

## **Lessons in Conference Planning: Adult Learning Principles at Work**

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### **Abstract**

Effectively applying principles of adult learning is the goal of adult educators. This article describes how one instructor successfully operationalized these principles in a college course in which students planned and executed a professional conference for adult educators.

### **The Course**

Chairing the annual Mountain Plains Adult Education Association Conference for 250 adult educators in Coeur d'Alene this past spring provided an opportunity to offer a hands-on, conference planning experience to graduate students. Wanting to try something outside the typical classroom experience, I organized a special topics course on conference planning which could provide experiential learning that not only espoused but also employed adult learning principles in an authentic context.

Because we needed to accomplish the conference planning task in a relatively short period of time, I structured the course to function more as a team with a commissioned assignment rather than a typical instructor-facilitated class. The students and I met at the beginning of the semester to lay the groundwork for the conference planning process and then more regularly as the event date approached. Three students lived in the city where the conference would convene; the other three students resided on the main campus about 90 minutes away. Early in the semester, I met with each of the two groups separately, and then, during the month leading up to the conference, we held weekly conference calls and used a web site to

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communicate progress on various tasks and assignments.

### **Adult Learning Principles**

In order to create a meaningful learning experience for the class, a philosophical framework was employed that utilized the principles of adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). These principles recognize the unique characteristics of adult learners:

- (1) the need to know;
- (2) a sense of autonomy;
- (3) the importance of life experiences and knowledge;
- (4) the readiness to learn;
- (5) the need for practical and applicable learning, and
- (6) internal motivation.

#### **The Need to Know**

The first principle is adult learners *need to know* why they need to learn something. Once the benefits of learning are clear, adults tend to invest considerable time and energy into the learning process. Thus, we began the course with a briefing on the associations and stakeholders involved in the conference followed by a discussion on past conference experiences. While all of the students had participated in professional conferences and some of them had experience with conference planning, none had experienced the full cycle of planning, developing, and putting on a conference. Nevertheless, the students expressed their excitement in participating in a hands-on project that would enhance their knowledge and skills in event planning.

#### **Self-Directed Learning**

The second principle of adult learning refers to the *autonomy* of the learner. Adults need to be free to direct their work and to choose learning activities that reflect their interests. For the class, students chose the responsibilities and specific tasks they would be responsible to complete for the conference. During team meetings, they reported on their progress—sometimes sharing a completed task or project and sometimes asking for help or information from their classmates.

## **Using Prior Experience and Knowledge**

The third principle of adult learning recognizes that adults have accumulated a foundation of *life experiences* and *knowledge*, and consequently, they are their own richest base of resources. Such was the case with the students in this course. They pulled from their previously attained knowledge and skills in areas such as graphic design, industrial technologies, and nutrition science to construct new knowledge in planning and developing the conference activities.

## **Readiness to Learn**

The fourth principle states that adults must be *ready to learn* and be able to see a reason for learning. Learning has to be applicable to their vocation or other responsibilities to be of significance to them. Most of the students enrolled in the program were working professionals who took the class because they wanted or needed to learn how to plan a conference for their own professional needs. The course provided an opportunity for them to engage in authentic, hands-on activities that involved planning an event for other professionals. One student commented, “The experience of this course was very helpful. Being involved in planning a large scale regional event is something that I expect to be involved in, and I now feel well prepared to tackle that task.”

## **The Need for Practical Application**

The fifth principle of adult learning considers adults’ orientation to learning; learning needs to be *practical* and applied in a meaningful context. Many students valued the realistic approach of the course and appreciated learning in a practical manner. One student noted that she obtained “very insightful information” from the “opportunity to do hands-on coursework.” From the first meeting to the debriefing at the end of the conference, students’ learning was contextual and authentic. Another student described her learning experience as follows: “Just . . . going through the process of planning a conference has been more valuable than any textbook read.”

## **Motivational Factors**

The sixth principle of adult learning concerns motivation; adults are *internally motivated* and their learning must include an intrinsic value in which they can see a personal payoff by acquiring the knowledge or skill. Students in the course were motivated by the authentic experiences that they could add to their resumes, the professional contacts they made that could be helpful in their professions, and the new friendships that developed among them. They also learned new skills and earned graduate credit in the process.

## **Putting It All Together**

The final authentic assessment for the course was the conference itself. Every student was present during the conference and had the opportunity to experience the results of their collective efforts. One student summed it all up: "This was a great experience --I really feel that I am prepared to take a more active role in planning a large event based on the information that I gained in this class. Thank you!"

Facilitating adult learning can be creative, fun, and meaningful for all involved. This special topics course on conference planning provided college students with a meaningful learning experience through a real-world application. By applying principles of adult learning and being creative in structuring learning experiences, adult educators can provide unique and practical learning opportunities for their adult students.

## **Reference**

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (6th Ed.). Elsevier: Burlington, MA.