Adult Learning in Your Classroom

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Adult Learning: What Do We Know for Sure?

If it’s your job to train adults — whether they want to be trained or not — adult learning theory can give insight and practical help.

Learning refers to relatively permanent changes in an individual which are related to past experience and the opportunity to learn, including practice, rather than to physiological changes such as fatigue, adaptation, drug-effects, motivation, maturation or senescence.

— Handbook of General Psychology

Learning: knowledge or skill acquired by instruction or study.

— Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary

Learning is but an adjunct of ourselves.

— Shakespeare

BY RON ZEMKE
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However you care to define it, learning is as natural to human beings as breathing, eating, sleeping, playing or procreating. And as far as anyone can tell, we maintain that natural capacity as long as any of the others. For the last century and a half or so, educators and psychologists have tried to develop ways to deliver instruction, practice and experience that enhance this innate capacity to learn.

For the last 20 to 75 years, depending on who’s doing the counting, an evolving school of thought has defined adult learners (as opposed to children, adolescents, college sophomores and lab rats) as a unique subgroup in need of specialized study, theory and educational practices.

Adult-learning theory emerged from the academic backwaters in 1973 with the publication of Malcolm Knowles’ highly readable book, The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species. Knowles, then a Boston University professor, scored an instant hit with adult educators and trainers. In The Adult Learner he dusted off the word “andragogy,” a term popular in German education circles in the early 1800s, and used it to label his attempt to create a unified theory of adult learning.

Knowles’ contentions were based on four assumptions:

• As they mature, adults tend to prefer self-direction.
• Adults’ experiences are a rich resource for learning. Adults learn more effectively through experiential techniques, such as discussion or problem-solving, than through didactic ways, say, passive instruction.
• Adults are aware of specific learning needs generated by real-life events such as marriage, divorce, taking a new job, losing a job and so on.
• Adults are competency-based learners, meaning that they want to learn a skill or acquire knowledge that they can apply pragmatically to their immediate circumstances.

The concept of andragogy generated a flurry of debate and study. Today, andragogy is considered something less than the all-encompassing explanation of adult learning that Knowles had hoped it would be.

Knowles himself later acknowledged that pedagogy and andragogy probably represent the ends of a spectrum that ranges from teacher-directed to student-directed learning. He and others now suggest both approaches are appropriate with children and adults, depending on the situation.

Sharan B. Merriam, a professor of adult education at the University of Georgia, summarizes the current state of adult-learning theory this way:

“It is doubtful that a phenomenon as complex as adult learning will ever be explained by a single theory, model or set of principles. Instead, we have a case of the proverbial elephant being described differently depending on who is talking and on which part of the animal is examined. In the first half of this century, psychologists took the lead in explaining learning behavior; from the 1960s onward, adult educators began formulating their own ideas about adult learning and, in particular, about how it might differ from learning in childhood. Both of these approaches are still operative. Where we are headed, it seems, is toward a multifaceted understanding of adult learning, reflecting the inherent richness and complexity of the phenomenon.”

In the June 1981 issue of TRAINING, we published a review of adult-learning theory and research titled “30 Things We Know for Sure About Adult Learning.” We revisited the information pile from which we culled that article. We then added more than 300 new references to the stack and asked ourselves, “Has anything changed?”

As far as solid, reliable information goes, most of what the literature has to tell us today is what it told us then. But while we haven’t seen the equivalent of the dramatic changes wrought by Knowles and the andragogy movement in the early 1970s, some important differences in nuance and understanding have occurred that add to our knowledge of the training craft.

As in our previous synthesis, we have divided what we garnered from our scan into three basic categories:

1. Things we know about adult learners and their motivation.
2. Things we know about designing curricula for adults.
3. Things we know about working with adults in the classroom.

The same caution applies now as did then: These categories are neither definitive nor exclusive. They overlap more than a little. But they help
us understand the implications that current theory and research hold for our day-to-day work in training and development.

**Motivation to Learn**

Adults can be ordered into a classroom and prodded into seats, but they can't be forced to learn. On the other hand, adults who see a need or have a desire to know something new are quite resourceful. Witness the legions of gainfully employed people enrolled in continuing education programs at community colleges, vo-techs and universities around the world, not to mention the success of proprietary self-development seminars, sports-skills camps, and independent study groups in virtually every industrial and post-industrial country.

When the conditions are right, adults seek out and demand learning experiences. Much of what we know about adult motivation to learn describes those conditions and comes from the work of Allen Tough, Carol Aslanian, Henry Brickell and others engaged in the study of self-directed learning. The key to using adults' "natural" motivation to learn is tapping into their most teachable moments: those points in their lives when they believe they need to learn something new or different.

For example, several longitudinal studies in corporations have demonstrated newly promoted supervisors and managers should be trained as quickly as possible. The longer such training is delayed, the less impact it appears to have on job performance.

In short, there is a window of opportunity during which adults are most receptive to learning — and a time after which they cannot be enticed with a champagne bottle or a baseball bat.

The idea of a window of opportunity applies not only to people's motivation to learn, but also to their ability to retain what they do learn. If trainees begin to acquire a new skill but then have no opportunity to practice it, the skill will quickly fade. Information-technology trainers have been reporting that training on a new software package or upgraded hardware configuration loses its effectiveness unless the equipment or software is installed and ready to use. The longer the group has to wait for the new system, the less impact the training has on effective use. This is a reconfirmation of an old lesson: Use it or lose it.

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- Adult learning is problem-centered. People do learn for the sake of learning: Hobbyists go to model-train conventions and take archery classes, retirees take golf and tennis lessons, and lots of people join book clubs. None of that is job- or "problem-related." But more often than not, adults seek out learning experiences to cope with life-changing events. Marriage, divorce, a new job, a promotion, being fired, retirement, death of a loved one — these sorts of occurrences often create a perceived need to learn.

The more life-changing events adults face, the more likely they are to seek out related learning experiences. In fact, learning may be a coping response to significant life changes for many people: some knit, some drink, some go to school. People who are highly educated are more likely to seek out learning opportunities as opposed to other coping options.

The impulse to go learn something in response to a life-changing event is to some extent generic: The subject that the person suddenly desires to learn about won't always pertain directly to the change that sparked the desire. Witness the divorcée who signs up for a course in art history. Predictably, however, adults usually will seek out and respond best to learning experiences that they perceive as directly addressing the changes that face them. If a change is primarily work-related, a learner will be more motivated if the learning event is primarily work-related.

Adults are generally willing to engage in learning experiences before, after or even during the life-changing event. Once convinced that the change is a certainty, they will engage in any learning that promises to help them through the transition, including seminars on coping with change.

- Adult learners can also be motivated by appealing to personal growth or gain. Though immediate utility is most often the motivation behind adults' learning efforts, it's not the only motivation.

For instance, some evidence suggests that adults more readily engage in job-skills training if they see it as relevant to the rest of their lives as well. Adult learners also can be motivated by the promise of increasing or maintaining their sense of self-esteem or pleasure. Developing a new skill or expanding knowledge can do both, depending on the individual's perceptions.

A newer subfield of adult learning sometimes referred to as "feminist pedagogy" suggests that emancipation from domination is a strong motivator. While most of the research in this area is related to feminist issues, the idea may have wider scope. You could argue that line employees who are enthusiastic about team training and participation techniques are motivated, in part, because they anticipate being liberated from management dominance in the workplace.

- Motivation to learn can be increased. While it may be true "the best motivation is self-motivation," some evidence suggests that adult learners who are with you in body but not in spirit can be led into participating and learning. If you can stimulate curiosity about the subject matter, demonstrate early on the learning will be immediately useful, and ensure low risk for learners, you can convert some of the uncaring. Sometimes simply exploring learners' positive and negative expectations can clear the air and increase participation.

**Curriculum Design**

Knowles cautions that adults confronted with a classroom and 30 chairs facing forward know exactly how to act: like bored 12-year-olds. Twelve to 18 years of pedagogic conditioning can do that to you. But the warning is important for designers of adult-learning experiences.

If you think that those 30 forward-facing chairs represent the optimum learning environment, don't be surprised if you end up with bored compliance. The most dramatic alternative is self-directed curriculum design but adult-learning theory offers clues for corporate curriculum design as well.
• Make the learning experience problem-centered. Working adults are likely to be less enthralled by survey courses than are full-time, professional students. Adults tend to prefer single-concept, single-theory courses that focus on applying the concept to relevant problems. This tendency increases with age. The learning experience should acknowledge and be relevant to the learner’s personal goals.

• Pre-program assessment is important. It is almost unconscionable to design a program that doesn’t take into account the entry-level knowledge and understanding of participants. To begin a team-building experience or diversity seminar without assessing where individuals stand on critical issues, without ferreting out information on the state of relationships in the company, or without clearly defining management’s goals for the training borders on malpractice.

• The learning design should promote information integration. To remember and use new information, adults need to be able to integrate it with what they already know. Information that conflicts sharply with what they already hold to be true, and thus forces them to re-evaluate the old material, is integrated more slowly. Information that has little conceptual overlap with what they already know also is acquired more slowly. Fast-paced, complex or unusual learning exercises will interfere with the learning of concepts or data they are intended to teach if the new information is too “foreign” to participants.

Adults tend to want a structure to help them keep track of details and facts in relation to one another. One school of thought suggests that adults have “personal maps of reality” in their heads that they use to organize information and experiences. Instruction should help the learner place new information on that “map.”

Information conveyed through storytelling is more than entertaining; evidence suggests that it is more easily integrated with existing knowledge. Well “storied” information has a learning adhesive makes it stick to previous learning and experience.

To help learners organize and integrate information, present one idea at a time. Summarize frequently to facilitate retention and recall. And pace the training so that learners can master one element before moving on to the next.

• Exercises and cases should have fidelity. Adults are not enthusiastic about far-fetched cases and artificial exercises. They prefer activities that are realistic and involving, that stimulate thinking, and that have some (but not too much) challenge. Adults evaluate exercises and games quickly and decide whether they are entertaining, useful or just plain silly.

The term “praxis,” a Greek word meaning “exercise or practice of an art, science or skill,” has begun to appear in adult-learning literature to describe exercises and activities. The concept acknowledges that while adults prefer “active” to “passive” learning (meaning they like exercises, cases, and simulations), the activity must contain a reflective element if learning (or change) is to occur. The literature enthusiastically endorses interactive computer simulations and games as high-fidelity learning experiences, though it holds little data that evaluate these methods.

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• Feedback and recognition should be planned. Learners need to know what they are trying to accomplish and how they are doing. The program design should include time to explore participants’ goals and expectations, to acknowledge those that will not be met, and to discuss both participants’ and trainers’ responsibilities during the training.

Adults tend to take errors personally and to let them affect their self-esteem. Therefore, they’re liable to stick to tried-and-true solutions and take few risks. Adults will even misinterpret feedback that corrects errors as positive confirmation. If you plan to ask participants to give each other feedback, demonstrate beforehand how to give effective feedback.

• Curriculum design should, where possible, account for learning-style differences. If we’ve learned anything from all the attention paid to the Myers-Briggs Type Instrument, Disc and Neurolinguistic Programming in the last decade, it is that adults do have learning-style differences and your design should accommodate them. (For more on adjusting to learning-style differences, see “Different Strokes: Learning Styles in the Classroom,” TRAINING March 1995.)

Do not, by the way, assume that all instruction must take place in a classroom/seminar/workshop. While most adults learn well when they have an opportunity to share their life experiences and actively contribute to the learning effort, plenty of people also learn well from nonhuman media. Tough and others have found that adults planning self-directed learning projects routinely include books, television, computer-based training, and other solitary media.

Regardless of media and learning style, most adults prefer straightforward how-to content. As many as 80 percent of the polled adults in one study cited the need to learn applications and how-to information as their primary motivation for involving themselves in a learning project, self-directed or otherwise.

• Design should accommodate adults’ continued growth and changing values. While not as hot a topic in the literature as it once was, the idea that adults go through developmental stages just as young children and adolescents do is still with us. Not only do adults’ needs and interests continually change, so do their values. A seminar group composed of new college recruits and one composed of 50-year-olds can be quite different. The trainer must take into account the life stages and values of the participants. In an orientation course for new employees, for instance, recent college grads might require not just indoctrination into the company’s culture but some background information about the business world in general. With the 50-year-olds, the trainer may more safely assume that they have such background knowledge.

Equally important to curriculum designers is whether concepts are in
concert or conflict with the organizational and personal values learners accept as valid. A company attempting to move from, say, a low-profile, reactive market strategy to an aggressive, high-visibility stance will likely encounter significant resistance from employees schooled in the "old way." Changing an organization’s values dramatically requires more than new brochures and a few buckets of paint. Changing people’s long-held values takes careful, planned intervention. New or radically different ideas must be explained repeatedly and in different ways before they will be understood and accepted.

- Designing in transfer strategies. More often than not, the training was a smash hit with the participants, but the performance problem didn’t go away. And more often than not, the fault lies in a training design that stops at the classroom door. Adults engage in workplace-learning activities for a productive end. The training is supposed to "transfer" to the real world: something is supposed to change back on the job. Failure to design transfer activities into the training breaks the implicit contract between trainer and trainee.

Transfer strategies include pre- and post-training activities, as well as discussions during training that focus on using the new knowledge or skills back on the job. Proven pretraining strategies such as self-assessments, discussions with supervisors that define expectations, and prework such as reading or data-gathering set the stage for effective transfer of training. Successful post-instruction strategies include application discussions with supervisors, refresher training, and support group meetings for graduates of the training.

In the Classroom

Prior to the Knowles era of adult-learning theory, most of the research in adult education focused on teacher behavior. So it is ironic that we still know so little about effective classroom facilitation techniques. Yes, courses have been written on the subject, but most of what is presented as "proven" is simply a compendium of tricks, tips, and theory passed on from master performers to their acolytes.

The problem with that approach to accumulating wisdom is that it usually takes an objective observer to distill the essence of how to become a master performer. As communications guru Marshall McLuhan put it, "We don't know who discovered water, but we can be pretty sure it wasn't a fish."

Still, it is possible to piece together the common threads that run through all this advice, and suggest some useful guidelines.

- Create a safe and comfortable environment. If you've ever walked into a dark hotel meeting room the morning after a late-night party and wondered how in the heck you are going to turn this into a learning environment, you know the importance of staging. Both the physical and psychological environment must be managed. Light, sound, heat, cold, supplies and amenities must be conducive to thought, focus and serious discourse. Participants need a mix of known and unknown, active and passive, serious and whimsical to keep them involved at an optimum level.

- Facilitation is more effective than lecture. Straight lecture is effective when trainees have zero grounding in the subject matter; when rules have to be passed along; and when matters of finance, fact or law are the subject of the training. But facilitation tends to work better to engage learners in setting objectives, to tap into learners' experience and opinions to create parts of the content, and to help participants reach consensus.

What constitutes good facilitation? While there are myriad views, most agree that a good facilitator:
- Establishes goals and clarifies expectations (both the facilitator's and the participants').
- Gives up the need to hold forth and be in control.
- Uses questioning techniques to provoke thinking, stimulate recall, challenge beliefs, confront opinions, draw implications and promote conclusions.
- Understands that adults have something real to lose in a classroom. Their ego's are on the line when they are asked to risk trying a new behavior in front of peers.
- Balances the many factors that make up a learning event: presentation of new material, debate, discussion and sharing of relevant trainee experiences. And does all this within the allotted time.
- Develops a learning environment that draws on participants' experiences, protects minority opinion, keeps disagreements civil, makes connections among various opinions and ideas, and reminds the group of the variety of possible solutions to the problem.

- Uses descriptive feedback and reinforces participants for their contributions and accomplishments.

- Actively promotes understanding and retention. In some ways this is as simple as recognizing that most adults aren't used to sitting passively for long stretches. Without activity, they turn into mushrooms before your eyes. But there is more to it than that. Despite (and frequently because of) the presence of an instructor/authority figure, many participants are reluctant to share ideas, feelings, confusion and annoyance with the group. Techniques such as breaking participants into small groups increase the chance that the reticent will contribute and collaborate.

The opportunity to exercise new skills in the relative safety of the training room is critical. Frequently participants are hesitant to try out new and untested skills in front of others. Using small praxis teams that practice, reflect and try again can overcome the reluctance to risk.

Helping adults acquire new skills and knowledge is an exhilarating, irritating, challenging and frustrating way to make a living. But if we keep trying and prod and testing and trying again, we might yet turn this art form into a science of sorts.

For Further Reading


