The Care and Feeding of the Adult Learner

Training companies use the principle of tabula rasa or "blank slate" to shape their learning designs. Treating employees like an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge is at odds with of our current understanding of the human mind. A VUCA world requires new tools and techniques that respect the learner.





Introduction

Corporate learning professionals face a profoundly challenging environment rife with opportunity. Your employee's need for growth and development are driven by VUCA—our contemporary world of growing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Machines are increasingly able to handle jobs traditional done by human beings.

These shifts cause massive disruptions to employment and hold enormous implications for you as a learning leader. Finding the best trajectory to hit your target while being buffeted by so many disrupting forces requires a new level of sophistication in learning strategies and techniques. One of those shifts is from a learning philosophy that treats the corporate learner as an unsophisticated drone to one that treats the learner as an extremely sophisticated fully-functioning adult human being.

Too often, training companies use the principle of tabula rasa or "blank slate" to shape their designs. Treating employees like an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge is at odds with our current understanding of the human mind. All accepted contemporary educational theory has dismissed the tabula rasa model, yet it continues to influence the design of corporate training. Workplace development research confirms that adults have a specific set of needs in an educational setting that are not met by the traditional design model. These needs must be the foundation of training design to get the full value of your development dollars

The Adult Learner

The "three-pound universe" of the human brain is the most sophisticated system in the world, and it is never found in isolation. Humans are always embedded in networks of relationships and practices. Research suggests we spend around 80% of our waking hours communicating across these complex systems. The brain learns and develops in that supportive social context. Educational researchers have been studying learning with an ever-growing array of tools and methods. Insights derived from experimental psychology and the sociology and anthropology of education are now being tested and validated by clinical and experimental neuroscience.



We are learning how adults develop professional and managerial skills through lifelong learning in the workplace. While the literature on adult learning and development is vast, several features of adult learning are known and can be usefully summarized and applied to workplace practice.

Learning is a Natural Process

Learning can be either supported by its environment or hindered by it. Workplace employee development programs must be constructed to support natural learning processes. Employees thrive in environments where they feel challenged and supported. Consistent, meaningful feedback creates a background that can help your people excel.

People have an inherent drive to increase their competencies to cope better with life's challenges (Knowles, 1980). Our competencies help shape our sense of self (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Workplace development succeeds best when it supports this natural learning process (see Billett, 2002a, b, 2004a, b; Billett et al., 2004). High-potential employees respond particularly well to organizations that offer rich opportunities for development, since they identify strongly with their competencies, and have high levels of natural development drive (Peters & Smith, 1996).



Employees' natural hunger for development is both a blessing and a curse. The blessings are clear. The curse is that weak employee development programs leave high-potentials frustrated, disengaged, and at-risk of flight to competitors (Peters & Smith, 1996). High-potentials thrive in environments where they feel genuinely challenged to grow, and will often accept less pay to work in organizations that offer more opportunities for career development (Bryson et al., 2006).



Learning is Constructive

Deep learning engages our whole brain and being: cognitive, affective, social and even physiological. This is not always understood. It was once thought that emotion clouds rational judgment, but clinical observations of patients with selective brain damage have conclusively proven otherwise (Damasio, 2005). Patients who have serious, extremely localized damage to the emotion-processing centers of the brain cannot live independently, even if their logical reasoning is perfectly intact. This is because they lack the emotional "markers" (internal cues) that normally help people decide who to trust, when to become alarmed, when to be suspicious, or how long to remain hopeful.

When developing employees, a significant part of what we want them to learn is emotional intelligence. We hope that experience will teach them when to develop a sense of urgency, when to remain calm, when to entertain doubts, and when to trust promises. This developmental outcome is often called "dispositional learning" (Billet, 1996), and it plays an important role in preparing high-potential employees for positions of greater responsibility.

Neuroscientific research in educational psychology affirms the role of emotions, dispositions, and physiological states in learning. Surveys of the field (Caine et al., 2009) now make it clear that learning involves the whole person in their unique individuality. We now know that:

- The brain/mind is inherently social.
- The search for meaning is innate.
- Body, mind, and brain exist in dynamic unity.
- All learning engages physiology.
- The optimal condition for learning is relaxed alertness.
- Complex learning is enhanced by challenge, and inhibited by threat, helplessness and fatigue.
- The brain establishes meaning through patterning/modeling.
- Emotions are crucial to patterning/modeling.
- The richest learning experiences involve immersion in complex experiences.
- Learning is both conscious and unconscious.
- Each brain is uniquely organized, with resulting differences of talent and preference.



Thus, employee trainings need to be designed to meet the group's current skill set as they come into the classroom. They need to leverage the employee's existing experience and match their overall development style, which encompasses cognitive, affective, physiological and interpersonal styles.

Learning is Cyclical

It is not enough for learners to experience challenges or receive new information. It is also necessary to reflect on experience: try out solutions, analyze results, and try again. Isolated development activities are less effective than integrated programs. Combining courses, mentoring and stretch tasks around an objective supports a complete learning cycle.

There are many models that depict experiential learning cycles. The most famous was proposed by David Kolb in 1984. He described learning as arising from concrete experience, adhering to the following sequence:

- We act on the world, and observe the results.
- Patterns, anomalies, and other features of our experience can prompt reflection on our experience, and this can incite us to question our own previous assumptions.
- We develop new hypotheses and new abstract generalizations, or induce new rules.
- We then test these new ideas via active experimentation.
- The experimentation gives rise to new concrete experiences that prompt further cycles of learning

The entire cycle is illustrated below:



Taken in isolation, traditional development methods often break the experiential learning cycle, which is a detriment to its effectiveness. Traditional coursework emphasizes abstract generalization, and offers few opportunities for active experimentation or concrete experience. To help employees execute complete learning cycles, you need to deploy a set of development methods that supports their development goal. When methods are combined in an intentional, systematic way, a full cycle can be supported.

Learning is Situated

Learning takes place in real contexts, and does not generalize across contexts as easily as previously believed. Adult learners need to see the authenticity in the design and be able to apply the new methods immediately and directly in order to retain the knowledge.

A distinction is sometimes drawn between "just in case" learning and "just in time" learning. Traditional classroom education is "just in case". A curriculum is planned and studied years before students will have to apply it to real-world problems. Workplace development is more "just in time". People are oriented to tasks and coached through them at just those times when the learning is needed.

One of the greatest surprises in contemporary education research has been the degree to which learning fails to generalize across contexts. It seems like competence cannot be easily separated from the context in which the performance is expected to occur, or transferred from one context to another (Ellström, 1997; Orr, 1996; Sandberg, 2000). The "just-in-case" learning we did for years in school does not generalize to the real world of work as seamlessly as we once thought. "Just-in-time" learning is much more potent. As Peters and Smith (1996) put it:

We can only learn about work at work, just as we can only learn how to ride a bicycle by riding a bicycle. Nothing else feels how it feels. No MBA program can prepare a person for the first time they fire someone, or are blocked by a politically-motivated colleague, or are confronted with an angry customer. In the end, we can only learn about it by doing it.

Collin (2006) expands:

Learning is embedded in everyday problem-solving situations, in the accumulation of competencies, in learning through mistakes, and in interactive negotiations with colleagues. The basis of learning in the workplace is thus seen as making practical decisions, applying personal experience to solving specific problems, or performing specific tasks using intuition and common sense (Gerber, 2001), as well as making sensible judgments. Learning is perceived here as the accumulation of experience, with reflection taking place, if at all, only after the task has been completed or the problem solved (e.g. Fisher, 2002; Rasmussen, 2002).

The importance of context goes beyond the practical context of completing tasks and accomplishing goals at work. It extends to specific relationships as well – what are sometimes called communities of practice. What you learn in one community of practice will not necessarily generalize to another one (Collin, 2006; Eteläpelto and Collin, 2004; Gherardi, 2001; Rainbird et al., 2004).

This has two implications for the adult learner. On the one hand, if an employee wants to develop in-place to excel in their current role, development tasks must be defined within their current communities of practice. On the other hand, to encourage people to stretch, it is important to help them participate in new communities of practice, both within and outside of the organization. The deep experiential learning they will undergo in that new social context will teach them things they will never learn in their current context.

Employees then face the challenge of trying to apply that deep learning back in their home context, where other peoples' roles and expectations have not changed. Their only means for doing this may be by helping others in their community of practice to also behave differently.

Insight into the deeply social nature of organizational learning explains why so many traditional training methods have failed to produce the desired results.

Learning is Interactive

Learning requires dialogue with others to enrich one's perspective. Great training allows us to access the scaffolding one needs for constructing and consolidating new understandings and behaviors. Given the importance of social support for development, and the way that behavioral learning remains embedded in the social contexts that shape it, planning for meaningful relationships is clearly a major component of the training design process.

McCauley and Martineau (1998) offer a list of potential developmental relationships a person can cultivate. Employees can construct a development network that will help them reach their professional goals by inviting the right people to fill these roles. Great training designs intentionally foster these connections. There are three archetypes of roles that McCauley and Martineau lay out. Challenge roles help the employee grow by pushing them out of their comfort zone. Support roles encourage and help the employee to overcome anxiety and distress. Assessment roles aid the employee in reflecting on data and fostering insights the employee can use to guide their own development.



A person's developmental network need not consist of many separate people. What matters is that the network provides the right balance of challenge, support and feedback to support that employee's achievement of their goals. Being intentional about setting up these relationships can be a critical success factor in employee development.

Learning is Transformational

Although no comprehensive theory of brain function exists today, it has been plausibly described as a "memoryprediction" device. It compares new information to models or prototypes stored in memory, "filling in" details and attaching implications. This lets us respond in a rapid yet flexible manner to events in the world (Hawkins & Blakeslee, 2004). This depiction of the brain accords with constructivist learning theories, which hold that we actively create meaning, building new perceptual, cognitive and behavioral models out of a blend of memory and ongoing experience. According to Collin (2006), individual former work experiences have foundational importance for workplace learning (see also Beckett, 2001; Boud and Miller, 1996).

This means that training can in some instances be treated like assessing candidates for a job "in reverse". You start with a thorough understanding of the "applicant" - their current skills and experience. Then you define "the position" - development challenges that build on the foundation of their experience.

However, sometimes both the company and the employee want development to take the employee in a new direction – one that breaks away from their prior experience. This kind of "transformational" development is fine, so long as the proper support is provided.

Like incremental learning, transformational learning can be illustrated as a cycle (from Taylor, 1979, 1980; MacKeracher, 2008).



Transformational learning starts with a "disorienting dilemma" (Immel, 1998; Mezirow, 1995, p.50). An employee is confronted with a situation in which their past experience is unequal to the task at hand. Once an employee has named and framed the dilemma that disoriented them, they often launch into a frenetic learning phase. The desire to construct new mental models after old ones have been disrupted stimulates a voracious appetite for learning and development. As the new mental model starts to crystalize in the employee's mind, they will feel a huge sense of pride, relief and accomplishment. They have overcome their past limitations, and can now enjoy a sense of self that is enriched with new capabilities.

Finally, the employee equilibrates by applying new competencies to a growing set of instances of the original problem. They refine their learning at this stage, and discover how various contingencies impact the effectiveness of their new behaviors in different contexts. This is the "new normal", which they use to guide their practice until a new disorienting dilemma activates the cycle again.

This process is necessary for employees to make authentic, lasting connections to new learning. Though the cycle is fraught with the potential for anxiety and discomfort, the benefits will push the employee to new heights.

Putting the Puzzle Together

Understanding these six tenets of adult learning ensures that design and delivery of training releases the potential of your investment. The contexts and constructs of learning cannot be dismissed. Instead, they must be understood and integrated into the training design. Pre-packaged, one-size-fits-all trainings simply does not meet the needs of today's employees. The adult learner excels with supportive, authentic, and integrative training methods that aim to transform existing mental models. Using these understandings, the natural process of learning can thrive.

"The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires."

William Arthur Ward



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