organization positions learning, information processing, and problem-solving skills as central to the survival of both the individual worker and the organization. Kanten, Kanten, and Gurlek (2015) recognize the importance of the learning organization in the age of globalization. They note, “Due to globalization, rapid changes, and [a] diverse workforce, learning organizations have become an important factor for organizations to gain competitive advantage. Learning organizations are considered a key process which contributes to organizational success” (p. 1359).

Closely related to shifts to a service and information economy are changes in America’s labor force. As previously mentioned, the service sector jobs are expected to grow followed by jobs in the health and social assistance sector (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Not surprisingly, women, minorities, and the elderly are overrepresented in the lower paying service jobs. Since the mid-1950s, however, the labor force has changed from one dominated by blue-collar occupations to one where most jobs are considered white collar. Changes in the composition of the workforce are also occurring along racial and ethnic lines. Although White non-Hispanic workers account for the majority of workers—78% in 2017—(U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018), the percentage of White non-Hispanics in the labor force has declined 2% since 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005) while the percentage of people of color in the workforce has risen. African Americans comprise 13% of the workforce compared to
11% in 2005, whereas Hispanics made up 17% of the workforce in 2017 compared to 13% in 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005, 2018). Asians account for 6% of the labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Perhaps the greatest change of all has been the participation of women in the workforce. “In 1950, there were 18.4 million women in the labor force, which accounted for about one-third of the total labor force” (Toossi & Morisi, 2017, p. 3). By 2024, “women in the labor force will increase to 77.2 million… for a 47.2% share” (p. 3). Economic necessity and the freeing of occupations traditionally assigned to men have contributed to this change.

In summary, economic factors are shaping the nature of our society, and by extension, the nature of learning that adults are most likely to undertake. A global economy, the shift to a service and information society, and consequent changes in the configuration of the labor force are determining to a large extent where learning takes place, what is offered, and who participates.

Technology

Technology has changed the way we live and learn. Technology-related vocabulary is part of our daily conversations. Those of us who teach students at a distance may need to log in to a learning management system (LMS) such as Blackboard, Schoology, Canvas, or Brightspace. We access our LMS from our computer. There is no more apt metaphor for reflecting the rate of technological change than the computer. Sometimes the computer requires that we install software and then we have to reboot our computer for it to take effect. We process students and information; we plan learning activities with an eye to inputs, flow, and outputs; we provide feedback to individual learners and to programs. Indeed, we program learning experiences and ourselves. Technology has had an enormous impact on society and adult learning. It has been instrumental in bringing about the information society, which has created new jobs and eliminated others. And as we have seen, globalization is technology driven.

The move to an information society has been a function of technological developments associated with an information explosion. Within a short span of time, electronic, communication, and information
technologies have changed society and affected how people go about their daily lives. From texting a colleague via cell phone, to ordering a ride to the airport via a smartphone app, to our car’s sensors alerting us to vehicles in our blind spot, everyday life has been irrevocably influenced by technology.

Concurrent with these technological advances has been an information explosion. There are “2.5 quintillion bytes of data created each day” and “90 percent of the data in the world was generated in the last 2 years” (Marr, 2018, para. 1). Data center storage capacity was about 1,450 exabytes worldwide with researchers predicting that storage capacity will be 2,300 exabytes by 2021 (Taylor, C. 2018). One exabyte is one million gigabytes. In this information-rich society, there is an increasing need for continuing education and for learning how to ask good questions and assess the veracity of the information.

Technology has changed where data is stored. At one time, information was stored on punch cards that programmed everything from player pianos to textile looms (Foote, 2017). By the late 1800s, data was stored on phonograph records and on film (History of Online Storage, 2017). Storing computer data on magnetic tape occurred in the 1950s (History of Online Storage, 2017). In the last 30 years we have seen floppy disks give way to 3.5-in. disks, to CD-ROMs, to jump or flash drives and cloud storage, which allows individuals to store data remotely and access it through the Internet.

A major societal shift, such as moving from an industrial to an information society, results in profound changes in the society’s structure. In an industrial society, machine technology extended physical ability; in an information society, computer technology extends mental ability. Material wealth has great value in an industrial society; knowledge and information are key assets in an information society. The social structure changes from hierarchies and bureaucracies to multicentered and horizontal networks. These changes in society’s underlying structure can be seen most dramatically in changes in the workforce. As noted earlier, the shift is eliminating certain classifications of work while creating others not previously dreamed of. For example, with the rise of Internet travel sites, fewer travel agents are needed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019b). However, software developers are predicted to be in increasing demand (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019a).
In addition to the creation and elimination of jobs, technological changes are affecting workers in other ways, such as where work is done. We check our e-mails and take calls on our commutes prior to arriving at the office, use videoconferencing instead of traveling, and virtual assistants are increasingly part of our workday to help us remember appointments, take notes, or launch video meetings (Barker, 2018). Working remotely or working from home has become increasingly popular. Approximately 3.9 million Americans report working from home at least half of the week, which is a 115% increase since 2005 (Guta, 2019). The average telecommuter is 46 years old, almost equally likely to be a man as a woman, and has at least a bachelor’s degree (Guta, 2019).

Yet others have cautioned against the unquestioning adoption of technology in the workplace, for information technologies have created something of a paradox. Designed to get work done more efficiently by fewer employees, information technologies have instead offered more ways to communicate, increased the demand for information, and raised the level of expectations regarding the print and graphic presentation of material. Think of the volume of mail one now handles through e-mail; this technology seems to have increased our workload and expectations of timely responses.

Technology’s pros and cons are also evident in life beyond work. Respondents to a Pew Research survey noted that advantages of the living in the information age include having knowledge at your fingertips to live a better life in addition to having access to an array of services at the click of a mouse (Anderson & Rainie, 2018). Those who see the digital world as potentially dangerous to our well-being cite information overload as resulting in stress, anxiety, and depression. They state this information overload can negatively affect individuals’ analytical thinking and memory (Anderson & Rainie, 2018).

Clearly, technology and the information age that it spawned are changing the nature of adult learning. Professionals’ knowledge becomes outdated in a few years. Older adults must learn new ways to communicate with their grandchildren whether it be via FaceTime, texting, or through a virtual assistant such as Alexa. We must be able to function in a fast-changing society, and this necessitates continued learning. Technology is not only making learning mandatory, it is providing many of the mechanisms for it to occur. Learners can teleconference, attain information through an intelligent tutoring system that presents materials
based on learner responses, or receive training through virtual worlds that ask learners to participate in a scenario via computer (Quinn, 2015). For example, those in counseling courses may pick an avatar and take the role of a counselor or client in a computer-simulated counseling session.

Simultaneous with the development of technologically sophisticated delivery systems is the development of new roles for educators and trainers. Although the “digital divide” has referred to those who can and cannot access technology, it can also refer to those who cannot use technologies effectively (Wei & Hindman, 2011). With smartphone use growing, more individuals can access the Internet, but possessing digital literacy skills such as knowing how to effectively search for and evaluate information or send effective e-mails, texts, and video images is also necessary in the twenty-first century (Rosen & Vanek, 2017).

A Pew Research team surveyed 2,752 Americans age 18 or older in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to uncover their “digital readiness” for personal learning (Horrigan, 2016, p. 7). Digital readiness included individuals’ self-reported skills at using technology, including their familiarity with technology terms such as MOOCs, distance learning, or digital badges. Researchers assessed learners’ trust of technology with survey questions such as: “I find it difficult to know whether information I find online is trustworthy” (p. 9). Respondents needed to indicate whether these statements described them “very well,” “somewhat well,” “not too well,” or “not at all well” (p. 9). A last indicator of readiness was how much respondents used technology. There were five groups along the spectrum of digital readiness. “The Unprepared” comprised 14% of respondents and were more likely to be women age 50 and older who came from lower income households and possessed lower levels of education. They do not adopt technology very readily, and “need help setting up tech devices and are not familiar with ‘ed tech’ terms” (p. 3). They were not confident about their computers skills or their ability to judge online information as trustworthy. Five percent of respondents were classified as “traditional learners” (p. 3). They were more likely to be women, minorities, and have lower levels of education and income. They are active learners, but they don’t use the Internet to pursue learning and have concerns about their ability to judge online information. “The Reluctant” made up 33% of respondents and were more likely to be men age 50 and older who had lower incomes and education. “The Reluctant” had higher digital skills than those who
were “Unprepared,” but they did not know new educational technology terms and did not use the Internet for learning. Group four, the “Cautious Clickers,” owned more technology and had higher levels of confidence in their ability to separate truth from fiction on the Internet (p. 3). They were not as familiar with online learning and technology terms as the “Digitally Ready.” They came from higher income households and typically had some college experience and were in their 30s and 40s. The “Digitally Ready,” 17%, loved to learn for personal enrichment and were very confident about their online skills and knew the most about online learning resources (Horrigan, 2016).

Part of becoming “Digitally Ready” is the ability to evaluate information online, and critical thinking skills are necessary. Critical thinking “involves people using a systematic approach to evaluate information, develop viable solutions, and test them as they seek to solve many different types of structured and ill-structured problems” (King, 2017, p. 115). The elements of critical thinking include “generating purposes, raising questions, using information, using concepts, making inferences, making assumptions, generating implications and embodying a point of view” (King, 2017, p. 115). To evaluate information, we need to examine its “clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, and fairness” (Elder & Paul, 2010, as cited in King, 2017, p. 115).

Technology is here to stay and teachers may need to learn new ways of interacting with students in an online or hybrid learning environment. Consulting with an instructional design specialist or attending professional development workshops on effectively integrating distance learning tools may be necessary for some instructors while others may pick these skills up on their own. Some higher education institutions offer distance education certificates for faculty. Course topics may include how to design an online course, best practices in facilitating an online course, exploring online learning communities, learning assessment tools, and copyright issues (Online Learning Consortium, 2018).

In other areas, such as adult basic skills education, ABE educators face challenges in using technology. These challenges are more evident in ABE than other areas of education due to persistent underfunding (Rosen & Vanek, 2017). Educators need “professional development, coaching, and technical assistance” to integrate technology into their
classrooms and they need to know how to “evaluate hardware and software” that can be used in the classroom (p. 56). Although both the Arizona Department of Education’s Adult Education Services and the Adult Education and Literacy Department of the Texas Workforce Commission provide a wide range of professional development programs, including webinars and self-paced learning for ABE instructors, these types of opportunities are needed nationwide (Rosen & Vanek, 2017). Unfortunately, federal funding has not increased for ABE, and most state funding has not increased either, so the integration of technology into ABE is a challenge (Rosen & Vanek, 2017).

In summary, technology has its benefits and drawbacks. Learners can access information easily and informal learning can occur via web searches, webinars, and YouTube tutorials. Individuals’ digital readiness affects how individuals can access and use the plethora of available information. Digital literacy includes learning critical thinking skills. In addition, educators must have appropriate professional development opportunities to understand how to evaluate hardware and software and integrate it into their teaching. Although training is available for some, other areas of adult education, such as ABE, may struggle due to funding shortages.

The Convergence of Demographics, Globalization, and Technology

Demographics, globalization, and technology are closely intertwined. Advances in technology, for example, are interrelated with changes in the economic sector. Automation and robotics displace production workers but create other jobs. Technology creates an alternative work sector. The need to be competitive in the world market leads to further technological sophistication. Demographics and economics are related. Economic growth is tied to productivity and the number of individuals in the workforce. The Baby Boom generation is beginning to retire and globally there are fewer working-age individuals and more retirees. This decrease in labor force participation has been offset somewhat with advances in technology (Hayes, 2018). We can now complete our taxes with software, we obtain money from ATMs instead of bank tellers, and in the future perhaps driverless cars will eliminate the need for chauffeurs (Hayes, 2018).
Embedded in this convergence of demographics, economics, and technology is a value system based on the political and economic structure of capitalism. More than three decades ago, Beder (1987, p. 107) explained how these three forces are linked in the value system:

The beliefs undergirding the capitalist system emphasize material values. The health of the system is gauged in terms of national wealth as embodied in the gross national product, and social equality is assessed in terms of economic opportunity—the potential of members of the underclasses to amass more income. Hence, the political and social systems become directed toward . . . economic productivity, and economic productivity under the rationale of human capital theory becomes the predominant rationale for all publicly funded social interventions including adult education.

This value system directly shapes adult education in the United States in several ways. First, economic productivity becomes “the dominant rationale for all public subsidy of adult education” (p. 109). Second, social justice becomes equated with economic opportunity in that “the just society is a society that provides opportunity for members of the underclasses to amass more income and material goods” and adult education “helps learners acquire the skills and knowledge” to do so (p. 109). The emphasis is on productivity and efficiency, both of which benefit from advances in technology. Thus technology, in the service of economic productivity, converges with changing demographics in shaping the adult learning enterprise.

Nowhere is this more visible than in higher education. Before globalization and the market economy, higher education was a local enterprise serving a predominantly local or national constituency. Academic foci shaped the nature of the student body and concerns of the institution. With the shift to a consumer approach to higher education, the institution worries about its “brand” appeal, its profitability, its “share” of the market. Globalization is reshaping higher education in several ways. Students are studying abroad with more coming to the United States and Europe than in previous generations (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). Technology has helped people communicate across the world using multiple media (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). This has also meant that the Western values have circulated to other countries (Mason, 2003).
As already pointed out, some writers would like to see the values and purposes of adult education reexamined in the wake of the wide-scale social and economic changes taking place. In a postmodern world characterized by large-scale changes in global activity resulting in economic, social, and political uncertainty, adult education tends to be an entrepreneurial instrument of the so-called new world order. Adult education is particularly sensitive to a restructured workplace, reliance on technology to produce knowledge, and a market demand for multiskilled workers. Humans are resources for the winners of globalization—transnational corporations (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). As well, knowledge has become an important business commodity that is readily marketed, due, in part, to the explosion of the Internet and other information technologies. Although knowledge and learning serve the needs of transnational corporations, there is also evidence that technology and globalization have made women’s struggles across the globe more evident and technology has helped movements like Occupy Wall Street come to fruition (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). Others note the impact of neoliberalism on adult education as educators help individuals cope with the overwhelming economic and other challenges that threaten their identities and survival (Bowl, 2017).

Globalization has affected the supply of low-skilled workers globally and in the United States (Hickman & Olney, 2011). Although scholars worry that low-level workers are being left behind in this global economy (Schied, Mulenga, & Baptiste, 2005), there is some evidence that U.S. workers are trying to obtain the skills needed for continued employment (Hickman & Olney, 2011). The researchers examined how immigration and offshoring levels affect enrollment in post-high school education (Hickman & Olney, 2011). Results showed that “offshoring and immigration increase enrollment at community colleges but not other types of institutions, particularly among older, non-traditional age students” (p. 654). Community colleges are appealing to lower skilled workers because they offer short-term affordable programs, and some community colleges offer technical programs that lower skilled workers find appealing (Hickman & Olney, 2011). The authors recommend increased governmental support for community colleges (Hickman & Olney, 2011).

If the postmodern world is characterized by fragmentation and diversity, it is also defined by new alliances and interactions. Demographics, the
global economy, and technology have come together in adult education in the blurring of the field’s content and delivery mechanisms. For example, adult education has been variously divided into formal, nonformal, and informal learning activities (see Chapter 3). Formal learning takes place in educational institutions and often leads to degrees or some sort of credit. Nonformal learning refers to organized activities outside educational institutions, such as those found in community organizations, cultural institutions such as museums and libraries, and voluntary associations. Informal learning refers to the experiences of everyday living from which we learn something. Today, many formal providers offer learning experiences that are noncredit, leisure oriented, and short term. Similarly, nonformal learning and informal life experiences can be turned into formal, credit-earning activities.

Another blurring can be noted in higher education. Once composed of learners 18 to 22 years old, the student body has grayed along with the population. Roughly 38% of those enrolled in college are age 25 or older (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Similar subjects may be taught at the local community college for credit and at the public adult school for noncredit. The part-time adult student taking a course during the day at a college is an adult learner as much as the 16-year-old studying for a high school diploma in a local evening class. There is also a blurring between higher education and business and industry. Many postsecondary institutions have business institutes that provide training and development services to business. Conversely, a growing number of private companies, such as McDonald’s Hamburger University (Tomar, 2019) and the Pardee RAND Graduate School, are offering accredited degrees (Pardee RAND Graduate School, 2018).

Finally, a blurring of content and delivery is found in such popular slogans as “workplace literacy,” “learning to learn,” “critical thinking,” and “media literacy.” Educators, employers, and society at large are focusing attention on developing the skills needed to be productive and informed members of a fast-changing and highly technical society. With the erosion of boundaries in the content and provision of adult learning, we may be witnessing the emergence of what has been called the learning society. Taking human beings rather than educational institutions as its beginning point, the learning society is a response to the social context.
Summary

Adult learning does not occur in a vacuum. What one needs or wants to learn, what opportunities are available, the way one learns—all are to a large extent determined by the society in which one lives. This chapter has discussed several characteristics of American society today that are shaping the nature of learning in adulthood.

Demographics, globalization, and technology are three forces affecting all of society’s endeavors, including adult learning. Regarding the American population, adults outnumber youth, there are more older adults, adults are better educated compared to previous generations, and there is more cultural and ethnic diversity among the population than ever before.

Globalization is linking the world through economics, knowledge, information, culture, and services. Transnational companies benefit the most from globalization but at what expense to workers? As a result of globalization, critics note learning has become increasingly individualized with greater gaps between the rich and the poor (Walters, 2014), whereas others say that lower skilled U.S. workers are finding more opportunities for pursuing additional skills at community colleges as a result of globalization and immigration (Hickman & Olney, 2011).

Technology is integral to the global economy and has contributed to, if not caused, the shift to an information society, creating dramatic changes in the workforce. Although we have treated them separately, these three forces are interactive and firmly embedded in the American capitalist value system. Adult education both reflects and responds to the forces prevalent in the sociocultural context. Among the implications discussed in the chapter are the field’s responsiveness to special groups of people, the economic productivity rationale behind much of adult education, the need for the development of critical thinking skills in order to assess the endless flow of information, and the need for educators, indeed, all adults, to constantly learn in a tech-driven society.