



What Makes for Effective Adult Learning

A Wisconsin Union Mini Course Instructor Resource

Introduction

Take a moment and pick the one best learning situation in your life so far. Now reflect on that learning situation and decide what factors made that experience great for you.

Did your factors include being fully engaged in the learning? How about an enthusiastic and passionate teacher? A teacher who really listened to what you had to contribute? Did you mention being challenged in a safe, respectful environment? And learning by actually doing it? Even if you didn't, as you reflect on that experience, you will most likely find that those factors were included in that learning situation that you enjoyed so much.

What are you going to do to create a memorable learning experience for your Mini Course participants?

What follows is some information to think about as you decide how to present your Mini Course. This information is not provided as a prescription. It is offered as the best available information we could find and share to help you create a learner, and learning, centered educational experience for your participants. If you have any questions about the research, principles and techniques that follow, please ask your Program Planner.

Research on Effective Adult Education

There has been much research on what contributes to an effective learning

environment for adults. Malcolm Knowles was perhaps the most famous researcher in this area. In his groundbreaking work in the 1950's and 60's Dr. Knowles determined that learning in adults was most effective when the environment included factors of:

- Respect
- Safety
- Immediacy
- Relevance
- Engagement

In other words adults learn best when they feel that they are being respected, their prior experience is acknowledged and respected, they feel safe in the environment, can see the immediate applicability of the learning to something that is relevant to their lives, and engaged in the learning process - are learning by doing. Dr. Knowles research further showed that adults remember:

- 20% of what they hear.
- 40% of what they see and hear.
- 80% of that they do!

Learners need to do something with the new information they are receiving in order to effectively integrate it into their lives and retain the information for future use.

Other researchers have found that to effectively learn something we must use the whole body in the learning. Our brain must process the new knowledge (cognitive learning), our heart must explore how we feel about this new learning (affective learning) and our muscles must do something with the

learning (psychomotor or kinesthetic learning). To truly know something our learning must involve all three domains.

For example a course on investments might introduce mutual funds as a form of investment by defining a mutual fund and listing the types of funds available (cognitive piece), then table groups could share with each other their experiences, successes and fears with funds (affective segment), and finish up with a problem solving exercise (psychomotor) that requires them to apply what they have learned to the problem and move from table to table to compare strategies and plans.

Many others in the field of adult education have taken this research and expanded upon it. Dr. Jane Vella, drawing upon twenty-plus years of experience in teaching adults around the world, and on her work with the famous Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, has developed a set of twelve principles to guide instructors in the design and practice of their teaching. A summary of these principles is found on the next page.

12 Principles for Effective Adult Teaching & Learning

- Needs Assessment - the participation of the learners in naming and informing what is to be learned.
- Safety - in the environment and the process for both the participants and the instructor.
- Sound Relationship - between the teacher and the learners for learning and development.
- Sequence and Reinforcement - from



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simple concepts to complex, from group supported learning to solo efforts and reflection, then repetition of facts, skills and attitudes in diverse, engaging and interesting ways.

- Praxis - action (learning) with reflection (thought after doing).
- Respect - for the learner, their life experiences, AND as subjects of their own learning.
- Cognitive, Affective & Psychomotor - involving ideas, feelings and actions, or the head, the heart, and the hands.
- Immediacy - of the learning, seeing that it is instantly useable, using it right away.
- Roles - clearly defined and developed for both learner and teacher. The teacher as a facilitator of learning, not a "professor" of knowledge.
- Teamwork - using small groups. Learners in dialog with each other, not just with the instructor.
- Engagement - of the learners in what they are learning.
- Accountability - How does the learner know that they know?

Adapted from: Learning To Listen, Learning To Teach: The Power Of Dialogue in Educating Adults, Jane Vella, 194 pages, Josey-Bass, 1994.

Dr. Vella maintains that designing and offering learning sessions that adhere to these principles will engage the learners in a dialog about the learning. If the design includes learning by doing with time for reflection and integration into the learner's life experiences then the teacher

helps insure that the learners "know they know" the subject at hand.

Techniques for Creating Dialog

Central to Dr. Vella's principles of effective learning is creating dialog in your "classroom." This is dialog not only between you and your participants, but also between the participants themselves. Listed below are some possible techniques that can be used to create this kind of dialog:

The Warm-Up

More than an icebreaker, a warm-up is an introductory learning task related to the topic at hand. It helps set the stage for greater learning throughout the session. A typical warm-up might ask people to reflect on a previous experience or activity and share their thoughts with a partner. Working in pairs first creates safety and time to talk in private conversation before having to open up to the entire group. The group can then be "sampled" for those things that they wish to share.

The Learning Task

A learning task is an open question, or problem, put to a group or individual, with the resources needed to create an answer. Learning tasks should be properly sequenced so that they build on one another and do not assume prior knowledge. A variety of learning tasks keeps your course fresh and can provide reinforcement of the learning.

Sampling

Ask participants to share verbally their

conclusions/discussion with the large group after having worked in a small group or pair. A quick sample of two or three is usually sufficient. More can be taken (time permitting, of course) if the information is important and people are willing to share.

Modeling

Never ask your participants to do something that you have not done yourself. Provide an example, or model, of what you expect them to do in a learning task. Your model should be real, and related to the actual learning. This insures that people understand the directions and provides an opportunity to ask questions before they begin the task.

Affirmations

Actively affirm all contributions given by your class members. This can be done verbally and through body language. Your learners need to know that they were heard and that what they say is valued. Acknowledging their contributions with a "Thank you," a smile and nod, or by echoing back what they have said provides that affirmation. Your participants are much more likely to contribute their own thoughts and ideas if they know the Instructor values them.

SNOW Cards

Use large sized post-its (Sticky Notes On the Wall) for participants to record their discoveries or conclusions. Have them post their snow cards on a flip chart or board, saying out loud what they have written. This captures the information generated and gets people to write, and



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say, what they came up with. Remember the research showed that we remember more of what we both say and do!

Teamwork/Small Group Work

Have people work in pairs or small groups of three or four. This creates a greater sense of safety (only having to talk to one or two other people vs. the whole class) and allows people time to think. Results of the small group work can be sampled verbally or by using snow cards. On important points/topics allow time for everyone who wants to speak, but do not require that everyone speak.

Read, Circle, Share

Have participants read a short (less than one page) passage of text. Beforehand give them the direction to circle or underline those things that stand out or strike them in the passage. The group is then sampled for the things that people picked out as they read. Important points can be reinforced and learners are given a chance to share what is important to them.

Open Questions

Asking questions that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" requires greater thought and reflection by your participants. "Do you have any questions?" becomes "What questions do you have?". "Is everything clear?" turns into "What else would you like to explore about this topic?". Allow for silence when using open questions - people need time to think!

Critical Incident/Case Study

Providing a scenario or short case study followed by a short series of open questions or some form of analysis offers the opportunity for strong reinforcement of previous topics and opportunity for application to the learners own life. The scenario must be close enough to be relevant yet distant enough for the audience to feel comfortable dealing with the issue(s) presented.

The Question Bin

Hang a piece of flip chart paper on the wall with the headline "The Question Bin". When people ask questions that are relevant, but not exactly timely, have them write the question on a snow card and post it in the bin. Then before a break or at the end of the session take time to visit the questions in the bin. People are welcome to put questions up at any time, and reminded to take down their question should it eventually get answered in the course of the workshop.

Bouncing The Question

When appropriate, put a question from a participant back to the audience. Allow them to answer the question based on what they have learned so far. You can incorporate your own responses as people answer and the discussion progresses. This is a great way for people to reflect on what they have learned and reinforce it by saying it out loud.

Web Chart

Ask your participants what connections they see between the various items posted or written on a chart or chalkboard. Have them actually draw

lines making the connections and explain why they see a connection. The finished "web" graphically shows the interconnectedness of the various topics/items on the chart.

Bumper Stickers

Have participants/pairs create a bumper sticker demonstrating a point or important factor. Provide bumper sticker sized paper and markers for people to use. Encourage creativity and limit the time they have to create the bumper sticker (Allowing only 3 to 5 minutes creates a lot of energy!).

Gallery Walk

After having pairs/small groups create a graphic representation of a concept or idea (like the bumper sticker) have them post their work on the wall. As a group walk around and review everyone's work. Have each pair/group explain their drawing. Provides both visual learning, verbal reinforcement and a psychomotor activity.

Put It To Music

Have pairs or small groups create (and perform!) a song that synthesizes the learning so far. This should only be used with a group that is already very comfortable with each other. The songs should be short (3 to 5 lines) and sung to popular/known melodies. Make sure you model an example for the group (making a fool of yourself first! - never ask a group to do something you would not do yourself). Again, like the bumper sticker, limit the work time (5 minutes maximum!).



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Transitions

A transition summarizes what was just covered and connects it to the next topic. It helps the learner review what has been covered and know where the learning is going.

Synthesis Task

A synthesis task allows participants to pull things together and reflect on what they have learned. It provides good reinforcement and opportunity to represent important points in a new way. A case study, a video clip, a short summary reading, or a list of open questions can all be made into synthesis tasks.

Feedback - Force Field Analysis

One easy and safe way to get verbal feedback on your course is to use a force field analysis approach. At the end of the session ask two questions:

- What did you like about today's presentation?
- What suggestions do you have for improving this presentation?

Deal with each question separately, in the order listed above. If people offer suggestions for improvement during the first question politely ask them to hold the thought until the second question is posed. When participants do offer suggestions acknowledge them with a "thank you" and reserve judgement. You do not need to justify your course in front of the entire class or offer excuses. This is an effective and safe way for you to get oral feedback that all benefit from hearing. A written feedback form should also be used for those who want to make private comments.

Conclusion

To insure a quality experience in your Mini Course think about how you will make the learning effective in your course. You can steal the ideas and techniques listed above if you have an appropriate spot for using them in your course plans - or create your own, keeping in mind the principles outlined from Dr. Vella above.

What will you do to help people remember the important points you want to make? In what ways will you draw out people's previous experience and help them apply this new learning to their own lives?

How will your learners know they know what you are teaching?

What techniques will you use to engage your learners in a dialogue about the learning? How will you insure that people learn using not only their minds but their feelings and muscles too? What opportunities do you provide for safely learning by doing?