Lose the Podium

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At an international conference in Atlanta, I prepared for my two-hour workshop on learning design by carefully setting the room with tables designed to encourage dialogue and group learning tasks. The session wasn't scheduled to begin until 2 pm so after ensuring everything was in place, I went out for a bite of lunch.

Mistake!

When I returned at 1:30, the room had been completely rearranged. A podium had been rolled to the front; chairs were set in "stern" theater-style rows; an overhead projector, which I had no intention of using, was in place; and a microphone that I had not ordered was set up as well.

This "traditional" setup was a classic example of a design model best described as "presenter-centered" learning. Time after time, however, research confirms that adult learning is most effective when it is "learner-centered." For many, this is nothing less than a paradigm shift; the design and facilitation of meetings requires a new architecture, one that "loses the podium."

By losing the podium, we establish the "learning place" as one that is highly conducive to effective adult learning, encouraging excited, turned-on adults to solve problems with new material, challenge one another's perspectives, and work through learning tasks that take them beyond their present knowledge, skills, or attitudes.

The arrangement of furniture is but one sign that we respect the knowledge adult learners bring to our sessions. By recognizing that they come with long, hard-earned experience, you will understand that the most effective workshops are not centered around the podium. In fact, it's just the opposite.

"Learning centered" activity engages participants in reflective thought and discussion of open questions that they have the resources to respond to. These "learning tasks" challenge them to re-create theory in their own context. The process also emboldens them to try new skills and test new attitudes in a "safe" setting with peers.

Imagine a room abuzz with the energy of men and women in dialogue, sharing their stories in a focused learning task that re-creates the theory they are examining. Witness the fun, and the learning, occurring at every table as people move to closure within a specified time frame. Note the attention paid as learners share the "distillate" of their task with the larger group.

The design of such learning events requires clear objectives and careful

Axioms of Popular Education

Don't tell what you can ask and don't ask if you know the answer. Use dialogue!

A warm-up is a learning task related to the topic.

You can't teach too little; you can't go too slowly.

A learning task is an open question put to a small group along with the resources they need to respond to it.

Don't write on a chart anything you won't use again.

A critical incident (a case study posing a problem) needs to be far enough away to be safe, yet close enough to be immediate.

A learning task is a task for the learner.

Pray for doubt!

If you don't dispute it, you don't learn it.

The more teaching, the less learning.

-- J.V.

Preparation

Does everyone who should be at the meeting know about it well in advance?

Was an agenda shared beforehand with all who are to be involved in the meeting? How long beforehand?

Is the meeting really necessary or could the information be shared in another, less expensive way?

sequencing to move tasks from simple to complex and work from solo to shared. Almost magically, adult learners who are engaged, active, and empowered can make a podium disappear.

Two Models of Education

- Presenter-Centered
- Learners are passive
- Theory is static
- Information is offered
- Time is devoted to presenters talking
- Overheads summarize info
- Learner-Centered
- Learners are engaged, active, and focused
- Theory is re-created, tested, examined, and applied
- New information is presented within learning tasks
- Time is devoted to completing learning tasks
- Overheads state learning tasks

12 Principles of 'Learner-Centered' Program Design

Principle 1: Needs Assessment

Needs assessments honor the fact that while many people register for a program, they all come with different work experiences and expectations. Those whose primary educational needs are ignored quickly become bored or indifferent. They tune out or vote with their feet and walk out. Either way, they're unlikely to return.

Needs assessment is a "listening effort" that enables learners to help shape what is to be taught. People are naturally excited to learn anything that will help them better understand their lives, and their motivation is enhanced when they are given the opportunity to establish their own educational themes.

Principle 2: Safety

Safety is achieved when development of the learning tasks, the atmosphere in the room, and the design of small group exercises and materials convey to learners that the experience will be beneficial.

While it does not obviate the challenges of learning new concepts, skills, and attitudes, safety creates an inviting setting for those things to occur.

How do you create such a setting? Start by establishing and reinforcing the competence of both the program design and the facilitator. When reviewing objectives, point out how they were established.

Allow small groups to find their own voice. Create a sequence of activities, building from simple to complex. Strive to keep the environment nonjudgmental.

Have resource providers been fully informed about the participants, the purpose of the meeting, the time allotted, and their expected role in the meeting?

* Does everyone have minutes of the last meeting for continuity?

* Have all the materials for the meeting (such as documents and audio-visual support) been gathered?

* Are the date and time set for the meeting appropriate?

* Is the time available for the meeting long enough for the issues to be raised?

Facilitation

* Is it clear who the chairperson or facilitator of the meeting is?

* Is the agenda available to all present?

* Does everyone present have the necessary materials for the meeting?

* Are people clear about the difference between a consultative voice (a suggestion) and a deliberative voice (a decision)?

* Is the meeting room adequate? (Is the light good? Is there enough space? Is there enough table room?)

* How does the facilitator or chairperson ensure brisk movement from one agenda item to another?

How does the group deal with an obtrusive member?

* Do all of the participants seem to feel comfortable speaking during the meeting?

* How are questions for clarification asked? What about substantive questions on the issue?

* Is the chairperson clear about which issues will be discussed for clarification

Also remember to "affirm" every idea and comment that is offered. Affirming is one of all teachers' basic responsibilities; when a learner says something in a group and there is no affirmation or recognition, the words fall to the floor unacknowledged, often destroying not only the individual's sense of safety but that of everyone else in the room.

Principle 3: Sound Relationships

True dialogue is not possible when we have to carefully weigh each and every word that comes out of our mouths. In a sound relationship, both the learner and the teacher can speak their minds. Presenting relevant and exciting learning tasks in an environment that fosters dialogue eradicates the seeds of distrust, fear, and intimidation.

Learners can quickly sense when a facilitator is addressing their needs. Imagine, for example, a workshop that begins with the presenter asking learners to re-read the program description ... and then to suggest additional objectives they would like to see addressed. This "listening task" on the part of the presenter acknowledges the experience of the learners and goes a long way toward establishing a sound relationship for dialogue.

Principle 4: Sequence and Reinforcement

Sequence describes the programming of learning tasks in an order that goes from simple to complex and from solo to group-supported. Failure to honor this concept can lead to people dropping out of courses and actually believing that they cannot learn.

Reinforcement occurs from the repetition of facts, skills, and attitudes in diverse, engaging, and interesting ways until they are learned. If adults are to be held accountable for achievement-based objectives, they must receive adequate reinforcement.

Careful listening will prompt an experienced facilitator to adjust learning tasks in order to meet the need for reinforcement. A task that proves too difficult for most of a group, for example, must be changed. This mutual accountability is the essence of "learning as dialogue."

only (informative)? For all to decide (deliberative)? For suggestions (consultative)?

* How is the synthesis or summary to be done? Who will do it?

* How is closure to be achieved?

Documentation

* How soon after the meeting will the recorder's report of the meeting be given to the chair?

* Are action decisions clearly taken and timelines set for completing actions?

* How will the meeting be linked with the next one?

* How will the meeting record be sent to all participants and to those who could not be present?

* How is the evaluation of the meeting to be conducted?

-- J.V.

Principle 5: Praxis

Praxis is a Greek work that means "action with reflection." Educators unanimously agree that adults learn best by doing. Praxis suggests doing with "built-in reflection." This is how the process of praxis might look in linear form:

Doing/Reflecting/Deciding/Changing/New Doing

These four questions can guide adult learners through the process:

1. Description: What do you see happening?
2. Analysis: Why do you think it is happening?
3. Application: When it happens in your situation, what problems does it cause?
4. Implementation: What can we do about it?

Learning tasks and materials should give learners the chance to practice new ideas, skills, and attitudes ... and immediately reflect on them.

Principle 6: Respect for Learners

Treating adults as "subjects" of their own learning recognizes that, in most parts of their lives, they already are decision makers. They steadfastly resist being treated as "objects." As a result, they need to know that they themselves decide what will occur in the learning event.

It is, of course, necessary to distinguish between the "consultative" voice (a suggestion) and the "deliberative" voice (a decision). But as a rule, effective teachers never do or decide what learners can do or decide on their own. Learning occurs both in doing and deciding; be careful not to steal that opportunity.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire titled one of his books Education as the Practice of Freedom. Inviting learners to be the subjects of their own learning is indeed the practice of freedom.

Principle 7: Ideas, Feelings, and Actions

The fact that the mind, emotions, and muscles all play a vital role in learning is often overlooked. "The brain thinks it is running the show but it isn't really," noted Joseph Campbell in The Power of Myth, published in 1988. "It is a peripheral organ, secondary at best."

The so-called "domains" of learning are cognitive (ideas), affective (feelings), and psychomotor (actions). Their linkage can be observed in the seemingly simple process of preparing an agenda for a first-time meeting. Among the questions that should be asked in preparation are the following: Who will decide what is to be included on the agenda? What will the meeting's other stakeholders think? How should the agenda be formatted?

Answers to these questions require a cognitive approach (defining the agenda), a psychomotor approach (designing it), and an affective approach (considering the implications for others attending the meeting). According to the pioneering theorist Kurt Lewin, little substantive learning takes place unless all three aspects are involved.

Principle 8: Immediacy

Adults need to see the immediate usefulness of new learning. Because time is so precious to them, they want to study those skills and theories that will immediately make a clear difference to them.

The best way to discover a group's real concerns is simply to ask! Needs assessment yields a road map for content development, but it is the design of learning tasks that are relevant, well-sequenced, and continually reinforced that creates immediacy.

We do not suggest "losing the podium" merely to be clever; when a classic "talking head" holds court, rarely does a program offer learners information that is immediately beneficial.

Principle 9: Clear Roles

Adult learners need reinforcement of equity between themselves and their teachers. If a learner perceives a facilitator as "a professor," with whom there is no disagreement, questioning, or challenge, the essential adult learning concept of "dialogue" is dead in the water.

In learner-centered programs, anything that impedes dialogue is addressed and eradicated; anything that enables dialogue is nurtured and used. Establishing "equitable" roles helps make dialogue more accessible.

Principle 10: Teamwork

How often have you heard people in an educational setting say: "When we get back to the real world..." Teams are the real world. The things that occur in group exercises tend to mirror experiences that occur every day. Many adults who feel overwhelmed or excluded in small groups will act out those feelings in other settings.

For that reason, peers become one of the most powerful influences in the adult learning process. Because they are able to draw on a bank of shared experiences, peers can challenge one another in ways a teacher cannot. Equally important, they can create safety for a team member who is struggling with a complex concept. In effective adult learning programs, teamwork is a process as well as a principle.

Principle 11: Engagement

A "typical" lecture in a college classroom or a conference session -- in which one person speaks, 40 listen passively, and two or three doze -- defines an environment in which there is no concern for the engagement of learners.

Contrast that with a program that bounces back and forth in small group settings, with adult learners sharing their personal experiences in relevant tasks designed to push the envelope to develop new ideas, skills, and applications.

That is engagement.

Think for a minute: Do your programs pulse with the "sound" of engagement? Are meeting rooms abuzz with dialogue, laughter, argument, and movement? Or is the only sound you hear a single voice? The creation of engagement is as necessary to learning as light is to the development of a plant.

Principle 12: Accountability

No teacher can learn for a learner. The design of effective adult education programs, however, must be accountable to the learner.

The contract is straightforward: What was proposed to be taught must be taught; what was meant to be learned must be learned. The skills intended to be gained should be apparent in all learners. There should be evidence of the knowledge acquired in their language and reasoning. Intended changes in attitude should be observable.

One of the most significant problems in the education of adults is the perceived distance between teacher and student, manager and employee, doctor and patient, buyer and supplier. The principles of learner-centered design are intended to close that gap.

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