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USING ADULT LEARNING TECHNIQUES
IN
ADULT EDUCATION CONFERENCES

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ABSTRACT. Conversation abounds regarding the importance of conducting adult education conferences through using adult learning techniques which are consistent with what is known about how adults learn. Many professionals already successfully implement this naturally, and experience very positive feedback and results. But many still struggle with the question, "Why don't we practice on ourselves what we say we believe about adult learning?" The question this paper seeks to explore is: Since the field is not very systematic in this, what needs to happen if it is to change? Much published literature suggests various designs and techniques for making the transition, even in short conference sessions of less than an hour. However, most conference program committees are reluctant to insist on this as a requirement for presenting at the conference. Those seeing this as important need to make and sustain the commitment to accomplish this, using the suggestions of the literature to help follow through. The breakthrough will come as we crack the genetic code and awaken organizations of adult, continuing, extension and community educators (that's us!) to such a level we can't go back to the ruts of our proceduralized, anesthetized, sleep — conducting conference sessions without using adult learning techniques to involve the participants.

INTRODUCTION

Conversation abounds on the importance of using adult learning techniques which are consistent with what is known concerning how adults learn. More specifically, some insist that an adult education conference session, above all, is the place where this practice needs to be most prominent. Theory says that the quality of the learning gained at conferences, institutes, workshops, etc., is in direct proportion to the quantity and quality of the interaction between the platform person(s), the subject matter content, and the audience as well as

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among the participants themselves. Research on how adults learn has confirmed their desire for: active participation in the learning process, being treated as "grown-ups" instead of as "children", engaging in a variety of experiential learning techniques, discussion time allotted in conjunction with a lecture if one is given, interaction with others in small groupings that helps them to internalize information, hands-on-practice, opportunity for each to share his/her expertise with others, raising questions about and exploring problems and various possibilities of practical application; in short, meeting their learning needs as they perceive and understand them.

A DESCRIPTION AND OUTLINE OF THE CONCERN

It hardly needs to be repeated that many conference sessions have all of this implemented very competently and successfully. There are those presenters who are "naturally talented" in this direction and adult, continuing, extension and community educators benefit as well as enjoy those times. This keeps us attending the myriad conferences we do. Nevertheless, this is more the exception than the rule. Each person has had his/her joy diminished, having participated in a large meeting of adults - conference, institute, workshop, seminar, etc., - and has said or heard someone else say, "Why do we violate everything we believe about how adults learn?" or, "Why don't we practice on ourselves what we preach about adult learning?" or, "Please, no more long lectures!" or, "Why should I stay in that session and be talked 'down to'?"

In addition, many have been presenters at conferences, etc., - concurrent sessions - and struggled with the dilemma of saying to themselves: "How can I get all of it said in the short time allotted?" or, " I don't have time in my session to engage the participants actively." or, "This interaction with conference participants is for other presenters, but I don't need to do it." or, "Having structured a lot of interaction, I still did not accomplish what I hoped to!"

The major concern is why, up till now, have we as professionals not been very systematic in practicing our adult learning principles in conference, institute, workshop, seminar, etc., settings, and, what needs to happen if we are to change?

IMPORTANCE OF THE CONCERN BOTH TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN ADULT, CONTINUING, EXTENSION AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

The most obvious aspect of all this concern about using adult learning techniques in adult education conferences is that we as teachers of adults or facilitators of adult learning are not practicing our own principles which we know and say we believe regarding helping adults learn. As a consequence, it raises some doubt regarding the value of the link from "research - to -

practice" in this field of study. Could it possibly be that it requires us to "think" if we are to link research and theory to practice and we prefer not to think of new ways to conduct our practice but stay in our familiar "I've always done it this 'other' way?"

If, on the other hand, practice has found, either intentionally or by accident, that participants do express satisfaction on increased learning results from their active participation, then, it seems very important, not only for the practice of involving adults actively in the learning process to be repeated again and again, but also for the research to continue, as well as linking the two more often and more consistently.

THE EXTENT TO WHICH VARIOUS APPROACHES HAVE BEEN ATTEMPTED TO DEAL WITH THE CONCERN

Numerous materials have been published which deal with this concern from a variety of perspectives and approaches. Although many suggestions are provided for presenters, participants will also be encouraged to become proactive in their participation, planners will also be enabled to improve conference designs, and administrators can also become more focused in their expectations of organizational benefit derived from their staff attending a conference.

Bedrosian (1991) suggests, that the ultimate checklist for affecting the audiences experience includes: setting the vision, being invited to speak, defining focus, shaping content, preparing materials and visuals, practicing, checking mechanics, and delivering the program.

Bellman and Kelly (1986) provide a workshop planner consisting of: Listing training needs, identifying objectives, describing the audience, knowing physical environment, describing limitations and how to overcome them.

Burke and Beckhard (1970) emphasize the process of planning various aspects of technology, suggested themes, and training of conference personnel in order to bring a conference to reality.

Cinnamon (1980) devotes 105 pages of narrative and forms to the participants perspective on effective participation, self-assessment, goal setting, learning/insights journal, active planning, skill development tracking system, resource identification and planning, and evaluation.

Davis (1974) presents 23 ideas on working with adults in planning, conducting and evaluating workshops, and includes 32 aids and a primer of 10 different methods for involving adults in the learning process.

Henschke (1992) edited the September issue of <u>Adult Learning</u> with each of four different authors providing an article focusing on practicing adult learning principles in conferences from the points of view of: administrator, presenter, participant, and planner.

Ilsley (1985) offers ideas on planning, participation, and provocative and practical considerations regarding ideal conferences. The eight chapters include focus on: process, dealing with problems, environment, profit form attending, first-time participants, residential, design, and outcomes.

Jones (1982) focuses on issues, tips, tricks, selecting and using media and methods, insuring back-on-the-job performance, and interestingly enough, understanding the adult learner. He does all this through <u>56</u> short articles, including one on <u>30</u> things we know for sure about adult learning -- in motivation, curriculum design and learning settings.

Loughary and Hopson (1979) call for setting aside the false assumptions of: if you can do it, you can teach it; teaching is simply showing and telling; everyone learns at about the same speed; my subject is interesting to everyone; and everyone wants to learn what I have to teach. Conferences could be vastly improved if the presenters actually set these false assumptions aside when they planned and made their presentation.

Margolis and Bell (1986) target results by clarifying what training involves, making arrangements, learning climates, presentations, instructions, managing individual and group work, the reporting process, learning activities and after the session is over.

McLagan (1982, 1985) offers a virtual <u>70</u> page encyclopedia and <u>35</u> page workbook of tips for participants, aiming for results. Sections include planning for results, information handling, learning strategies, action planning, note-taking, and strategy suggestions.

Nadlers (1987), unfortunately only devoted <u>4</u> pages of instructions on <u>54</u> learning strategies and aids within what is supposed to be a comprehensive guide of detailed instruction and step-by-step checklists for everything involved in meetings and conferences.

Smith (1986) helps participants identify and analyze personal learning.

This (1972) helps identify human forces at work in a conference and presents extensive methods and techniques for dealing with those forces to enhance learning. He identifies and explains the use of <u>76</u> methods and techniques, <u>36</u> visual aids, and <u>15</u> audio-visual aids.

Wircenski and Sullivan (1986) plan for audience, topic and facilities, deliver verbal and non-verbal communication, questions and reinforcement, humor and follow-up during training, through instructional feedback, and in the workplace.

Despite all the rhetoric, research, theory and published instructions, there is still a very huge gap between principles and practice in our field, especially in conferences.

THE WAY THIS CONCERN RELATES TO CONFERENCE THEME OF LINKING RESEARCH / THEORY AND PRACTICE

The steering committee of this Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference has discussed this concern for a number of years. In fact, the idea of linking the two was part of the impetus for starting this kind of "get together" in the field eleven years ago. While some progress has been made to improve the situation, it remains largely in the talk stage. The format of the manuscripts to be published in the proceedings has strict guidelines to be adhered to: number of pages, spacing, margins, font style and size, title page, abstract, first page details, headings and sub-headings, tables and figures, pagination, printing, and most recently computer format to conform to the era of high-tech. However, there is no such strictness in the guidelines for oral presentations. Even though concern is expressed that every presentation maximize conference participation, only three alternatives for participant involvement are proposed, with the option provided for the presenter to check preference of method. They are: (1) Participant involvement in listening and feedback teams, (2) Panel of reactors, and, (3) Presentation with questions and answers. Pale and confusing by comparison are these guidelines provided for oral presentations. They are referred to on green colored paper as "oral presentation guidelines" and as being described further on more green colored paper, but are in fact described further on salmon colored paper which is labeled "steering committee proposal selection". Reluctance has been continuously expressed by the steering committee of this conference concerning requiring the addressing of this issue as one of the strict criteria for presenting at this conference.

Everytime this writer's effort has been focused on preparing to and practicing adult learning principles in any adult learning setting -- conference settings, credit courses, large meetings, small groups, workshops, seminars -- the resulting participant satisfaction, benefit, insight, interaction and feedback have far outweighed the energy required. Even with professional adult basic educators, who seem to be primarily concerned with participant subject matter acquisition, three different conference session groups totaling over one hundred persons affirmed the learning process as being a critical element in those conference sessions as well as in the adult basic education programs in which they teach. Furthermore, these sessions were designed to involve

them in a learning process to answer for themselves the question, "Is the learning process a critical element in adult basic educational programs?" and after they answered the question, then they were asked to evaluate the learning process they had just been involved in to answer the question.

While this writer was reflecting on reasons for his moving in the direction of modeling principles of adult learning and practicing the research findings of our field, the major reason which became apparent was the belief that this was important enough to make the commitment to do, no matter how long it took to refine the process in order to get past the "rough edge" stage and to be headed toward the "comfort zone" stage.

The literature availability cited above then became supportive, explanatory, suggestive, idea sparking and a help to follow through on the commitment. McLagan (1990) in Sustaining Change suggests that in changing any of our practices, we need to crack the genetic code and awaken organizations (and that means, we the professionals who are in them) to such a level they (we) can't go back to the ruts of our proceduralized, anesthetized, sleep — and in this situation it means, we can't go back to conducting conference sessions without using adult learning techniques to actively and dynamically involve the participants. It may be well for us and, incidentally, an improvement for our field when we as professionals are preparing for and conducting conference presentations to ask and answer for ourselves the following three questions as guidelines for our
practice of selecting and using learning techniques: (1) How does my selection and use of a particular learning technique for this conference session fit into my understanding of the way adults learn or change (learning theory)? (2) What position does this learning technique hold in the context of learning objectives toward which I am working in this conference session (learning design)? (3) What immediate and observable learning needs does this adult learning technique meet at this time with these conference participants (specific relevance)?

Further research on the above, on competencies necessary for conference presenters, additional questions for consideration, and discussion during this conference session on appropriate research topics could be beneficial. Questions may include, but not be limited to: To what extent is this issue important to the field and/or myself? Would it be a help or hindrance to the field that the link be closer and more consistent between the research and practice? Why or why not? If I as a professional were to reflect on the direction I need to move regarding this issue, which way would it be and what will it take to help me move forward?

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