



Dr. Chris T. Boleman, Associate Professor & 4-H and Youth Development Program Director

Dr. Susan Ballabina, RPD, Family & Consumer Sciences

Dr. Landry L. Lockett, Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist

Introduction to Adult Learning Theory:

The educational programs we develop are our products. They are very important to fulfilling our mission of improving the lives of people, businesses, and communities across Texas and beyond through high-quality, relevant education. We in Extension often measure the success of our educational programs based on the knowledge, skills, and best practices participants learn. The educator's ability to communicate and disseminate information to their target audience, will determine if these objectives are met and to what degree a true impact is made.

Everyone that is a part of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service is involved in education. How can we ensure that our educational efforts are being translated effectively to our target audiences? The first step is to teach our field educators definitions and general principles associated with Adult Learning.

Important Definitions & Concepts

Adult Learning is a process through which learners become aware of significant experience. Recognition of significance leads to evaluation. Meanings accompany experience when we know what is happening and what importance the event includes for our personalities (Linderman, 1926, p. 169). This definition has been evaluated and fine tuned over the years, but overall, this definition is still the most effective at capturing the essence of adult learning theory.

In addition to adult learning, it is also appropriate to define three other terms so that these terms are clearly understood.

Education is an activity undertaken by one or more teachers that is designed to effect changes in the knowledge, skills and attitudes of individuals.

Learning is the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that bring about a change in the student's behavior.

Teaching is helping someone to learn. Any activity of the teacher that helps the student to learn is teaching.

There are three major processes that are occurring when teaching takes place. These three processes are going on simultaneously. It is important that the educator be aware of these three processes as teaching is taken place. The three processes are as follows:

1. The Subject Matter Content – This is the information that is being shared. Studies have revealed that subject matter knowledge of the presenter is the number one factor for successful learning. Obviously, having knowledge concerning the subject matter content the educator is providing is most important.

2. The Level of Thinking – This is understanding where the audience is concerning the content. In other words, does the educator know where the understanding and education level is with the targeted audience? Is the educator talking over or under the target audience's level? This is why it is very important that the educator feels confident in knowing where the audience is related to the subject matter being presented. This is typically accomplished by having baseline data on the targeted audience. Baseline data can be collected by an informal group brainstorming exercise to start a program or through a survey instrument before the program. The key to level of thinking is to teach slightly above the level of the audience. This ensures that the information is not too low to bore them, but sufficiently high enough to keep them interested.

3. The Level of Emotional Relationships – Adult learners want to feel comfortable with the educator. A major characteristic of non-formal education is that the learner and the educator have a common trust and bond with each other. The education and teaching is curriculum focused with the environment yielding itself to a mutual respect between the learner and the educator. The structure of this type of teaching can be described as democratic in nature. This is different from a formal educational setting containing a classroom teacher and youth student where the education is much more hierarchal with the teacher being above the student. The structure of this type of teaching can be described as authoritative.

It is important to understand these three processes and be effective at educating individuals by developing competencies in these three processes.

Assumptions of Adult Learners

The foundation of adult learning theory is based on five major assumptions first developed by Lindeman (1929). These five are:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy.
2. Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered.
3. Experience is the richest source for adults' learning.
4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing
5. Individual differences among people increase with age.

These are all items the educator must think about when developing and implementing educational programs for adult audiences. Adults tend to bring real life scenarios to the educational setting and discuss their experiences. It is important that the educator be aware of these tendencies and facilitates a classroom where communication happens both ways. Having the adult learner bring their experiences to the classroom allows them to feel more comfortable in the group and it provides the audiences with additional situations to learn from.

Houle (1961) determined that there are three types of adult learners that seek out continuing education programs. He did point out that "These are not pure types; the best way to represent them pictorially would be by three circles which overlap at their edges. But the central emphasis of each subgroup is clearly discernible" (Houle, 1961, p. 16.) The three types of adult learners are:

1. **The Goal-Oriented Learners** – Goal-oriented learners use education for accomplishing clear-cut objectives. Goal oriented learners begin with the realization of a need or the identification of an interest. As the need or interest arises, they satisfy it by enrolling in a class, joining a group, or reading a book.
2. **The Activity-Oriented Learners** - Activity-oriented learners take part because they need to be active and enjoy being in groups. They typically do not have a direct connection with the subject matter, but want the social contact and the relationships it can yield.

3. The Learning-Oriented Learners – Learning-oriented learners seek knowledge for its own sake. Most learning-oriented adults have been engrossed in learning as long as they can remember. Their learning is continuous and establishes the nature of participation in continuing education.

Cooperative Extension has all three of these types participating in its programs. They represent all the base programs associated in Cooperative Extension. This is an important concept to decipher because it helps educators understand more about the individuals participating in educational programs.

