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Building Blocks for the Adult Learning Experience

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The author is seeking to improve the process of building and conducting active adult learning experiences by considering and implementing the various elements that need to be included. After reflecting on his 22 years of experience in the adult education field and immersing himself in the literature of adult education, he concluded that there were five major elements (which he called building blocks) for conducting and engaging participants in an Adult Learning Experience, which are: beliefs and notions about adult learners; perceptions concerning qualities of effective teachers; phases and sequences of the learning process; teaching tips and learning techniques; and, implementing the prepared plan. Before a presentation the audience may be divided into teams of four or five people. Depending upon how many groups there are, each team is given one of the five building blocks to address the following question: As you are readying yourself for helping a group of adults learn, what would/do you focus on regarding your…? (beliefs and notions about adult learners, etc.)   After each group develops their answer, and a spokesperson gives their answer, then the author will give comments to each one in turn, and summarize. This demonstrates the building blocks "best practice."

Introduction

Building Blocks for the Adult Learning Experience is a learning activity that I developed and practiced after many years of searching the adult education literature, and researching this particular concept. I asked myself the question: What are the ingredients that are necessary for helping novice or experienced adult educators to be aware of and use in facilitating the learning of adults.   After garnering 22 years of experience in the field as an adult educator, and looking at the literature in the field, I determined there were five major ingredients (which I call building blocks) in getting adult educators ready to facilitate adult learning: beliefs and notions about adult learners; perceptions concerning qualities of effective teachers; phases and sequences of the learning process; teaching tips and learning techniques; and, implementing the prepared plan (Henschke, 1987).

It is described as follows. Before a presentation the audience may be divided into teams of four or five persons and be asked to serve as inquiry teams. Each of teams, respectively, is assigned to develop their answer to one of the following questions: As you are readying yourself for helping a group of adults learn, what would/do you focus on regarding your..?   1. Beliefs and Notions About Adult Learners; 2. Perceptions Concerning the Qualities of Effective Teachers; 3. Phases and Sequences of the Learning Process; 4.Teaching Tips and Learning Techniques; and,

5. Implementing the Prepared Plan. After each group develops their answer and a spokesperson gives their answer, then I will add some comments to each one in turn, and summarize.

Importance of this best practice to the field of adult, continuing, community, and extension education

When this learning activity is used, in large meetings with numerous participants, or with small groups in adult, continuing, community, and extension education gatherings (conferences, meetings, workshops, classrooms, etc.), the people may be broken out into smaller groups of four or five persons. Thus, active participation and pro-active learning is designed into the session processes which stimulates the active involvement of all who are present. The handout material that will be provided may be generalized, but also adapted and fitted to the personal and professional situation of each participant's setting, and to each one of the groups included in this conference. This activity may be used back home by the participants in their professional settings to enhance the learning and for gaining understanding of what is involved for helping the constituencies they serve in adult, continuing, extension, and community education.

Of major importance is that when the adult educator uses this process with folks back home, he/she needs to think through why it is to be used, how it may need to be adapted or changed (perhaps very little, or maybe a lot) in order for the group it will be used with and even the various subject matter it is used with, thus making certain the adult learners will derive the most benefit. Otherwise, there is a danger and risk that if the educational purpose for using it is not well planned and thought through for use with the new group, it may be viewed by the new group as just a 'canned' process and irrelevant to their learning.

A theoretical context for using the building blocks for adult learning

I ask myself three guiding questions when considering the choice of any adult learning method or technique (including the building blocks for the adult learning experience) that I may think about using in an adult learning experience where I am in charge. I seek to answer these questions with an educationally sound answer. The questions follow. How does my selection and use of this method or technique fit into my understanding of the way adults learn, change or grow (what is my learning theory)? What position does this method or technique hold in the context of the learning goals or objectives toward which I am working in this adult learning / teaching situation (what is my learning design for this experience)? What immediate and observable learning needs does this adult learning technique or method meet at this time with these participants (what is the specific relevance now)?   It may be well for each of us and, incidentally, an improvement for our field when we as professionals are preparing for and conducting learning experiences, to ask and answer for ourselves each of these questions (Henschke, 1975. 1992).

Articulating the learning theory(ies) which inform and support the techniques

There may be many theories that could contribute to this activity. However, I have chosen two theories to support this activity**; the theory of building blocks for the adult**

learning experience; and, the theory of andragogy – the art and science of helping adults learn. The basic component of the building blocks theory is that asking the groups of participants to address each of five questions first, before I offer ideas, implies that I believe they have something to offer from their experience which is worthwhile to consider. This may enhance the educative quality of the activity and raise the learning to its highest level (Henschke, 1987, 2010). One of the earlier times I implemented the use of this theory, I offered the groups a choice: Did they want me to share my answer first to one question at a time, then have them discuss, generate and share their answer to each one of the questions in turn? Or, did they want to discuss, generate and then share their responses to each question, and then I add what I would answer that is additional and different from what they answered? Interestingly they chose the latter one. They wished to have the opportunity first to discuss, generate and share their answers, with mine added. This made it obvious that my early perception that they did not want me to lecture to them was affirmed. They were very much in line with what we know about how adults learn – they are inclined to be self-directed and interested in more of an andragogical process.

Thus, for the course structure and for subsequent use of what I considered this "Best Practice," I decided to preface each one of these building blocks with the following words in the form of a question:

1. As you are readying yourself for helping a group of adults learn, what would/do you focus on regarding your – beliefs and notions about adult learners?

2. As you are readying yourself for helping a group of adults learn, what would/do you focus on regarding your – perceptions concerning the qualities of effective teachers?

3. As you are readying yourself for helping a group of adults learn, what would/do you focus on regarding your – phases and sequences of the learning process?

4. As you are readying yourself for helping a group of adults learn, what would/do you focus on regarding your – teaching tips and learning techniques?

5. As you are readying yourself for helping a group of adults learn, what would/do you focus on regarding your – implementing the prepared plan?

My theory about how adults learn is very much in line with Knowles' (1995, 1996) **theory of andragogy – the art and science of helping adults learn**. It has six assumptions and eight process elements. The six assumptions are as follows.

1. Concept of the learner – As adults, we have a deep psychological need to be self-directing—to be perceived by others and treated by others as able to take responsibility for ourselves.

2. Role of the learner's experience – Adults possess a greater volume and a different quality of experience than youths. It means that adults are themselves the richest learning resource for one another for many kinds of learning.

3. Readiness to learn – when adults experience a need to know or be able to do something to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives — marriage, the birth of children, the loss of a job, divorce, the death of a friend or relative, or a change of residence.

4. Orientation to learning – adults enter an educational activity with a life-, task-, or problem-centered orientation to learning. Hence, their learning is for immediate, not postponed, application.

5. Motivation to learn in adults – much more internally oriented (self-esteem, confidence, recognition by others) than externally oriented (chance for promotion, change of technology).

6. Why learn something – Adults have a need to know a reason that makes sense to them, as to why they should learn some particular thing, rather than because the teacher said so.

The eight process elements are as follows. These need to be sequential or as part of a continuous cycle.

1. Preparing the learners for the program – Learners become informed on the contents of this experience, generally how it will be conducted, and the general process of each segment building upon the previous element.

2. Setting the climate – A climate conducive to learning is a prerequisite for effective learning. Two aspects of climate are important: physical and psychological. Physical climate needs to be comfortable, bright, colorful, and exciting. The psychological climate for learning needs to be infused very deeply with support, mutual respect, pleasure/fun, humanness, openness, authenticity, mutual trust, collaboration, and critical thinking.

3. Involving learners in mutual planning – Learners sharing the responsibility for planning learning activities with the facilitator. Research indicates that learners will be committed to a decision or activity to the extent they have had a say in constructing what is to be done.

4. Diagnosing their own learning needs –- Learners can share in small groups what they perceive their needs and interests to be regarding the acquisition of knowledge, understanding, skill, attitude, value and interest (KUSAVI) in this learning experience. The needs include such things as growth like movement toward: wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, richness, simplicity, beauty, goodness, uniqueness, effortlessness, playfulness, truth, honesty, reality, and self-sufficiency. This makes for a well- rounded, comprehensive, total person involvement in determining their most crucial needs.

5. Translating the learning needs into objectives – Participants now face the task of translating the learning needs into learning objectives—positive statements of directions of growth – KUSAVI regarding expanding their horizons in things like autonomy, activity, objectivity, enlightenment, large abilities, many responsibilities, broad interests, altruism, self-acceptance, integrated self-identity, focus on principles, deep concerns, originality, tolerance for ambiguity, and rationality.

6. Designing a pattern of learning experiences – This plan (mutually designed by the leaders and the participants) will include identifying the resources most relevant to addressing each objective and the most effective strategies for utilizing these resources.

7. Helping adult learners manage and carry out their learning plans – Learning contracts are among the most effective ways to help learners structure and conduct their learning.

8. Evaluating the extent to which the learners have achieved their objectives –Finding out what is really happening inside the learners and how differently they are performing in life.

When these two theories (**the theory of large meetings** and**, the theory of andragogy – the art and science of helping adults learn**) are merged in practice, especially through the living lecture, they become a beneficial pair. Thus, it may be possible to identify the Building Blocks for the Adult Learning Experience as a 'best practice'.

Why the author thinks it qualifies as a best practice

I have used this successfully with audiences from eight to 275 participants, from 1987 to the present, and have published on this activity (Henschke, 1987, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). These are a few of the numerous audiences where I have used it and have garnered positive responses.

- Used it with the andragogy doctoral students at Lindenwood University, St. Charles, Missouri on the topic of *Building Blocks for Adult Learning Foundations;*
- With 100 conference participants at the Arabian Society for Human Resource Management in Egypt, where the topic was "*Staying Ahead of the Curve of Human Capital Management where Building Blocks are Foundational to Adult Learning;*
- On Instructional Television with 80 Doctoral students and professors in the North Dakota State University on the topic of*, Dynamic Adult Learning, Malcolm S. Knowles, and Andragogy, for Structuring the Building Blocks to Facilitate the Learning of Adults*;
- At a University of Missouri-St. Louis faculty professional development session on the topic of *Elements in the Design of Building Blocks for Programs with Adult Learners*;
- Conducting a Course for 275 Personnel of SESI – The Educational Division of the Brazilian Government Section for Education within Industries and Other Corporate Entities, Belem and Castanial, Para, Brazil on a focus of *Constructing the Building Blocks for Curriculum Development in Corporate Human Resource Development,* and*, Increasing the Educational Value of Facilitating Adults Learn in Programs Designed for their Growth;*
- For 100 Kentucky Faculty in Adult/Higher Education and the State Department, on the topic of *Developing, Understanding and Using the Building Blocks for Adult Learning;*
- 200 Adult Education Professionals with the ," International Conference on Lifelong Learning, Beijing, China: Beijing Adult Education Association, and Beijing Normal University -- Divisions of International Comparative Education & Lifelong Learning, and Hong Kong Caritas Adult & Higher Education Service, on the topic of *Developing and Understanding the Building Blocks that Make Up the Foundation of Adult Learning;*
- A video conference workshop session, June, 2011, sponsored by the newly formed Department of Lifelong Education, (formerly the Division of Non-Formal Education) Faculty of Education, CU, Bangkok, Thailand, engaging 100 Faculty and Doctoral Students from CU and seven additional universities in Bangkok, Thailand, including a focus on *How to Understand and Use Adult Learning Elements as Building Blocks for Adult Education and Lifelong Learning Programs.*

Conclusion

Each time the author has used this activity, he has reflected (action research) on how it was received, what could have been improved, and what were the most cogent elements that resulted from it. In addition, the living lecture will be demonstrated in this session of the conference. Thus, the overall experience of the Living Lecture for Lifelong Learning, with its gradual improvement over the years affirmed it in the mind of the author as a 'best practice'.

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