Adult Learning Styles

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Last June I had the opportunity to participate in Dr. Goetz’s session on presentation skills. During his presentation, he covered Adult Learning Theory. This particular topic is one that has interested me for several years. In my current job, I train adults in property policy and procedure. Understanding Adult Learning Theory and Style has been instrumental in my job. I have learned that understanding one’s learning style can be beneficial for more than just attending training and classes. Our learning style affects the way we solve problems, make decisions, and develop and change our attitudes and behavior. It also largely determines the career in which we will find the most comfortable fit.

People learn from immediate, here and now experience, as well as from concepts and books. Learning happens in all human settings - from school to shop floor, from research laboratory to management boardroom, in personal relationships and in the aisles of the local grocery store. Learning is the method we use to adapt to and cope with our world; it keeps us busy through life - from childhood to adolescence, to middle and old age.

How adults learn has been an interest of mine for several years. I have read many books, research articles, and class materials to better understand the adult learner. How adults learn has also been a central question for scholars and practitioners since the founding of adult education, as a professional field or practice since the 1920s. Almost 80 years later we have no single answer, no one theory or model that explains all that we know about adult learners.

You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,.... or can you?

In the early decades of the twentieth century learning became systematically studied. The question that framed much of the early research on adult learning was whether or not adults could learn. Today we know the answer to that question; but in 1944 tests under timed conditions of older adults against young people made it appear that younger meant being a better learner. When the shifted focus on adults’ ability to learn rather than on the speed or rate of learning (that is, when time pressure was removed), adults up to age seventy did as well as younger adults. (Lorge 1944, 1947).

The question of whether adults could learn was put to rest, and the new focus of what was different about adult learning emerged. Thus, the drive to professionalize (which included the need to develop a knowledge base unique to adult education) was the context in which two of the field’s most important theory-building efforts, andragogy and self-directed learning, emerged.

Pillars of Adult Learning Theory

In 1968, Knowles proposed “a new label and a new technology” of adult learning to distinguish it from pre-adult schooling (Knowles p.351). The European concept of andragogy, which he defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn,” was contrasted with pedagogy, the art and science of helping children learn (Knowles, 1980 p.43). Andragogy became a rallying point for those trying to define the field of adult education as separate from other areas of education.

Applying at about the same time as andragogy was self-directed learning. These were the first two attempts by adult educators to define adult education as a unique field of practice, one that could be differentiated from learning in general and childhood education in particular (Merriam, 2001 p.11).

Since this time there have been several other theories on Adult Learning. Two that are most popular and widely studied today are Transformational Learning, and Informal and Incidental Learning.

Transformational Learning is based on the theory that knowledge is not “out there” to be discovered but is created from interpretations and reinterpretations in light of new experiences. It is not what we know but how we know that is important. Research using Mezirow’s transformational learning theory has provided insights into the importance of relationships, feelings, and context in the process (Mezirow, 1996).

Informal and incidental learning is the theory I mostly agree with. I feel it applies more directly to us as professionals. The definition of informal and incidental learning is very informative. It is defined the following way:

‘Formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured. Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. Incidental learning is defined as a byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction sending the organizational culture, trial- and error experimentation, or even formal learning. Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organization or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning. Incidental learning, on the other hand, almost always takes place although people are not always conscious of it (Marsick & Watkins 1990, p.12).

As mentioned previously, these learning theories have been and continue to be researched. A review of the research makes it immediately clear that informal and incidental learning are relevant to practice in many cultures and contexts: the private and public sectors, hospitals and health care, colleges and universities, schools, professional associations, museums, religions, families and communities (Calahan 1999).

Is it Style or Skill?

Learning style describes basic and generalized dimensions of individuality in learning, learning skill is more situational and subject to intentional development. A skill is a combination of ability, knowledge, and experience that enables a person to do something well. While we all learn all the time, we do not all learn in the same way. As a result of our unique set of experiences, we each develop a preferred style of learning. This learning is simply the way we prefer to absorb and incorporate new information. (Calahan 1999).
From a trainer’s perspective, I want to better understand the ways in which adults ideally learn. Gaining this understanding helps me to develop training, workshops, and presentations, which appeal to all learning types. From a personal perspective it helps me to better understand myself in a learning role, an employee, a team member, a spouse and mother.

Similar to the various learning theories, there are also many learning models. The Experiential Learning Model is the model I prefer. Based on a four stage learning cycle, how experience is translated into concepts, which in turn, are used as guides in the choice of new experiences. The four stages are:

1. Immediate or Concrete Experience
2. Reflective Observation
3. Abstract Conceptualization
4. Active Experimentation

From this model, Kolb developed the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) in 1971. The LSI is a test or a questionnaire of sorts. With each question answered, points are assigned based on the answer chosen. The points are specific to four basic learning styles:

1. Diverging
2. Assimilating
3. Converging
4. Accommodating

These four styles coordinate with the four stages in the learning model.

Summaries of the four learning styles are as follows:

Diverging
People with this style tend to diverge from conventional solutions, coming up with alternative possibilities. They perform better in situations that call for the generation of ideas, such as a “brainstorming” session. Research shows that people with the Diverging style are interested in people, and tend to be imaginative and aware of their emotions. They have broad cultural interests and tend to specialize in the arts (Hay/McBer 2000).

Assimilating
These people excel in inductive reasoning and assimilating disparate observations into an integrated explanation. They are less interested in people and more concerned with abstract concepts. It is more important for them that the theory be logically sound and precise. In a situation where a theory or plan does not fit “facts,” they would be likely to disregard or reexamine the facts (Hay/McBer 2000).

Converging
Individuals with this style seem to do best in situations such as conventional intelligence tests, where there is a single, correct answer or solution to a question or problem. Knowledge is organized so that, through hypothetical-deductive reasoning, they can focus it on specific problems and converge on the correct solution. Research on this learning style show that people with this style can be unemotional, preferring to deal with things rather than people (Hay/McBer 2000).

Accommodating
People with this style are most interested in doing things, in carrying out plans and experiments, and involving themselves in new experiences. They tend to be risk takers and often excel in situations where one must adapt, or accommodate, oneself to specific, immediate circumstances. In situations where a theory or plan does not fit “facts,” the person will most likely discard the theory or plan. They tend to solve problems in an intuitive, trial-and-error manner, relying heavily on other people for information rather than on their own analytic ability. They are at ease with people, but are sometimes seen as impatient and pushy. (Hay/McBer 2000)

Where do you fit in?
Interested in finding out what your learning style is? From the information above, you may have taken a guess of where you may fit in. You might be surprised what the real results turn out to be. The way to find out is simple, take the LSI. One option would be to join me at NES in Jacksonville. I will be issuing the LSI to 50 individuals during one of the scheduled sessions during the seminar. You may also take the LSI from anyone who is able and willing to administer it.

You’ve taken the LSI, now what?
How can you apply the results you have received from the Learning Style Inventory (LSI)? This is completely up to you. As with any training received or class attended, what is taught may be all well and good, but it is up to you, the individual to apply what you have learned. The Learning Style Inventory has been used for many different purposes, among them, to understand the unique learning needs of specific, specialized, professional groups, and to design and organize educational activities to meet these needs.

One of the areas the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) applies to property professionals is in work settings. The LSI has been used to help people gain insights into the functions of their team in a nonevaluative, nonjudgmental way. It has been used successfully to uncover and creatively manage differences among people, differences that initially masquerade as “personality conflicts” but may represent differences in learning and coping styles, or differences in problem-solving styles (Hay/McBer 2000). Are you green and growing or are you ripe and rotten?
Think about where you are in your career and your life. Do you want to find ways to improve them? Are you energized for ways to improve yourself? Or are you ready to drop from the vine and rot? It has been proven that one’s longevity is a result of his or her ability to keep his or her brain flexible. This means that one must be constantly learning. What better way to keep a brain flexible then by understanding how you best learn. •

REFERENCES:
Merriam, S.B. "New Directions For Adult and Continuing Education", no.89, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001