

ADULT LEARNING

(The following material is excerpted from: "The Ultimate Educator" by Edmunds, C., K. Lowe, M. Murray, and A. Seymour, 1999.)

Since the 1970s, adult learning theory has offered a framework for educators and trainers whose job it is to train adults. Malcolm S. Knowles (1973) was among the first proponents of this approach. In his book, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, he resurrected 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:

1. As they mature, adults tend to prefer self-direction. The role of the instructor is to engage in a process of inquiry, analysis, and decision-making with adult learners, rather than to transmit knowledge.
2. Adults' experiences are a rich resource for learning. Active participation in planned experiences - such as discussions or problem solving exercises, an analysis of those experiences, and their application to work or life situations - should be the core methodology for training adults. Adults learn and retain information more easily if they can relate it to their reservoir of past experiences.
3. Adults are aware of specific learning needs generated by real-life events such as marriage, divorce, parenting, taking a new job, losing a job, and so on. Adult learners' needs and interests are the starting points and serve as guideposts for training activities.
4. 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. Life or work-related situations present a more appropriate framework for adult learning than academic or theoretical approaches.

Robert W. Pike (1989), an internationally recognized expert in human resources development and author of the book *Creative Training Techniques*, has conducted thousands of adult training seminars. His principles of adult learning, referred to as "Pike's Laws of Adult Learning," have built upon the original philosophy to provide similar guidance for trainers:

Law 1: Adults are babies with big bodies. It is accepted that babies enjoy learning through experience, because every exploration is a new experience. As children grow, educators traditionally reduce the amount of learning through experience to the point that few courses in secondary and higher education devote significant time to experiential education. It is now recognized that adult learning is enhanced by hands-on experience that involves adults in the learning process. In addition, adults bring a wealth of experience that must be acknowledged and respected in the training setting.

Law 2: People do not argue with their own data. Succinctly put, people are more likely to believe something fervently if they arrive at the idea themselves. Thus, when training

adults, presenting structured activities that generate the students' ideas, concepts, or techniques will facilitate learning more effectively than simply giving adults information to remember.

Law 3: Learning is directly proportional to the amount of fun you are having. Humor is an important tool for coping with stress and anxiety, and can be effective in promoting a comfortable learning environment. If you are involved in the learning process and understand how it will enable you to do your job or other chosen task better, you can experience the sheer joy of learning.

Law 4: Learning has not taken place until behavior has changed. It is not what you know, but what you do that counts. The ability to apply new material is a good measure of whether learning has taken place. Experiences that provide an opportunity for successfully practicing a new skill will increase the likelihood of retention and on-the-job application.

For more than two decades, adult learning theory has served as the framework for training adults. The idea that adults as learners require different educational strategies than children was first voiced fifty years ago when Irving Lorge (1947), writing about effective methods in adult education, suggested that to reach the adult learner, you have to teach to what adults want. He stated that adults have "wants" in the following four areas:

1. To gain something.
2. To be something.
3. To do something.
4. To save something.

Eduard Lindeman, also writing in the 1940s, proposed that adults learn best when they are actively involved in determining what, how, and when they learn. Since the 1970s, several authors and training experts have expanded upon the original concepts presented as adult learning theory.

Ultimate instruction, as used here, means helping adults to learn and involves far more than lecturing or presenting information. It involves instructing for results - powerful, highly effective instruction that results in applicable learning for adult participants. The material presented here is intended as a guide for both new and experienced trainers and educators. The reader is encouraged to adapt these ideas and techniques freely and to modify them as necessary to compliment his or her unique style of instruction. You, too, can become an ultimate educator.

To find out more about learning in general and adult learning in particular, check out the How People Learn section of the Teaching Tips Index of the HCC Faculty Development Guidebook.