

## Specialization and Time: Two Core Principles for Adult Learning

Sara Makki Alamdari, Betty A. Walton, and Stephanie Moynihan

### Overview

Training plays an important role in the profession of social services to improve the quality of services. Interviewing ten social service providers, data analysis demonstrated that the most important principles pursued by participants are specialization and time. Consistent with adult learning theory, if training is designed to meet these principles, participants will become actively involved in training, and their perceived relevancy and in-depth learning will be improved.

### Abstract

Training plays an important role in the profession of social services to improve the quality of services through workforce development. Since 2006, the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, Division of Mental Health and Addiction in collaboration with Indiana University has sponsored training for the staff. Annually, more than 500 trainees attend these in-person statewide workshops.

In this study, ten social service providers who attended these trainings were interviewed in order to understand strategies to improve effectiveness of workshops. Grounded theory approach was applied to analyze data. Data analysis demonstrated that the most important principles and values pursued by participants are specialization and time. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of specialized learning tailored toward their needs. Time is also crucial. Adult learners would rather shorter trainings for several reasons. For example, participants leave their workplace for training purposes, when they come back; they face many in-complete tasks, which is overwhelming for them.

If trainings are designed to meet these principles, participants will become actively involved in training, and their perceived relevancy and in-depth learning will be improved. These two core principles are consistent with adult learning theory mentioned by Knowles (1980, 1990). According to this theory, understanding of intrinsic value, autonomy, direct impact on the work and meaningful engagement are important components for adult learning. Adherence to these two principles, in designing trainings for adult, helps meet fundamental components of adult learning theory and attract adult learners. In this case, technology, organizational supportive environment and activities beside and out of workshops can be employed to serve these two principles. It is also helpful to consider dynamics of any specific group of participants to tailor the training toward their needs. In this case, having need assessment a few days before training is recommended to discover expectations.

**Key words:** Adult Learning Theory, Social Service Providers, Specialization, Workforce Development

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## Overview

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## Context

Training is necessary to share information and begin the process of transfer of knowledge to practice (Rieckmann, Zwick, Rasplca, & McCarty, 2015).

Since 2006, the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction (DMHA) in collaboration with Indiana University has sponsored cross-system training.

Annually, more than 500 trainees attend these in-person statewide workshops (DMHA, 2015).



## Unique 'Training' Challenge

Interdisciplinary workshops support the integration of outcome management tools across social service systems & service provider organizations for planning, monitoring progress, & improving outcomes (Israel, 2015; Lyons, 2009).

After online training, local coaches complete in-person training & certification followed by annual 'booster' workshops & periodic online recertification.



## Methodology

Seven social service providers who attended these trainings and three workshop facilitators were interviewed in order to better understand factors related to the transfer of knowledge to practice and to develop strategies to improve workshop effectiveness (Hutchins & Burke, 2007; Lim & Morris, 2006). Grounded Theory was applied to analyze survey data.



## Findings

Participants frequently emphasized the importance of specialized learning tailored to their needs.

Time is also crucial. Adult learners would rather have shorter trainings for several reasons.





## Discussion

These two core principles are consistent with adult learning theory mentioned by Knowles (1980, 1990).

Adherence to these two principles, in designing trainings for adults, helps meet fundamental components of adult learning theory and better engage adult learners.



# Implications

- Technology, organizational supportive environment, and activities inside and out of workshops can be employed to serve these two principles
- Helpful to consider dynamics of any specific group of participants to tailor the training toward their needs
- Administering a need assessment a few days before training is recommended to discover expectations



# Application of Study to Training

Regional booster workshops focus on implementation success & challenges

Participants grouped by role and population served

Facilitators ask participants to apply information to their work

Increased small group activities & discussion

Limited workshop size



# Impact of Training Adaptations

“This past booster training was the best yet! :)”

“People love the small group discussion, dislike talking in larger group”

“We love that you come to Ft Wayne!”

Improved “interest” in workshop evaluations (Walker & Bruns, n.d.) across systems & types of providers  
(predictive of use in practice)



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