

CHAPTER 1:

How Adults Learn

Aims:

To explore the nature of adult learning

To clarify what helps adults learn

To understand what creates barriers to learning and how to overcome these

To determine the role of the trainer with adults

Resources required:

Plenary room and small group discussion areas; flipchart, pens and OHP

- 3.1 'What encourages adults to learn?' OHP transparency
- 3.2 'Barriers to adult learning' OHP transparency
- 3.3 Dale's 'Cone of Experience' OHP/handout
- 4.1 Sets of 'Adult learning quotation cards' for each small group
- 4.2 'The Trainer's Role' participants' instruction sheets

'Learning log' sheets

1 Background notes

If you ask most people about their education, they will invariably talk about their school or college days.

Very few will relate the everyday experiences they have gone through to learn what they now know. Yet, particularly in the work setting, it is our day-to-day experience which teaches us far more about how to do our job than formal education and training.

This may sound like bad news for trainers! On the contrary, it is this understanding that gives trainers the key to help participants unlock their learning potential.

Adults become motivated to learn for many reasons. Learning is most often triggered off by experiencing a problem which the person cannot, at the time, solve. Sometimes learning is motivated by an individual recognising a gap between where they are now and where they want to be.

Helping adults to learn requires that trainers themselves 'unlearn' a lot about their experience of formal education. Exercise 4.1 uses a number of quotations to stimulate discussion about trainers' attitudes to adult learning. A number of key points about adult learning are contained in the quotations.

Firstly, adults are not 'empty vessels' waiting to be filled by trainers. Trainers need to recognise and acknowledge the experience which people bring with them. It should be a

trainer's duty to deliberately create opportunities for the participants on their training events to build on, exchange and learn from each other's experience.

Secondly, learning is not about knowing all the answers. Trainers should not try to convey the idea that they know everything about the subject in question. Being able to say "I don't know" not only liberates the trainer from the anxiety of being asked 'awkward' questions, it allows the questioner to embark on a genuine quest for knowledge in partnership with the trainer.

Thirdly, learning is not a passive experience. You can't learn just by 'being taught'. Learning can only happen if you make an effort to make sense of ideas or experience. Learning requires a great deal of energy, commitment and, sometimes, help.

From these basic principles, we can begin to identify what helps adults to learn. The key points are summarised on OHP 3.1 and explained in more detail below. Adults learn best when:

- the learning relates to a problem they are experiencing or a goal they wish to achieve
- they see the relevance and value of what they are learning
- they have some control over how the learning will take place
- they are involved voluntarily
- they and their experience are valued
- they can express themselves without fear of censure
- they can make mistakes without being judged or punished
- they are actively involved with others in the learning process

These factors have important implications for trainers. Each helps to determine the trainer's role.

We acknowledged earlier the negative effects that our previous experience of education can have on us. This is only one of a range of factors which can block learning in adults. The key factors are listed in 3.2 and are explained in more detail below. Barriers to adult learning can include:

Pride

Learning is inextricably linked to change. Acknowledging the need to change can be unsettling to some people. They may well view it as an indication of personal inadequacy. This can make it very difficult for them to open themselves to learning. Trainers should be sensitive to this and build on the current strengths and experience of participants.

CHAPTER 1:**Self-image**

Individuals' self image can be a powerful block to learning. Some people may view themselves as 'stupid' or incapable of learning. Others, particularly those who have been *told* to attend training events, may believe they already know all there is to know about the subject.

Lack of confidence

This may express itself as a lack of self-confidence or a lack of confidence in the trainer. The more important problem is that of low self-confidence. This is often, but not always, linked to the person's previous experience of education or training events. Fear of failure (however the individual may define this) can prevent an individual from participating in training events. Fear of being ridiculed can also inhibit some individuals' active participation. Trainers should acknowledge participants' fears at the very beginning of the training event and help build a climate which creates the security necessary for overcoming problems of low self-confidence. Early experiences of personal 'success' can also help greatly in dealing with this very common blockage.

Lack of interest

This is probably the most difficult blockage to overcome. It arises most often when individuals have been instructed to attend training events. Being forewarned that some of your participants are reluctant attenders can help (that is, if you have no control over who attends your event). At least that way, you know what to expect and can address the problem directly rather than find that your best efforts are being sabotaged during the training event itself.

Recognising the importance of activities, acknowledging previous experience, and making the event relevant to individuals' 'back home' work are the best ways of overcoming the problem of lack of interest. If these don't work and the disinterested participant can't come up with any ideas either, it is probably best to encourage them to leave the event and ensure that they talk to the person who told them to come in the first place. Whatever happens, they should leave with an understanding that it is not their fault.

Lack of motivation

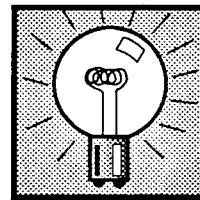
This is not the same as lack of interest. It is important for individuals to be clear in their own minds about why they intend to embark on a new journey of learning. For some the journey itself is motivation enough. Others may require a more tangible destination before they are prepared to put themselves whole-heartedly into the venture. Trainers should be mindful of the wide range of factors which motivate and encourage learning (see 3.1). The source of motivation for some may be tangible rewards (a certificate, a pay rise, a stay in a comfortable training venue, promotion). For others it may be less tangible (the solution to a particular problem, some new ideas to try out, a break from routine). Participants should be given opportunities before and during training events to reflect on what they want to get out of the event. The clearer they are, the easier

it will be for you and they to work together to achieve their desired outcomes.

Previous experience of education

Most people have had a conventional teacher-centred experience of education. Most of us have had bad experiences of education which have stuck with us throughout our lives. These previous experiences may well determine our whole view of learning. At the very least, the experiences are likely to shape our expectations of what learning is - to lock us into a 'mind set' which makes the job of the trainer difficult. As trainers, most of us will have come up against participants who almost defy us to challenge their negative experience of education. But that is exactly what we, as trainers, must do. We have to challenge preconceptions of learning as a passive, irrelevant, judgmental, insular experience. In any training event we should not only be helping people to learn about the subject but to learn about learning itself.

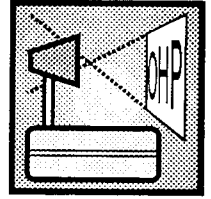
Adults learn and remember best when they are actively involved in the training. Dale's 'Cone of Experience' summarises the effectiveness of different training methods very graphically. It is reproduced as an OHP in 3.3.

2 Suggestions for using these materials

- 1 Outline the aims of the session and introduce your session plan.
- 2 Introduce exercise 4.1 and distribute sets of cards. A selection of cards provided, but the trainer should feel free to add others.
- 3 Lead discussion on learning points arising from this exercise.
- 4 Input on 'How Adults Learn' using 'Background notes' and OHP transparency 3.1.
- 5 Introduce exercise 4.2 and distribute 'The Trainer's Role' participants' instruction sheets.
- 6 Lead discussion on learning points arising from this exercise. Introduce the idea of barriers to adult learning using OHP transparency 3.2 and 'Background notes'.
- 7 Distribute 'Learning log' sheets for completion by participants.
- 8 Close the session with a review of its aims and an evaluation.

3.1 OHP Transparency

What encourages adults to learn?

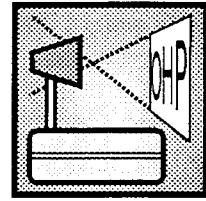


Adults learn best when:

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3.2 OHP Transparency

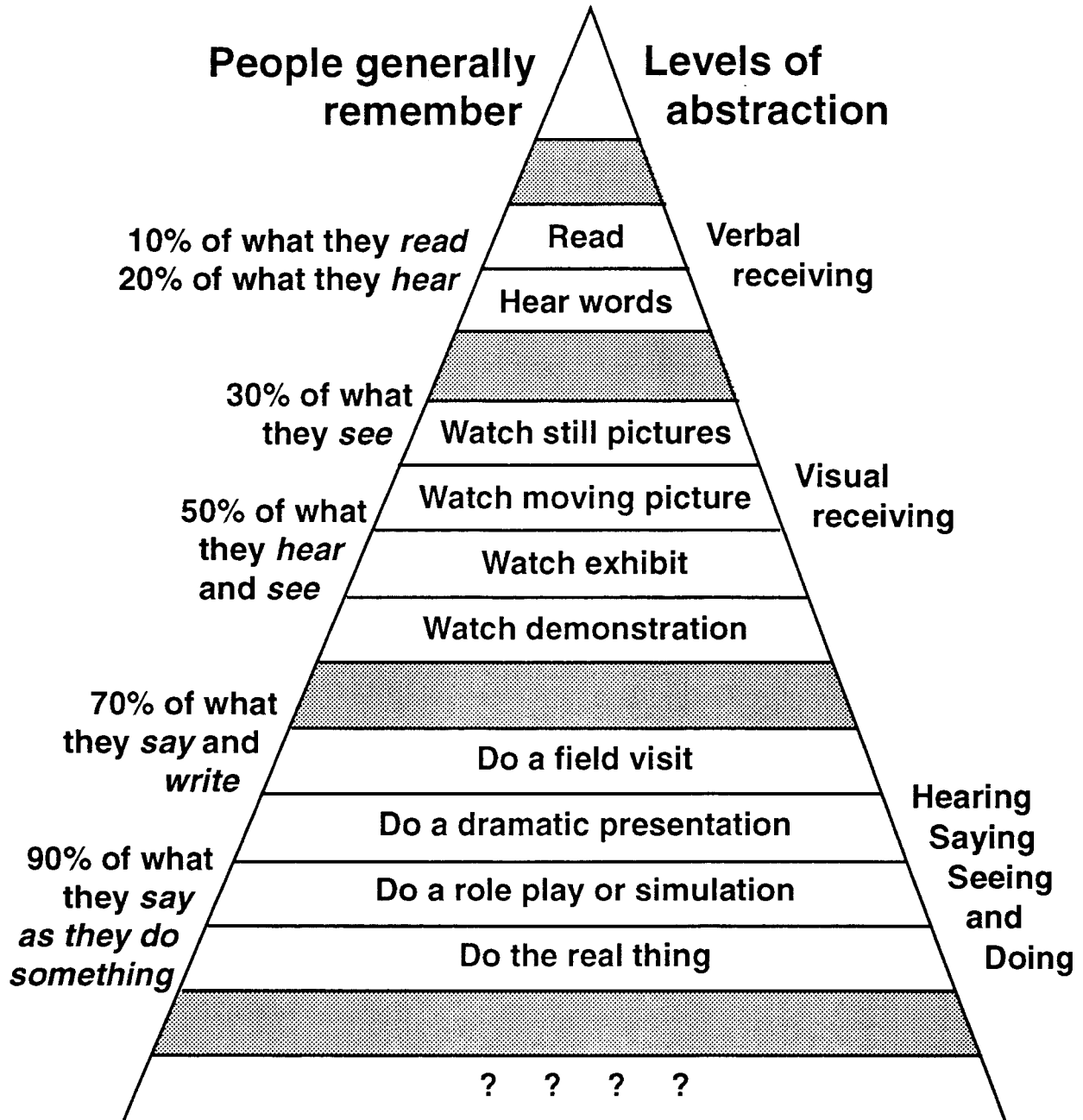
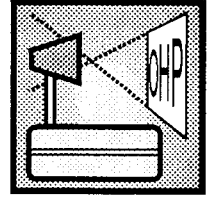
Barriers to adult learning



- Pride
- Self-image
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of interest
- Lack of motivation
- Previous experience of education

3.3 OHP Transparency/Handout

Dale's 'Cone of Experience' *

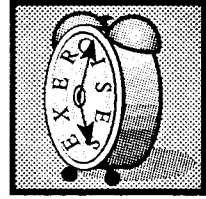


* in Wiman & Mierhensy, "Educational Media", Merrill 1969

CHAPTER 1:

4.1 Exercise: trainer's notes

'Quotations about Adult Learning'

**Purpose:**

This exercise uses a number of quotations to help participants discuss their understanding of adult learning. The statements can be used to explore participants' own experience of education; the values participants hold concerning learning or the role of the trainer.

Process:

- 1 Explain the purpose of the exercise. Divide the group into a number of smaller groups each comprising a maximum of six participants.
- 2 Give a set of quotation cards to each group.
- 3 Each person in their small group selects a card in turn, reads it out to the others and begins a discussion by giving their personal response to the statement.
- 4 The next person in the small group repeats the process with a fresh card until everyone has taken a turn or until all the cards have been discussed.
- 5 Bring together all the groups and lead a discussion on what the participants found most challenging about the statements.

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