

Needs of the Adult Learner

In the early 1970s Malcolm Knowles introduced the term "andragogy," describing differences between children and adult learners (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005). Andragogy focuses on special needs of adult learners. Knowles identified six assumptions about adult learning: (1) need to know, (2) self-concept, (3) prior experience, (4) readiness to learn, (5) learning orientation, and (6) motivation to learn.

The Need to Know. Adults want to know why they need to learn something before undertaking learning (Knowles et al., 2005). Facilitators must help adults become aware of their "need to know" and make a case for the value of learning.

The Learners' Self-Concept. Adults believe they are responsible for their lives (Knowles et al., 2005). They need to be seen and treated as capable and self-directed. Facilitators should create environments where adults develop their latent self-directed learning skills (Brookfield, 1986).

The Role of the Learners' Experiences. Adults come into an educational activity with different experiences than do youth (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). There are individual differences in background, learning style, motivation, needs, interests, and goals, creating a greater need for individualization of teaching and learning strategies (Brookfield, 1986; Silberman & Auerbach, 1998). The richest resource for learning resides in adults themselves; therefore, tapping into their experiences through experiential techniques (discussions, simulations, problem-solving activities, or case methods) is beneficial (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles et al., 2005; McKeachie, 2002; Silberman & Auerbach, 1998).

Readiness to Learn. Adults become ready to learn things they need to know and do in order to cope effectively with real-life situations (Knowles et al., 2005). Adults want to learn what they can apply in the present, making training focused on the future or that does not relate to their current situations, less effective.

Orientation to Learning. Adults are life-centered (task-centered, problem-centered) in their orientation to learning (Knowles et al., 2005). They want to learn what will help them perform tasks or deal with problems they confront in everyday situations and those presented in the context of application to real-life (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Motivation. Adults are responsive to some external motivators (e.g., better job, higher salaries), but the most potent motivators are internal (e.g., desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem). Their motivation can be blocked by training and education that ignores adult learning principles (Knowles et al., 2005).

Andragogy urges teachers to base curricula on the learner's experiences and interests. Every group contains a configuration of idiosyncratic personalities, differing past experiences, current orientations, levels of readiness for learning, and individual learning styles. Thus trainers should be wary of prescribing any standardized approach to facilitating learning (Brookfield, 1986). Understanding the six assumptions in andragogy prepares facilitators to create successful training.

Teaching and Learning Strategies

In line with Knowles' theory of andragogy, trainers should recognize that the richest resources for learning reside in adult learners themselves; therefore, emphasis in adult education should focus on experiential techniques that tap into the experience of learners, such as group discussion, problem-solving, case methods, simulation exercises, games, and role-play, instead of primarily using transmittal techniques such as lecture (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles et al., 2005). Using a combination of the following teaching strategies will have the greatest impact.

Lecture

Lecture, a transmittal technique, is the method most widely used in teaching adults (McKeachie, 2002). Lectures should be used in 15- to 20-minute sections spaced with active learning activities to reenergize participants for the next wave of information (Middendorf & Kalish, 1996). Lectures are useful for presenting up-to-date information; summarizing material from various sources; adapting material to the background and interests of a group at a particular time and place; helping learners read more effectively by providing orientation and conceptual framework; and focusing on key concepts or ideas (McKeachie, 2002). Lectures can create interest in new topics, motivate learners to research further, or challenge ideas they have previously taken for granted (McKeachie, 2002).

Problem-Based Learning

Problem-based learning is an instructional strategy that encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Participants confront contextualized, ill-structured problems and strive to find solutions ("PBL Insight," 1998). The trainer is in the role of a facilitator to stimulate, guide, integrate, and summarize discussions. Strategies for problem solving with adults include games, simulations, and role play.

Case Studies

Case studies are narratives, situations, data samplings, or statements that present unresolved and provocative issues, situations, or questions. Cases challenge adults to analyze, critique, make judgments, speculate, and express opinions (Indiana University Teaching Handbook, 2004). Case studies bring real-world problems into the training.

They ensure active participation and may lead to innovative solutions (Indiana University Teaching Handbook, 2004). Use of case studies can result in better retention, recall, and use of learning outside the training (McKeachie, 2002).

Educational Games

Educational games involve students in competition or achievement in relationship to a goal; the game teaches and is fun (McKeachie, 2002). Many games are simulations with the goal of modeling real-life problems or crisis situations. One advantage of games and simulations is they encourage participants to confront their own attitudes and values (Silberman & Auerbach, 1998) through involvement in making decisions, solving problems, and reacting to results of their decisions (McKeachie, 2002).

Role Play

Role play is used to assist participants in experiencing feelings and practicing skills (Silberman & Auerbach, 1998). Role play is defined as an experience around a specific situation that contains two or more different viewpoints or perspectives. Situations can be written as a prepared brief, and different perspectives or roles are handed out to different people who discuss the situation. The situations should be realistic and relevant. The most successful scenarios develop a skill.

Discussion

Discussion is the prototypic teaching method for active learning (McKeachie, 2002). Discussion encourages students to discover solutions and develop critical thinking abilities (Teaching Concerns, 1993). Discussion allows learners to be active and experience personal contact (Indiana University Teaching Handbook, 2004; McKeachie, 2002). Trainers using discussion pose a problem, monitor discussion, and summarize when completed (Indiana University Teaching Handbook, 2004). Discussion methods are superior to lectures in adult learners' information retention; transfer of knowledge to new situations; problem solving, thinking, or attitude change; and motivation for further learning (McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, & Smith, 1986).

Conclusion

By using combinations of adult learner techniques and strategies, Extension educators can create training experiences that will enhance the learning of participants. When adults participate in a positive learning experience that follows the six assumptions of andragogy presented above, they are more likely to retain what they have learned and apply it in their work environment.

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