

# Principles of Adult Learning: The Cornerstone of OCWTP Training

Literature on adult learning theory is replete with theorists who add their own interpretation to the principles of adult learning theory first outlined by Malcolm Knowles. Knowles understood that the adults learning is influenced by behavioral, cultural and situational factors that must not only be understood, but more importantly, managed by those that design and conduct adult learning events.

The principles of Knowles theory are learner-centered, focusing on the needs and viewpoint of the learner. These principles include:

1. Adults need to know why they should learn something. They need to see a relationship between what is learned and its usefulness to them.
2. Adult have a deep need for self-direction and want to determine what they learn and how they will engage in learning.
3. Adults have a greater volume and difference in quality of experience than youth and base all of their learning on these past experiences.
4. Adults become ready to learn when they identify something they need to know or do differently in order to perform job related or other activities more effectively and satisfactorily.
5. Adults enter into a learning experience with a task-centered orientation to learning, requiring that the learning benefit them in some desired way.
6. Adults are motivated to learn by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators.

*Used with permission, Knowles, Malcome S. "Adult Learning" (Chapter 9), in The Training and Development Handbook 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1987)*

In order to take charge of learning in the training room and optimize the learning experience for the adult participant, the OCWTP trainer must understand the intricacies of learner-centered adult learning theory in order to provide a positive and productive training experience.

## **The OCWTP trainer must understand and manage:**

### **The Reason for Learner Participation:**

People participate in adult learning for a variety of reasons including for the sake of learning itself, social relationships, escape and stimulation, the expectations of others, and professional growth and advancement. For the most part participants of OCWTP training are in the classroom because of the expectations of the OCWTP and child welfare system. The child welfare professional may view training as an opportunity to

gain credit for continuing education, or as a means to improve performance on the job as well as a step towards job advancement. At the onset of training it is important that the trainer understand and acknowledge the diverse reasons for why people participate as well as help them define the “What’s In It For Me” or how participation in learning can be of value in helping address workplace performance. Once defined, it is more likely that the individual will acknowledge the value of the training as a means of achieving professional growth and enrichment.

Also important to the trainer is assessing the experience level, background and organizational context of the learners and in order to project how they will view what is captured in the curriculum and its usefulness to them in the workplace. Taking the time to relate to the learners as individuals help them feel respected for who they are and the set of experiences they bring into the classroom.

### The Environment in Which Learning Takes Place:

The OCWTP trainer must see a direct relationship between the learning environment of the classroom and the adult learner’s level of participation. The trainer can provide an environment that either promotes learning by addressing both the physical as well as the emotional or psychological climate of the classroom.

One of factors essential to the learning environment is respect for the learners and their ability to freely express their thoughts and ideas. In the classroom, the trainer has a responsibility to provide the learner with a safe and permissive environment. Permissive means that the trainer encourages learner participation in experiencing the learning through active classroom involvement. Understanding that classroom experimentation is a workplace simulation the trainer validates the importance of trying out the learning in the safety of the classroom, understanding that performance may be less than perfect. The trainer must acknowledge that mistakes made and can be rich with learning if understood. This can only be accomplished if the trainer creates an environment in the classroom that is void of criticism, allowing the learner to be vulnerable before others.

In addition, respect for the learner requires the trainer to assess and manage the diversity of the learners from a cultural standpoint as well as from an adult learning style perspective. The trainer must be able to successfully manage the diversity in the classroom in order to ensure the needs of all learners are addressed.

The trainer should work hard to create a comfortable and interesting physical environment for the learner. The trainer should strive to make the room pleasing to view by texturing or changing methods of media throughout the day. Whenever possible the trainer should find ways of best managing seating, temperature control and other physical factors that can serve as a distraction to learning.

### Factors That Enhance Learning:

Participation in adult learning is high when triggered by motivation. Adult learners must feel motivated to learn. The trainer must see their role as providing motivational triggers to learning. These include the following.

Motivation is encouraged when learners feel they are being given direction and support by the trainer. Direction in the form of defining what is being taught and why it is relevant to improving child welfare practice. Support from the trainer, training system, supervisors, management and others to ensure that transfer of learning takes place.

Adults must perceive the trainer is a skilled subject matter expert in their area of content, as well as skilled in facilitating learning by providing the learners with a quality training experience.

Adults want to participate in their learning by helping define what is important for them personally to learn and then be able to invest themselves and their own sets of experiences in the discussion. Openness on the part of the trainer to take time to discuss problems and topics of learner interest increases motivation to learn.

### **In Summary:**

The adult learner in the Ohio Child Welfare Training System requires and deserves special consideration from the trainer in order to achieve a quality learning experience. It is the responsibility of the OCWTP trainer to be aware and manage the many factors of adult learning theory in order to ensure that they provide the type of training that will not only positively change the quality of workplace performance of the adult learner, but more importantly improve the service to the children and families served by the Ohio Child Welfare system.