

Adult Learning Basics

William J. Rothwell



Alexandria, Virginia

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13 12 11 10 09 08 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

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ASTD Press is an internationally renowned source of insightful and practical information on workplace learning and performance topics, including training basics, evaluation and return-on-investment, instructional systems development, e-learning, leadership, and career development.

Ordering information: Books published by ASTD Press can be purchased by visiting our website at store.astd.org or by calling 800.628.2783 or 703.683.8100.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007939265

ISBN-10: 1-56286-533-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-56286-533-7

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Printed by Victor Graphics, Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, www.victorgraphics.com

Contents



About the <i>Training Basics</i> Series	v
Preface	vii
1. Understanding and Applying Adult Learning Theory	1
2. Using Theory to Design More Effective Training.....	7
3. Leveraging Adult Learner Differences.....	39
4. Engaging Boomer, Gen X, and Gen Y Learners	63
5. Managing Cultural Differences in Learners	77
6. Making Learning Environment a Key to Success.....	87
7. Putting Technology to Work for Learners	105
8. Using Proven Facilitation Techniques to Drive Learning.....	113
9. Reading the Future of Adult Learning: Seven Hopeful Predictions	129
References	137
Additional Resources	141
About the Author	144
Index	145

About the *Training Basics* Series

ASTD's *Training Basics* series recognizes and, in some ways, celebrates the fast-paced, ever-changing reality of organizations today. Jobs, roles, and expectations change quickly. One day you might be a network administrator or a process line manager, and the next day you might be asked to train 50 employees in basic computer skills or to instruct line workers in quality processes.

Where do you turn for help? The ASTD *Training Basics* series is designed to be your one-stop solution. The series takes a minimalist approach to your learning curve dilemma and presents only the information you need to be successful. Each book in the series guides you through key aspects of training: giving presentations, making the transition to the role of trainer, designing and delivering training, and evaluating training. The books in the series also include some advanced skills such as performance and basic business proficiencies.

The ASTD *Training Basics* series is the perfect tool for training and performance professionals looking for easy-to-understand materials that will prepare non-trainers to take on a training role. In addition, this series is the perfect reference tool for any trainer's bookshelf and a quick way to hone your existing skills.

Preface

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All people learn in pretty much the same way, right? Wrong! Research, theory, practice, and philosophy over many years indicate that people may learn in different ways and may even change how they learn. Children tend to be willing to listen to adults give them information that may not have immediate application. But adults have traditionally been regarded as being much less patient and much more prone to focus on immediate application. They want to know *why* new information is worth knowing and *how to use it*.

Since many trainers and other learning professionals are promoted internally within their organizations, they may lack a solid grounding in adult learning theory, practice, and principles. That can cause problems. There is more to training others than simply throwing grab bags of facts at them. Good trainers should possess an excellent grasp of how to train adults, how training adults is different from training children, and how training older adults may differ from training younger adults.

But what is an adult, and what is an adult learner? Who should read this book? This preface answers these questions, provides chapter-by-chapter highlights to indicate what issues are treated in which chapters, provides an overview of visual icons that are used throughout the book to emphasize key points, and acknowledges the contributions of others who have contributed to this book.

What Is an Adult, and What Is an Adult Learner?

Any book about adult learning should start off with some kind of answers to the questions “What is an adult?” and “What is an adult learner?”

The term *adult* usually means someone who has reached maturity. Of course, there can be a difference between being mature and being of legal age. We sometimes

hear people say, “Act your age” to admonish someone to act more mature. Legal age varies by culture and even by location. The key issue in legal age is the age at which an individual may enter into a contract. That is not the same everywhere in the world—or even in every state in the United States.

An *adult learner*, on the other hand, usually implies someone who engages in learning beyond the traditional age of school attendance. Of course, even what is regarded as “traditional school age” can vary. It has been getting older as the U.S. population ages and there are fewer “traditional school-age people” (from ages 7 to 17 for high school and ages 17 to 21 for college). “Average school age” has been on the increase in the United States as people find that a plethora of college graduates leads to a need for higher educational levels to be competitive in the entry-level job market.

But there are several important fallacies to address right at the outset of any book on adult learning. First, while adults may share some things in common, it is a mistake to generalize that all adult learners are the same. They are not. Second, while it is popular to point out generational differences in working and learning styles, the reality is that too little empirical research has been done to indicate differences among so-called Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z, and all the other various age groups in today’s labor market. Care must be taken in making sweeping generalizations about people, since the research to support it is not strong enough to do so with certainty. Third, as the U.S. and global working populations age, interest will increasingly shift from a focus on differences between teaching children and adults to differences among teaching children, adults, and older adults. An *older adult* is an individual beyond traditional retirement age. Some authorities even distinguish among the “young old” (65–75), the “old” (76–85), and the “old old” (86 and up).

Who Should Read This Book?

This book is written for anyone who has occasion to teach, train, coach, or mentor adults or to facilitate groups of adults working together. The audience for this group thus may include

- ▶ subject matter experts
- ▶ managers
- ▶ learning professionals
- ▶ HR professionals.

It is important to emphasize that the vast majority of learning occurs on the job. Hence, supervisors, managers, or executives have important roles to play in developing their staff on the job. Being aware of adult learning theory and practice can improve efforts to manage and develop staff members in real time while, at the same time, getting the daily work accomplished.

Chapter-by-Chapter Highlights

Each chapter in this book is intended to contribute to your success as a learning professional who trains, educates, develops, and facilitates adult learning. Here is a summary of the nine chapters:

Chapter 1—“Understanding and Applying Adult Learning Theory” emphasizes the importance of this book and why you should care about it.

Chapter 2—“Using Theory to Design More Effective Training” attempts to answer an age-old question, summarizing what is known about learning theory.

Chapter 3—“Leveraging Adult Learner Differences” summarizes unique issues in learning theory as they apply to adults in workplace settings.

Chapter 4—“Engaging Boomer, Gen X, and Gen Y Learners” seeks to avoid the mistake of generalizing about all adult learning theory. But it does examine some unique differences that may result in learning style and the emergence of different categories of learners.

Chapter 5—“Managing Cultural Differences in Learners” examines cultural issues as they affect adult learners.

Chapter 6—“Making Learning Environment a Key to Success” examines how the learning climate, including the support or lack of support adult learners receive, affects their learning experience.

Chapter 7—“Putting Technology to Work for Learners” describes how instructional technology can affect adult learning. The chapter reviews the so-called *digital divide*.

Chapter 8—“Using Proven Facilitation Techniques to Drive Learning” offers suggestions on facilitating adult learning in various settings—on site, online, and in other formats.

Chapter 9—“Reading the Future of Adult Learning: Seven Hopeful Predictions” invites the reader to consider various trends that may affect future adult learners.

Look for These Icons

This book strives to make it easy for you to understand and apply its lessons. Icons throughout this book help you identify key points.



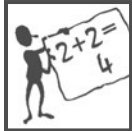
What's Inside This Chapter

Each chapter opens with a summary of the topics addressed in the chapter. You can use this reference to find the areas that interest you most.



Think About This

These are helpful tips for how to use the tools and techniques presented in the chapter.



Basic Rules

These rules cut to the chase. They represent important concepts and assumptions that form the foundation of adult learning.



Noted

This icon calls out additional information.



Getting It Done

The final section of each chapter supports your ability to take the content of that chapter and apply it to your situation. Sometimes this section contains a list of questions for you to ponder. Sometimes it is a self-assessment tool. And sometimes it is a list of action steps you can take to enhance your facilitation.

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this book to my wife, Marcelina Rothwell, and to my daughter, Candice Rothwell. They light up my life.

I would like to thank Mark Morrow of ASTD for his patience and his encouragement to do this book. I would also like to thank Scott Long for his able help as editor.

Finally, I would like to thank my graduate research assistant, Lin Gao, for her help in securing the necessary copyright permissions for this book.

William J. Rothwell

November 2008

Understanding and Applying Adult Learning Theory



What's Inside This Chapter

In this chapter, you'll learn:

- ▶ How this book can help you to improve your success in teaching, training, developing, and coaching adult learners
- ▶ Why knowing how adults learn is important
- ▶ How *training* and *learning* differ
- ▶ How learning can affect organizational and individual success.

Most people who work as learning professionals are transferred into it or are promoted into their jobs. They do not possess formal degrees in employee training, human resource development, human performance improvement, or workplace learning and performance (WLP). Most are still not certified professionals in learning and performance. And yet awareness of learning—and how to make it better—is fundamental, and essential, to the work of people in the WLP field. By analogy, medicine is based on a fundamental understanding of human anatomy, and WLP is

The information age means that workers are devoting most of their time to acquiring, analyzing, and using information in their daily work. That means they must learn to solve practical work-related problems, often in real time.

But how much formal schooling or training has the average manager (or worker) had about learning? Typically, the answer is “very little to none.” Teaching principles of adult learning is not embedded in business school curricula or emphasized in business school classes. And yet knowing how to coach, mentor, and direct people to achieve results is central to what managers (and workers) do. Finding, developing, and retaining talent is foundational to an organization’s competitive success. And meeting these challenges means that the typical manager must know about adult learning. Learning is also foundational to the success of a worker. But most people have not been given instruction on effective ways to learn.



Think About This

How could people be trained to learn? Organizations have made efforts to improve the quality of on-the-job learning (OJL). Is it possible to train people to learn how to learn better? It may be. Think about adding a module to your organization’s onboarding program to encourage people to take initiative to learn—and give them practice in taking the initiative to do that.

How Training and Learning Differ

Training is something done to others. It “pushes” knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are essential to successful work performance. Training changes individuals so that they can get better work results as quickly as possible. It is a short-term, individually oriented change strategy intended to improve a worker’s job performance.

But *learning* is something that individuals do on their own. It is a “pull” strategy. Learners “pull” knowledge, skills, and attitudes from others so that they can be successful.

In fact, learning may be as natural for human beings as breathing. Research by Allen Tough (1971) revealed that the typical adult undertakes learning projects to solve real-time work or life problems. Tough concluded that “almost everyone

back to the customer. By doing so, the worker is also learning how to field that question from future customers and may even discover that the organization has not done a good job in addressing the issue that the customer is asking about. That is also a learning project.

How Learning Can Impact Organizational and Individual Success

If learning is about mastering useful knowledge, skills, and attitudes to achieve results, then it is central to organizational and individual success. Neither organizations nor individuals can adapt to change—or take advantage of future opportunities—if they lack the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes. As a result, learning is a very important means to the end of performing.

In recent years, much attention has been focused on demonstrating the impact or the return-on-investments in training. But less attention has been focused on demonstrating the impact or return-on-investments in learning. One reason may be that measuring the value of learning may be even more daunting than measuring the value of training. Participation in training can be identified. It is easy to count how many people are sitting in training seats or are logged into online training. And if the training is planned, it is easy to see what people have been taught to do by consulting the measurable instructional objectives. However, it remains to be seen whether they apply what they have been taught back on the job and what measurable value the organization gains when they do that.

But learning is not always as obvious. Much learning is informal. The fruits of organizational learning are embedded in taken-for-granted aspects of corporate culture. *Culture* has to do with the unspoken assumptions about the right and wrong ways to do things. Where did those assumptions come from? The answer is usually “from experience,” and that experience is registered in the memories of individuals and in the relics of organizational life (such as policies and procedures). Experience is valued because it is the result of learning. While the value of learning from experience seems obvious, it is more difficult to measure. Whose experience is important? How is experience applied? What do people do with it, and how do they creatively apply what has been learned from experience to new situations?

While measurement difficulties may be apparent in noting the impact of learning on performance, it is clear that individuals—and organizations—usually

