

Adult

Learners:

Considerations for Education and Training

BY MARK J. KISTLER

We live in trying times. A war, recession, high unemployment, foreclosures, private and public sector downsizing, and many other issues contribute to our current, seemingly dire, situation. Even though times seem bleak, there is a bright side. Many of the unemployed will need education and training to get back into the workforce. This provides an opportunity for career and technical education at all levels.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (October 2010), the largest percentage of the total unemployed (58.7 percent) were persons 25 to 54 years of age with an additional 13.7 percent in the 55 years of age and older category. Since a lot of the unemployed will be looking at education and training programs to help them to be more marketable and competitive in the current job market, it is important for us to look at the principles or characteristics of adult learners and how we can incorporate these into our education and training programs.

Before we begin discussing these principles, it is important to understand that these are only guidelines and they need to be examined in reference to the specific context in which they will be applied. The

value of these principles or characteristics is they compel us, as educators, to reflect upon and question our current practices in relation to the specific context and/or environment in which we teach.

Although there is much theoretical debate in academic circles, Malcolm Knowles' work with andragogy ("the art and science of helping adults learn") will provide the framework for discussion (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2005). Knowles' andragogical model presents six core principles of adult learners that are very useful to those who design and conduct education and training to develop a more effective learning process that is more conducive to adults.

The Need to Know

Adults need to know why they need to learn something before they will attempt to learn it. Typically in a learning environment, adults will invest a considerable amount of time weighing the benefits of learning something against the consequences of not learning it. Therefore, it is the task of the educator to help them become aware of "the need to know." They need to show the value of learning. For example, how it can improve their performance or quality of life. Putting

learners in real or simulated scenarios can help them become aware of their own gaps in knowledge and/or skills which can then help them to realize why they need to know it. Also, adults may already be aware of the "need to know" after an on-the-job performance appraisal and through job shadowing.

The Learners' Self-Concept

Adults maintain the concept of responsibility for their own decisions and lives. As a result, they have a need to be seen and treated as being capable of self-direction and resent when others impose their own will onto them. Therefore, educators need to build trust and respect with their learners. Typical educational settings put adults into a dependent role where they revert back to previous conditioning from formal education where they expect the teacher to teach them. It is the role of the educator to make an effort to create learning experiences whereby they help adults transition from this role of dependency to become self-directed learners.

The Role of Learners' Experience

One of the major differences between youth and adults is their volume and quality of experiences. From an adult educa-

tion standpoint, this can be both positive and negative. From a positive standpoint, their learning experiences provide a great resource from which to draw on. Tapping into these experiences utilizing techniques like group discussions, problem solving, case studies and simulations can enhance and benefit learning. Peer activities, where adults learn from each other, and other experiential techniques are also beneficial to learning.

However, a challenge due to this vast array of experiences is the differences among the learners themselves—they are a more heterogeneous group in relation to their background (*i.e.*, social, educational), learning style, motivation, needs and goals. This can pose a challenge to the educator in terms of the educational delivery methods and techniques used. A focus should be placed on more individualized methods and techniques.

Another challenge is due to the type of past experiences the learners have had, which can have negative effects. As we accumulate experiences, we tend to pick “bad habits” and develop mental models which can contain biases and assumptions that can create closed-mindedness. Therefore, it is up to the educator to have the adult learners examine and reflect on their habits and mental models, and find ways to open their minds to new ideas, approaches and ways of thinking.

One last reason for stressing the role of experience in adult learning is each learner’s self-concept or identity. Adults tend to define themselves in terms of their experiences—this is who they are. Therefore, it is important for the educator to not ignore or devalue these experiences due to the implications it will have on the adult learner (*i.e.*, rejecting them as a person).

Readiness to Learn

Adults become “ready to learn” those things they need to know in order to effectively handle or solve real-world problems or situations. Timing is critical. We all have heard of and probably have

experienced the “teachable moment.” This is what is meant by “readiness to learn.” For example, someone would not be ready for supervisor and management training until they have mastered the work of the position they would supervise, and have decided they are ready for more responsibility by becoming a supervisor or manager. Educators do not have to wait and then react to these situations. There are ways to help learners stimulate their readiness to learn. Some of these techniques include career counseling, simulations or role play.

Orientation to Learning

Adults are life-centered (or problem-centered) in their orientation to learning. They are motivated to learn when they perceive that learning will help them to address their own problems, needs, or concerns and ultimately, improve their quality of life. In addition, the most effective learning occurs when the change in behavior (*i.e.*, knowledge, attitude, skills and practices) is presented in the context of their application to their own life. Therefore, it is critical for educators to use real-world examples and scenarios that the learners can understand and relate to their own life situations.

Motivation

Adults are more responsive to internal motivators than external motivators. Yes, most adults do respond to external motivators like better jobs, promotions and higher salaries; however, internal motivators like increased self esteem, job satisfaction and quality of life are the most persuasive.

What About the Educator?

Up to this point, we have focused on characteristics of the adult learners. What about the educator? Lorraine M. Zinn developed an inventory, *Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory*, which is useful to those involved in the education of adults. An online version of this inventory is

As more and more adults seek out education and training programs to help them become more competitive in the job market, it provides an opportunity for career and technical education.

available at www25.brinkster.com/educ605/paei_howtouse.htm. Understanding your own philosophy will help you to become aware of what you do as an educator along with what you believe and value about education. Having this understanding will ultimately help you to be a more effective educator.

Knowledge is Key

As more and more adults seek out education and training programs to help them become more competitive in the job market, it provides an opportunity for career and technical education. Understanding the principles and characteristics of adult learning along with the development of a personal philosophy of adult education provide guidelines for educators to consider in the planning and delivery of education and training programs which ultimately can positively impact the adult learning process. ■

Mark J. Kistler

is an assistant professor of agricultural education and extension education at North Carolina State University. He can be contacted at mark_kistler@ncsu.edu.

ACTE Interested in exploring this topic further? Discuss it with your colleagues on the ACTE forums at www.acteonline.org/forum.aspx.