
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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FROM TRAINER PRESENTATION TO PARTICIPANT PRACTICE: THE VALUE OF GIVING ADULT LEARNERS WHAT THEY WANT

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"I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn."

~ Albert Einstein ~

INTRODUCTION

A wealth of valuable information on many varied and important topics is presented during early childhood training events. The challenge for trainers is to convey that information to those who want and need it most and, at the same time, do it in such a way that they can and want to actually use it! When training events fall short, valuable—and often critical—outcomes for young children and their families are left undervalued and unused.

Applying simple and basic adult learning principles to the delivery of professional presentations can change the situation. Everyone benefits when trainers intentionally address the learning needs of the adults in attendance. The field of early childhood is enriched by practitioners who are able to articulate and apply evidence-based and developmentally appropriate practices. At the same time, trainers have the satisfaction of knowing that their efforts will be rewarded with improved quality.

There are numerous descriptions of the learning needs and styles of adults. Depending on the approach, the various lists often include similar elements. This newsletter is based on a set of principles that synthesizes adult learning in ways that can easily be used to develop both the content and learning activities typically offered in early childhood training events.

The majority of these principles were first articulated by Kathy Modigliani at Wheelock College-Boston

in 1991. These basic principles can not only guide the choice of learning experiences offered; they form the basis—and rationale—for asking participants to evaluate their own growth and development.

SEVEN BASIC PRINCIPLES

Exemplary trainers embrace—and even celebrate—the fact that adults are in charge of their own learning. They understand that the trainer's primary role is to provide meaningful opportunities for learning both during and after the session. To guide their decisions about training content and activities, they carefully consider what is known about what adults want from learning experiences and consciously address those "wants."

In general, adult learners want to:

- Learn about things that are directly relevant to their everyday lives.
- Be able to put what they learn to use tomorrow morning.
- Make choices and do things their own way.
- Customize their study to meet their individual interests.
- Learn from others' experiences and share their own wisdom and understanding.
- Create their own meaning—find their own way.
- Acquire resources for reference and further learning.

"The very definition of the word present is to bring . . . to make a gift to. This implies a giver (a presenter) is tuned into what the recipient (the audience) wants." ~ Lani Arredondo

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

Let's look at these seven basic principles of adult learning and examine how each principle looks when it is translated into teaching strategies.

Adult learners want to learn about things that are directly relevant to their everyday lives. When you focus on knowledge and skills that have a direct relationship to participants' daily work, participants are more likely to open themselves to the effort of growth and change. You must also be prepared to clearly point out these connections when they may not be obvious.

- Stress practice and application in session activities. Adult learners need to plainly see how what is being taught fits with what they are doing (or want to do) in their individual programs. Knowing this also helps you prioritize and fine-tune training content.
- Use open-ended activities; encourage participants to tackle their own program's curriculum, children, families, and community in completing them. Arrange for participants to bring personal child case studies, parent handbooks, or questions about practice. Doing this heightens relevance, and application is more likely.

"A master can tell you what he expects of you. A teacher, though, awakens your own expectations."
~ Patricia Neal with Richard DeNeut

Adult learners want to be able to put what they learn to use tomorrow morning. This has been aptly called the "Monday-morning principle." With only so much time and energy, learners often steer toward the practical. After seeing how what they are learning is relevant, adult learners want the knowledge or skill to make an immediate difference in their work. Think about it; when a new skill is immediately applied

with visible results, it has every possibility of being maintained over time. Do not overlook this principle.

- Focus session activities on helping adult learners make connections between what is being taught and their daily activities with children, families, and the early childhood environment. Self-assessment can help participants determine their current practice—both areas of strength as well as areas that may need improvement—and make significant connections with session content.
- Ensure that the information presented and the activities provided are transparent. That is, connections between what they are learning and what they are doing on Monday morning are not left to chance but are plainly explained. Emphasize "what this looks like in practice" with demonstrations, videos, and practice activities.

Adult learners want to make choices and do things their own way. Readiness and choice form the foundations of meaningful learning. While providing choices may seem daunting to experienced as well as inexperienced trainers, it does not have to be. And the results in participant growth and learning are worth the effort.

- Offer a choice of learning activities throughout the session. This is particularly necessary when participants are from different types of early childhood settings. The parent bulletin board in a home-based program is likely to be different from that of a center-based program. Grouping on this topic could be based on type of program.
- When choices about WHAT to learn are not possible, offer a choice of HOW to learn. A guided note-taking form with key points and space for notes says "here are the key points and here's space to use in any way that will help you understand and remember the key points." As learners mature, they often become able to devise their own learning methods. Let them.

"A good teacher must be able to put himself in the place of those who find learning hard." ~ Eliphas Levi

Adult learners want to customize their study to meet their individual interests. There are many ways to address this "want." The very first is to publish a session description that clearly describes session content, methods, and learning outcomes so individuals can accurately make decisions about registering. Having done that, planning activities that allow participants to tailor what is offered so it personally benefits them is the only way to affect growth and change. When you routinely do this in every session, you may discover that your ability to individualize increases exponentially.

- Implement learning activities that include a variety of possibilities for different levels of energy and interest. Participants are more likely to participate when they can match the activity to their learning needs *at the moment*. For example, the debaters in a debate or the models in a role-play have a different level of involvement than the "audience" although everyone is expected to actively assess the results.
- After setting the stage, use multiple learning centers to address the same topic in different ways. For example, five different learning centers emphasizing behavior guidance strategies might include 1) a case study, 2) a self-assessment, 3) a parent's story, 4) current journal articles, and 5) a video clip of the strategies.
- Select learning activities that span the range of developmental stages of learning: survival, consolidation, renewal, maturity (Katz, 1995). During a small group activity, allow participants to select the role that suits their stage. The roles of recorder, time-keeper, and cheerleader require little experience with the topic, yet they are actively involved in the group process.

"An educator's learning preference may predispose her/him to teach in the way s/he likes to learn. When this happens it is self-indulgence by the educator that disadvantages every learner with a different learning style." ~ Susan Cleverly

Adult learners want to learn from others' experiences and share their own wisdom and understanding. When you trust the competence of the

individual and value the combined expertise of the group, you naturally build in multiple opportunities for individual/group sharing of experiences and insights.

- Encourage peer interaction through pair and small group activities, interviews, problem-solving discussions, role plays, peer teaching, etc.
- Offer recognition and encouragement when individuals share their thoughts and ideas. Let participants know privately (perhaps during a break) that their contributions are making a difference in the success of the session. Ask the person who mentions an exemplary practice or describes a useful solution to go into more detail about it.
- Include stories, quotes, and other materials about and produced by parents and other early childhood professionals as well as items by respected authors in the field.
- Provide a participant list. Knowing each other's names and titles/roles makes it easier to feel like a member of a community of learners.
- Develop the sense of belonging to a group with general comments about the group's learning process. Comments have to be honest and might address anything from the group's seeming struggle with a concept to their skill in mastering the material. Showing trust in the group's competence often results in their willingness to tackle new information with gusto.
- Highlight examples of participants' insights, activities, discoveries, and practice with formal invitations to come prepared to share, serve on panel presentations, and give reports on progress in implementing specific skills and practices.

"When we can use information or knowledge to do something, to express something or to make something, we own it—we've learned it!" ~ The Creative Pulse, School of Fine Arts (UM-Missoula)

Adult learners want to create their own meaning, find their own way. When you see the value in promoting deep and critical thinking, you will not ignore this principle. When adult learners explore and discover the personal significance of what they are learning, the experience begins to not only make sense to them but their motivation for learning is

enhanced. Once learning becomes personal, your role is to guide the individual in the appropriate direction.

- Conduct a KWL activity (what we **K**now, what we **W**ant to know, what we **L**earned). Recording what participants know and want to know acknowledges the expertise in the group and identify goals for learning. Then, at the end, when participants describe what they learned, you are helping everyone recognize what they have accomplished together.
- Give participants opportunities to discover personal meaning. Encourage guided reflection both during and after the session through journals and thinking-it-over activities. Basically, help each participant answer the question "what's in it for me."
- Reiterate learning goals, what it means to be self-directed, and reassurance for taking risks in learning materials and your feedback during the session.
- Use a variety of modalities to demonstrate mastery of the materials: sculptures, dioramas, stories, poetry, demonstrations, newsletters, guided interviews, posters/bulletin boards, observations, debates, persuasive essays, etc. Employ these methods not only to convey information but as practice activities to show understanding and display learning.

"When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did this ourselves.'" ~ Lao-Tzu

Adult learners want to acquire resources for reference and further learning.

It is interesting that educators espouse lifelong learning and yet may not actively promote/support it as practice. You might more quickly adopt this practice when you understand that this "want" is actually one of the easiest to address; it can be accomplished on a continuum of intensity.

- Introduce local, state, and national resources. These resources can continue to be available for support after the session ends.
- Encourage peer networking to complete session learning activities and follow-up assignments.

Early childhood professionals often expound that children learn much from each other but may not apply that same principle to adults learning from one another.

- Provide current professional resources (texts, articles, journals, etc.) related to the topic. Participants can be given a list of these resources as well as encouraged to peruse them before and after the session as well as during breaks.

CONCLUSION

Recognition of adult learning needs and preferences shows respect for the experience and expertise that adult learners already possess. Specifically addressing the needs of adult learners in training increases the likelihood that the information presented will have a positive impact on their early childhood practice and the young children and families they serve.

These principles can be applied in any type of presentation on any topic to facilitate everything from two-hour workshops to semester-long classes. Participants in sessions where these principles have been consistently applied relate that it has a positive impact on their ability to do their jobs.

When you provide ample and effective learning opportunities based on what adult learners want, you accomplish two things. First, you immediately enhance individual learning and application. Second, you are now able to assess success by asking whether or not participants learned what **THEY** came to learn.

***RESOURCES**

* *Training Programs for Family Child Care Providers: An Analysis of Ten Curricula (Second Edition)* by K. Modigliani (1991). Family Child Care Project (Wheelock College: Boston).

* *The Developmental Stages of Teachers* by Lilian G. Katz (1995) in Talks with Teachers of Young Children: A Collection (Stamford, CT: Ablex). First published in 1972 under the title "The Developmental Stages of Preschool Teachers" in Elementary School Journal [73(1), 50-54]. The 1995 revised and reprinted version has undergone further revisions, though the same central ideas are presented.

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