

Presenting Workshops to Adults¹

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Workshops are a popular method for disseminating new information and teaching new skills to adults. Knowles (1980) coined the term *andragogy* to describe the art and science of helping adults learn. Teaching adults in a workshop setting requires educators to implement the principles of andragogy as they would in other educational settings, yet workshops also have some unique characteristics.

Adults attend workshops for a variety of reasons. Some may be forced to be there by supervisors or by the need for continuing education points required for re-certification. Others may be looking for social interaction with other adults. Still others may have a specific problem they want solved or they may just be driven by the desire to learn more about your topic. Any workshop session will most likely contain individuals with all of these needs. It is the workshop presenters challenge to identify these needs and find the best way to address them.

Teaching Adults

To meet this challenge the workshop presenter must be prepared, but also have a flexible teaching strategy. The presenter should have a variety of educational tools in their presenter “tool box” to address the participants’ needs, and also must meet the objectives of the workshop. Towards this end, the workshop should be designed with an understanding of some key principles of adult learning:

Keys to Teaching Adults

1. The presenter should explain the purpose and objectives for the workshop.

2. The instruction should be task-oriented instead of memorization-based.
3. The content should have immediate relevance to the participants’ jobs or personal lives.
4. The learner experience should provide the basis for learning.
5. Instruction should focus on the quality of a few experiences, not on the quantity of information.
6. Learning should progress from concrete to abstract.

Early in the session, adult learners need to know the intended outcomes of the workshop and why it is important for them to achieve them. Unlike younger learners, adults are typically not motivated by grades. Workshop presenters should clearly articulate the learning objectives of the workshop and explain how participants will be able to apply those objectives in their daily lives (Birkenholz 1999).

Instruction for adults should be built around completing a task or solving a problem that participants are facing. Participants should also be given the opportunity to share their own experiences with the topic at hand. This keeps them engaged and provides wonderful examples the skillful presenter can use to illustrate the key concepts (objectives) of the workshop session.

Workshop designers must be careful to focus on providing a few quality learning experiences rather than on the quantity of information. Too often presenters attempt to

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include too much information into a workshop session. The result is that a great deal of information gets “covered”, but little true learning takes place.

Workshop Characteristics

Many types of professional development are called “workshops”. However, many of the educational programs that are given this label are actually lectures, seminars, or demonstrations. In order for an educational program to be considered a workshop, it must exhibit several key characteristics (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward 1999):

Key Characteristics of a Workshop

1. Short-term Intensive Learning
2. Small Group Interaction
3. Active Involvement
4. Application of New Learning

Workshops should be tightly designed around very specific learning objectives. In most cases, the intended outcome of the session is a behavior change in the participants. This behavior change may be a new skill, teaching method, or the implementation of a new curriculum or laboratory activity.

Participant Interaction

Participants in workshop sessions should be actively involved in the learning experience. Although there may be a lecture portion to a workshop session, it should be very brief. The majority of the session participants should be engaged in active learning strategies that enable them to apply the new knowledge and skills. Remember that learning is a social experience for most adults. Small groups allow participants the opportunity to interact with other individuals and to share their own knowledge and experiences. Interaction is an important component of a workshop experience. It is important that participants have the opportunity to not only interact with the presenter, but also with other participants and the content of the workshop itself.

Important Types of Workshop Interaction

1. Presenter—Participant
2. Content—Participant

3. Participant—Participant.

To increase the impact of workshop sessions, time must be provided for participants to practice the new competency gained from the workshop. The likelihood that participants will implement new learning from the workshop in their own situations at work and home is greatly increased by allowing them to practice in the workshop setting.

Experiential Learning

An important fundamental of adult learning is that learning progresses from concrete examples to abstract ideas. One teaching method that can be employed by workshop presenters to capitalize on this fundamental is experiential learning (Kolb 1984) (Figure 1).

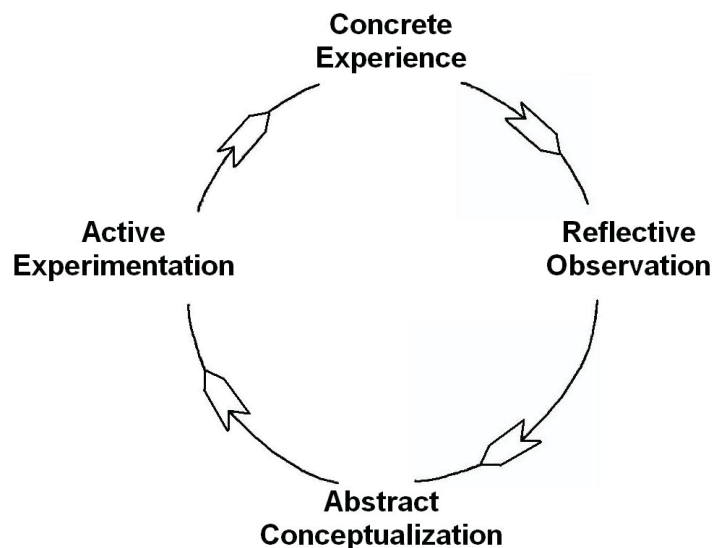


Figure 1. Kolb Model of Experiential Learning

Instruction using this model begins with the participants having direct contact with the experience. This provides them with real, relevant, and applicable experience upon which they can draw later in the workshop session. Minimal instruction should occur prior to this interaction. Only basic safety and equipment operation instruction should be given.

Following the participants concrete experience, the workshop presenter should guide the participants in reflecting upon the experience. Participants should answer the questions, “What happened?” “What did I observe?” Reflection should be done individually followed by small or whole group reflection. The third phase, abstract conceptualization, is where participants will answer the question, “What can I conclude?” Based upon what they observed, instruction provided by the presenter, and by experiences shared by others, participants are able to develop new

understanding and or skills they can apply in their own work and life experiences.

As an example, to use experiential learning in a workshop on designing and developing laboratory activities the presenter could have participants design a simple laboratory activity using provided materials. Participants could then conduct the brief activity and collect data. Once completed, the participants would reflect upon the activity they designed and conducted. They would identify what components of the scientific process (problem identification, identification and control of variables, etc.) they adequately addressed. Following group reflection and instruction by the presenter, the participants could then redesign their laboratory activity based on the new knowledge they gained from the experience, the shared experiences of the whole group, and instruction by the presenter.

Summary

If designed and used correctly, workshops can be powerful educational experiences that can have tremendous impact on learners. It is the responsibility of the designer and presenter to ensure that all the key characteristics of a workshop are included in the learning experience and that the fundamentals of adult learning are maximized to make it a positive experience for both participant and presenter.

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