Be forewarned—this post is going to get a little academic. Training and education in the workplace is not as simple as throwing a few data points into a PowerPoint presentation and reading them to your team. There is a lot going on behind the scenes when it comes to educating adults and this and subsequent articles dive right into it, beginning with accepted adult learning theory and adult education principles.

Kolb’s Learning Cycle

Kolb’s learning cycle suggests that there are four stages or processes that form the basis of adult learning. The four processes follow and build on each other, forming an iterative cycle.

The cycle starts when the adult learner has a **Concrete Experience** to which she applies **Reflective Observation**. This involves reflecting on or thinking about that experience and how it applies on a personal level. From that original experience and subsequent reflection, the adult learner may then identify concepts, rules or generalizations that can be transferred to other situations and experiences. This step is called **Abstract Conceptualisation**. Finally, to complete the cycle, the adult learner can test these concepts, rules and generalizations in future circumstances through **Active Experimentation**, which then leads into another **Concrete Experience** in a continuing cycle of learning [2].

The full learning cycle process can be almost instantaneous (e.g. when someone experiences an “aha” moment), or it may occur over days, weeks or months. In structuring training for adult learners, it’s important to incorporate all phases of the learning cycle to ensure that new information is relevant for the participants and they are given the opportunity to integrate the new information into the framework of their existing knowledge and experience.

When developing or delivering training, in addition to Kolb’s learning cycle, it’s also important to consider individual learning styles. Kolb identified four learning styles that work together with his learning cycle and further reflect each adult’s way of learning. These four learning styles are Converger, Diverger, Assimilator, and Accommodator[3]. The following diagram shows how they integrate with the learning cycle.
In addition to Kolb’s theory, effective adult educators also consider Neil Fleming’s VARK model, which identifies learner preferences in terms of Visual, Auditory (or Aural), Read/Write, and Kinesthetic. (The next article in this series will look at learning styles in more detail.)

The Nature of Adult Learners

The most important thing to consider when creating training experiences for adults is the fundamental nature of adult learners expressed in the following six characteristics, identified by Malcolm Knowles, an American professor in the field of adult education:[4]

1. **Adults perceive themselves as self-directed**: Adult learners are not only defined by their role as a student. It is more common for an adult to have other roles in their life, roles that may take precedence over their identities as students.
2. **Adults bring a wealth of experience to the learning process**: Adult learners bring prior educational, professional, and life experience to the classroom.
3. **Adults come to the learning process ready to learn**: Adult learners are typically eager to acquire new information that is relevant and directly beneficial to their professional lives.
4. **Adults are oriented toward immediate application of learned knowledge**: Typically, adults learn from a performance-oriented or problem-oriented mind-set. They want information that they can immediately apply to their life tasks and enhance their professional performance, in addition to wanting information that they can use to solve problems.
5. **Adults need to know the reason for learning something**: Designing a curriculum for adult learners that makes explicitly clear the reason, purpose, and usefulness of the subject matter is a necessary component of effectively reaching adult learners.
6. **Adults are driven by an intrinsic motivation to learn:** Adult learners juggle multiple responsibilities, and take ownership of their education, with the goal of improving their knowledge base and career opportunities.

Workplace training programs, whether they are developed in-house or by an external resource, will be much more effective if the following principles, drawn from the discoveries of Kolb, Fleming and Knowles, are incorporated into the training materials and delivery (as applicable) so that training works with, and not against, the basic nature of the adult learner:

- Respect for the knowledge and experience that participants bring to the table.
- A format or facilitation process that encourages participants to share their knowledge and experience freely.
- Content that focuses on real life situations, addresses immediate problems, and offers direct applicability to their professional roles.
- A student-centric approach to program delivery that incorporates active involvement by participants in the learning experience, with instructors serving as facilitators and technological tools functioning as enablers and resources.
- A conscious effort on the part of facilitators and/or course developers to meet the needs of participants with varying learning styles.

One of the biggest challenges that employers face when it comes to employee development is ensuring that their investment delivers results. Understanding how adults learn, and then building that knowledge into your workplace education initiatives will greatly increase participant engagement, as well as improving skills/knowledge retention and application on the job.

*****