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# ***Applying Principles of Adult Learning*** ***The Key to More Effective Training Programs***

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**T**he field of adult education has been emerging steadily as a discrete field of social practice in the United States since the founding of the American Association for Adult Education in 1926.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, research has produced many new concepts about the learning processes of adults and the motives that direct and influence an adult's ability to acquire new knowledge and skills. Recognition and application of these concepts are the key to more effective law enforcement training programs.

Although adult and youth learning are governed by many of the same basic concepts, research now shows that adults differ from youths in many ways that influence their learning. Adults differ distinctly in terms of such factors as motivation, interest, values, attitudes, physical and mental abilities, and learning histories. The conditions imposed by these differences make adult



learners a unique audience and form the basis for the principles of adult learning and for the instructional methodologies tailored to the characteristics of adult learners. With this in mind, law enforcement instructors, supervisors, and administrators who not only design training courses but also select those provided by other sources should inquire as to whether, as well as, how these courses use adult learning methodologies. Such knowledge can help law enforcement

managers find the most suitable training for their employees.

## **PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING**

The principles of adult learning involve several differences compared with those of younger learners. Adult learners possess a different self-image, more life experiences, the fear of failure, a greater expectation to immediately use learning, a diminished speed and retention of learning, and some



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basic physical differences that can impact their abilities to learn.

### **Different Self-Image**

Adults have a different self-image than youths. Unlike young people, adults enter learning activities with an image of themselves as self-directing, responsible, mature, and independent learners. Adults generally resist situations where they are treated like anything other than responsible adults.

A hallmark of the adult education philosophy is to include learners in the planning and implementation of their learning activities. When possible, law enforcement managers should solicit suggestions from officers through need assessment surveys and course critiques, as well as appoint officers to serve on training advisory boards. They should avoid placing officers in the position of simply being passive recipients of facts. Adult learning activities should include action and involvement.

Instructors should clearly inform officers concerning what they expect of them, the material they will be learning, and the standards by which their performance will be evaluated. This information not only will direct officers in the learning process but will give them clearly defined goals for direction in the training program.

Educators should create a classroom atmosphere that is informal and friendly and where a sense of mutual respect exists between the teacher and the student. Although teachers have the overall responsibility for leading a learning activity, the adult education philosophy espouses that everyone has something to teach and to learn from each other.

### **More Life Experiences**

Adults enter learning activities with a greater amount of life experiences to which they can relate new learning. Therefore, teachers should not ignore what their

students already know. The life experiences and perspectives that adults bring to the classroom can provide a rich reservoir for learning. Where possible, educators should base new learning on the previous experience of the learner. This will facilitate faster and more effective learning. Instructors should use teaching techniques, such as group discussions, symposiums, debates, demonstrations, role-plays, and group projects, where learners have an opportunity to draw upon their previous experiences and to share them in cooperative interaction with others.

Conversely, past experiences also can be a handicap in acquiring new learning. To change past habits or old ways of thinking about important issues is one of the most difficult tasks educators may have. This may require extra time and effort to show learners why their old behavior is no longer appropriate and then to help them build a new pattern of response.

### **Fear of Failure**

Many adults have experienced so much criticism, failure, and discouragement in their youth that their self-confidence and sense of worth are damaged. In a new learning environment, adults often are anxious, fear failure, and dread rejection by their peer group.

To counter these apprehensions, teachers should accent the positive and take every opportunity to praise good work and to minimize faults or mistakes. It is not necessary to ignore errors, only to minimize their negative impact on the adult learner. Educators can encourage adult learners by

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recognizing their achievements. Adults need to believe that success is attainable. Meeting short-term goals and achieving recognition for these accomplishments can motivate adult learners to continue in the learning activity.

On the other hand, instructors must ensure that sufficient challenge exists in the learning activity to nurture an adult's interest. Individuals are best challenged just beyond their present level of ability. If challenged too far beyond, people have a tendency to give up; if not challenged enough, they become bored and learn little.

### **Expectations About Learning**

Adults enter learning situations with more specific and immediate intention to apply newly acquired knowledge than youths who generally do not expect to use most of what they learn until much later in their lives. Because of this, optimum performance requires adults to perceive that a learning activity has some immediate application. Officers must believe that the content of the learning activity is relevant and can act as a catalyst for acquiring needed job knowledge and skills.

Instructional methods should emphasize techniques that are problem or situation centered. Problem-centered methods and techniques give adults personal meaning that promotes learning, as opposed to subject-centered teaching that tends to be very impersonal.

### **Speed of Learning**

At about age 20, the learning performance rate begins a slow decline of approximately 1 percent a

year. The adult learner retains the power to learn, but gradually loses the speed at which learning is accomplished.<sup>2</sup> However, if time is not a factor, no difference generally occurs in an adult's ability to learn.

The slowdown in learning performance ability means that, in many cases, instructors should establish fewer goals and objectives for average classes and provide more time for those classes involving complex subject matter. New steps are learned better and faster when individuals already have

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learned the preceding step. Educators should break down complicated skills or complex ideas into sequential learning segments, progressing from the simple to the difficult or complex and introducing the next operation or idea only after students have mastered the previous one.

Teachers should adjust the instructional tempo and level of instruction to make them consistent with the desired degree of success. Neither the subject matter nor the time limit within which officers are required to learn should exceed their capacities, providing their

abilities meet or exceed established agency standards.

In addition, instructors should preface each training session with convincing introductory remarks or otherwise encourage officers to motivate their best possible performance. An appeal to personal safety, economic interest, or psychological or physiological well-being might act to minimize the decline in the learning performance speed.

### **Knowledge Retention**

In general, an adult's ability to retain knowledge also declines with age. Memory functioning peaks around the late teens or early 20s and slowly declines into the 70s. Recall shortly after learning reduces the amount of forgetting, and spaced or distributed practice further facilitates retention.<sup>3</sup>

In short, learning must be used. Individuals tend to forget those items of knowledge and those skills that they do not use regularly. Therefore, training programs should provide a variety of opportunities to use what is gained. They should test, repeat, and provide officers with an opportunity to practice what they learned at previous sessions. For maximum benefit, programs should include practice opportunities as soon as possible after the instruction. Performing newly acquired skills under lifelike conditions allows officers to become more confident and effective when they use the action or related actions on the job.

### **Physical Differences**

Adults often differ from youths in body size, weight, physical

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endurance, visual clarity, and auditory acuity. The physiological changes associated with the aging process may require educators to modify their teaching methods and classroom environments for the adult learner.

#### *Environmental and Social Factors*

Physical discomfort and fatigue caused by inadequate classroom furniture hamper the learning process. Law enforcement training facilities should contain comfortable classroom furniture suitable for adults. Likewise, heating, air conditioning, and ventilation also play an important role. The ideal classroom is neither too hot nor too cold. If learners must sit for long periods in a warm or poorly ventilated room, they tend to get drowsy. If, on the other hand, the room is too cool, they become nervous and distracted. The best temperature seems to lie in a range from 68 to 70 degrees.

Adults learn best and remember longer when the presentation does not exceed their physical limits. They need regular breaks and the availability of refreshments. Moreover, if fatigue sets in, adults may need the freedom to quietly move around and stretch while in the classroom or even to take unscheduled restroom breaks. This freedom allows the adult learner to relax and to perform better in the classroom.

The adult lifestyle sometimes results in learners being fatigued when they attend training; therefore, most adults appreciate any teaching device that adds interest and a sense of liveliness to the learning activity. Instructors should

maintain a good sense of humor, employ a variety of teaching methods, make full use of available audiovisual aids, and occasionally find creative ways to change the pace of a learning activity.

#### *Visual Clarity*

Visual clarity, how well a person sees, is the physiological change most associated with the aging process. It peaks somewhere in the late teens or early 20s and then declines steadily until about age 40. After that, a sharp decrease is noted to around age 55, and then a gradual decrease continues throughout the remainder of adult life.<sup>4</sup>

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Because of this decline in vision, adult learners require proper lighting in any classroom. Common problems include inaccurate or improper lighting and glare. Professionals can provide advice on what might be best in each particular classroom setting. Other ways of helping adult learners combat visual difficulties include walls painted in soft shades that are restful to the eyes and nonreflective, thus minimizing glare, and

windows equipped with blinds or curtains.

Instructors should keep visual aids, such as overhead transparencies and computer presentations, short, simple, large, and legible (e.g., no more than six lines and no more than six words per line). In addition, strong colors can accent and add richness to visual material.

When using a chalkboard, teachers should write in large letters on only the top two-thirds of the board, use yellow “sight saver” chalk, and clean the board frequently. They also should allow adequate time for students taking notes from a board of any type.

#### *Auditory Acuity*

Auditory acuity, how well a person hears, also undergoes great physiological change with age. Auditory acuity normally reaches peak performance somewhere between 10 and 15 years of age, after which a gradual but consistent decline occurs to about age 65.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, instructors should keep the teaching environment free from outside noise distractions because an inability to hear may profoundly affect a person’s ability to learn.

Teachers should consider using a fixed or portable (wireless) sound system, depending upon the learning activity and the classroom environment. Seats in rows should give way to nontraditional classroom arrangements where learners can see one another face-to-face, which makes verbal communication more effective. Other techniques that instructors can use to reduce the impact on hearing loss include—

- speaking clearly, distinctly, and loudly enough to be

heard anywhere in a classroom;

- writing unusual words, new names, and strange expressions on the board to assist the spoken word;
- refraining from turning their backs to classes while talking, as facial expressions and gestures improve verbal communications;
- changing the pitch of their voices often;
- repeating questions asked back to the entire class before answering; and
- encouraging those who cannot hear to speak out.

## CONCLUSION

New theories have evolved regarding the discipline of adult learning as being distinct from the principles advanced for the effective teaching of youths. Adult learning principles are based on the fact that adults differ from young people in terms of physical, psychological, and social characteristics and that these differences are relevant to creating the most effective learning environments for adults. The challenge to law enforcement administrators and instructors is to become proactive and reexamine current practices and find ways to incorporate adult learning principles, strategies, and methodologies in their

training programs. Doing so is the key to more effective training programs that, in turn, enhance the law enforcement profession and its goal of improving service to the public. ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm S. Knowles, "What Do We Know About the Field of Adult Education," *Adult Education* 14, no. 2. (1966): 66. For additional information, access the association's Web site at <http://www.aaace.org>.

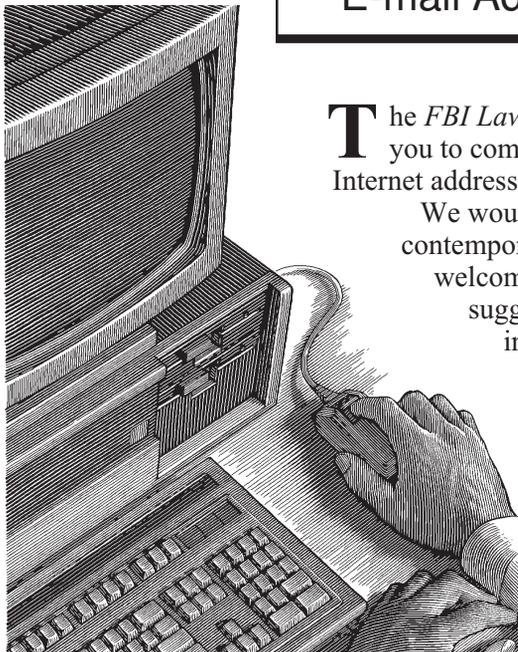
<sup>2</sup> Jane C. Zahn, "Differences Between Adults and Youth Affecting Learning," *Adult Education* 17, no. 2 (1967): 69.

<sup>3</sup> Connie Lauerma, "Memory Storage Changes Give Us Senior Moments," *Democrat Gazette*, December 17, 2001, sec. E, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Supra* note 2, 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Supra* note 2, 71.

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