

Malcolm Knowles is considered the father of adult learning theory. And, as such, he determined that adults like their learning to be delivered or created in accordance with the following principles; adult like their learning to:

1. Be self directed
2. Be problem centered
3. Be collaborative
4. Pull from their experiences
5. Be active

Recently there seems to be a renewed interest in the principles of adult learning theory and how they apply to workplace learners. This series will discuss each one of these principles and how you can model it in your training design or delivery.

This month we focus on: Adults like their learning to be self directed.

Self directed does not mean that adults like to learn alone. In fact, research shows that most self-directed learning involves up to 10 other individuals. For instance, if I am planning to lay a new ceramic floor in my bathroom, I may speak with a friend who did that himself, I may go to the local big-box store and ask for expert advice in that area, or I may go online and look for a tutorial at the Home Depot website or www.howstuffworks.com.

What self directed learning *does* mean is that the learner likes to set the parameters of the learning and make decisions about the learning process.

Some ways that you can affect this in your training design are to allow for group activities. Ask participants to spend 20 minutes working on a case study independently, and then join a group to share their answers, or, create a team environment in which one small group of trainees poses a challenging question to another small group who must then respond with an answer that conforms to a given set of criteria.

An excellent way to include self direction AND touch upon principles 2 and 4 as well is to ask participants to bring their own work to the training. For example, a class on time management would ask them to bring a log of how they used their work hours in the previous week. A class on financial planning would ask them to bring their own list of bills, etc.

Ways that we can allow for self directedness in facilitation are allowing individuals to choose their own groups when group work is required (e.g. simply saying 'choose a partner'), by asking the group as a whole if they are ready for a break or not ('we need to take a break soon and we also have 20 minutes of content left to cover - which would you like to do first?') or, when we put individuals in to groups and give them a learning activity, we can give very loose completion parameters, such as discuss the XYZ case study and come up with three questions that you might ask this prospective customer; so while the activity has completion requirements, the participants are able to shape the activity based on the conversation they are having and the decision that they make with their chosen work group.

The key to self directed success is to establish clear parameters and direction for your learners. So long as they understand the process and the outcomes they are expected to achieve, they will have success in directing their own activities and they will appreciate the freedom of shaping their learning in a way that is most meaningful to them.

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