Abstract:

The practice of teaching and educating adults, commonly known as andragogy, touches many areas of workforce education. Programs such as the Tribal Technical Assistance Program (TTAP) and Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP) and others have adults as their primary audiences. Bringing 30+ years of experience as a practitioner and a researcher, the author will give valuable information about adult education and its basic principles, barriers and best practices as well as the impact of societal and generational changes on adult education. This session will provide summit attendees current valuable and practical practices which could be implemented in their next training sessions or classes.

With a continued “Graying of America” and increased emphasis on learning throughout one’s life span, all educators, both formal and informal would benefit from knowing more about the topic of adult education. Scholars such as Knowles, Merriam, Brookfield, and Mezirow have contributed valuable research in this field. Adults are different from youth with different needs or reasons for pursuing education as well as differing levels of motivation. Adults also seek to learn what they have identified as important, look for immediately applicable learning as well as focusing more on problem centered learning rather than subject centered learning.

Generational theory in relationship to adult education will be discussed as it relates to tailoring of educational approaches. This paper will provide best practices to increase the effectiveness of the teaching/learning process.
Introduction

Education of the workforce, whether directed toward incumbent workers or future workers, is critical to our country as we struggle to rebound from a recession. The field of workforce education is often defined in various ways depending upon the audience. Some would describe workforce education as only the education of adults while others see the field as targeting both adults and those preparing for adulthood. Others would distinguish not between the audiences but rather the level of education being provided. Those with that definition believe that workforce education is all education above basic literacy and citizenship (Gray and Herr, 1998). All would agree that workforce education is based upon the premise that the result would be better performance in the workplace and a higher standard of living for workers. Regardless of which way(s) it is defined our economic future may rest on how well and to what level our workforce is prepared.

Within the workplace of today and in the future, we will have multiple generations working side by side. Such a mixed workforce has caused educators to develop a new theory of educational practice to deal with the phenomenon. Known as generational theory, this theory espouses the differing work attitudes and work perceptions based on what year an individual was born. Thought to be a more recent construct, generational theory with its basis in sociology began as early as the 1950’s (Mannheim, 1952). Much attention has been paid in the literature to this social construct by researchers such as Stephey (2008) and Parry & Urwin (2009). Strauss and Howe (1991) popularized four distinct generations based on birth years. These four generations are; Veterans (1925-1942), Baby Boomers (1943-1960), Generation X (1961-1981) and Generation Y (1982-). Added to the mix of gender, race, and ethnicity; the addition of multiple generations working together further complicates the workplace. This diversity presents unique challenges to educators. For this manuscript, the author will simply refer to the very basic division of adults and youth without any further distinctions in terms of generations.

Gray and Herr, in Workforce Education: The Basics propose that professions such as workforce education have three characteristics, all demonstrable in the day-to-day implementation of efforts by all concerned. The professional practice of workforce education can be identified by its history, its philosophy, and its ethical standards. The history of workforce education is rich, beginning long before the industrial age. Starting (or at least formalizing) with Medieval guilds and apprenticeships, it moved forward through the industrial age, culminating in today’s system including career and technical education at the secondary and postsecondary levels; community colleges and universities; industry-based and government-based efforts as well as human resource development. The driving philosophies have ranged from humanism and behaviorism to progressivism but have always focused on the skill sets that would improve the workers’ lot in life. The ethical standards are well established with a strong connection between education, in all of its structures and forms with business and industry and providing the ability to enjoy a life which includes a meaningful occupation.

From the history, philosophy, and ethical standards comes a well-respected and broadly accepted construct known as the ‘skills-employability’ paradigm (Gray & Herr, 1998). Supporting job training in our society, this paradigm recognizes the interplay and interaction between the skill level of an individual, the likelihood of gainful employment, and societal ills such as poverty and social unrest. As our economy has struggled in recent years, even a cursory review of current news events would indicate this paradigm holds true even today.
This manuscript will focus on a specific field within the broad area of workforce education known as andragogy, more commonly referred to as adult education, and provide a basic level of knowledge of the topic. The field of adult education is broad and full of many important concepts. Malcolm Knowles (1970) has been recognized as one of the major contributors to the field of adult education and proposes that the education of adults is far different than the education of children. Andragogy refers to a theoretical framework of the teaching of adults and is often used by adult educators to describe their field of practice. Whether one truly embraces all aspects of this framework, most educators would agree at least on a surface level that educating adults is far different than educating children, both in approach, applicability of content as well as life experiences of the learners. The author prefers the use of the word educator rather than trainer. It signifies a broader and more holistic approach to workforce education instead of simply preparing a worker for a specific job that might or might not endure the test of time. Other terms for this pivotal role include teachers, facilitators and managers of learning. Basic principles of adult education will be discussed with the important corresponding considerations for educators and explore the barriers which exist for adult learners in becoming successful as learners.

Effective educators are able to merge their knowledge of content with a delivery system that recognizes the characteristics of their learners and actively engages them in the teaching/learning process. Knowledge of the content without the ability to engage students is not enough and neither is the ability to engage students without meaningful information and content with which to engage them. Anyone involved in workforce education would benefit greatly from a better and deeper understanding of adult learners and methods to increase the likelihood that learning will occur.

Principles and Implications

There are many concepts and theories on the purposes of adult education, and different methods of categorizing them. Hal Beder (1980) collapses all of the various purposes for adult education into four categories: (1) to facilitate change in a dynamic society, (2) to support and maintain the good social order, (3) to promote productivity, and (4) to enhance personal growth (p. 39). He postulates that success or failure in any of the four categories is interrelated. Leo Meyer in Teach! The Art of Teaching Adults uses the idea of conditions; those the adult learner brings to class; those the educator sets up before class, and those conditions created during the class. Ron and Susan Zemke (1988) use the “divisions of things”, that is, things we know about adult learners and their motivation, things we know about designing curriculum for adults and things we know about working with adults in the classroom. Using Zemke’s divisions and the work of many other researchers in the field, one can postulate the following principles of adult education and implications for educators.

Motivation to Learn

Often described as self directed in terms of motivation, adult learners tend to seek out the knowledge they believe they need. The goal of education is the facilitation of change and learning. Much of how adults learn is self directed or done in one’s own way. Mezirow’s theory of adult education further clarifies the goals of adult education to “include helping learners to be self-guided, self-reflective, and rational and helping them to establish communities of discourse in which these qualities are honored and fostered” (1991, p. 224). Other researchers who join
this school of thought are Brookfield and Caffarella & O’Donnell who discuss the critical
paradigm of self-directed adult learning. This ability to be self-directed with a high level of
motivation is described by Meyer as one of the conditions that learners bring to the classroom.
Motivation is very specific to context, circumstances, and reinforcement. Facilitating personal
growth can lead to motivation particularly when it is accompanied by a transition in life, many
times a specific life-changing event.

Aslanian and Brickell (1980) reported that 83 percent of adults have as a reason for
learning a transition, either one in the past, present or future. As the stress surrounding the event
increases, so does the motivation to cope and engage in the learning situation. This is often
described by researchers as trying to make sense of the event, and exert some sort of control,
whether or not the possibility of control exists. Adults will engage in learning that promises to
help them cope with the transition particularly when it becomes evident the change is happening
and can’t be halted. Egos and self-esteem can be fragile during these learning experiences and
the moments when learning has occurred cherished and celebrated.

Levinson (1996) refers to these transitions in adult life as “a person’s life structure”, that
is, “the underlying pattern or design of a person’s life at any given time” (p. 22). Educators
would do well to remember and be sensitive to the life events the adults see as overcoming them
and offer additional services and support as needed. This change is fundamental and
indisputable and skills to cope with change are much needed. Life events of themselves are not
emotion laden. Life events take the meaning given to them by the adult learner. Such events
thought by some to be a negative may in others’ lives be a positive.

Astute educators recognize that adults seek out learning experiences when THEY
perceive a need, not when the educator decides to schedule a class. Self-assessments such as
learning style inventories; stress level indicators; and reflections upon life will be of help in order
for educators to tap into the natural motivation of an adult learner when a perceived need
presents itself. Helping the adult learner actually learn not only the content but skills in coping
with uncertainty and change would serve them well long after they have left the formal learning
environment.

Curriculum Design

The key point for curriculum design is the understanding that adult learners need
concepts to be ‘anchored’ and connected to previous knowledge if the knowledge is to be
retained. Given the varied life experiences of adults and often the viewpoints from people in
different life stages and with different values, a teaching situation requires adept handling of
sensitive content and applications. Most adults prefer a course or class in one specific theory or
concept rather than an “all you ever wanted to know” type of course. Again, as they search for
where new information fits in their overall cognition, they are focused on that process and have
little patience for what they perceive to be irrelevant or simply nice to know information. One
adage is this definition of the relevance of information: information that must be learned;
information that would be nice to learn and simply some information that it is nuts to know!

Andragogy understands that psychomotor tasks may come slower to the adult learner but
their accuracy outweighs any slowness. Psychomotor tasks are those tasks that are mental
activities that require motor skills. Educators may introduce new information which does not fit
within what the adult believes to be true, so time must be allowed for new belief systems to
develop when necessary. The ability to move slowly and deliberately but in an interactive
engaging matter can be developed by adult educators, which will greatly influence their
effectiveness. As a general rule, adult learners are less willing to take risks and although self-
directed in many aspects do not object to group activities. The ability to network and discuss
with other respected peers is important. A balance of independent and more structured activities
throughout the teaching/learning process is preferred.

The areas of curriculum design and instructional procedures and methods are frequently
covered in basic teacher preparation courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels on most
college and university campuses. Those professors and faculty are reservoirs of knowledge
about basic teaching principles and would be a valuable asset as consultants to project managers
and directors.

In the Classroom

All of us have attended school and thus have an opinion of how school should operate.
Many adults unfortunately have negative experiences from traditional schooling and bring those
experiences to the current situation. Any vestiges of an arrogant educator whose focus is
themselves will quickly cause both the educator and the content to be discounted. The current
personal and family situations of adults also join the classroom and can cause the learner to be
distracted and not focused on the tasks at hand. Physical and psychological comfort are also
paramount and any efforts to relieve anxiety at trying new tasks or performing in front of others
will be rewarded. More so than a youth, adults stand to lose self esteem and self ego when they
are put on stage or feel singled out by the educator.

As discussed previously within the section on curriculum design the need for strong
connections to the life experiences and previous knowledge bases of the adult learners is critical.
This recognition will be validating to those learners and enhances the sense of relationships
between the adult learners and their educators.

Other implications include simple preparation of the room/location to emphasize easy
access to any refreshments, rest areas and computer access. A well planned learning
environment will also balance breaks and alternate activities with content delivery and allow for
some choices when feasible about start and stop times as well as the speed of delivery. The
educator would be best served by viewing their adult learners not so much as students but rather
as co-learners. Many educators find they learn as much or more from their students given such a
broad array of life experiences. It requires a setting aside of self and a focus on the learners and
how best to recognize the learners’ assets.

Another important consideration based on the research is to find out prior to instruction
the expectations of the learners and where possible to meet those. It is certainly not always
possible to do so but a wise educator keeps those expectations front and center and does not
hesitate to discuss why some might not be able to be met in the current situation. Educators who
can be themselves, honest with their students and prepared for any last minute changes will be
more effective than those with a rigid set schedule which becomes more important than the
content.
At times the adult educator may actually be a referee and coach to keep all disagreements civil; allow for multiple and conflicting perspectives to be presented and connected to each other all the while connecting the knowledge to be attained to what is already known. If the learning situation becomes combative or argumentative among participants all will be lost and for naught.

A misconception of some is that self direction means working alone which is not the case. Often face to face, one to one access to an expert is most desirable and a strong support system of others can facilitate a deeper understanding of the topic.

In the classroom, adult learners are less likely to respond well to a take charge educator who has little tolerance for suggestions, group activities and is focused on being a ‘sage on the stage’. A better approach is one of a ‘guide from the side’ allowing the learning process to materialize more naturally and with pacing more appropriate to this audience.

Barriers to Adults Being Successful as Learners

Researchers and practitioners present various kinds of barriers which can prevent adults from being successful. Careful attention to these barriers will better prepare and make more likely learning to occur. Beginning in 1965 with Johnstone and Rivera’s work, potential barriers were identified, linked to gender, age and socioeconomic categories and classified as external (situational) and internal (dispositional). Interestingly, socioeconomic categories greatly influenced whether or not adults even knew what education was available. 85% of the adults in a high socioeconomic class knew what was available while a paltry 19% of adults in a low socioeconomic class knew what opportunities existed.

Cross in 1981, utilizing data from Carp’s 1974 Commission on Nontraditional Study, grouped 24 potential barriers into 3 groups. Those three groups were situational; institutional and dispositional. Situational barriers often cited as the number one reason for not seeking further education include lack of time, cost or personal problems. Many practices and procedures of various educational entities create barriers that discourage or exclude adults from participation and can be as varied as location, inconvenient scheduling, procedural or classes seen as not interesting or practical. These barriers are often referred to as institutional barriers. Dispositional barriers are more difficult to identify as these are the adults’ attitudes and self-perceptions of oneself as a learner. In 1982, Darkenwald and Merriam using the Psychosocial Interaction Model introduced a fourth category of barrier known as informational barriers which reflect a simple lack of awareness of what educational opportunities are being offered.

Attempting to model what has been discussed in this manuscript in terms of relevance and ease of access to information, the author will present a checklist of things to consider as educators strive to offer a wide buffet of educational opportunities for those clients. This list is a summary of the research and practice in this wide field of adult education and is not intended to be a complete comprehensive list.

Top 10 Checklist for Adult Educators (honesty is the best policy!)

1. Did you conduct an assessment of the needs of your clients/students?
2. What do you know about the students? Their educational levels? Experience levels? Life stories? How can you integrate that information in your presentation of content?
3. Can you clearly state your expectations for the experience and honor the expectations of the students?
4. Is the topic immediately relevant to the clients/students?
5. Do you have planned within the instruction frequent and clear emphasis on the relevance and applicability of the content?
6. How physically comfortable is the learning environment?
7. How do you plan to purposefully engage the students throughout the class?
8. Do you have a balance of group and individual activities planned?
9. How skilled is your instructor? Is the instructor able to effectively engage the class by setting aside their ego?
10. How will you evaluate the class? More importantly, how will you utilize the evaluation and assessment for future endeavors?

Summary

Andragogy is of extreme importance to educators who have adults as their audience. A solid understanding of the nature of adult education would serve educators well and increase the likelihood of successful educational experiences. Adult learning is multidimensional and multifaceted and asks of the educator a focused and realistic approach to instruction. Kistler in Adult Learners: Considerations for education and training, reminds all of us that these are only guidelines in the broad field of adult education 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 (p. 29).

Education is about facilitating change whether it is in the adult learners we teach or in ourselves. There is no nobler and better goal for us as adult educators.
References


