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The Adult Learner: Do Learning Models, Activities and Environment Impact Retention?

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The Adult Learner: Do Learning Models, Activities and Environment Impact Retention?

Abstract

This paper provides a literature review of the impact the learning environment, learning activities, and adult learning models have on the learner and learner retention. Books, periodicals, and articles reviewed and selected for this paper were done with so with a corporate setting in mind. Several different theories are reviewed that all suggest that a positive environment that considers the unique learning needs of adults leads towards a overall positive learning experience. Activities and learning models are reviewed that support the positive learning environment.

THE ADULT LEARNER:
DO LEARNING MODELS, ACTIVITIES AND
ENVIRONMENT IMPACT RETENTION?

A Graduate Literature Review

Submitted to the

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Mindy Westendorf

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a literature review of the impact the learning environment, learning activities, and adult learning models have on the learner and learner retention. Books, periodicals, and articles reviewed and selected for this paper were done with so with a corporate setting in mind.

Several different theories are reviewed that all suggest that a positive environment that considers the unique learning needs of adults leads towards a overall positive learning experience. Activities and learning models are reviewed that support the positive learning environment.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Educating adults in the workplace can be a momentous undertaking. In addition to developing and presenting the appropriate level of material, an adult educator must also take into consideration how adults learn and what impacts their learning.

When an adult learner walks in the door of a classroom, chances are it may have been years since the learner was actually in a classroom setting. The mind is not occupied with learning, but rather with the work that is still accumulating at the desk, anxieties about the upcoming learning experience, and numerous other factors that can negatively impact the learning experience.

The educating of adults, and study of said subject, is not new. Therefore, when asking the question of what aids the retention of adult learners, it is appropriate to analyze existing literature.

In the Fifth Century B.C., the Chinese Book of Ceremonies proclaimed that the teacher of adults leads but does not drag; strengthens and does not discourage; opens the way but does not conduct to the end without the learner's own efforts (Cassivi, 1989). In the year 1996, it was written that you can order adults into the classroom, but you cannot make them learn (Lightfoot and Bennett, 1996). Much has been written about adult learners and how they learn.

The impact of models, activities, and environment on adult learners can be substantial. The time an adult spends learning in the workplace must provide almost immediate benefits and return on investment to be considered worthwhile. Appropriately

structuring the learning event ensures that both the investment in the training and the employees attending the training will provide benefit.

This review will provide answers to the questions of the effect of the learning environment, what activities aid the learning process, how models can be used to facilitate learning.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The identification of sources for this review was completed in several stages. The initial review included approximately twenty journal and periodical articles on the broad topic of adult learning.

The second phase of this review focused on the environment and activities that successfully address adult learning needs. This review included periodical articles, books, and material presented at a national training conference.

The third phase of the review focused on models and theories of adult learning. Materials reviewed included journal and periodical articles and books on instruction for adult learners.

The procedure used for evaluating the material that was used was fairly simple. The sources used had to be applicable to a corporate environment and applicable to a variety of learning events. It was also important that the sources emphasized a hands-on, real life, usable approaches to teaching adults.

CHAPTER 3

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Learning Environment

During the instructional development process, preparation process, and facilitation of the learning event, multiple considerations should be taken to aid in the learning and retention process. A comfortable physical environment is essential, especially for the non-traditional or infrequent learner. Setting the appropriate tone for the learning event will aid in acclimation to the physical environment, alleviate concerns or fear a learner may have, and set the stage for the entire learning event. This can be accomplished by something as simple as greeting learners as they enter the classroom, asking learners to share an interesting fact about themselves during an introduction, or having learners complete a pre-assessment or pre-work prior to attending class. A pre-assessment or pre-work contributes to the frame of mind a learner has when beginning a course and aids in retention, as often times the learner must research information pertinent to the subject matter.

Deck (1997) stated that when learners have a positive emotional experience, retention rates increases and the learner is more likely to recall specific details about the session. Negative emotional experiences can also have a similar impact on the lack of learner retention. A learner with a negative emotional experience may forget the content of the instruction, but will not forget the experience as a whole, which can result in negative feelings towards training. As trainers and facilitators, it is imperative to utilize instructional techniques and activities to creative a positive learning environment.

Adults learn best if they are active participants in the learning process and if they are involved in the planning and participatory activities (Reddick, 1994). Effective training focuses on creating a learning climate that is physically and psychologically conducive to learning.

The classical conditioning concept of associating positive feelings with learning is known to influence learner motivation (Rose, 1995). To positively influence motivation and retention, instructors need to create a non-threatening learning environment. In addition, the instructor must prepare the appropriate information for the target audience in order to facilitate the teaching and learning process.

Arch (1995) illustrated the classical conditioning concept with the use of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. While there may be some situations where a learner is motivated to attend training solely to keep their jobs and in turn provide their families with food, clothing, and shelter, most learners are not in a situation where they need their basic level of needs fulfilled while attending a learning event. The environment created by an instructor should meet the top three levels of the pyramid; belonging, love, and self-actualization. Facilitating the process of a learner moving up through the top three levels of the hierarchy will result in the learner working in the framework of self-actualization, which emphasizes the personal growth and development of individual participants as well as the group. In some cases, the instructor may find it necessary to address safety concerns of participants. If a participant feels unsafe, this must be addressed prior to moving into the presentation of content.

Creating a positive learning environment should also include consideration to the intrinsic interest of the participants. Arch (1995) used Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to illustrate what learners need to have to most effectively learn. Content presented at the belonging level places strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships and networking among the participants, bridging to the level of love and its components of respect, vulnerability, and praise. Content presented within the framework of self-actualization emphasizes the personal growth and development of individual participants as well as the group. If participants feel unsafe, vulnerable, isolated or alienated, addressing the belonging need before the instruction begins will ensure learners can move between the levels and to a higher level of functioning.

Activities

Adult learning activities and environments are commonly comprised of no-nonsense, no-frills, no-fun types of learning situations. Many learners and adult educators believe that if an activity is enjoyable, it is not providing a professional environment. Rose (1995) said that learners who have pleasant feelings about the learning experience are more likely to be motivated to learn.

Rose (1995) and Deck (1997) both discussed the need to involve the participants in the learning process and use as many presentation methods as possible. Addressing the varied learning styles of the participants with numerous presentation methods will result in increased interest in the content and increased retention. Using these techniques to create positive learning situations and activities for the learners will aid in retention. The use of

humor, when appropriate, can also have an impact in retention. Funny or compelling stories that add to the content can drive a point home and create an instant reference point for participants

Enjoyable learning activities also impact the learner's retention and perception of the learning event. Arch (1997) encouraged the use of games and activities throughout a learning event and especially during review of the content. Using simple participative activities such as reviewing the topic, scribed on the front of an envelope, and then opening it up to reveal a fun prize allows for group discussion and participation on specific topics or ideas. By incorporating the prize aspect, participants enjoy the spontaneity of the activity, the reaction of their co-participant, and the group camaraderie that the activity builds. Balancing the work of learning with the play of reviewing also reduces stress levels of the participants and re-engages their interest in the content.

Due to fears of being considered unprofessional or silly, many trainers and participants avoid activities that include fun things. By using review techniques that involves the participants in group fun, retention can be greatly increased (Arch, 1997). Simple magic tricks or games engage participants in activities that can be extremely enjoyable while at the same time provide a high level of review. Many times the activities can be structured so that the participants don't realize how much they are learning. Awarding inexpensive prizes for participation or good performance keeps participants actively involved in their learning. Parting gifts or momentos are a fun way to visually remind the participants of the learning event, reinforce the subject matter, and can serve as

a common bond or link between participants, resulting in informal discussions of the content for weeks and months to come.

Zemke and Zemke (1981) suggested a number of classroom activities that are effective for helping adults learn. They include the following:

1. Develop a physically and psychologically comfortable learning environment.
2. Be aware of learners' self-esteem and ego needs.
3. Help learners clarify and articulate expectations.
4. Use learner's life experiences in the classroom.
5. Use open-ended questions and other techniques to encourage learner participation.
6. Elicit feedback from the learners' course progress and learner expectations.
7. Balance teacher-centered control and learner control.
8. Protect minority opinion.
9. Help learners transfer classroom knowledge and skills to real life situations.
10. Use theories of learning as resources, not as rules.

According to Gagne, Briggs, and Wager (1988), there are nine events of instruction that should occur in each learning activity:

1. Gaining attention.
2. Information the learner of the objective.
3. Stimulating recall of prerequisite learning.

4. Presenting the stimulus material.
5. Providing learning guidance.
6. Eliciting the performance.
7. Providing feedback about the performance.
8. Assessing the performance.
9. Enhancing retention and transfer

Learning Models

Instructional motivation attracts learners toward the instruction and increases their efforts in relation to the subject (Keller, 1983). Instructional motivation has two components; appeal and effort generation (Bohlin, Milheim, and Viechnicki, 1993). Motivational instruction has appeal for the learner and stimulates learner effort.

Four categories of motivational conditions in learning situations have been identified: attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. To facilitate continuous motivation, these four conditions or stages should be addressed (Bohlin, et al., 1993).

The first requirement is to gain and maintain the attention of the learner. Numerous techniques can be used that increase curiosity, use humor, or provide for participation. The second requirement is relevance. The learner evaluates the relevance of the environment before becoming motivated and must perceive that personal needs are being met by the instruction. One method for meeting needs can be met by matching instruction to learner goals and objectives. The third requirement, confidence, is related to the learners expectation for success or failure. This influences the learner's actual effort

and performance. Confidence can be increased by providing a low risk environment and providing the tools for success. The fourth and last requirement, satisfaction, can be promoted by providing appropriate recognition for success. Learners must perceive the rewards gained as being appropriate and consistent with their expectations

The situational instruction model is based on two components necessary for all education: instruction and content. Each can be viewed on a continuum with bi-polar levels of application (Smith, 1989). This model emphasizes the need to know the levels of understanding and educational maturity of the learners.

Determining the educational maturity of learners requires an understanding of four dimensions: the learner's attitudes towards learning, learning problems, educational environment, and the present level of understanding of what is to be taught. Content, instruction, and the learner's educational motivation interact with each other to form four situational frameworks of instruction. The situational instructional model is designed to assist in the development of personalized learning (Smith, 1989).

Pike's (1997) use of the 90/20/8 Rule is an easy to remember formula for putting together training that doesn't tax a learner's learning abilities. In today's world of continuous entertainment and instant gratification, channel surfing, and short attention spans, ignoring the entertainment world conditioning of the participants often times results in ineffective training. Using the rule as a guideline, content can also be broke into manageable segments of information. Because participants are used to the entertainment world, they want to be entertained. Gone are the days of standing behind a podium

without moving during a training course. Today's learner expects and wants to be entertained while engaged in the learning activity.

According to Pike (1997), the 90/20/8 Rule should be used with all adult learning events. The use of this rule is necessitated by the fact that we live in a world of entertainment. Attention spans are shortened by our need for instant gratification and the fact that by the time a child graduate high school, they have watched an average of 40,000 hours of television. The 90/20/8 Rule breaks down as follows:

1. Adult learners can listen for up to 90 minutes.
2. Adult learners can listen for retention for 20 minutes.
Information should be broken into twenty minute segments.
3. Say what needs to be said every 8 minutes and involve the learners every 8 minutes.

A variety of presentation methods are beneficial, especially when working with a diverse group. Deck (1997) identified seven types of learners and the methods best used to raise retention for each style. Retention techniques from a minimum of three of the identified styles should be utilized to appeal to multiple learning styles.

1. Jabber reads, rephrases, and take notes.
2. Touch is kinesthetic, preferring to experience a concept or method and practice several times and use physical movement.
3. Integer is logical and uses sequence, comparisons and contrasts, and orderly materials.
4. Loner is intrapersonal, prefers self study, and keeps a log or journal to plan what content will be used.

5. Friendly Twins are interpersonal, interact with other participants, and prefer to participate in group discussions where information can be shared with and told to others.
6. Rainbow is visual/spatial, responds to pictures and colors, and prefers visual chunks of information.
7. Rapper utilizes music and songs, cheers and chants, and remembers content by singing it to a familiar song.

When working with the seven learning styles, at least three reinforcements should be used that will pertain to multiple styles. Additional considerations include:

1. Multiple experience or exposure to a new concept, idea, or method. To build a habit, a task or behavior must be repeated 21 times.
2. The use of color, which increases memory and retention.
3. Providing positive emotional experiences, which in addition to increasing learner retention, also means less instruction time is needed.
4. Chunking information into manageable bits makes it easier for learners to absorb information.

Experiential learning is the process that empowers the learner to take charge of his or her own success (Reddick, 1994). Techniques a trainer should thread through training to ensure that participants are given opportunity to learn experientially include games, role plays, discussion, and role plays.

Many learners feel out of their element and have increased stress levels due to the feeling of having no control. Involving learners in determining objectives for themselves and stating the objectives in observable terms encourages participants to focus on the ideas being presented as well as the end result of the class or workshop. Allowing learners to select the activities to be used for assignments and out of class work allows for learners

to adapt the materials to best suit their situations and apply their knowledge in the method they feel most comfortable with (Rose, 1995).

Cranton (1989) stated that Carl Roger “has provided useful insights into the learning process, emphasizing the self-actualization of the learner as a goal of education” (page 11). Characteristics of experiential learning which are incorporated into theories of adult education:

1. The learner must perceive the relevance of the subject matter.
2. Learning involves a change in self-perception.
3. Learning occurs when the self is not threatened.
4. Learning is facilitated by doing.
5. Learning is facilitated when the learner actively participates in the process.
6. Self-directed learning involves the whole person.

Knowles (1984) described the andragogical model, which is organized around the notion that adults learn best in informal, comfortable, flexible, non-threatening settings:

1. *The need to know.* Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking the task to learn it.
2. *The learners' self-concept.* Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they arrived at that self-concept they develop a psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self direction.
3. *The role of the learners' experience.* Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youths.

4. *Readiness to learn.* Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do so in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations.
5. *Orientation to learning.* Adults are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations. They learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations.
6. *Motivation.* While adults are responsive to external motivators such as better jobs, promotions, and higher salaries, the most potent motivators are internal pressures, such as desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, and quality of life.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Trainers, instructors, and facilitators in today's training world have to wear many hats. They have to be an entertainer, a subject matter expert, instructional designer, a resource, a coach, a top notch presenter, and technically literate, to name a few. Creating the appropriate environment and including participative, fun activities will greatly increase the levels of learner involvement and retention.

The use of laughter and humor to create the positive learning environment results in healthier, happier participants. Since positive emotions increase retention, the learning process often takes less time. The increased level of participation keeps learners actively engaged in their learning process, which in turn adds to the positive feelings.

Recognizing the different learning styles of the participants and developing instructional methods that meet the needs of the different styles will add to the environment. Using color throughout a course, whether in handouts, overheads, or computer presentation, will increase retention. Posting colorful review sheets and materials completed by participants will not only increase retention, but work towards fulfilling the basic needs of the learners.

Recognizing the limitations of the learner can also add to the positive environment. Utilizing the 90/20/8 rule when developing instructional content and presentations will ensure that the learners aren't overly taxed by lectures or other activities. The rule recognizes that adults are not beyond the limits of attention spans and retention capabilities.

Recognizing how and why adults learn and utilizing adult learning models in the instructional development process will impact the learning capabilities and retention of the learner.

The use of learning activities to create a positive learning environment does aid in adult learner retention. Incorporating the appropriate level of activities into each learning situation will help ensure the highest level of learner retention.

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