TEACHING TECHNIQUES

FOR THE

"LONG HAUL"

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ABSTRACT

TEACHING TECHNIQUES FOR THE "LONG HAUL"

There is not a faculty member who has taught the adult learner in the non-traditional environment that has not pondered the question of how it is you keep a class "going" for four or five hours. I have talked with quite a number who have even reached a conclusion--"You cannot! So just make the best of a bad situation." WRONG!!!

There are proven strategies and techniques for keeping a class "going" and doing it week after week, term after term. And, believe it or not, it can be done without an inordinate dependence on "there I was at 20,000 feet..."

The answer cannot be found solely in traditional strategies and techniques--and that is where most of us are looking. The answer does emphasize multi-media presentations, simulations and gaming, and active participation and interaction by both faculty and the adult learner (the operative word being, "active").

CONTENTS

THE ADULT LEARNER IS DIFFERENT

The mature adult learner who works full-time in a profession does not bring the same experiences and expectations to the classroom as does the traditional full-time student. To conduct, control, and evaluate classes in the traditional fashion would be foolhardy at best. Before you accept the challenge of educating these unique persons, it is well worth your while to take a closer look at what is that makes them "tick."

The primary focus of the instructional act is human behavior. More specifically, it is to bring about some new and desired behavior. Each person in your classroom has different experiences, values, needs, aspirations, and persuasions which cause them to act and react differently from other individuals. As a result of maturation and learning, adult behavior is a very broad and complex phenomenon unlike anything observed in the traditional classroom. You will have to teach accordingly for the "long haul."

The biggest difference between the traditional undergraduate student and the "adult-learner" undergraduate student is a much broader base of experiences. The biggest difference between any graduate student and an undergraduate student is an even broader base of experiences. It is very important to give some consideration to perceptual determinants if you expect to change behavior to some new desired behavior. These include the following:

Beliefs:

What adults believe to be true affects their behavior. whether the belief is based on faith, knowledge, assumption, or superstition, it is reality to the individual. The more mature the individual the firmer the conviction of reality will be. Beliefs can be changed but not easily.

Values:

Values are peoples feelings about what is important to them. They could be related to ideas, knowledge, learning, people, etc. The adult learner will have a wide range of and more firmly established values than the traditional college student, the graduate student more than the undergraduate student. This perceptual determinant needs to be dealt with in your teaching strategies and techniques.

Needs:

Needs are those things individuals feel they require to maintain or improve themselves. Needs can be divided into the physiological kinds and the social kinds. Traditional college students are usually rather involved in dealing with

physiological needs and commonly view the attainment of a degree as a less clearly defined need than the adult learner does. The adult learner can be expected to feel a rather definitive need for the undergraduate or graduate degree but with varying degrees of intensity. The adult learner is more intent on dealing with social needs, both in pursuing the degree and in life in general.

Attitudes:

Attitudes are the emotionalized belief about the worth, or lack thereof, of someone or something. If you accept the notion that both beliefs and values are different with the adult learner, then a logical assumption is to expect different attitudes. This will usually, but not always, work in your favor because the adult learner generally has a positive attitude towards the educational process.

Self-Concept:

Self-concept is how people see themselves, how they feel about that person, how they think others see them, and how they see other people. Another key part of this concept is role perception.

Because adult learners have lived in this world for a given number of years, they have had the opportunity to gain many perceptions of their environment and the objects and events within it. The sum total of these perceptions is an adult learners past experiences. These past experiences form the adult learner's behavior as he or she begins your class and are the point of departure for the change of behavior (learning process) which will hopefully take place. The adult learner's behavior at this stage is more rigid than the traditional college student's behavior because it has been formed over a longer period of time and with more reinforcement. An attempt to change behavior is commonly perceived as a threat by the adult learner. There are special strategies and techniques, appropriately used in the learning environment, that will change person's perceptions and subsequent interpretations of past experiences and modify his or her behavior so that, in fact, learning will have taken place and the process will have been both meaningful and pleasant.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Learners in the non-traditional environment come to your classroom as another part of an already busy day. They have been through the pressures of a full day at work and it has taken its toll. They have been through some portion of their "family" day--whatever that exactly consist of--and it has taken its toll. They come to your classroom ready to challenge your position. They come to your classroom ready to "dare you to teach them anything." They come to your classroom ready to silently tolerate you. They come to your classroom ready to ignore you.

The instructor of this learner comes to this classroom as another part of an already busy day. He, or she, has been through the pressures...

However, it is the instructor who comes to this classroom that bears the burden of transforming it into a learning environment. This is not to suggest the instructor must necessarily do it alone but it should be abundantly clear that IT IS THE INSTRUCTOR WHO BEARS THE RESPONSIBILITY TO SEE THAT IT DOES HAPPEN.

It is not just the "first night" of class that the instructor needs to establish this learning environment but rather each and every night of class. Establishing this "learning environment" is not just something that is done at the beginning of each class either. It is an environment that needs to be maintained for the entire class period--and that is not easily done for the last hour or two. There are specific reasons, which will be discussed later, that explain why it is not so easily done.

Not establishing and maintaining a "learning environment" is one thing that will quickly turn the classroom into the "bored-room" or, worse yet, into the bedroom.

THE INSTRUCTOR

When most people think of instruction, the approach to teaching they usually visualize is known as the "institutional mode." To a large extent, teaching in this way assigns responsibilities for the process to the instructor as the institutional representative. The premise is that this leaves learners free to put their energies into learning. The disadvantage to this approach seems to be that faculty continue to assume even more responsibility--for learning, and the student willingly gives it up.

Probably the most popular approach to the delivery of instruction for the adult learner has been the "individual" mode. In this self-directed mode, the adult learner is both the instructor and the student. For the mature, self-disciplined learner, this is a very satisfying approach. A frustrating disadvantage to the approach is that many adult learners have not developed the ability to set personal objectives, locate learning resources, and/or evaluate their progress.

A third approach to instructing is the collaborative mode. Once the members of the group are willing to trust each other and have mutual respect, they will provide support and be a resource for one another in the learning effort. Meaningful communication and mutual motivation make this group process an ideal environment for exploring new concepts and attempting new behaviors.

Adults learn in each organizational pattern but there are disadvantages to each. It is the instructor who develops the idiosyncratic hybrid, tailored to the specific group, that establishes and maintains a "learning environment".

Learning is part of a transactional process. Teaching is another part. Instructors have used numerous ways to organize the learners they teach. Most traditional school systems organize around age, achievement and/or vocational interests, and usually in that order. However, in the non-traditional environment major attention has been given to organizing learners around the distinction between individuals and groups. Teaching approaches that address these distinctions range from independent study with a tremendous emphasis on self-initiated and self-planned learning efforts to approaches that place a significant emphasis on interrelationships and transactional processes. Both approaches have an appropriate place in the non-traditional learning environment. Neither is better nor worse. Nothing I have said is intended to make a case for a specific teaching approach. If anything, I would hope to make a case for adaptability and variety in teaching approaches.

The astute instructor of the adult learner will become attuned

to existing classroom environments and adopt teaching approaches that will be most effective with whatever approach to learning has been adopted and prevails amongst the students. If a "learning" environment does not exist one will have to be established. Again, flexibility in the instructor's approach to teaching could likely make the difference in the classroom becoming the "bored-room" or the bedroom.

The type of organizational structure the instructor of the non-traditional learner is faced with is usually what is referred to as the "informal." This informal approach to the organizational aspects of the process allow the learner to make most of the decisions about the ways and means of pursuing the learning objectives, which have been articulated by the instructor and agreed to, at least implicitly by the learners. This approach allows the learner to grow as an individual, which is, of course, why he or she is there. It also allows learners, as participants of the total process, to be used as educational resources. The process allows control of the objectives and strategies to remain with the instructor.

THE LEARNER

The adult learner can be described around two factors. These factors are "needs" and "preferences." It is certainly the descriptions that surrounds these factors that gives the best picture of that adult learner for purposes of "teaching for the long haul."

Regardless of what it might specifically be, it is always a perceived utilitarian need which motivates the individual to pursue his/her education in the non-traditional environment. This is in stark contrast to being there because of a societal/familial expectation. Many of us who are teaching in the non-traditional environment have satisfied ourselves that the "perceived utilitarian need" is the credential that goes with completion of the course of study. There is certainly ample support for the notion. However, the fact of the matter is that the "perceived utilitarian need" often reflects almost anything that could be included under personal, religious, cultural or escape. Yes! Getting away from "the routine" might be much more important to some of your learners than becoming better informed and/or getting the credential that says they are.

As long as faculty continually attempt to identify the "perceived utilitarian need" and satisfactorily address it, the student will continue to seek out this "learning" that is perceived as movement toward meeting selected need(s). As an aside, this totally discounts the notion that "busy work" to fill a five-hour class session is either teaching or learning. It is not even acceptable.

The second factor, preferences, present the instructor with a real challenge, Adult learners prefer to acquire skills and knowledge in ways that require specific teaching strategies. However, instructors prefer to use selected teaching strategies with which they feel most comfortable. We might be setting up a paradoxical situation that will in no way lend itself to establishing a learning environment.

Those who facilitate learning activities for the non-traditional adult student must pay attention to the personal preferences of those students. Hiemstra (1986) points out, "the concept of self, the wealth of experiences, the variety of real problems, and the various reasons (perceived utilitarian needs) for learning that the adult learner brings to the non-traditional educational setting _must_ be reckoned with by the instructor."

With this in mind, the instructors responsibility is to provide the adult learner with opportunities to acquire the desired learning in a meaningful way. The instructor must use strategies

that encourage participation even if they are strategies with which the instructor is not completely comfortable. When the adult learner is able to be an active, participating part of the process, the learning becomes more meaningful. A learning environment exists.

THE STRATEGIES

Not to oversimplify things but rather as a point of departure, those things that make up truly effective strategies for the "short haul" are the same ones that make up truly effective strategies for the "long haul." It's more of the same.

For teaching and learning to be effective for the "long haul" the underlying premise for developing strategy (ies) has to be the development of a complementary, symbiotic relationship between the needs and preferences of the student, of the instructor, and of the administration.

The instructor must go into the classroom armed with both a knowledge and understanding of the needs and preferences of the institution, the administration's perspective. At least, as important, is that the instructor is committed to meeting/satisfying those needs and preferences. The realization of administration's needs and preferences occurs with the commitment of the instructor. This commitment is manifested in the creation of an expectation among the adult learners that those needs and preferences will be satisfied along with their own.

Thus, the first step in the development of a symbiotic relationship is the internalizing, or legitimizing, of the administration's needs and preferences by the instructor and among the adult learners. These must be satisfied as they move towards satisfying their own need and preferences. i.e. satisfying a requirement for contact time is a strong felt need of administration. It must become manifested as an expectation of students. It is the instructor and student who have this expectation that are beginning to prepare for the "long haul."

Adult learners are not going to be taken in by the instructor who has not internalized the commitment to satisfy this need of administration. They will take it for just what it is, "lip service," and this does not lend itself to a learning environment. There must be an attitude, a commitment, and an expectation that a particular/specific learning experience will require the scheduled class time and, that if it doesn't, the learning experience will be broadened. If all three of these are not an integral part of both the instructor's and the adult learner's mind set, the educational process is already doomed to deterioration and, probably, failure.

There is more than one way to facilitate learning for the adult. Unfortunately, those instructors who have been lectured to in their learning experiences also often use the lecture because it is the only strategy they know. "If it was good enough for me, it's good enough for them." That being said, an instructor cannot be too uncomfortable with any specific strategy. The adult learner

will detect the discomfort and usually be uncomfortable too.

The main issue, when it comes to a specific strategy, is usually one of control. How much control of the situation is the instructor willing to share with the students? How much control is necessary to ensure accomplishment of the objectives? In the lecture and in the demonstration, the instructor has almost total control. In the seminar/discussion, control of the situation is shared with the learner. In the performance strategy, control is almost totally held by the learner. So how does the instructor decide?

1. Even though a group of adults has similar learning needs, individuals within the group will have different preferences for what will establish and maintain those interest, and participation.

2. Instructors must use strategies with which they and the students are familiar and comfortable. This does not mean the instructor should not try something new. It does mean that before doing so the instructor should (1) practice detecting what learner needs and preferences call for use of the new strategy and (2) learn how to use the strategy to create/maintain the learning environment.

3. When an instructor's needs and preferences for learning are different from those of the students themselves, the instructor must carefully explain why his/her expectations are important, how they will benefit the learner, and get the learner to internalize those expectations.

If the instructor has "read" the situational environment correctly, as is indicated by the selection of teaching strategy, the learning experiences will be meaningful.

THE TECHNIQUES

At the risk, again, of sounding as though I am over-simplifying, the successful techniques of "teaching for the long haul" are:

(1) creating an expectation

Create an expectation that the needs and preferences of the administration, the instructor, and the learner are compatible and will all be met.

Create an expectation that the learning experience for any particular class session will take as long as the time assigned.

Create an expectation that if the learning experience doesn't take the allotted time, it is the learning experience that will be broadened and not the time assigned for it that will be shortened.

Create an expectation within the student that he or she will get that amount of meaningful time from their instructor they paid for.

Create an expectation that both the instructor and the learner will come to the learning situation prepared well enough to make the learning experience a meaningful one.

Create an expectation that the learner will get meaningful instruction and not clock tending.

(2) establishing and maintaining a learning environment

Anticipate the needs and preferences of the learner.

Determine the instructional strategy that is best suited to the current classroom situation. Adopt a teaching strategy/method that fits.

As the classroom situation changes, change the instructional strategy.

In the collaborative mode, the active participation of the instructor is inversely related to the active participation of the learner.

Teaching and learning are transactional processes. When

there is no transaction, there is no process.

Lecture is only a small part of what it is all about. Learn when, and how, to use the other strategies. And, be comfortable using them.

There are learning resources available for the instructor's use that will satisfy every need and preference held by your students.

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