

Article

An Andragogical Approach to Training

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It is estimated that private employers spend \$210 billion each year on training for adults, while the government spends an additional \$5 billion each year. Much of this training is made necessary by the rapid change that has become the norm in modern workforces. The reality of downsizing, cutback management, and “do more with less” strategies requires training that is targeted, efficient and effective. It is the responsibility of professional trainers to ensure that clients receive the value that they deserve for their training dollars, and that training sessions are both enjoyable and beneficial to the participants. When training programs or trainer’s actions are incongruent with principles of adult learning it shows in the dissatisfaction of the learners. This discontentment is often expressed by returning late from breaks and lunches and not participating in class.

The relationship between instructors and adult learners is different than between teachers and pre-adult students. The pre-adult learning environment is hierarchical because of the difference in age, maturity, and experience between the teacher and students. The relationship between trainers and adult learners is one where authority is shared. Research suggests that adults learn well from their peers, therefore trainers must assume the role of facilitators of learning. In addition to removing artificial hierarchical barriers, facilitators of adult learning sessions should also include small group activities to create learning synergy among learners. Learning becomes a shared activity integrating the expertise and life experiences of all participants, including the facilitator. It is my premise that facilitators of adult learning must understand andragogy and design training programs to optimize those conditions that research has shown enhances the ability of adults to learn and succeed.

Malcolm Knowles is known as the father of andragogy in the United States. Andragogy is defined as the art and science of helping adults learn, in contrast to Pedagogy, the art and science of educating children. He was one of the world’s leading practitioners of adult learning techniques, producing 18 books and more than 200 articles on the subject. Malcolm’s understanding of how adults learn has provided insight that can guide professionals who provide education to adults into the next millennium. He put forth the following postulation about adult learners:

Adults are autonomous and self-directed. Therefore, an andragogical approach to training requires that we keep participants actively involved in the learning process. Specifically, learners must be consulted about the content of the training and allowed to work on projects that are important to them. The goal of the training session is to allow the participants to obtain their own knowledge rather than supply them with facts.

Adults have accumulated a wealth of knowledge through life experiences. The facilitator of an andragogical based learning program will create an environment that allows the learner to relate the theories and concepts of the training to activities they understand, or will need in order to improve their lives.

Adults are relevancy and practically oriented. Few of us are willing to give full attention to activities we deem to have no bearing on the things that matter to us, or have no practical use to us. Therefore “off the shelf” training materials at a minimum must be customized to reflect conditions specific to the learners.

Adults demand respect, therefore trainers need to treat participants as equals in knowledge and experience and allow them to voice their opinions. Trainers must make sure to show respect for diverging opinions by participants and act on credible suggestions that might be offered. The “I am the expert” approach does not work with adult learners.

Any professional involved in the education of adults can attest to the fact that once an adult is in a class, the real challenge is keeping him or her focused and involved. Whether in search of professional training or seeking a degree, adults are more successful in an environment where their life experiences and maturity are recognized, respected and incorporated into the learning process.