

Two Models of Adult Learning Development: Which is More Effective?

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Hypothesis: Of two models of adult learning development, one model is more effective than the other.

There are two primary models of adult learning development. The first model is the formal educational approach that is found on most college campuses: an expert presents his or her wisdom and experience. The learners come to be educated by the expert, so they expect to listen while the expert talks. The focus is on the expert. We will refer to this model as the Expert Presenter.

The second model of adult learning development is a more informal experiential approach that is found in many organizations: the instructor facilitates interactive opportunities for the learners to discover and then practice new skills. The learners are active participants in their own learning, so they expect to offer information and demonstrate what they have learned. The focus is on the learner. We will refer to this model as the Learning Facilitator.

In this chapter, we will explore the similarities and differences of the two models and determine which is more effective.

1. EXPERT PRESENTER MODEL

Approach: Expert presents wisdom and experience

Method: Lecture with PowerPoint slides

Role of Learner: Listen and absorb

Learner's Prior Experience: Untapped resource

Learning: A passive process of being educated

Focus: The expert

Expert Presenters are typically competent, credible, knowledgeable, and committed to their subject areas. They often like to share everything they know about a topic with their audiences, so they do most, if not all, of the talking. They may rely heavily on PowerPoint visuals to present and clarify concepts.

Master Expert Presenters can be excellent storytellers, able to verbally create imaginative and realistic scenarios that bring concepts alive and engage their listeners.

In addition, they can establish a positive rapport with their audiences through their credentials, personalities, humorous anecdotes, and responses to questions.

Many lecturers incorporate question and answer sessions into their presentations, so the participants can get involved in a limited fashion.

The participants typically leave a session with an Expert Presenter with great confidence in the Expert's competence. The participants have not had an opportunity to build any confidence in their own competence.

2. LEARNING FACILITATOR MODEL

Approach: Learners discover and practice new skills

Method: Participatory activities

Role of Learner: Offer information and demonstrate learning

Learner's Prior Experience: Source of information and meaning

Learning: An active process of involvement

Focus: The learner

Learning Facilitators must also be competent and credible. Aware that adults can learn only so much information at one time, so they focus in on key concepts and skills. They make sure that these concepts are understood before moving on to the next topic area. They also engage as many of the learners' senses as possible to increase retention.

They provide workbooks that include activity worksheets and reference materials. They use PowerPoint slides to supplement information in the workbook.

Learning Facilitators need excellent presentation skills, so they are also masterful storytellers. However, they generally call on participants to share their own stories because that keeps everyone engaged.

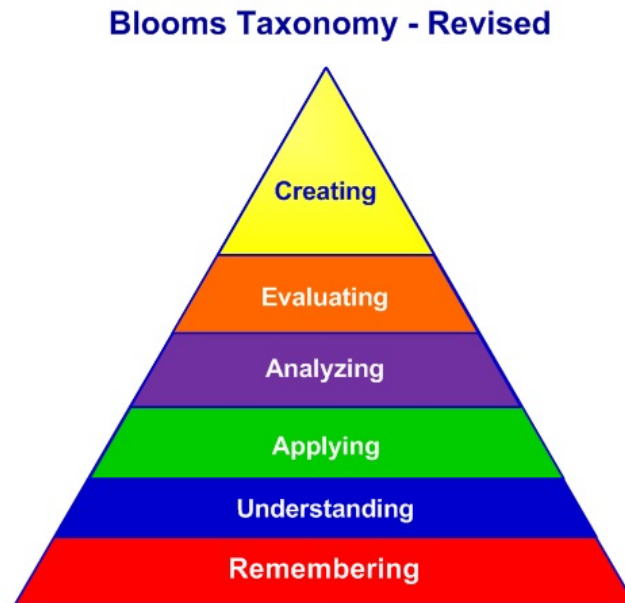
The key focus is on enabling the learners to actively discover what they need to learn. So, the learners do most of the talking, rather than the Learning Facilitator. This does not mean that the learners control the class. The Learning Facilitator still assigns activities, debriefs them, and handles questions that arise so they don't pull the content off track.

The participants typically leave a session with a Learning Facilitator with great confidence in their own competence. This is due to the different opportunities they have during the session to practice their new knowledge or skills.

Let's consider how each model fares when compared to Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Learning Objectives and Malcolm Knowles' Adult Learning Principles.

3. BLOOM'S TAXONOMY

In 1956, Benjamin Bloom classified learning outcomes in a Taxonomy of Educational Learning Objectives. This framework was revised in 2001 by Lorin Anderson and David Krathwohl.¹ There are six progressive levels, or building blocks, of learning.



This graphic of Bloom's revised taxonomy is from <https://thepeakperformancecenter.com/educational-learning/thinking/blooms-taxonomy/blooms-taxonomy-revised>

The first level of learning is to Remember, which is the ability to recall what has been learned.

If the desired outcome is to have learners demonstrate that they remember new information, quizzes, questionnaires, question and answer sessions, fill-in-the-blank worksheets, memory games, peg systems, or tests can be effective.

The second level of learning is to Understand, which is the ability to grasp the meaning of information. Knowledge is meaningless without understanding.

¹ Anderson, L. W., Krathwohl, D. R., & Bloom, B. S. *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives* (Complete ed.). New York: Longman, 2001.

If the desired outcome is to have the learners demonstrate that they understand the meaning of newly learned information, case study questions, essays, role plays, or games can be effective.

The third level of learning is to Apply, which is the ability to use new knowledge or skills. It is impractical for learners to know and understand a skill but not be able to apply it.

If the desired outcome is to have the learners demonstrate that they can use learned materials in new and concrete situations, hands on, application, problem solving, or simulation activities can be effective.

The fourth level of learning is to Analyze, which is the ability to assess information or situations. Learners are more likely to change their attitudes or responses to a situation when they realize the consequences of their actions or inaction.

If the desired outcome is to have the learners demonstrate that they can conduct a critical analysis, more complex scenarios, case study questions, or role plays can be effective.

The fifth level of learning is to Evaluate, where the learners apply criteria to make judgments. Learners will use this skill when they must make difficult decisions.

If the desired outcome is to have the learners demonstrate that they can make evidence-based judgments, the most complex scenarios, case studies, or role plays can be effective.

The sixth and highest level of learning is to Create, where the learners produce original results. Learners require a learning environment where they can use their senses, drawing on everything they have previously learned, to produce something new.

If the desired outcome is to have the learners demonstrate that they can be innovative and creative, learning activities that encourage brainstorming, problem solving, experimentation, and invention of novel ideas, solutions and/or products can be effective.

Observation: Lecture is not listed as a useful activity. Bloom's outcomes require participants to demonstrate their learning. Because lecture is intended to demonstrate the knowledge of the expert, not the participants', lecture alone cannot achieve any of the levels of learning.

4. ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES

Contemporary adult learning principles are drawn from the work of Malcolm Knowles, the father of adult learning. In 1980, Knowles popularized the term andragogy, which is the art and science of helping adults learn.² His work was a significant factor in reorienting adult educators from “educating” people to “helping people learn.”

The discussion of Knowles’ six adult learning principles that follows is augmented with facilitator instructions as well as a seventh principle that is based on brain research.

Principle #1: Need to Know. Goal: Obtain participant buy-in.

Adults learn because they see the value of the training content to their lives. Use an initial activity that helps participants discover what’s in it for them rather than telling them what it is.

Principle #2: Prior Experience. Goal: Build on what the participants already know.

Adults bring a wealth of experience that must be acknowledged and respected in the training setting. Use activities that enable the participants to indicate and/or demonstrate their level of experience and expertise.

Adults learn and retain information more easily when they can relate it to their reservoir of past experiences. Provide and draw from the participants good examples and stories that connect new learning to the participants’ prior learning and experience.

Adults have previous experience that can obstruct new learning unless it is noted and dismissed. Anticipate and eliminate negative transfer by differentiating the new learning from previous less-positive experiences.

Principle #3: Self-Directedness. Goal: Engage the participants.

Adults have a need to be self-directing and take a leadership role in their learning. Give participants choices regarding learning activities or content to ensure they are relevant to the participants’ interests and needs.

Adults are more likely to believe something if they arrive at the idea themselves. Use activities that enable the participants to discover important information on their own. Launch them on a voyage of self-discovery.

² Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Cambridge.

Principle #4: Readiness. Goal: Have the participants recognize an immediate reason to learn.

Adults learn best when they need skills to handle a current problem. As part of the buy-in process, use an activity that will help the participants realize they have a skill gap that needs to be filled.

Adults learn best when practical application is encouraged. Emphasize and demonstrate the immediate usefulness of the learning in the participants' lives.

Principle #5: Problem Orientation. Goal: Emphasize practical applications.

Adults prefer a hands-on problem-solving approach to learning. Provide job-related problem-solving activities that actively engage the learners.

Adults want to apply new knowledge and skills. Provide opportunities for participants to immediately practice their new learning in the classroom.

Principle #6: Intrinsic Motivation. Goal: Tap into the participants' desire to learn.

Adults want to learn when they recognize how the new learning will help them. Provide an activity that will help the participants find a personal reason to learn even if attending the program was not their idea.

Adults learn best in an informal atmosphere. Create a safe, respectful, and participant-centered learning environment that encourages open discussion and active participation.

Principle #7: Learning Retention. Goal: Make it easy for participants to learn.

Adults can learn only a specific amount of information at one time. Avoid cognitive overload. Break complex concepts or skills into smaller segments or chunks. Teach a maximum of 5 familiar and meaningful concepts or a maximum of 3 unfamiliar concepts at one time.

Adults need to recognize that new learning can be used in different situations. Provide at least three examples. Provide one example and draw the other examples from the participants.

Adults need time to reflect on what they have learned. Provide activities that require the participants to consider how what they have learned relates to them personally.

Adults need to learn rules before they learn exceptions to the rules. Provide activities that help the participants discover the rules first. Introduce exceptions only after the participants understand the rules.

Adults need to know how one part of the training relates to other parts. Have an organizing principle and make transitional statements that show how different sections of the training relate to each other.

Adults need time to consolidate learning. Give participants 10-minute breaks approximately every 50 minutes to avoid overwhelming them and to give them time to process what they've learned.

Adults need regular recall of new learning to reinforce and retain that learning. Provide many activities that prompt the participants to remember and apply their new learning.

Observation: With minor exceptions, all the adult learning principles require the learners to actively participate in their learning experience.

5. WHICH MODEL IS MORE EFFECTIVE?

So, now let's determine if one of the models of adult learning development is more effective.

Bloom's Taxonomy requires that participants demonstrate their learning.

The Expert Presenter educates people by providing information through lecture. Without augmenting the lecture with more active learning activities, the Expert Presenter has no way to determine if the participants have learned or retained anything. Therefore, the Expert Presenter model does not achieve Bloom's learning outcomes.

The Learning Facilitator helps people learn and then demonstrate their learning through a variety of learning activities. The participants take observable and measurable action that shows they have achieved the relevant learning outcome.

Conclusion: In terms of Bloom's Taxonomy, the Learning Facilitator model is more effective.

Knowles' Adult Learning Principles require the learners to actively participate in their learning experience.

The Expert Presenter requires passive rather than active learner participation when giving a lecture that is not augmented by more interactive learning

activities. The Expert Presenter model is more concerned with the competence of the expert than giving participants an opportunity to develop their own competence. Therefore, the Expert Presenter model does not embody Knowles' adult learning principles.

The Learning Facilitator requires active learner participation in a variety of experiential activities. The Learning Facilitator model is concerned about building the participants' competence and the confidence to demonstrate their competence.

Conclusion: In terms of Knowles' adult learning principles, the Learning Facilitator model is more effective.

Q.E.D. Of the two adult learning development models, one is more effective: **the Learning Facilitator model.**

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