
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices

September 2009

MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

Issue #24

TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR OWN LEARNING

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Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young.

~ Henry Ford ~

INTRODUCTION

Quality learning experiences are essential for optimal development of effective educational practices. One factor consistently associated with the quality of early childhood training is the amount of early childhood education and adult learning training the trainer or instructor has completed. However, in spite of increasing requirements and incentives for ongoing professional development, there is a persistent gap between what trainers/instructors KNOW about good adult education practices and what they actually DO in training events.

You have a responsibility to provide meaningful activities in workshops and course work whether you are instructing other trainers or teaching child care providers. It is also expected that it takes focused work on your part to consistently USE the knowledge and skills you have acquired. Examining specific influences that often impact your efforts can help you move forward and successfully implement what you have learned about best practice.

1. PAST EXPERIENCE

Experiences from your past have a powerful impact on how you relate to participants in your training session today. Past experiences guide your current practices in numerous ways. You may, however, not always be consciously aware of their influence!

Your training practice has been shaped—both positively

and negatively—by what has happened to you in learning situations in your home, in child care, in public school, and in college classrooms. Your experience as a parent, caregiver, or teacher also shapes your approach to teaching others. For example, it might be easy to believe that learners should be treated as individuals and, at the same time, repeat traditions from your own school experiences such as accepting questions only at the end of the session or failing to assess participants' previous knowledge and experience.

Continuous reflection on the "fit" between what you believe professionally and what you actually do in your training sessions is essential. Frequent introspection can help you become more aware of—and address the consequences from—past experiences that are shaping your current behavior.

... the goal of lifelong learning has been identified as important during the "information age," but our society as a whole has room for growth in actually practicing this belief. Many classrooms, elementary through college, still use the lecture method which typically directs learners to master dictated content. Most evaluation is still done by someone to someone else—rather than teaching and practicing the skill of self-evaluation. The focus is still on perfection and product rather than the process of learning.
~ Susan Harper-Whalen

2. LEARNING STYLE

Your learning style impacts your ability to learn as well as your ability to employ what you have learned. Adult professional development has tended to rely on reading and "lecture" to transmit information. While this combination may be effective for a few, many learners need to see a new idea in practice or try it out several times in order to really understand and use it.

Knowing your own learning style helps you seek professional development experiences that match your personal learning preferences. When the instructor's teaching style and your learning style match, you are better able to incorporate what you learn in day-to-day practice. When an instructor has the ability to foster learning for individuals no matter what their learning style, you also have the advantage of a model for your own training practice.

Knowing your own learning style is also critical to your role as a trainer. Your preferences may need to be set aside in order to be more effective. It is important that you get the information and professional development you need to implement training that addresses multiple learning styles.

One simple strategy that addresses multiple learning styles is to develop learning centers about a particular topic or skill. The primary activity at each learning center is designed to meet a specific learning preference. As participants visit each center, they have opportunities to learn in multiple ways, one or more of which are likely to match their preference.

You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him discover it in himself. ~ Galileo

3. DISPOSITIONS*

Your development of certain early childhood dispositions has a significant influence on your ability to seek and try out new ideas. The dispositions that are most critical for trainers include willingness to:

- ~ take risks and make mistakes
- ~ seek change and challenge
- ~ engage in ongoing reflection and self-evaluation
- ~ seek peer feedback and support

These dispositions have a significant impact on your

eagerness to complete the hard work it takes to employ new practices in training sessions.

*Refer to Training Solutions #19: Early Childhood Dispositions for Teachers AND Trainers.

It seems obvious that we cannot teach all the knowledge, skills, methods, techniques, etc., which are of potential use to teachers. This being the case, it seems advisable to teach teachers and caregivers in such a way as to strengthen their dispositions to go on learning, to be resourceful and to be inventive long after the inservice educator's work with them is over.
~ Lilian Katz

4. PROGRAM CLIMATE

Your agency or program's climate influences your ability to implement new ideas by creating a positive or negative environment for learning. When a program director or advisory board is extremely critical, or maintaining the "status quo" is highly valued, you may hesitate to take the risks involved in trying new education strategies. Other climate issues that can effect change include availability of resources, meaningful and ongoing professional feedback, and sufficient time for planning and preparing training events.

It is important to advocate for recognition of the value of lifelong learning and insist on a supportive learning environment. When an early childhood agency embraces lifelong learning and supports staff in their pursuit of professional excellence, the positive effects are felt throughout the whole early childhood community.

One strategy that programs use to foster lifelong learning is to plan for staff to "return and report." Staff who attend conferences or other professional development experiences—even when all staff attend—are given opportunity to report what they learned. Part of the report is to explain how they intend to use the information in their work. Not only does this serve staff who did not go, but it broadens and deepens the learning experience for those who went.

The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires. ~ William A. Ward

5. RESOURCES AS TOOLS

The ability to identify, locate, and use resources is essential for lifelong learning. Developing a solid understanding of the many resources that support quality early childhood training is important on two levels. First, these resources facilitate trainers' commitment to lifelong learning. Second, these same resources help trainers support the lifelong learning of participants in training events.

Suggesting readings, local programs to visit, or national web sites fosters training participants' ownership of the process of continued learning. Trainers can easily admit that they "don't know everything" when they can refer participants to relevant resources. Collecting resources also gives trainers ready tools to increase their own knowledge as need and interest arise.

Resources include courses, workshops, and conference sessions, both on-site and online. Resources also include books, journal articles, and newsletters found in libraries and on the Internet. Start collecting names and contact information for individuals and organizations in your community and state as well as for national organizations that support quality in early childhood settings. The development of resource files is a lifelong process. Take every opportunity to gather and file business cards and brochures. Bookmark web sites you can use to enhance your skills and practice.

Active involvement in professional organizations, seeking and using peer mentors, engaging in regular and focused discussion about early childhood practices, and problem-solving with other trainers can all support permanent growth and change. Participate in online discussions about early childhood topics. Join an NAEYC Community Forum around topics that interest you. There is no end to readily available resources to support your professional growth.

Learn to be a bold information seeker rather than worry about appearing foolish—make calls and ask questions. It is the foolish who do not. ~ Susan Harper-Whalen

NEXT STEPS

It can be difficult to take even the most motivational words at a conference and translate them into reality. As a result, merely attending a workshop or taking a

semester-long class may have little impact on your performance. You must work to make it happen. Here are concrete steps that can help make your translation from knowledge to practice more likely.

~ Set Goals

Each year, identify one or two clear personal goals for professional growth. Post a note in your office that openly states your goal and your ongoing commitment to learning. Be specific about what you need or want to know.

~ Take Action

Develop a reasonable action plan to complete your goal. Identify the resources you will need. Acknowledge that learning takes time and effort. Seek multiple learning opportunities related to your goal over time. Make your expectations of yourself achievable and yet challenging. Set time-lines for completion.

~ Be Prepared to Learn

Become an informed consumer of learning opportunities. Contact your local community college or other training entities, and request specific topics that are important to you. Look for funding sources that can offset professional development costs.

Once you select a training event or class, make sure the session meets your needs. Take time to contact the instructor. Find out as much as you can about the content and presentation format. Review books, articles, and web sites on the topic. Develop a learning packet that includes:

- a. Ideas and questions you have considered before attending the session, such as what do I know about this topic already, and what do I need/want to know?
- b. Paper for note-taking. Divide at least one piece of paper horizontally into two columns marked New Information and Action I Can Take.
- c. Pocket dividers or file folders for organizing handouts. Be sure to label them with the name of the presenter, date, and topic. Sorting handouts during the session guarantees you will be able to find and use the information when you need it.
- d. Pen, highlighter, and post-it notes. Listen for information that is important to you. Capturing an idea—or your thoughts about the idea—ensures it is there for future reference.

Coming prepared can help you find meaningful learning in even the most ineffective presentation. Sometimes what you learn is simply an unrelated idea triggered by someone's comment!

Near the end of a training session, review your initial questions. When they have not been answered, find a way to get the information: ask a question during the remaining time, stay and visit with the presenter afterwards, contact the presenter later, or ask the presenter to suggest relevant resources.

~ Celebrate

Reward yourself when you complete your goal. Go out to lunch, buy a new CD, or regularly repeat a positive thought such as "I am an incredible learner." Then move on to the next goal and repeat the lifelong cycle of learning.

The process of setting goals, taking action, coming prepared, and celebration is likely to result in deeper understanding of the topic or skill. Deeper understanding enhances your ability to really change or improve your practice.

CONCLUSION

Lifelong learning is just that, learning that is incremental. It demands time and opportunity. What you learned yesterday about adult learning or early child-

hood practices is continually evolving, and so are your knowledge and skills!

As you implement what you learn, you become ready to learn more and more. Active involvement in ongoing professional development provides the intensity of learning necessary to facilitate—and maintain—the use of new and better practices in your own work. ~

Today I will be grateful for my talents. I will strive to live up to my full potential and put those talents to good use. I will have the courage to walk through the door opportunity leaves open. ~ Unknown

RESOURCES*

* A number of individuals have become known for their ability to inspire early childhood professionals who are striving for personal and professional growth. While they often speak at state and national conferences, many have also written books or developed web sites that are a valuable early childhood resources. Here are the names of a few of the best: Bev Bos, Marge Carter, Camille Catlett, Deb Curtis, Marian Wright Edelman, Dan Gartrell, Robert Fulghum, Lella Gandini, Magda Gerber, Jim Greenman, Elizabeth Jones, Lilian Katz, Loris Malaguzzi, Rebecca New, and Pam Winton.

TRAINING SOLUTIONS was established by the Early Childhood Project at Montana State University with monies from the federal Child Care and Development Fund administered through the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services Early Childhood Services Bureau. It is designed to support positive and effective training strategies for use in early childhood professional development.

TRAINING SOLUTIONS is published four-six times a year. Individuals on the Montana Early Childhood Trainer Directory receive the e-newsletter as a benefit through the ECP Trainer Listserv. If you are not currently subscribed to the listserv, or are unsure if you are or not, please check your status by e-mailing ecp@montana.edu. **TRAINING SOLUTIONS** is also available at www.mtecp.org. Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

If you have stories to share about implementing the ideas described in this issue, please address your comments to your training colleagues at trainerdirectoryexchange@listserv.montana.edu. If you have comments about the topic of this newsletter or ideas for topics to address in future issues, please contact:

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