

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 active.

Malcolm Knowles once said “The typical classroom set up, with chairs in rows and a lectern in front, is probably the one least conducive to learning that the fertile human brain could invent.”

Adults are used to actively controlling the processes and the outcomes of their day (within certain parameters). The adult can choose if and when to answer the telephone, if and when to respond to e-mail, they can call meetings of their own accord, they can choose to break for lunch when they feel it is appropriate in their workload, can choose to stay late to finalize work etc. In order to effectively reach adults during a training program, the same environment of activity must be created. Because there are so many stimuli in the workplace throughout the day, adults are used to prioritizing and decision making without even thinking about it and a stagnant learning environment in which the participant sits at a desk, facing forward, and listens to a “sage on the stage,” can cause them to tune out, at best, and become resistant to the process at worst.

Here are a few techniques to keep adult learners actively engaged in your learning process:

From an instructional design point of view – change what the learner is doing, at a minimum, every 20 minutes and better every 8 – 10 minutes. Bob Pike says that we all learned to pay attention in 8 minute chunks thanks to years of television viewing which has programmed us to expect a break every 8 minutes or so. I like to think that adults can pay attention a little bit longer, but truly, 20 minutes of lecture is hard for anyone to stay focused through.

A variety of activities can be employed to keep adults focused, even when couched in a lecture; for instance, instead of lecturing on the three best ways to engage a prospect in a selling opportunity, turn the lecture in to a group discussion or a group brainstorming session by asking, “what do you think are three ways we can pique a prospect’s interest in our product?” The same learning outcome can be achieved by having participants work with a partner to brainstorm the three best ways to engage a prospect. Similarly, rather than tell participants, “You will hear objections in the following three areas when trying to close a sale,” you may turn the lesson in to a competition by having smaller

groups pose objections to fellow participants to see how they might respond. In general, almost anything that you can lecture through, you can also create an activity around. If you wanted to take the same objections-exercise out of the classroom you might require your trainees to interview a more seasoned sales professional within the company about sales that they lost and the objections that they could not overcome. In that way, the lesson would be real-world rather than hypothetical and would be customized to your training group. Not only would this approach be active, but it would keep participants engaged in the content because it would be specific to their product, their sales process, and the objections they might hear on the job.

As a facilitator, the same thinking process applies as when designing training, although you may find that you need to employ a different learning process in the moment because you find the attention of your participants to be waning. So when you notice eyes glazing over, even though the design of your class may say to pose a question to the group as a whole, you may choose to break participants in to groups of 3 or 4 just to change the energy in the room.

It is also acceptable to have participants get up and move about; if you ask people to break into a small group of 3 or 4 and work together for 20 minutes, you can also tell them to get up and work down the hall in an empty conference room or meet in the cafeteria.

Another example of in-the-moment active facilitation is to ask participants to read a section in their workbook or operations manual and come up with 3 questions based on their reading. Not all activities have to involve others – individuals can be active independently as well. We often don't think of reading or thinking as an "activity," but if it is different than the "sage on the stage" lecture, then it is active enough to keep people engaged.

The key to keeping adults active is not physical activity; active engagement can occur through mental engagement as well. Mental engagement includes reading, thinking, discussion, problem solving, competitions, and a variety of independent and group learning processes.

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