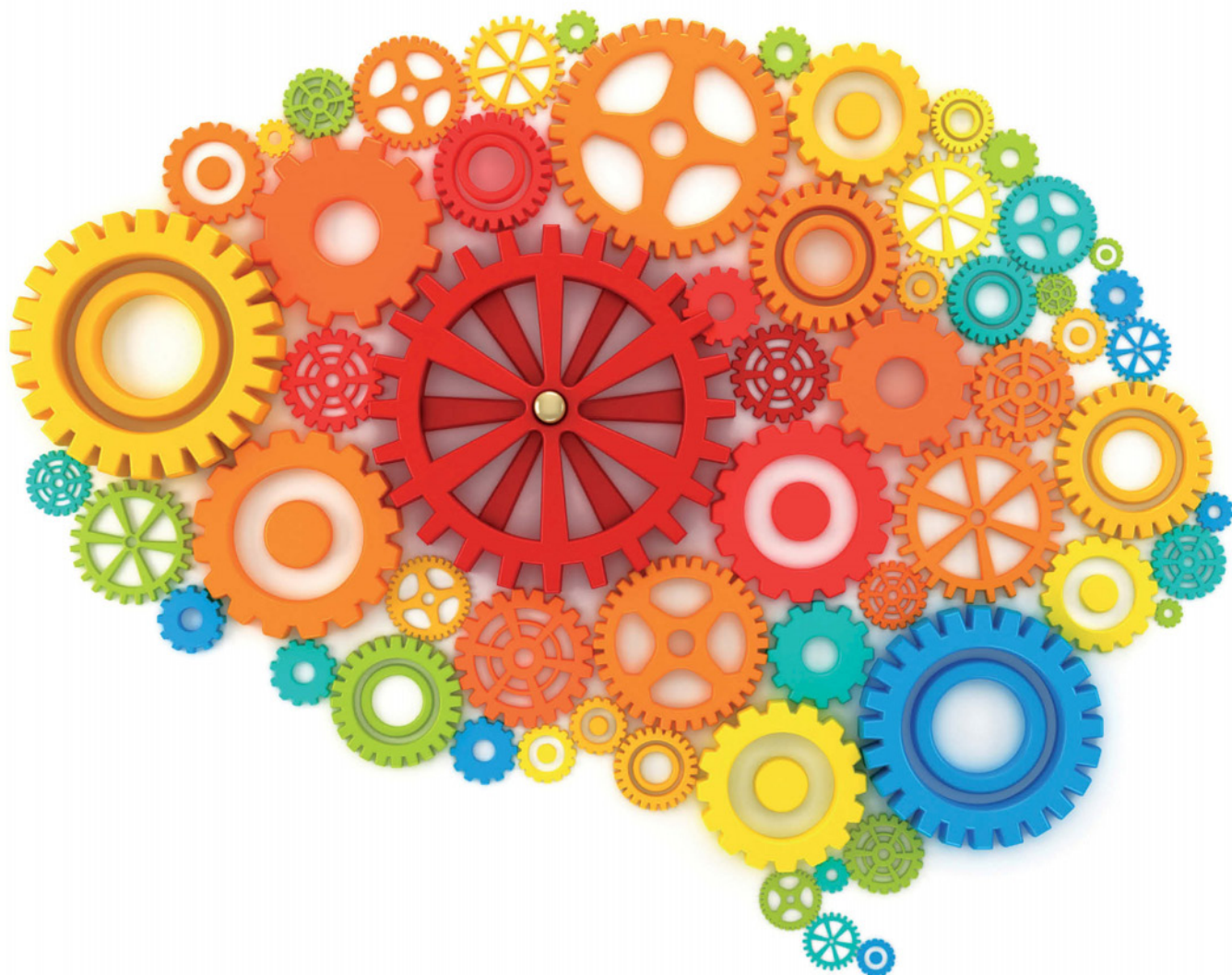


What Do We Know About Adult Education?

BY NICHOLAS PHILLIPS



Teaching adults is not a simple matter of creating and delivering the appropriate content. Adult learners should be handled with thoughtful care and attention to the quirks the big kids may bring to the classroom.

As workforce demographics change, organizational demands increase, and as occupational competition elevates, the need for leaders of effective adult education is paramount to organizational success. Employee development is not passive or static; it must be active and changing, representative of employee growth and development and used responsibly by organizations in an ongoing capacity. Wide-ranging discussions of adult education and its role in organizational strategy abound, but before any real constructive plans can be prepared, it is often necessary to step backward, take a panoramic view of adult education, and ask, “What do we know?”

Study, Practice, Activity

Adult education as an area of study means that one may engage in a recognized learning and development program at various educational institutions. The emergence and subsequent growth of academic offerings is likely a product of social and professional drivers for high performance in an identified area of expertise. Further, with rapid advancements in relevant technology solutions and cultural norms that change across generations, formal study often becomes requisite to responsible practice.

Adult education as a field of professional practice can be understood best by acknowledging that organizations hire adult educators such as trainers. Adult educators practice the art and science of transferring knowledge to meet identified behavioral objectives. As a field of practice, adult education continues to grow, particularly as organizations segment business units and departments in order to adhere to core practices.

Adult education as an activity refers to the learning or training sessions that adults attend and how and why they learn. Most closely associated with education as an adult activity is the term “andragogy.” Andra-

gogy focuses on learning strategies for effective adult instruction and considers the multifaceted processes involved in the how and why of adult learner engagement. The learning activity and interplay between trainer and trainee best define adult education. To address the needs of a changing workforce, learning leaders must acknowledge and prioritize adult education as an adult activity.

Big Kids Can and Do Want to Learn

Children in secondary school learn quite a bit from their teachers, but they rarely seek out learning. It’s just there, and children are told what they need to know. For adults, most entering into a learning activity are forced or mandated based on job requirements, social pressures or cultural influences, but once engaged, the motivation to learn is often intrinsic. Malcolm Knowles, one of the leaders in the study of adult education, recognized that unlike children, adults are primarily self-directed. They want to learn, but not every adult learner will automatically jump to enroll in training.

Adults have their own learning objectives. Consider a scenario involving, Bob, a learning leader, as he designs a training program and prepares for attendees. He understands what learning activities are meant to do and knows why people will attend class, what they will need to know and how they will be expected to prove it. Bob considers these things as he reviews behavioral objectives, but attendees have their own objectives in mind before they walk into the classroom. Attendees demand to know: What’s in it for me? Will I apply this specifically to what I do? Will I enjoy myself in the process? Leaders of adult education must ensure they are prepared for what adult learners want to know and must be ready to offer considerate and sufficient answers.

Adults want to apply learning. Let’s go back to

secondary school again for a moment. When students sit through a math class, they take notes and do their homework. At the end of the semester they take tests. Hopefully they pass, and then they quite likely tip their heads to one side and perform a data dump to make room for new information. They may think: When will I use calculus anyway? Adult learners are different. They choose what to learn. There may be times when information is thrust upon them; however, they still choose whether or not to be open to it. So how do leaders ensure that adult learners are open to learning initiatives? Simply put, it is by ensuring that they can immediately and beneficially apply what they have learned in their specific organizational role. If it can be applied, then it's worthwhile, but if it can't, then it's just clutter.

Adults have lots of rich experience. When a father tells his teenage son how to navigate rush-hour traffic, he makes a mental note and acknowledges the advice. When a mother tells her daughter how to pick stocks with high yield potential, she nods and says, "OK." They take their parents' word because they've never done those things before. When sharing one's position on these things with an adult, something quite different happens. Most likely they won't automatically take what's said as gospel truth; rather, they will compare the information with their own life experiences. An adult might not know a thing about stocks,

audience quickly can become the fatal flaw of even the best learning activity. Leaders of effective adult education must understand and recognize learning styles — visual, auditory, kinesthetic — prior to and during engagement in an educational setting and apply sincere consideration to the audience. To understand someone else's dominant learning style, it helps to first identify one's own, which is often a focus of train-the-trainer education.

Beliefs, Intentions and Actions

A responsible approach to leading adult education begins with a commitment from the adult educator. This is not just saying, "I promise," or simply following through on a plan. Commitment is the pledge an adult educator makes to the adult learner. It purports that he or she will perform in a manner considerate of idiosyncrasies and individual needs, and that takes into account any necessary preparations that will offer the greatest potential for meaningful and useful learning to occur. By assuming responsibilities, the adult educator commits a certain passion to seek out the best interest of the adult learner. Effective leaders must ensure the educator applies a sincere passion and reflects on three important elements of commitment: beliefs, intentions and actions.

Beliefs represent the most stable and least flexible aspect of the adult educator. They parallel his

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but may remember a time when a friend lost a bundle. An adult might reflect on a rush-hour car accident that occurred in the past. Adult learners come to a learning activity with their own schema or underlying conceptual cognitive framework to aid in the organization and interpretation of information. Leaders of adult education must remember that everything taught funnels through experience and is translated based on that filter.

Adults have different learning styles. A person's learning style represents how he or she learns most effectively. Learners are engaged by varying methods of instruction, which contribute to what extent learning and behavioral changes take place. Failure to consider the diverse learning styles present among an

or her philosophy of adult education and are guided by the primary learning theories to which the adult educator subscribes. Beliefs answer questions such as:

- How do I feel about adult education, and what's most important?
- How can I tell when true learning has occurred?
- How will I decide where my focus should be, and why is this so?

Beliefs determine what guides the adult educator and how learners should be approached. Essentially, just as a person's beliefs might cause him or her to help someone in need, the adult educator's beliefs might cause him or her to feel obligated to consider how

best to make learning truly engaging, enjoyable and worthwhile.

Intentions represent the purpose, responsibility and dedication directed toward learners, content and ideals. Intentions answer questions such as:

- What am I trying to accomplish?
- What is the organizational impetus for education?
- What role do I expect to play in the learning process?

It is important for the learning leader to ensure that a distinction between intentions and objectives is made. Intentions express the adult educator's direction, while objectives indicate outcomes. Intentions are held by the adult educator with a level of conviction, while objectives exist regardless of individual commitment. Intentions are grounded in the adult educator's passion and responsibility, while objectives are grounded in behavior-based change. The adult educator must have a firm grasp on his or her intentions before behavioral objectives can be developed and met.

Actions represent the routines and techniques adult educators employ to engage learners. They are education in motion. Actions answer questions such as:

- Which routine do I use to begin or end a learning activity?
- Which adult learning techniques do I incorporate into an educational program?
- Which activities and modes of instruction do I use to engage my audience?

Adult learners are active by nature. They demand to be engaged and often require multiple stimuli during training. This is often done by switching the instructional technique or learning activity and moving from one focus area to another. Leaders of adult education must ensure that multiple stimuli are injected regularly throughout learning activities to maintain focus and attention and in consideration of adult learner expectations.

The Iceberg Theory has been applied to everything from writing to leadership and culture. Applied to adult education, the picture comes into focus. Actions are small yet critically important pieces that are most visible by the adult learner; however, the adult educator's beliefs and inten-

tions direct and comprise the bulk of every learning activity. When leaders of adult education make certain their actions are congruent with their beliefs and intentions, the actions on which adult learning is built will have the greatest potential to achieve positive results all around.

As the face of today's workforce changes, expectations and directions shift course, and populations grow more diverse, the link between adult education and organizational success becomes more demanding. The expectations placed on leaders of adult education have increased, and long-held organizational paradigms have shifted, causing the adult educator to step back and refocus. Discussions of adult education and its connection to business results always will be present but will continue to change. As long as leaders ensure adult educators adhere to a core value system that places the adult learner first, success will remain within reach. Then all that remains is to remember to step back when necessary and ask, "What do we know?" **CLO**

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