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11 Applying Principles of Adult Learning in Conference Presentations

Malcolm S. Knowles
Practicing What We Preach

All adult educators benefit from as well as enjoy participating in adult education conferences. Otherwise, there would not be so many of us attending the invitational conferences we do. Each of us finds highly satisfying conference sessions that provide solid, relevant content while actively involving us in the learning process. Nevertheless, we have all come out of conference sessions and expressed or heard such comments as, "Why do we waste much of what—if not everything—we know about how adults learn?" or "We're the specialists, so, how come we don't practice what we preach about adult learning?" or, "Please, no more lectures!"

In addition, many of us who present at adult education conferences have found ourselves guilty of the violations noted in the above comments. What adds to the difficulty is that we had struggled with the dilemma of saving ourselves. Do we have time in our session to engage actively our participants? Or, "Will the benefit really warrant my taking time to plan for involvement?" Or, "How can I get it all said in the limited time available?"

The important fact of all this is that we as adult educators have not been very systematic in practicing our adult learning principles in conference settings. We can do something about this if we make that determination. The four articles in this issue of Adult Learning present suggestions and share each writer's personal experience for improving our conference from four points of view: presenter, participantattendee, planner, and administrator.

Malcolm S. Knowles, in describing a presenter's approach to participative involvement in a process of active inquiry (rather than passive receiving) and building on attendees' backgrounds, needs, and concerns, in his theory, Knowles holds that the more and better the interaction on the part of the audience, and the better learning is likely to be. He details a number of designs to make this happen.

Knowles also provides numerous personal examples from his own practice of engaging audiences in participation in presentations and the gratifying outcome of the audiences getting "turned on" to collaborative thinking.

Ann Wegman, in looking at adult education conferences from a participant's point of view, assesses on an early start in preparation for attending. She provides a step-by-step process for proactive involvement. In detailing her thoughtful suggestions, Wegman starts—even before receiving the conference announcement—to think through and actively approach the boss about attending. This may include our reasons for participating and the benefits it will be to our work. In a workshop format, she seeks to help us answer such questions as Why go? What objectives will I seek to meet? Which sessions will help me meet my objectives? What are my expectations regarding how the sessions will be conducted? and, How to report my learnings?

Barbara Emili helps conference planners include a variety of sessions that meet different educational needs. Finding what works in solving immediate problems, developing the skills needed for effective practice, comparing alternative issues as well as critically examining practices to choose what will work best. She suggests that sessions be provided for each level of learning knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In addition, she encourages planners to demonstrate understanding of each part of the conference and the total conference picture by asking if the content of the sessions could be practically applied in a variety of settings back home.

Seymour Grossman, from an administrator's point of view, advocates that one of the best investments an adult education organization can make is aggressively supporting their adult educators' (staff members) interest in professional development through adult education conference participation. She emphasizes four principles of adult learning and related strategies that influence staff members' learning experiences. Grossman also says that staff will benefit in numerous ways, such as their love of learning, self-improvement, colleague support, increased effectiveness as an instructor, and improved quality of life for the adult learners they serve.

The last word on practicing our adult learning principles was not been uttered, but we hope this material will encourage adult educators (you and me) to implement more of our principles in conference settings.

For those interested in some of the many additional printed resources available on that topic, consider the following:

- Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Workshops and Conferences by Larry Nolan Davis
- The Participant's Workbook and Learning Guide by Kenneth Cunnion
- Getting Results Through Learning by Patricia McLagan
- The Small Meeting Planner by Leslie Tiss
- Improving Conference Design and Outcomes by Paul J. Keeser
- Getting the Most from Seminars and Conferences by Angus Reynolds

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by John A. Henschke
Associate Professor of Education, University of Missouri-St. Louis, and Continuing Education Specialist, University Extension—University of Missouri and Lincoln University

The following membership of the Adult Learning External Board were the editors for the articles in this issue on "Practicing Adult Learning Principles at Adult Education Conferences": John Henschke, Mary Frawner, and Rochelle Newson

Upcoming issues for special sections:
November/December—Current Trends & Social Issues, MACE Tenth Anniversary; January/February—Technology; March/April—Administrating Adult Education, May/June—Women's Issues, Transitions, July/August—Literacy, Continuing Professional Education
Adult education has long viewed conferences as important educational tools. Emphasis on developing conference techniques goes back to the early days of the American Association for Adult Education in the 1920s. Much of the work on this topic has focused on how to plan conferences and the introduction of adult education methods into the design. Of particular concern has been the consistent plea for a shift away from stated, dry presentations, to the design of more stimulating, active, learning experiences that allow for greater individual participation. Despite great interest in this area, little headway has been made.

Research in this area is amazingly sparse. Little systematic research has been done on the actual experience of the conference, and although many books have been written on the planning of conferences and the adoption of adult education techniques starting in the 1950s, but really growing in the 1960s, there has been little emphasis on the part of some researchers who emphasize the importance of thinking of the conference as a complex social network that requires certain competencies on the part of the participants if it is to be a successful experience.

Surprisingly, although we often tend to think of conferences as a modern invention, or, at least, the idea of using meetings as a means of disseminating information about research and implantation is relatively recent. Going back at least to the eighteenth century, learned societies in the United States, such as the American Academy in Philadelphia, held meetings that were important to the development of the American philosophic movement. There was a strong tradition between theory and practice, research and utility, which meant that the problems of innovation were closely connected to the issue of diffusion. Starting in the late nineteenth century, with increasing professionalization, conferences evolved as places where specialists met and discussed ideas. The growth of professionalism, the increasing emphasis on participation, and the use of conferences as tools for dissemination of new ideas and innovations, have had a profound impact on the way conferences are designed and conducted. Today, conferences are seen as an integral part of the research and dissemination process, and as important forums for the exchange of ideas and the development of new methods and approaches.

Conferences in the 1990s—How Far Have We Really Come?

Direct connection between diffusion and innovation became more obscure. Thus, was born the art of popularization as distinct from diffusion and dissemination, and the growing distinction between practical and theoretical research.

Research on the phenomenon of conferences touches on several different academic areas, including adult education, educational psychology, social psychology, and communication. One of the fruitful avenues for the study of the conference has been the study of the role of the conference in the development of communication. The conference is a place where ideas are exchanged, and the conference attending body is a significant factor in the dissemination of these ideas. Through the use of surveys, interviews, and other research methods, researchers have been able to gain insight into the ways in which conferences function and how they contribute to the development of new ideas and innovations.

The skills needed by the prospective consumer include self-knowledge, awareness of the various influences affecting participation and professional needs, and the ability to analyze and evaluate the conference. This work provides a good basis for future work.

Research indicates that planners and organizers need to take the conference culture into account especially to prevent the tourist reaction. The need to recognize that individuals are constantly weighing what they hear in terms of their back-home realities and need to work on the inclusion of those who remain on the conference’s periphery.

The most pervasive approach to the question of conference is dealing with the problems of innovation by trying to implement the strategies that are deemed most effective. Borrowed from the work on self-directed learning, instruction, training, and conference development, these strategies include personalizing, using groups, small groups, case studies, and individualized instruction. Many of these approaches have proved to be successful in overcoming the barriers and the lack of follow-through that are seen as principal problems of conference attendance.

But the research into the effectiveness of these approaches has not been adequately studied. Thus, while the emphasis is on participation and movement away from lectures and the reading of papers, there are no studies that can provide evidence of the effectiveness of these strategies. While consumers are able to participate fully in the conference and thus learn from it, attendance are observers who never fully engage in the conference. Becoming a consumer involves a set of skills that can be learned.

The consumer views the conference as a social system and strives to understand it as such a system. Getting the most out of this system means not only attending sessions, but developing an understanding of the structure of the system and the interrelationships among participants. This includes an analysis of the group dynamics, networks, and norms of the organization.

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one tutoring, or even to another center (where
they will probably drop out anyway).

Third, formative or regular feedback evaluation
on RLS could be developed to enable
counselors to monitor the RLS progress along
with team, small group teacher, or tutor
involvement.

Where do under-resourced programs get
the resources to mount team approaches
create small group teaching, or develop one-on-
one tutoring systems? Since the premise is
that RLS need more attention than Ps, why
not re-allocate resources “unequally,” but
more fairly, according to need? The more
independent RLS will rarely be interested in
social aspects of the program, while the Ps
will. Thus, Ps may well respond to peer
weakening or group projects which would free
up more one-on-one teacher time for RLS
Because Ps need very little counselor time.

Why not focus more follow up time on RLS
from the beginning? As for adding small
group and one-on-one tutoring supplements,
one of the centers mentioned here added one-
on-one tutoring using local volunteers in the
evening and the small group class was sup-
ported through funding requests. More expen-
sive? Compare it to the cost of attrition as part
of your program’s next budget submission.
Accountability sometimes argues for diversity
Resistant Learners—Early
Program Attention Can Make
a Difference
RLS are easy to overlook in literacy/ABE,
just as they were back in school. It is easy to
label them “disinterested” after they leave,
a label probably used when they attended
school. Closer attention to these “disinter-
ested” students in the first three weeks
promises to make a difference. But for the
future, this study presents many questions
We need to know why, if so many quit school
with their belief in education “intact,” why
some return to literacy and ABE and others
refuse to do so. We need to further investi-
gate the attitudes of those who persist in ABE
against all odds, those who quit and try and
try again, and those who never come back
in ABE/literacy. Thus, further research is
needed to respond effectively to the expec-
tations of those willing to move, more
clearly reveal the complex dimensions of
school,” and to understand better the life-
long love-hate relationships so many adults,
formally educated and undereducated, have
with their past schooling. We need to turn
attention around in ABE and stop the “dis-
appearance” of so many students who have
the potential to do more, to be more.
Breaking with tradition in programs and research
may be the first step.

by Terri Massin
Co-Director, Caregivers, VESL
a training program in child-
care for refugee and immi-
grant women in Oakland,
California. Massin is also an
ESL instructor at Golden Gate
University in San Francisco

For more information about the Time Out
department, contact Terri Massin, Executive
Director, Caregivers, VESL, 225 N. Millsdirect a student to taking an ESL program

by Amy Rose
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois

September/October 1992 △ 31
I have a deep commitment to applying principles of adult learning in everything I do—even in one-hour keynote speeches. Indeed, one of the most frequent (and flattering) comments I get on evaluation sheets of my sessions is, “Malcolm practices what he preaches!” This makes me both happy and sad—that it should be such a noteworthy behavior.

My foundational principle of adult learning in making presentations is that the learners be active participants in a process of inquiry, rather than passively receive transmitted content. A second principle is that the process should start with and build on the backgrounds, needs, interests, problems, and concerns of the participants. My experience is that when people have the opportunity to learn by taking some initiative and perceiving the learning in the context of their own life situations, they will internalize more quickly, retain more permanently, and apply more confidently. And I am convinced that every learning experience should result in both some acquisition of content and some enhancement of their self-directed learning competencies.

Theory of Large Meetings

These principles also provide the foundation of my special theory of large meetings, which are a prominent mode in conferences. The additional basic premise of this special theory is that the educative quality of a large meeting is directly a function of the quantity and quality of interaction in the meeting. This is to say that the more and better the interaction within and among the various elements of a large meeting, the greater the learning is likely to be. A second premise of the theory is that there are three areas in which interaction can be influenced: (1) the platform itself, (2) the audience, and (3) the relationship between the platform and the audience. Let us examine the possibilities of each in turn.

Interaction on the platform is at its lowest point with a single speaker or film. The amount of interaction can be increased by having the speaker field questions from the audience or use a panel discussion. Interaction can be increased another notch by adding a visual aid, such as a slide show, a chart, or a map. Interaction can be increased another notch by having the speaker use a visual aid, such as a slide show, a chart, or a map. Interaction can be increased another notch by having the speaker use a visual aid, such as a slide show, a chart, or a map.

Interaction between the platform and the audience at its highest level occurs when there is an active role for the audience in the presentation, such as in a question and answer session. Interaction can be achieved by bringing representatives of the audience on to the platform to introduce or discuss a presentation. Interaction can be achieved by bringing representatives of the audience on to the platform to introduce or discuss a presentation.

Malcolm S. Knowles

Malcolm S. Knowles is professor emeritus, North Carolina State University, and a well-known leader in adult education.
The Assumptions and Process Elements of the Pedagogical and Andragogical Models of Learning

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<th>Andragogical</th>
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<td>Dependent personality</td>
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<td>Role of learner's experience</td>
<td>To be built on more than used as a resource</td>
<td>A rich resource for learning by self and others</td>
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<td>Readiness to learn</td>
<td>Uniform by age, level &amp; curriculum</td>
<td>Develops from life tasks &amp; problems</td>
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<td>Orientation to learning</td>
<td>Subject-centered</td>
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<td>Motivation</td>
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<th>PROCESS ELEMENTS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Tense, low task</td>
<td>Relaxed, training</td>
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<td>Formally cold, aloof</td>
<td>Mutual respect for others</td>
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<td>Audiences-oriented</td>
<td>Informal, warm</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Constructive</td>
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<td>Planning</td>
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<td>Primarily by teacher</td>
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<td>Evaluation</td>
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The body of theory and practice on which teacher-directed learning is based is often given the label "pedagogy," from the Greek words peda (meaning child) and agoges (meaning guide or leader)—thus being defined as the art and science of teaching children.

The body of theory and practice on which self-directed learning is based is often given the label "andragogy," from the Greek words andr (meaning adult)—thus being defined as the art and science of helping adults (or even better, maturing human beings) learn.

These two models do not represent bad, good, or child-adult dichotomies, but rather a continuum of assumptions to be checked out in terms of their meanings for particular learners in particular situations. If the pedagogical assumption is realistic for a particular situation, then pedagogical strategies are appropriate. For example, if a learner is entering into a totally strange content area, he or she will be dependent on a teacher until enough information has been gained to enable self-directed inquiry to begin.

serve on the teams are truly representative of the main characteristics of the audience (in terms of age, gender, special interests, occupations, and geography), to that extent will the audience psychologically identify with the interaction on the platform.

interaction among members of the audience can be promoted in several ways. The audience can be asked to meet in small groups of from two to five or six without moving from their seats and perform several functions. (1) Before a presentation, they can be asked to take a few minutes to pool the questions or issues they would like the speaker to address and have one member summarize the result—thus, in effect, outlining the speech for the presenter; (2) before a presentation the audience can be asked to serve as "listening teams" according to the section of the room they are sitting in—one section to listen to the presentation for points requiring clarification (the clarification team), another for points with which they disagree (the rebuttal team), another for points they wish to have elaborated on (the elaboration team), and a fourth for problems of practical application they wish the speaker to address (the application team). After the presentation the teams are asked to "buzz" in groups of four or five to pool their thinking about the points they want raised, following which one member of each group gives a summary of its deliberations and the speaker responds to each item in turn, until time runs out or all issues are discussed, (3) following a presentation, the audience can be asked to form buzz groups to discuss for a few minutes how they plan to apply one or more of the ideas contained in the presentation, with the results being summarized by one member of each group.

Some Examples from My Own Experience

Want some real-life examples? Here are a few.

Perhaps the most frequent presentation I am asked to make is usually titled something like "Modern Concepts of Adult Learning" or "Understanding and Working With Adult..."
The audiences generally range from fifty to a few hundred. The first thing I do is to take five minutes or so to get a feel for the audience. I announce that I am going to shout out some categories, and anyone who fits into a category, raise your hand. The first set of categories has to do with the institutional setting in which they work: Elementary schools? High schools? Community colleges? Colleges and universities? Business and industry? Government agencies? Health agencies and hospitals? Voluntary organizations? Religious institutions? The second set of categories is about their roles in these institutions: Administrators? Supervisors? Teachers or trainers? Librarians? Materials producers? Counselors or consultants? Unemployed? (Laughter.) The third set concerns their background in education: Degrees in education? In adult education? Workshops and conferences? Extensive reading? How many of you could with confidence write a 1000-word article for your professional journal on “The meaning of andragogy”? 

If the audience clearly has considerable background in education, I ask them to pull their chairs around into groups of four or five and take ten minutes pooling the questions, problems, issues, and concerns they have about adult learners that they would like this conference to deal with. I ask that one person in each group volunteer to serve as reporter for that group and give us a highlights summary of the points raised. At the end of ten minutes I call them back to order and invite a sample of ten or so reporters to give their summaries.

I then explain that I am not going to respond to each point individually, but will propose some general principles and concepts of adult learning and suggest how they might apply to the points they raised. I then ask them to take out their copy of the chart: “The Assumptions and Process Elements of the Pedagogical and Andragogical Models of Learning,” which they obtained when they entered the room (see figure). I then take about twenty minutes reviewing the assumptions and process elements of the two models, illustrating their application to the questions, problems, and concerns they raised at the beginning of the meeting. For example, if one of the questions was “How do I get students interested in the subject I have to teach?” when I get to the assumption about readiness to learn in my review of the chart, I point out that adults become ready to learn those things that are relevant to their life tasks and problems, hence the andragogical process elements of involving the learners in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning objectives, and designing learning plans through mutual negotiation with the teacher.

On the other hand, if the audience clearly has had limited background in education (as is often the case with industrial trainers, medical personnel, pharmacists, government workers, and others), I use a different design. I still open with getting a show of hands on their institutional settings, roles, and educational backgrounds. Then I ask them to take out the chart and “Assumptions” and ask them to take five minutes looking at it and reflecting on it. Then I ask them to form groups of four or five, with one member serving as a reporter and take ten minutes pooling questions they have with the chart. At the end of ten minutes I invite each reporter to choose one question or problem raised by his or her group, and I respond to each item as it is reported. I deal with as many items as I can until time runs out.

Occasionally a session is scheduled to run for an hour and a half or two hours, in which case I have time to add another component in the design, which I think of as “back-home application,” but which in the literature is usually referred to as “transfer of training.” I ask the participants to reflect for five minutes on their experience so far and to select one or two ideas they have picked up that they think they would like to put into their basic back-home situations. After five minutes I ask them to form groups of four or five and take turns describing to other members of their group the idea they would like to experiment with, the two steps they would go in applying it, and (3) any obstacles or resistances they anticipate encountering in putting it into effect. After a reasonable amount of time (depending upon the time available), I call them back to order and invite volunteers to present plans to the total audience. After each presentation, I invite members of the audience to react to the plan and, particularly, to suggest strategies for dealing with the obstacle and resistances. During the last five minutes or so I add my own ideas about strategies for bringing about change.

Another presentation I am frequently asked to make goes under a title such as “Looking into the Future of Adult Education” (or Education” or “Training”) I open this ses-

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sion with the statement that professional futurists typically use two techniques for peer-
ing into the future: (1) scenario-writing, in which they dream about what they would like the future to be and write a scenario describing the future, main features, and (2) forecasting, in which they identify current trends and project them into the future. (I usually ask them to pick the year 2025 as the target date in the future.) I then explain that I like to divide the labor with my colleagues and so I am going to ask them to be the scenario writers, and that after they have shared some of their dreams with us I'll do the forecasting and tell them “how it's really going to be.” (Laughter) I ask them to get into groups of four or five and take fifteen minutes sharing their dreams, with one member of each group volunteering to serve as reporter to give us a high-point summary of their dreams. After fifteen minutes I call them back to order and invite a sample of ten or so report to give their summaries. (Incidentally, one of the most common dreams is that adult educators will occupy the highest status positions in their organizations and will draw the highest salaries. But most of the dreams have adult education making a sign-
ificant contribution to the quality of life of all citizens and bringing about lifelong learning communities.)

In my forecasting I pick up such current trends as (1) the demographic changes in our society, such as an increasing proportion of the elderly and the increasing diversity of our population, (2) the accelerating pace of social and technological change, (3) the development of new means—particularly electronic—for delivering educational services, and (4) the explosion of research-based knowledge about learning—especially adult learning. I then invite the audience to brainstorm with me on some of the implications of these trends for the reorganization of our educational system and practices.

I'd like to conclude with the observation that when I first started experimenting with this sort of participation presentation, I was very nervous. What if the audience refused to get into small groups? What if their responses were silly or irresponsible? What if nobody volunteered? I can attest that all of my fears were unfounded. I have never had an audience that failed to get turned on to the adventure of collaborative thinking.

Got an Idea for an AAACE Publication?

The goal of AAACE’s Publications Standing Service Unit is to identify, produce and promote publications considered timely and valuable by members and others involved in adult education. If you have an idea or suggestion about a book or monograph that you think would be useful to practicing adult educators, please take a few minutes and drop us a note indicating what you would like to see developed and why. If you are interested in working with the Unit to prepare a publication or know of someone with the experience and expertise to write a book or monograph on an important topic, please let us know. Please contact Ms. Jeanette Smith, Director of Communications, AAACE, 2101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 925, Arlington, VA 22201. Phone: (703) 522-2234; FAX (703) 522-2250.
Fostering Adult Learning Principles for Your Staff
one administrator's perspective of the value of conferences

Beverly McMurtry Grissom

Given that student success is the primary goal of adult educators, administrators have an obligation to train and nurture charismatic and informed staff members who provide quality instruction and support services to adult students. Toward that end, administrators serve as leaders in providing professional development opportunities that not only deliver useful field-specific information but that also take into account that all staff members are in fact adult learners themselves. This premise has significant and defining implications for the types and structures of on-site programs that are selected, especially conferences.

Obligations and Opportunities

Adult education administrators worthy of their salt are members of local, state, and national profession-related associations. These associations provide valuable opportunities to affiliate with state, national, and local colleagues, and offer information on current issues and trends through publications and conferences, workshops and seminars. In Administration of Continuing Education (1977), Curtis W. Cliner stressed that in order for administrators to be at maximum assistance to faculty and staff they must have expertise in the theory and practice of adult education. He emphasized administrators' responsibility to continue their education through active participation in conferences. However, administrators are not the only members of an adult education program staff who might enhance program quality by incorporating what they learn at conferences. Cliner recognized the supervisors' obligation to work with staff to stimulate new interest and knowledge and to establish a school climate which fosters freedom of inquiry. Isn't that how we expect teachers to perform with adult students? Shouldn't administrators aggressively support staff members' interest in inquiry for professional development through conference participation? Absolutely.

A Gentle Reminder

In The Modern Practice of Adult Education (1980), Malcolm Knowles observed that it is extremely important to understand the various educational purposes that a conference can serve. Participants may acquire information on new materials and methods, become aware of new ways of looking at old issues and concepts, and learn how others deal with problems that are common to many adult education personnel. Just as important, however, perhaps most important is that participants renew their commitment—to action—to their programs, and ultimately to their students as a result of their attendance.

Practicing What We Preach in Adult Learning Principles

It is useful for administrators to help staff members develop awareness of four of the principles of adult learning that influence their conference learning experiences. These principles and related strategies to develop awareness of each are as follows:

1. Adults learn what they really want to learn; so administrators must assist their staff members in focus-
ing their professional interests and needs. Cultivating their interest in professional renewal and development opportunities will surely enhance their positive experiences at workshops and conferences. Selecting a national conference that is consistent with their identified interests and needs will increase the potential benefit to the conference to them and the ultimate benefit to the students.

2. Adult learners learn by doing and participating, their learning is never a passive process. The workshops and discussions available at conferences usually offer the opportunity for attendees to interact with the presenters and among themselves, sharing ideas and tips for learning from each other. Over the years, I have gained as much valuable knowledge from members of session audiences as I have from the presentations.

3. Adults learn quickly because they have stronger reasons for learning. Their motivations are varied. Administrators must be catalysts for staff members’ enthusiasm for their work and interest in professional growth. They must be positive and persistent in overseeing the collaborative planning and implementation of professional development activities. Making available travel and professional development funds limited though they may be, is a significant signal to staff members that broadened perspectives and expanded horizons are valued in the name of student success. Allowing staff members the opportunity to travel to a conference in an attractive location is a motivator in itself. It sends a strong message that they are worth investing in as professionals and team members. My staff members’ morale is always boosted by the opportunity to attend a good conference. It is, in turn, most obviously reflected in their enthusiasm and energy in the classroom. The return on the investment will accrue to the students many times over.

4. Adult learners have many and varied experiences that are valuable resources to enrich learning situations. Teachers, counselors, support staff, and administrators from school districts, community colleges, universities, public and private community-based organizations, volunteer groups, correctional facilities, churches, and military installations bring unique and extraordinary experience and the experiences to the adult education setting. Each has a special perspective that, when shared within the conference context, can be most enlightening, reinforcing, encouraging, and inspiring to those in attendance. An adult education teacher recently attested that her effectiveness as an instructor is directly related to her participation in national adult education conferences. She characterized the interchange with peers as very validating, particularly when she learned that strategies she employs to resolve students’ learning problems are ones that are the subjects of concurrent sessions or are employed by colleagues near and far. I firmly believe that interaction with this diverse group of adult educators diminishes the risk of “professional tunnel vision” and broadens our perspective. The friends I have developed through conference participation during the past twenty years have provided me with a wonderful extended family of people who are very important to me and who understand my life’s work. I learn from them every time I am with them. I value my staff enough to want them to enjoy that same experience.

Additional Assets and Amenities

Direct instructional and ancillary strategies that are broadly accepted as effective with adult learners are usually in evidence at national conferences. The atmosphere of conferences is pervaded by mutual respect. Adult educators appreciate in each other the love of learning and self-improvement. Participants are eager to hear and share ideas, concerns, and secrets of success. In both formal and informal gatherings, new participants report, “It is so nice to learn that others have the same problems, challenges, circumstances and successes!” I come away from conferences not only comforted that I am not the only one struggling with funding or student retention problems but thrilled and warmed by the encouragement and kind words from my peers. After networking with colleagues, my professional batteries are recharged. Conference facilities are usually conducive to learning, with concurrent sessions held in reasonably comfortable surroundings. National conferences are held in attractive venues, utilizing first class hotel accommodations and often state-of-the-art meeting spaces.

Field trips and guest speakers are always beneficial instructional delivery mechanisms for adult learners and prove to be very effective ways to diversify the presentation of new concepts and skills. National conferences offer both. After a visit to an adult center at a conference, my staff members return full of good suggestions on ways we can improve a variety of aspects of our programs.

Incidental learning is a frequent phenomenon in adult students. Certainly, the opportunities for this type of learning are abundant at national conferences. As noted by Christine Knott and Wendy Cole in their 1989 article, "Searching for Quality: Interaction can be intense and challenging among the large numbers of people attending national conferences. People from diverse geographic areas and professional circumstances can be brought together to exchange ideas over refreshments. Sometimes, very useful program information comes serendipitously from conversations during social events. I encourage participation in conference special events. Sometimes we get our most useful, new ideas for our programs during a friendly chat in a wendy’s suite or over the din of the dance band.”

Strategic Planning

Given the expense of travel, administrators should make every effort to plan carefully to receive the fullest return on the investment by assuring staff members at planning meetings that conference attendance is supported by the organization and that it is time well spent. Staff should be encouraged to research the conference, ascertain concurrent session schedules and formats. My frustration is that there are so many good session topics and only one of me! Scheduling conflicts don’t allow me to get to all the sessions in which I am interested. After every conference I review the program book again. I write to presenters whose sessions I could not attend and ask for a synopsis of the presentation and copies of materials they distributed. People are delighted to share, and they respond promptly. Upon receipt of the information I distribute it to my staff members so they too may benefit from these excellent resources.

It is also wise to review supplied conference information with the staff members and give guidance regarding particularly good presenters and special events. When more than one staff member attends I encourage each member to review the program book and plan who will attend which sessions in order to ensure maximum coverage.

When a staff member returns the adminis-
And the Winner is...

Most successful adult education programs are led by administrators who practice participatory management. Central to this approach is the involvement of staff members in the decision-making process. The prospect of informed decision makers is increased by encouraging and facilitating participation in meetings and conferences. The wise adult education administrator can thereby enhance the capacity of team members to contribute to good decisions by customizing their (1) staying current on current initiatives and trends, (2) learning about new materials and best practices, (3) networking with colleagues, (4) participating in the exchange of ideas, and perspectives, and (5) understanding the context in which they operate professionally. Ultimately, the student (both staff and clients) succeeds. After all, isn’t that the point??
Packing Your Brain: Pre-Conference Preparation

Ann Wegman

It's exciting to attend conferences. Travel time away from the routine and frenzied networking, new ideas sharing—all are a part of a great conference experience. But as adult educators, we know that proactive preparation is also a big part of learning—including the learning we do at conferences. So, as an adult educator when you pack your bags, do you remember to pack your brain?

As budgets tighten, adult educators must be accountable to their institutions and themselves when spending money on conferences. How do you convince your institution or company that a conference is worthwhile? How do you get the most out of a conference to satisfy yourself and the institution that you work for? How do you approach the boss to request money to pay for your trip? Believe it or not, some people never think through these important questions when requesting travel expense and time away from the job.

Develop a plan about six months in advance. Talk with your boss as you develop your plan—even before the conference brochure arrives. Then, when you get the conference brochure, use the information to close your sales pitch to the boss convincing him or her to send you. The brochure will also help guide you as you plan a productive conference experience.

Remember the learning contract? It's an agreement with yourself that defines what you want to accomplish. A contract also implies that the learner is responsible for the learning—the learner is thinking in advance about the benefits and outcomes of the learning experience.

A learning contract is an excellent way to plan proactively to make the most of your conference experience. So let's begin.

Why Do You Want to Go?
First you must decide on your objectives. Most likely, you will have personal objectives as well as job-related objectives. Some common reasons for attending a conference are listed below. Rank order the list to get a quick look at your own needs. Be sure to add in other objectives that may not be included on the list below.

___ Professional development
___ Networking
___ Leisure/Vacation
___ Learn about new products/resources
___ See old friends/colleagues
___ Meet leading researchers and practitioners
___ Enhance educational pursuits
___ Other

What's Your Focus?
Take your top three reasons for attending a conference and write a descriptive statement about each. This will help define your objectives. You may even want to include actions and intended outcome for each reason you list.

Objective #1

Objective #2

Objective #3

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Selecting the Sessions

Keeping your three main objectives in mind, review the conference schedule looking for sessions and activities that help you accomplish your intended outcomes. Record your choices on the contract sheet below. Complete the first two columns only. The other columns will be completed after you have attended each session at the conference.

Objective:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sessions/Activity</th>
<th>Day/Time</th>
<th>Meet My</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Best</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</table>

People to See:

| Vendors to Visit | 
|------------------|-------|
|                  | 1     |
|                  | 2     |
|                  | 3     |
|                  | 4     |

Information my boss wants me to bring back:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

There may be some overlap of dates and times. This will give you a quick look at all of your choices. Helming you fine-tune your schedule once you have arrived at the conference. Many conferences—especially the larger national conferences—video and audio tape sessions. I suggest tapping into this information upon arriving at a conference so that you can resolve conflicting choices with the possibility of ordering the audio or video tape for later viewing. I have a colleague who even ordered a video tape of a session that was poorly presented in order to teach his graduate students how not to teach adults. How’s that for vicarious learning?

Be sure to list vendors, colleagues, and old friends that you want to see. I once arrived at a conference finding a note attached to the conference memo board from a friend in Minneapolis. She had simply left her name and hotel phone number with a quick note to call her when I arrived. I later found out that as a routine practice, she leaves notes to all of her out-of-town friends requesting a call. This saves her the time and trouble of trying to locate them through the crowds.

It’s also a good idea to make a list with your boss detailing the information that he or she wants you to bring back. Engaging your boss in the preplanning will allow the “buy-in” that may help you get approval to go to the conference.

Remember this plan tucked along with your conference expense request is a winning duo. Sell-contracting not only shows the boss that you have been proactive in your planning, but indicates how the institution can benefit.

Fine-Tuning

Most preconference brochures give only titles of sessions and presenters and do not describe the session or activity. Once you have actually arrived at the conference, get your hands on the conference manual as soon as possible. Pull out your preliminary contract, and begin fine-tuning.

Think about the following when narrowing your options:

- Will the session be presented in a style that fits with your personal learning preference?
- Does the session description give me clues as to whether there will be an interaction, collaboration, or hands-on application included during the presentation?
- In what context is the information placed? Can I easily apply and transfer the information to my professional or educational role?
- Does the session provide new material or is it a review of existing practice and theory?
- Is the presenter a leading authority? Does this matter to me?
- Will the session give me new views to take back to my institution to improve practice?
- Are there any sessions that are innovative that will help me explore new territory?

Using your contract to begin make a schedule for each day of the conference. Insist on the schedule of your first and second choices for each time slot so that you will have a back-up plan in the event that a session is cancelled or off at a time you were not expecting.

And don’t be bashful to attend sessions that are on unfamiliar turf. Sometimes new worlds of information and thought are provoked by exploring topics that are not familiar or part of your repertoire. At a recent national conference I wandered into a session on cultural diversity presented by an educator from Taos, New Mexico. I went only because the topic was catchy and the other sessions didn’t meet my needs. The session was not only superb but its woven its way into my awareness and personal tenets of practice.

The Plan in Action

By now you have done a thorough job of thinking, planning, and fine-tuning. Not all breakout sessions at keynotes will be what you expected. What if you get to the session...
and after the first ten minutes, the presentation style or information just doesn't fit in with your plan? You have two choices: stay or leave. Look back to your objectives and reasons for attending the session to help you decide if you stay.

- Read the handouts, or abstract.
- Ask questions that may help you find relevancy.
- Listen, acknowledging that we do learn from information that is not necessarily relevant and useful at the moment.
- If you leave:
  - Do so politely.
  - A friend of mine always sits at the back of the room at sessions that she's not sure about so that she can bow out unobtrusively.
  - Rush to your second choice. You may have missed the first few minutes, but the substance of the presentation is probably yet to come.
  - Visit one of the vendors on your must-see list.
  - Visit the information center for an update on conference information, check for messages and get a copy of the daily conference newsletter.
  - Use this time to leave messages for friends that you hope to see or for presenters that you want to talk with at the conference.
  - Leave short notes stating your question or concern when corresponding with presenters. This will help the presenter prepare for the visit.
  - Use the time to read handouts from other sessions and to make reflective notes and ratings on your contract.
  - If you are lucky, you might run into one of those old colleagues that are on your list of people to see.
  - Network with strangers. They won't be strangers anymore.

What Now?

Once the session is over, go back to your contract form and make notes. This will help you integrate your learning while it's fresh in your memory. Later, upon returning home, your learning will become even more meaningful as you begin to engage in reflective thinking. You will be able to glean the important concepts and information as it applies to your current concerns in practice.

If you have attended any sessions with colleagues from your own institution, you may want to discuss this session with them either at the conference or when you return home. Collaborative learning can often prove to be much more enlightening as shared ideas escalate into innovative solutions or revelations.

Use your contract form to rate each session on a predetermined scale and list one main idea or skill that you learned from the session. Be sure to keep your notes and handouts attached. Back at home, you will want to use all of this information to help you apply your learning, evaluate your experience, engage in discussions with colleagues, and report to the boss.

As a matter of housekeeping, keep your notes and handouts organized so that you can easily and quickly file the information after the conference. New and fresh learning often goes untapped as it washes away inside conference satchels that are never unpacked after a conference is over.

A Word for the Presenter

- Don't lecture. We are so good at teaching others how to facilitate learning according to the principles of adult learning, but often throw all of this preparation out the window when in an audience of peers. Just as students enjoy participative, collaborative and experiential learning, so do adult education conference participants.
- Consider the goals of the conference and attendees when preparing your session.
- Find a way to approach the information that you are sharing. This will make the experience meaningful for you and the learners.
- Request that the conference planners add video or audio tape your session. There may be conference attendees who are unable to attend your session, but are interested in obtaining a copy of the video or audio tape.

In closing, I'd like to share a story. I attended a conference a few years ago where one of the goals of adult education was giving a breakout session. I went and it wasn't so good. He must have been having an off day. After reviewing my objectives, I decided to stay I didn't walk away from the session with any new skills or ideas, but one of my objectives was met. After all, I had an audience with God! Those opportunities don't come often (especially when you attend conferences), but when they do, we should make the most of them. My object was met. I'm glad I went.
The Conference Planners' Dilemma

GIVE THEM A FISH,
TEACH THEM TO FISH,
OR HELP THEM SATISFY THEIR OWN HUNGER

Barbara Battiste Emil

Three continuing educators were planning a conference for conference planners. They soon found their viewpoints about the conference objectives, content, and activities varied widely. Their discussion went something like this.

Continuing Educator #1

"We must include information-sharing sessions so participants can learn from each other. What works? Adults have an immediate problem-solving orientation. I know I'm right about this because the roundtables with people talking about their problems and how they solved them are always packed."

Continuing Educator #2

"That reminds me of the adage... give them a fish and they'll eat for a day, but teach them to fish and they'll eat for a lifetime... You are suggesting we give them a fish. I say let's teach them the skills to solve problems typically encountered in practice. Our needs assessments clearly indicate people want practical information they can really use. What could be more practical than how to workshoppers and hand-outs with useful tips?"

Continuing Educator #3

"That's easy. The most practical information in all helps people figure out for themselves what to do in unfamiliar situations. Neither the proverb nor your solutions go far enough."

What happens if someone is allergic to fish? Or the stream dries up? Or the number of people fishing exceeds the supply of fish? Only when individuals take information and turn it upside down, do they own the knowledge. We need thought-provoking sessions that encourage participants to compare alternatives, explore future trends and issues, and critically examine practices and philosophies. This will make them better problem-solvers—both now and in the future.

The conference planners sat in silence until someone came in looking for the G and I meeting. Thinking she meant the conferences and institutes meeting, they invited her to join them and explained their dilemma. As it turned out, she was looking for the curriculum and instruction gathering. On her way out, she suggested the group consider a model of classifying intellectual knowledge skills and abilities commonly referred to as Bloom's Taxonomy. (Taxonomy of Educational Objectives in the Cognitive Domain, 1956.)

A Refresher Course—Definitions and Distinctions

The continuing educators examined the six levels of the taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

They learned the first three levels—knowledge, comprehension, and application—refer to the acquisition or specific information and the beginning of the intellectual...
skills and abilities that enable people to use the information.

They discovered the upper three levels—analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—involve learners in taking knowledge apart, putting concepts together in new ways, and making evaluative judgments. They noted the distinction between evaluation—a result of the conscious application of criteria standards and values—and opinion.

The continuing educators could each find their viewpoints on conference objectives, activities expressed in the taxonomy, with its informational base: application, utilization, and what if’t nature of the upper levels of the hierarchy.

Are You Doing What I’m Thinking?—Demonstrating Understanding

The first applied the model to a content area—effective budgeting in continuing education—to see how it worked. They agreed practical budgeting tips, sample budget forms, a glossary of common terms, and a hands-on workshop could provide knowledge and skill base for those who needed it, reflecting the first three levels of the taxonomy.

The motivations or institutional context, marketplace variables, and cost-recovery requirements in program among could then be explored. This would encourage participants to stretch their basic budgeting skills to reach a more sophisticated level of budgeting decision-making.

This exercise increased the continuing educators’ understanding of the taxonomy and demonstrated its application to a given content area.

Apples and Oranges as Fruits of a Different Color—Looking at (and for) Relationships

Next, the continuing educators analyzed the taxonomy’s implications for the conference. They discussed its emphasis on cognitive rather than affective learning. They worried that some participants would consider the divergent problem-solving nature of the taxonomy’s upper levels a waste of their time. They speculated that some presenters might be reluctant to design their sessions to include a range of learning opportunities.

They soon recognized the parallels between these issues and those faced by curriculum specialists and teachers in more formal educational settings. Their discussion of the taxonomy had reminded them of the dual nature of their responsibilities: all too easily dominated by the overwhelming logistical aspects of day-to-day conference planning.

In light of the continuing educators concluded, a conference design reflecting the different levels of the taxonomy, and encompassing their varying expectations for the professional development experience—basic information for immediate use, (give them... how) practical skills (teach them to how), and critical thinking abilities—also requires ability for participants to make their own range.

Some Assembly Required—Putting It All Together

As the planning proceeded, the group discovered their own awareness of adult learning and of the interaction between conference content and format was growing along with the conference design. Their varying viewpoints on the actual planning meeting, reappeared from time to time.

For example, the group made two predictions about the conference participants: (1) they would bring their experiences with them, and (2) what they drew from experience would depend on the individual’s nature of the interaction, and the context or setting.

As a means of creating more homogenous participant groupings, one planning committee member suggested a tracking approach to steer the novices toward the basic skill sessions and the experienced conference planners toward the “big picture” presentations. Another member advocated, rather intensely, a new definition of basic skills for conference planners in today’s changing world.

The group ultimately decided that a range of learning outcomes—from basic information acquisition to new ways of conceptualizing existing practice—are important to professionals at both ends of the experience scale and that seminar has little to do with the levels of the taxonomy. The tracking concept was abandoned.

As the planning progressed, the continuing educators sometimes joked about the “good old days” before this experiment. At the end of a particularly demanding planning session one asked, “Can we pick the coffee break menu now?” But most of the time the group was excited by the project.

Will It Play in Peaone and Pasadena?—Applying Multiple Perspectives

The continuing educators subjected their final design to a number of self-imposed tests. For example, they examined it through the perspective of participants to determine if it accommodated the unique concerns and the shared characteristics of their learners. They scrutinized the program to see if it upheld the standards of the profession and incorporated training and educational goals. And finally, they studied the internal consistency of the plan and the degree to which it provided opportunities for the range of learning outcomes, representing the various levels of the taxonomy.

Fish, Fishing, and Food—The Dilemma Resolved

When last seen, the three continuing educators who planned the conference were comparing notes on different sessions and preliminary feedback from participants. The last reported those looking for information they could use—today—were satisfied. They would not go away hungry unless they refused to eat.

The second observed those interested in skill building had ample opportunities to practice. When their stomachs growled again they would be able to find another snack.

The third was about to speak when the sounds of an unannounced discussion suddenly halted the hallway. It seemed to have something to do with the differences between maintenance and learning organizations. The third member of the planning committee just smiled. When the food supply ran out no one here would have to starve.
I have a deep commitment to applying principles of adult learning in everything I do—even in one-hour keynote speeches. Indeed, one of the most frequent (and gratifying) comments I get on evaluation sheets of my sessions is, “Malcolm practices what he preaches!” This makes me both happy and sad—sad that it should be such a noteworthy behavior.

My foundational principle of adult learning in making presentations is that the learners be active participants in a process of inquiry rather than passively receive transmitted content. A second principle is that the process should start with and build on the backgrounds, needs, interests, problems, and concerns of the participants. My experience is that when people have the opportunity to learn by taking some initiative and performing the learning in the context of their own life situations, they will internalize more quickly, retain more permanently, and apply more confidently. And I am convinced that every learning experience should result in both some acquisition of content and some enhancement of their self-directed learning competencies.

Theory of Large Meetings

These principles also provide the foundation of my special theory of large meetings, which are a prominent feature in conferences. The foundational premise of this special theory is that the effective quality of a large meeting is directly a function of the quantity and quality of interaction in the meeting. This is to say that the more and better the interaction within and among the various elements of a large meeting, the greater the learning is likely to be. A second premise of the theory is that there are three areas in which interaction can be influenced: (1) the platform itself, (2) the audience, and (3) the relationship between the platform and the audience. Let us examine the possibilities of each in turn.

Interaction on the Platform is at its lowest point with a single speaker or film. The amount of interaction can be increased by adding a chalkboard, flip chart, film, or some other visual aid for the speaker to use. Interaction can be increased another notch by adding one or two other persons, so that two people are interacting in debate, dialogue, or interview. Maximum interaction can be achieved by introducing two or more people to the platform for a symposium, panel discussion, group interview, dramatized skit, demonstration.

The following text is a continuation of the above discussion on adult learning in conference presentations.