

MODULE 5 – INTRODUCTION TO ADULT LEARNING

Learning Objectives

- Describe the conditions for successful learning
- Describe two key elements of adult learning theory
- Discuss the seven considerations when working with adult learners
- Give examples of at least five activity-based learning activities
- Explain how to give objective feedback

Introduction

In order to present the successful training programs, particularly to diverse audiences with different training needs, trainers need to be able to adapt course material. This training introduces participants to the elements of instructional design, Gagne’s conditions of learning, and elements of adult learning theory.

Participants should gain an insight into the course, structure and contents. Personal requirements include good communication and reflection skills, flexibility; and, they should show respect and acceptance towards people with and without special language needs.

Robert Gagne’s Conditions of Learning

Gagne’s theory stipulates there are several different types or levels of learning with each requiring different types of instruction. Gagne identifies five major categories of learning:

1. Verbal information
2. Intellectual skills
3. Cognitive strategies
4. Motor skills
5. Attitudes

Gagne states that different internal and cognitive conditions are necessary for learning. For example, if cognitive strategies are to be learned, there must be a chance to practice developing new solutions to problems; to learn new attitudes, the learner must be exposed to a credible role model or persuasive arguments.

Gagne suggests that there are nine conditions that directly relate to successful learning: They are:

- Gaining attention (reception)
- Informing learners of objectives (direction or expectancy)
- Recall (retrieval)
- Presenting new material (content)
- Providing learning guidance (semantic encoding)
- Eliciting performance (responding)
- Providing feedback (reinforcement)
- Assessing performance (retrieval/evaluation)
- Retention and transfer (closure/generalization)

The following examples for the nine conditions of learning can be changed to focus on examples relative to the training being developed or delivered.

1. Gain attention – show variety of Personal Fall Arrest System (PFAS).
2. Identify objective – pose question: “What is a full body harness?”
3. Recall prior learning – review definitions of PFAS.
4. Presenting new material – give definition of safety nets.
5. Guide learning–show actual example or photo of safety nets.
6. Elicit performance – ask participants to create a Level B ensemble for a given task.
7. Provide feedback – check examples as correct/incorrect.
8. Assess performance– provide scores and remediation.
9. Enhance retention/transfer – show pictures of PPE and ask participants to identify where and how it should be used.

Key Elements of Adult Learning Theory

Review key elements of adult learning theory:

Key Element One:

- Adults learn best by doing.
- Participants should be engaged in learning and encouraged to be self-directed.
- Take advantage of participants’ experience and previous experiences.
- Learning activities have more direct relevance if they relate directly to learners’ circumstances.

Key Element Two:

- Take individual learning styles for each new element of learning and provide the information in at least two different ways and three different times.
- Use varying approaches and circumstances.

Additional Tips Related to Adult Learning

Establish a climate conducive to learning. This varies based on what type of training will be given, the expected audience, the training venue, and many other items. For example, a noisy construction site may be just as conducive to learning as a quiet, enclosed classroom; it depends on contributing factors and conditions.

Design training to be approximately 35% presentation and 65% application and feedback. For example, studies show that information that is either seen or heard is not retained as long as information that is both seen and heard.

Considerations When Working with Adult Learners

- Adults will commit to learning when the goals and objectives are considered realistic and important to them. Application in the “real world” is important to the adult learners personal and professional needs.
- Adults want to be the origin of their own learning and will resist learning activities they believe are an attack on their competence. Thus, professional development needs to give participants some control over the what, who, how, why, when, and where of their learning.

- Adult learners need direct, concrete experiences to apply the learning in real work.
- Adult learning has ego involved. Professional development must be structured to provide support from peers and to reduce the fear of judgment during learning.
- Adults need to receive feedback on how they are doing and the results of their efforts. Opportunities must be built into professional activities that allow the learner to practice the learning and receive structured, helpful feedback.
- Adults need to participate in small group activities during the learning to move them beyond understanding to:
 - Application
 - Analysis
 - Synthesis
 - Evaluation

Small group activities provide an opportunity to share, reflect, and generalize their learning experiences.

- Adult learners come to learning with a wide range of previous :
 - Experiences
 - Knowledge
 - Self Direction
 - Interests
 - Competencies

This diversity must be accommodated in the professional development planning.

Transfer of learning for adults is not automatic and must be facilitated. Coaching and other kinds of follow-up support are needed to help adult learners transfer learning into daily practice so that it is sustained.

Activity-based Learning (AbL)

Activity-based learning is a process that involves participants in doing things, thinking about what they are doing and applying what they have learned to new situations. The process includes a range of activities such as interactive lecture, hands-on, class discussion, small group exercises, videotapes, case studies, role plays, reflective exercises, panel of experts, brainstorming, guest speakers, and demonstration.

The Interactive Lecture

The use of interactive lecture allows the opportunities for the instructor to present factual material in a direct, logical manner while relating the participants' background and experience to course topics, stimulating critical and creative thinking and providing examples and stories.

Hands-on

The use of hands-on allows opportunities for the participant to show the instructor how well he/she can perform a particular task or procedure.

Class Discussion

The use of class discussion after a learning activity allows opportunities for the participant to gather ideas, analyze issues and /or generate solutions or recommendations.

Small Group Discussions

Small group exercises usually consist of participants from different backgrounds and experiences working toward a common goal. For example, a small group may analyze a job site accident, determine what caused it and establish guidelines to prevent it from happening.

Videotapes

The use of videotapes is an entertaining way of teaching content and keeping the participants' attention while stimulating discussion.

Case Studies

The use of case studies allows opportunities for the participants to develop analytical skills, explore complex issues and apply new knowledge and skills.

Role-playing

The use of role-playing allows opportunities for the participants to assume the role of others and thus appreciate another point of view, explore complex issues and rehearse skills before applying them in real situations.

Reflective Exercises

The use of reflective exercises allows opportunities for the participants to think for themselves without being influenced by others and then share their individual thoughts with others.

Panels of Experts

The use of experts allows opportunities for the participants to become aware of different opinions and then generate solutions or recommendations based on further reflection and discussion.

Brainstorming

The use of brainstorming allows opportunities for the participants to think creatively, participate fully, draw on their background and trigger other ideas.

Guest Speakers

The use of guest speakers allows opportunities for the participants to personalize the topics and break down stereotypes.

Demonstration

The use of demonstration allows opportunities for the instructor to show the participants how to perform a particular task or procedure.

Tips on Giving Objective Behavioral Feedback

One of the most important aspects of giving feedback is keeping it objective and behavioral. This kind of feedback can provide learning opportunities for both the sender and the receiver. The sender can learn more about observing human behavior while the receiver can become more aware of what he/she does and how well he/she does it.

To develop better techniques for giving feedback, it is necessary to understand some aspects of the process. The following is a brief description of some factors that may assist you in giving feedback. This list is not intended to be all encompassing but to serve as a basic starting point.

Focus Feedback on Behavior Rather the Person

During feedback sessions, it is important that you refer to what a person did during the observation rather than on how you imagine the person to be. This focus on behavior further implies the use of

adverbs (which relate to actions taken) rather than adjectives (which relates to qualities) when referring to the person observed. Thus, one might say “this person talked considerably (approximately 40% of the time) during the exercise” rather than “this person talks too much.” Speaking in terms of personality characteristics, these examples imply inherited qualities are difficult, if not impossible, to change. Focusing on behavior implies that it is something related to the specific situation observed that might be changed. It is less threatening to a person to hear comments on behavior rather than on traits.

Focus Feedback on Observations Rather than Inferences

Observations refer to what you saw or hear in the behavior of the person you are observing, while inferences refer to interpretations and conclusions that were made from what you saw or heard. These latter aspects can be best addressed when discussing a person’s development needs and suggestions. In a sense, inferences or conclusions about a person can contaminate observations, thus clouding the feedback for another person. When inferences and conclusions are shared, they should be identified and separated from observations.

Focus on Description Rather than Judgment

The effort of describing implies the process of reporting what took place during the observation, while judgment implies evaluation in terms of good and bad; right or wrong. Judgments arise out of the personal frame of reference of one’s values, whereas descriptions represent neutral reporting (to the extent possible).

Another important aspect of description is the terminology selected. Words may imply a continuum on which any behavior may fall. Stress quantity, which is objective and somewhat measurable, rather than quality, which is subjective.

Focus Feedback on Behavior to Specific Situations

Feedback is generally more useful if it can be tied to specific observations and events. By tying it to time and place, we can increase our understanding of behavior. Therefore, it is extremely important that you accurately document what happened in the observation prior to the feedback session.

Focus Feedback on the Sharing of Ideas and Information

Sharing ideas and information implies leaving the person receiving the feedback free to decide for herself/himself, in light of personal goals, how to use the ideas and information. If you approach the situation through advice giving, you could be perceived as telling the person what to do with the information. In this sense, you could take away the person’s freedom to determine what is most appropriate for himself/herself.

The more that you can focus on a variety of procedures and means for the attainment of developmental goals, the less likely the person you are giving feedback to will prematurely accept a specific suggestion – which may or may not fit his/her developmental need.

Module 5 Key Take-aways

- Robert Gagne’s Conditions of Learning stipulates there are several different types or levels of learning with each requiring different types of instruction.
- The five major categories of learning are:
 1. Verbal information
 2. Intellectual skills
 3. Cognitive strategies
 4. Motor skills
 5. Attitudes
- There are nine conditions that directly relate to successful learning:
 1. Gaining attention
 2. Informing learners of objectives
 3. Recall
 4. Presenting new material
 5. Providing learning guidance
 6. Eliciting performance
 7. Providing feedback
 8. Assessing performance
 9. Retention and transfer
- Adults learn best by doing.
- Establish a climate conducive to learning.
- Adult learners need direct, concrete experiences to apply the learning in real work.
- Activity-based learning is a process that involves participants in doing things, thinking about what they are doing and applying what they have learned to new situations.
- The use of hands-on allows opportunities for the participant to show the instructor how well he/she can perform a task or procedure.
- One of the most important aspects of giving feedback is keeping it objective and behavioral.