

Adult Learning Principles

Adults learn differently than their youthful counterparts. Understandably, adults have different needs. Very often it is a life experience or situation that compels them to seek new information. In fact, the reasons most adults enter any learning experience is to create change — they know what goals they want to attain and are naturally motivated to learn what it takes to achieve them. It should come as no surprise then, given the many hazards in workplaces where exposure results in injuries, illness and deaths, that adults are motivated to learn ways to protect their health and safety.

Understanding how adults learn means recognizing learning is a continual process throughout life, one that occurs at different speeds. It also means valuing the accumulated knowledge that adults bring to



the table from their years of life experiences. Educational programs must be able to connect learning to this knowledge base. New information must have relevance and be able to be applied to activities of the day-to-day life. Helping adults learn means tapping into those teachable moments.

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Adult Learners

- ✓ Problem-centered
- ✓ Results-oriented
- ✓ Self-directed
- ✓ Often skeptical about new information
- ✓ Seek relevancy
- ✓ Accepts responsibility for own learning

Youth Learners

- ✓ Subject-oriented
- ✓ Future-oriented
- ✓ Often depend on adults for direction
- ✓ More accepting
- ✓ Often train for unclear future
- ✓ Often dependent on others

Adult Learning Principles ... cont'd

The Workers Health & Safety Centre (WHSC), Ontario's designated occupational health and safety training centre applies principles of adult teaching where learning is embedded in practice. We know for example that:

- ◆ Learners move from being dependent personalities toward being self-directed. Adults may be independent, self-directed people in other areas but may initially exhibit a "teach me" attitude because of previous school experiences.
- ◆ Adults come to an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youths.
- ◆ The timing of learning activities is related to developmental tasks. Instructors need to plan activities that are relevant and of interest to the learner.
- ◆ Adult learning is problem-centred rather than subject-centred. Programs need to address the learners' needs.
- ◆ Adults are internally rather than externally motivated to learn.

WHSC recognizes that much of adults' readiness to learn stems from their workplace problems. Some of the delivery techniques identified in the WHSC's training material focus on "buzz groups," brainstorm activities, role plays and whole group discussions, to name a few. All are designed to allow participants the opportunity to bring their workplace experiences into the classroom. In this way participant knowledge is used as a resource. It has been said, "Without knowledge, action is useless and knowledge without action is futile." Knowing the importance of this concept, WHSC programs are designed with action-oriented learning objectives. Participants can take what they learn in class and apply it upon their return to the workplace.

Self-direction Means Taking Responsibility

WHSC worker instructors act as facilitators to encourage an adult's natural tendency to be self-directed. Workers have insights about what is likely to work back in their workplaces. They are readily able to relate new facts to past experiences. Each participant is given the opportunity to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. This self-directed learning style empowers participants to address health and safety issues proactively. WHSC also takes into consideration literacy and interpersonal skills in their adult learning approach to occupational health and safety education.

Drawing Upon Their Experiences as a Resource

Having more challenges, greater perspective and a deeper understanding, adults have much more life experiences to draw upon as they take in more information. Any new material must connect with what workers already know.

Finding Out What's Relevant

Finding out what workers most want to know about regarding their health and safety concerns in their workplace begins with a program advisory group (PAG). Selected amongst and within their own workplaces, workers bring to the table an assessment of their memberships' needs. This helps to establish overall goals and objectives. Based on participants' experience and knowledge, theo-

ries and concepts can be explained in settings familiar to participants. This ensures that our health and safety educational programs match the learning requirements of the workers and that it is relevant.



Tackling the Problem

We know that past experience and knowledge shapes how new knowledge is received and applied. WHSC therefore seeks to find out what our participants bring to the classroom — skill levels, prior training, education, professional experience, interest in, need for, and expectations for the session. By doing so, program sessions can be designed and developed to ensure a match is made to meet the needs of the participant through appropriately designed activities. Workers taking our programs need to see that progress is being made, that they are learning ways to address their issues.

Given that adults are problem-centred, goal-oriented beings, problem-based learning exercises are welcomed by participants and provided in WHSC training programs. Participants build on their

prior experiences and apply practical solutions to the material covered.

Motivating Factors

Adults are internally, not externally motivated to learn. Unlike children or teens, grades or parental approval will not motivate adult learning. Readiness for learning increases when there is a specific need to know. It may be meeting job related issues or problems that need solutions that motivate the adult to acquire new knowledge or the skills to address them. In any event, learning is best done where the environment is safe to do so.

With every WHSC training course, the facilitator discusses the WHSC policy on harassment. This policy highlights the importance of mutual respect for one another's culture, knowledge and experiences and sets the tone for everyone in which they can enjoy an engaging, collaborative learning experience in a safe environment. WHSC programs foster an environment where all participants know their experiences and considerable knowledge are welcome. All participants are encouraged to voice their opinions. This way everyone learns, everyone benefits. This learning atmosphere generally works to allay potential conflicts that may arise. When a conflict does occur, it is handled in a way that challenges participants to acquire new perspectives.

Conclusion

Unlike youth, adults come to classes with precisely defined expectations. They have many responsibilities and tackling them requires acquiring specific information and skills. Adults are self-directed individuals who will use prior knowledge from life experiences to understand and apply newly obtained information. New information must therefore have relevance. Adult learning principles draw upon the adult inclination to be problem-centred, rather than subject-centred. This because they are motivated to learn, not just for the sake of learning itself, but to take action so that change can be made. WHSC works hard to help them make these changes using adult learning principles so workers can actively learn to address the hazards they face in the workplace.



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