Adult Learning, Assessment, And The Extraordinary Teacher

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Abstract

The enclosed literature focuses on delivering content through learner participation while increasing learning using creative modalities and participants' dominant learning styles without increasing administrative cost to the school. Personal experiences of about 40 years in corporate executive and training as well as best practices gleaned from several different universities (graduate / undergraduate business programs using cutting edge technologies) are discussed and highlighted. Learner participation and interaction are critical to effective "experiential facilitation techniques" that increase learning and retention with adult participants. A major element of being or becoming effective educators involves understanding how students learn best and then integrating activities that best suit learning styles regardless of teaching modality. Compared to children and teens, adults need to be involved in the learning process.

1. Adult Learning And Learning Assessment

There has been a consistent pattern in the requirement for the development of a systematic approach to outcomes assessment by the accrediting agencies in the past decade. Accrediting bodies such as SACS, IACBE, and AACSB have all heavily focused on the inclusion of demonstrated literature on the achievement of learning outcomes and strategic planning to enhance student learning.

Compared to children and teens, adults need to be more involved in the learning process in order for the learning to be effective. Learner participation and interaction are critical to effective facilitation techniques that increase learning and retention with adult learners. A major element of being or becoming an effective educator involves understanding how each group of learners learn best and then integrating activities that best suit their learning styles regardless of teaching modality. Dr. W. Edwards Deming, business consultant and author, said "Learning is not compulsory. Neither is survival." Adults understand this concept and learn because they want to use the learning to achieve their personal and professional goals.

The field of adult learning is pioneered by Malcolm Knowles as he emphasized many characteristics of adult learners:

- Adults are *autonomous* and *self-directed.*
- Adults have accumulated a foundation of *life experiences* and *knowledge* that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education.
- Adults are *goal-oriented*.
- Adults are *relevancy-oriented*.
- Adults are *practical*, focusing on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work.
- As do all learners, adults need to be shown *respect*.

While considering the above characteristics, faculty members can acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult students can integrate into the classroom. These adults should be encouraged to take initiative in their learning and they must become a part of the learning process through effective facilitation by the faculty processes

that allows students to become a part of the learning experience.   The following elements should be considered about adults in the educational environment.

- Adults want learning experiences that assist them with specific and immediate challenges.
- Adults are likely to engage in learning activities before, after, or even during any challenges facing them (these are all teaching moments) and they are likely to engage in learning that promises to help them cope with the transition.
- Adults seek out a learning experience because they have a use for the knowledge or skill. They are likely to use learning as a means to an end and not necessarily an end in itself.
- Adults are concerned about their self-esteem and ego that influence their behavior. Facilitation should respect their dignity and self-esteem concerns.
- Adults have expectations that must be heard and progressively integrated into the learning process.
- New learning and concepts should to be linked with previous knowledge, thus, allowing them to cross over to new territories without much fear.
- Adults can effectively focus on a limited number of concepts at a given time. The faculty should effectively balance the presentation of new material, discussions, sharing of relevant experiences, and the time simultaneously.

Faculty members and facilitators should recognize that adults want their learning to be problem-oriented, personalized and appropriate to their need for direction and personal responsibility.

2. Learning Institutions' Knowledge Generation And Conditioning

Learning institutions tend to generate knowledge by empowering their employees to become continuous learners rather than being passive doers based on what they know from their certification or degree upon hiring. There are many significant changes happening in the area of business education both nationally and internationally. Such changes will have a profound impact on education, training, human resources, and in all areas of business.

Dr. W. Deming, the American father of Japanese management, said the prevailing system of Western management has destroyed people's natural learning process. People are born with intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, desire or curiosity for learning, and enjoy learning. The destruction starts with toddlers, a prize for the best Halloween costumes, gold stars by teachers for good behavior, and grades in grade school through high school and university. On the job, people, teams, and divisions are ranked to work for the ones on the top, punishment for the bottom, management by incentive, bonus plans and other systems that are unknown and untested.

3. Learning And Societal Conditioning

What is the first thing that comes to mind when one hears the word "learning"? Perhaps school! And, more specifically, possibly primary school. For many, learning is boring and doesn't attract attention because it is associated with school. People are given the impression that school is not about learning. It is about accomplishing something in order to get someone else's approval. It is about taking-in information and digesting it in such away that you can reproduce it according to what the authority approves and when they want it.

People have a natural passion for learning. The famous anthropologist, Edward Hall, once said "The drive to learn is the most basic drive in the human species, more basic than the desire to reproduce."   Human beings are designed to learn and to live as learners and to enhance the standards of living in the world. Unfortunately, most primary education programs have been about controlling and not learning. So, destruction sometimes starts with toddlers because we destroy their hunger for learning early in their lives through the so called "boring" education process as they are conditioned to obey the teacher and memorize the concepts rather than understand them. While one may hope that this "boring" process does not continue into higher education, the reality points out that many higher educators in business simply model what they had observed in their primary schooling since they have not been exposed to any other forms of "teaching how to teach" tools.

Learning is about the enhancement of one's capacity for effective action (Senge, 1992). Learning is about building knowledge. Knowledge is not just the ownership of information but rather knowledge is one's capacity for effective actions. Human beings are designed to learn by nature. Each person has the natural drive, capacity and hunger to learn. Learning has many cornerstones and a few of them, stated below, were discussed by Peter Senge (1992) at the American Society for Training Development (ASTD) Conference.

- The learner learns what the learner really wants to learn. The learning occurs where the learner has a real need for it. The impulse to learn should precede the learning activity. This is especially true of adult learners.
- We learn by doing. Learning is not disconnected from doing. Learning is in the body. Learning comes from action and from experiencing something. Learning occurs where people are doing the work and not at the top of the organizations.
- Learning is a process where one moves back and forth between a world of action and a world of reflections. John Dewey said, 100 years ago, that learning is a continuous process. As such, "learning is a process to: discover, invent, produce, and reflect." This process moves continually between a world of action and a world of reflections. Learning moves between the discovery and the reflection process. In reality, in most American firms we run around in the circles of "invent" and "produce" and do as much as we can to get greater quantity, so learning does not occur. Learning has to integrate action with reflection in order for it to be effective.
- We need to distinguish extrinsic from intrinsic motivations. We are designed to learn, so we have the intrinsic motivation to learn. When we try to extrinsically motivate learners, we usually destroy their intrinsic motivation to learn. We don't and can't motivate people for long-term learning through external motivators.

Note: Since the third cornerstone talked about learning as a process, we must clearly understand the definition of a process in the context of a service driven operation. A *process* is a specific group of activities and subordinate tasks which results in the performance of a service that is of value. The process and the learning are inseparable, which means that the process is the learning. Process delivers value through quality facilitation, involving the audience in the learning process and flexibility to make adjustments as needed. An effective process is "results driven", deriving its form from learner requirements, experiences and needs. The learners' understanding levels gauge the value and effectiveness of the process.

Designing training or a facilitation session is different from designing an organizational learning process. Training will always be needed to help people and their organizations to enhance their capacity to create knowledge that produces results. Learning happens through action and by doing. In knowledge generating institutions, the human aspect of knowledge is a necessity. There are at least two reasons why people are moving into creating learning and knowledge producing institutions.

- Competitive necessity or as Deming puts it, "fear" that if we don't do it we will lose our jobs and be dead in the business world. We know that fear does not work well with all individuals, at least not in the long-term. Yes, people will change if you put fear in them in some cases.
- Institutions improve in this direction because they want to and because they are aspired to a new vision. Basically, effective leadership is about tapping the inspiration that exists in the organization because people want to become a learning institution, and not necessarily because they need to due to survival.

4. Learning Assessment Of Stated Objectives

Effective facilitators know that they need to assess learning in terms of the course's stated objectives (exit competencies) and be able to provide evidence that demonstrates the achievement of learning outcomes to employers and other relevant stakeholders. The same principle applies in the academic world regardless of whether one is teaching traditional adults students (full-time students) or non-traditional adult students (part-time students that are working professionals).

Academicians know that taking the strategic plans for measuring and assessing student achievement, analyzing them for improvement purposes, and implementing the resulting analysis throughout the university can present many challenges for schools committed to a process improvement philosophy. Universities use a good variety of tools that support the model of planning, delivery, assessment, reflection, and continuous improvement of student learning. However, none of the tools can take the place of the faculty member's key role in effective deployment, improvement, and documentation of student learning in each session of his/her course. For example, an experienced faculty member can adjust his/her lecturing or facilitation while assessing the audience to see how much they know and how fast they are able to process the information. Continuous improvement comes from keeping one's finger on the pulse of the customer (students) to get the right data and information in a timely manner so appropriate actions can be taken after its assessment.

Assessment can be seen as the process of establishing and/or understanding the learning outcomes that meet the learners' needs, assessing students to determine whether or not they have achieved the learning outcomes through factual evidence, documenting those results, and reflecting on how to continually improve the process of teaching, learning and learner assessment. The purpose of the assessment process is to continually improve and document or credential learning. A structured review of the assessment model can enhance the assessment process by providing a framework that supports thoughtful planning, communication to relevant stakeholders before and during the learning process, deployment of valid and reliable assessment strategies, informed reflection on the results, as well as improvement of teaching, learning and assessment.

When it comes to personal reflections for improvement, faculty members tend to have three formats for facilitation of learning: one, the facilitation they plan to do; two, the facilitation they actually do; and, three, the facilitation they wish they had done. This type of reflection can certainly lead to improvement when the third format is put back into the loop thereby improving the next facilitation they plan to do. This closes the loop and improves the learning process for the students. It has been said that some universities have three undergraduate curricula: The one that appears in the catalog, the one that professors teach, and the one that students actually learn. It is the faculty member's moral imperative to find out the degree to which the curriculum asserted on paper or imagined by academic leaders accurately portray what goes on in the minds of students. Making the curricula visible so their usefulness in terms of demonstrated learning and results through students can be documented as evidence is the business of *assessment*, an activity practiced by each faculty teaching the course. The American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 1996) defined assessment as "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about academic programs in order to improve student learning, development, and success." Their guidelines and suggestions for assessment include the following:

- Assessment should be guided by the school's missions.
- The main purpose of assessment is to improve academic programs.
- Assessment of student learning should be a collaborative process.
- Assessment of results should not be used for faculty or staff evaluation.
- Assessment activities should include multiple measures. Course learning outcomes can and should be assessed both inside and outside of the classroom through the staff, faculty and university administrators.
- Students should be active participants in the assessment process.
- Assessment measures should focus on the most important outcomes.
- Assessment results should be used for decision-making to improve the learning and the institution.
- The assessment process itself should be continuously evaluated and improved.

Huizenga School administrators encourage and empower faculty members to measure the level of learning in their courses through various direct and indirect measurements for continuous personal and institutional improvement purposes. So, it is the faculty member's responsibility to make sure students learn the stated course objectives and learning outcomes. It is also each faculty member's responsibility to assess student learning, provide timely feedback to students for improvement purposes and to be able to demonstrate or provide evidence of student learning for those who successfully complete the course. Most schools try to accommodate a certain amount of academic freedom in the facilitation of learning objectives; however, every deviation from the syllabus and its learning objective should be evaluated in terms of meeting the stated course objectives and academic performance of

the students once they complete the program. All successful students are expected to achieve the stated objectives and/or exit competencies regardless of location or delivery modality. New competencies gained as a result of academic freedom cannot be substituted for those stated competencies described in the course outline/syllabus. All exit competencies and outcomes must remain the same as per the standard syllabi. So, individual faculty members should not eliminate assignments or session objectives without prior discussion with the relevant stakeholders. Of-course, faculty members can always add assignments and assessment methodologies but should be cautious about reducing or completely changing assignments as that may alter outcome.

5. Classroom Best Practices

Nova Southeastern University's business school, the Huizenga School, is a good example of how a school can create a values driven culture to ensure staff and faculty are focused on achieving the stated program and course learning outcomes. Their main objective at the Huizenga School is to support the mission/vision of Nova Southeastern University by providing high-quality educational business programs of distinction as well as service to the community. They do this by:

- Preparing students for lifelong learning and leadership roles in business and their selected professions;
- Offering academic programs at times convenient to students while uniting them with competent faculty in jointly acquiring and applying knowledge in professional settings; and by
- Being consistent in achieving the required curriculum / course outcomes as a result of successfully completing each course / session regardless of location, modality or faculty.

With competent faculty members, there is no doubt that actions in regard to classroom instruction will achieve the above objectives and more. The objective, on the administrative side, is to provide faculty members all the support possible so they have a successful educational experience with students. However, their overall objectives and imperatives of academic success can be summed in the following points:

- Know the "mission"; so, you can progress in the right direction.
- Know the profession / industry / subject; so, you can effectively advise, suggest, direct, and/or facilitate the learning objectives.
- Know the job; so, you can simplify the operation and how it is done.
- Know the policies; so, you can apply and enforce them.
- Know the students; so, you can meet and exceed their needs.

Knowing the mission, profession, job, policies, and students will help everyone be focused and serve them qualitatively. Students bring different learning styles and experiences with them. It is incumbent upon everyone at the institution to assess / know if the students are achieving stated educational milestones and outcomes in each session of each course and in their degree programs.

Evaluating the Outcomes. The Nova Southeastern University is a learning centered institution. Its academic vision can be embodied in the answers to a few crucial questions implemented by individual faculty members. At the end of every session, faculty members are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

- Have I taught students the objectives of the course?
- Do my students understand what they should know as a result of taking the course, reading the assignments, and completing the required quality of work?
- Have I challenged students to higher standards in their professions and in critical thinking?
- Have I tested the students to (and can they) demonstrate their new knowledge with the quality required?
- Has the session enhanced their ability to innovate, compete, create value, and think critically in their organizations?

If each faculty can answer yes to such questions with regard to their students, then they will fulfill the mission of the institution and may become "*extraordinary teachers*"! The following list includes some of the essential responsibilities of each faculty to assist them in becoming extraordinary faculty.

- To become familiar with the school mission as well as its academic policies.
- To administer the course assigned in a professional and ethical manner consistent with both Huizenga School and Nova Southeastern University's policies and procedures.
- To teach the courses assigned according to established course content guidelines as prescribed by the course outline/syllabus and to work on curriculum related to assigned course.
- To inform students in writing of all course requirements.
- To maintain accurate scholastic and attendance records for one calendar year, and to make this information available to Huizenga School and Nova Southeastern University.
- To provide a telephone number or e-mail address where students can contact for information or clarification about course content. Generally, be available to students both before and after the course sessions for academic assistance.
- To begin class on time and end class as scheduled with great content for all sessions. Generally, to adhere to the prescribed contact hours.
- To encourage students to take advantage of all the educational resources available at Nova Southeastern University's physical and electronic library.
- To maintain professional competence in the field by remaining current through reading, writing, presenting, publishing, and/or actively participating in professional development organizations.
- To conduct all functions related to the Huizenga School and Nova Southeastern University in a professional and ethical manner.

In today's fast-paced, rapidly changing world, individuals in business, government, and nonprofit organizations need convenient, accessible, and superior educational opportunities. Only by utilizing highly qualified faculty possessing academic and practical experience, providing personal interaction with students and effectively using leading edge technology, can schools prepare students for success. The success of the Huizenga School is evaluated by the success of their students in mastering and applying knowledge to create value in their respective business, government, and nonprofit organizations. They understand that they can only realize their vision if all faculty, staff, and administrators are dedicated to anticipating the needs of their students; and, as such, if they can constantly change courses, curricula, delivery methods, and services to students according to these (changing) needs.

Through faculty development workshops and personal sessions with faculty members, the Huizenga School aims to make sure their faculty members have all the tools needed to be extraordinary teachers. Extraordinary teachers continuously learn and pass on relevant (updated) information to their students as identified in the book titled "Extraordinary Teachers: The Essence of Excellent Teaching", by Dr. Frederick Stephenson, Associate Professor of Marketing and Distribution at the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business. The book is basically a compilation of about thirty six papers written by teachers that are considered to be extraordinary and have also received the Josiah Meigs Award for Excellence in Teaching (the highest teaching honor given by the University of Georgia). Throughout the book, six characteristics of extraordinary teachers are discussed. Extraordinary teachers:

- Have great passion for their work.
- Know what to teach, how to teach, and how to improve.
- Excel at creating exciting classroom environments.
- Connect exceptionally well with students.
- Challenge students to reach their full potential.
- Get extraordinary results using variety of skills.

Dr. Stephenson goes on to mention the applicability of the six characteristics no matter at what level one is teaching. All faculty members should continually demonstrate these characteristics in order to deliver superior value through extraordinary teaching.

The goal for faculty members at Huizenga School is to be and keep on becoming extraordinary teachers. They want students to say that "my professor had great passion for the subject area, knows how to teach, created an exciting environment where I wanted to learn and participate, connected my experience to the learning objectives of the session/course, challenged me to stretch and learn beyond my known abilities, and assisted me in achieving extraordinary outcomes."

Extraordinary teachers are innovative in achieving the stated learning outcomes and they involve students in the learning process. Dr. Marcia Silver, assistant professor at the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences' Division of Social and Behavior Sciences, often creates innovative and fun experiments for her students to involve them in the learning process. For example, in her Adulthood and Aging class, in an effort to help the traditional nineteen to twenty-two year old students understand some of the personal and societal difficulties that the elderly experience because of reduction in sensory perceptual abilities, Dr. Silver asked her class to participate in a simulated sensory loss. Students were given eyeglasses smeared with Vaseline to simulate blurred vision and cataracts, earplugs to simulate loss of hearing, as well as ace bandages, walkers, and canes to experience loss of mobility. As part of the assignment, the "elderly" students are asked to walk along the corridors of the building, climb stairs, buy snacks from nearby vending machines, and sit or stand while encumbered with the various apparatuses. The final component of the experiment charged students to write an essay about the entire experience while integrating academic concepts with practical experiences. While students enjoy being involved in the simulation, the experiment often accomplishes its objective because the learners are involved in the process. Based on the completed essays, the outcomes show that the class develops empathy and a greater understanding of some of the physical and emotional challenges that face the elderly.

"Get the Star Treatment" was the title of an article published at NSU's website about a professor of public health at NSU's Health Professions Division, Dr. Cyril Blavo. According to the article, Dr. Blavo is well aware that his job is to impart information to create learning while also striving to make the process memorable and fun for students. Dr. Blavo understands that adult learners need to be involved in the process in order for them to learn best. When students enter his classes, they have the freedom to put themselves into the lesson by getting involved. He stated that

I don't want them just scribbling away. Regurgitation isn't learning. I always challenge my students to reach their optimum level. I must have trained more than 1,000 doctors now, and the majority tell me they still keep my notes! That's why you hardly ever see me behind a lectern. I'm usually walking up and down the aisles, interacting with my students. I get quite animated! My classes are more of a conversation, with students getting much more of the spotlight than I do. To me, it's vital I really get to know the students as well as teach them how to think. When a university feels impersonal, students feel lost. Here, everyone knows everyone and individuals are always coming through my door with new ideas. When professors invest more of themselves, students get more out of it. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is not what today's students are looking for. As educators, we have a responsibility to prepare them to succeed in a rapidly changing world. (December, 2003).

So, extraordinary teachers (just like the aforementioned faculty members) involve their students to the extent possible based on their individual learning styles, in order for learning to be long-term and memorable for adult students. They take care of students by providing them with "star treatment." Educators and college officials can use a similar analogy to see how faculty members can best create long-term learning by seeing students as guests who are temporarily in their class and will soon leave.

Extraordinary teachers often do and can take care of their students like they take care of guests when it comes to being responsive to students' collective and individual learning needs as well as their educational goals, while enforcing the university polices with high academic rigor. Treating students as "a star" or as "a guest" does not imply that schools should drive students to classrooms in a first class limousine service, or that faculty members

should bring goodies / food to class, or to cater to students' suggestions or requests for fewer or less demanding assignments, etc. What treating students like "stars" and "guests" should mean and imply is that adult students should be respected for their maturity and they should become active participants in their learning journey while they receive timely and qualitative feedback on their progress from the faculty. The faculty member's responsibility becomes actual "facilitation of learning" that may include "lecturing" when needed. Gone should be the days of just lecturing and asking students to memorize the book for the mid-term and final exams. Such old paradigms of education and antiquated systems based on "memorization and examination" alone should be replaced with teaching skills and facilitation styles that encourage independent thinking and active participation of students in the learning process. Effective facilitation of the learning outcomes should have more assessment methodologies and feedback mechanisms built into the process on a continuous basis to see if the faculty member is achieving the learning outcomes before it is too late. Timely feedback through the built-in assessments will afford the faculty opportunities to adjust (facilitation and lecturing styles) to the learning needs of his/her students before the term ends. Seeing students as "stars" and "guests" requires a student-centered paradigm where the faculty member serves as a "facilitator" in the process rather than a purveyor of information. This facilitation paradigm requires that students become active participants in their roles as "stars" and "guests" in the class. If you, as a faculty member, do not buy in to the concept of seeing students as "customers" because it may imply exchange of grade for money, then you are welcome to see students as guests to dissociate that typical perception of a retail customer from students in your class. Traditionally speaking, we welcome our guests, we call them by their names, we take care of their needs, we thank them for coming, and, often times, we invite them back. Perhaps, many of the same concepts can be applied to students as well (welcome them to the class, call them by their names, take care of their individual educational/learning needs, and thank them for participating qualitatively in each session). 📖

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