

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 pull from their experiences.

The primary difference between teaching adults and teaching youngsters is the fact that adults have a wealth of experience from which to draw. Not only are they more mature and have significant life experiences, such as those of us today who can say “This recession is nothing like the one in the early 90’s, the early 80’s, or the early 70’s,” but they have a wealth of working experiences as well. It’s impossible to say to a second grader, “Think back to a time when you needed to make a tough decision about an ethical dilemma.”

Instructional designers and facilitators can not only make their training more engaging by drawing on these experiences, but they can also lighten the load of their own responsibility by utilizing adults to create the content based on their wealth of experience. For example, when designing a training class on leadership skills, the instructional designer might ask the training group to first create a list of 10 qualities a good leader demonstrates with the instruction that the trainee think back to an excellent supervisor for whom they had a great deal of respect; What qualities did that individual demonstrate? The designer may then ask the trainees to join a small group and compare their lists with a description of a good leader.

In the classroom, a facilitator of a management development class might ask a participant to share a story about a particularly troubling situation or corrective action conversation with an underling and ask, “In retrospect, what skills do you wish you possessed in order to handle that relationship better?” The facilitator could then focus his or her training on the needs of the that individual or could ask the rest of the group if they had a similar experiences and identified similar needs and, if not, ask for other experiences and identified needs and then mold the training program to fit the “customized” needs of that particular training group.

So an adult can pull from a wealth of experience in their own past responsibilities and relationships in order to mold the agenda for the training opportunity at hand. The key to capitalizing on the experiences of adults in workplace training is to allow them to a) contribute to the content or the discussion by calling on their accumulated wealth of knowledge and experiences and b) helping the participants to shape the content based on their input.

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