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How Adults Learn?

Introduction

Nowadays, when people can experience education throughout their lives, it is important to discuss the education not only of young people, but of adults, too. And, more particularly, the education of adults in Scouting.

The Scout Method is an informal educational approach that aims to support character development in children and young people. Even though it is the principal method of the Movement, the Scout Method is best suited to young people, but not necessarily for adult training. Do we always choose and use the right principles and methods when educating adults in Scouting?

This document is specifically addressed to trainers but it may be of use for adult resource managers and leaders in general. It can be of use when starting the Training System renewal and also when designing any training.

Who are the adults in our Scout organisations?

When wondering how adults learn in our NSOs, let us look at the diversity of the adults who take responsibilities in Scouting.

Women and men

In this document we look at gender issues from a training perspective only. Our shared experience is that a group dynamic is different whether this group is comprised mostly of men or mostly of women.

We have to take this gender difference into consideration in various aspects of training: for instance, training teams should be balanced male/female; training time and duration should be appropriate to participate for both genders.

"Young adults" and "life experienced" adults

At what age is someone an adult? It is a difficult question to answer with any degree of certainty: there are so many criteria, and these are so different, varying from one culture to another. Training for a young adult who is starting to build their life is not quite the same as that for an experienced adult. Young adults are searching for ways to enlighten their choices, to open their minds to new horizons, to increase their self-confidence with new competencies; more experienced adults will want to enrich what already they know and makes sense in their lives, to affirm their choices and convictions, to be more efficient in their missions and responsibilities.

Adults who are students and adults with a job

The pedagogical framework of school or university studies influences students or apprentices. They are used to being challenged intellectually, to accepting the expert's words without really contesting them. They discover while learning. Adults with a job don't have much time for training. They put into action those competencies they have already assimilated, competencies that need to be renewed. They want new things given through training that they can then integrate into their working world.

Nowadays, many people are facing great difficulties in finding a job or changing career. It is important to consider training and volunteering in Scouting as a master card to improve leaders' capacities, to increase their self-confidence. It is important to help them to take the best from training and use it in their search to find a job.

Adults with Scouting experience and adults who discover Scouting later in life

Many adults in Scouting have spent practically their whole lives in Scouting and see volunteering as an extension of their Scouting career. As experienced Scouts, they have rich and various competencies that are very useful in Scouting, but they don't easily question their practice or knowledge, convinced that the local Scouting they know is the very best possible. And they do not clearly understand the requirements of those leaders who are new to Scouting.

These adults, these new Scouts, may be more open for new ideas in Scouting and find the tribal Scout folklore a little backward looking. They are interested in the relevance of Scouting to education especially if, as parents, they can measure its effects with their own children. They are expecting their personal competencies to be recognised and developed by the Scout Organisation.

Adults with different missions

There are many different responsibilities for adult leaders in a Scout Organisation. It is not only the educational action, the direct contact with children and young people. This is supported by structures that provide the technical competencies necessary to Scouting maintenance and development. Adults have different expectations of training, depending on what they do in Scouting.

An adult leader who has an educational responsibility will demand in-depth training on Scouting, its educational project, its methods and its techniques.

An adult volunteer helping the Association in a specific area (accounting, building maintenance, communication...) will need a less intense but more focused training which will have immediate effect.

A conscious approach

If you really want to build a house and don't know how, you will find out. The same applies to adult learning in Scouting: they will learn if they see a practical purpose! What are their learning needs?

The Life Long Learning Workshop in Slovenia in 2006 determined some of these needs:

- The need for new qualifications/competencies
- The need to fit with the accelerated changes in the World – to be always switched 'on' and not just on 'stand by'.
- The need to be more creative.
- The need to be more employable.

The learning process can start with a mutual agreement. From the Personal Progression 'plan', learning should or could be a conscious process. If leaders understand that they are learning – they will feel the real value and will be more satisfied with education in Scouting! We should think about what we can achieve with learning, before starting with training.

How are adult learners different from young learners?

Andragogy vs Pedagogy

> *Learning can be defined formally as the act, process, or experience of gaining knowledge or skills. In contrast, memory can define the capacity of storing, retrieving, and acting on that knowledge.*
>
> Marcia L. Conner

Learning is now a lifelong process, it is no longer limited to children and young people. But adults have a specific approach to learning and use techniques different to those used by children and young people. They are motivated to learn primarily when they have a need to do so. They want to know how it will help them and why they must learn particular material or skills.

Adult learners learn best when they are actively involved in the process. That is why we will distinguish 'pedagogy' – the art and science of educating children, a teacher-focused process – and 'andragogy' – the art and science of training adults, a learner-focused process.

Even if Scout training brings leaders from different age ranges together, and sometimes we don't really see the difference between pedagogy and andragogy, there are some differences that we should take into account.

Let us follow Malcolm Knowles, a central figure in the field of informal adult education who introduced the concept of andragogy:
A comparison of the assumptions of pedagogy and andragogy following Knowles (Jarvis 1985: 51)

	Pedagogy Young learner	**Andragogy** Adult learner
The learner	*Dependent.* Teacher directs what, when, how a subject is learned and tests that it has been learned.	*Moves towards independence. Self-directing.* Teacher encourages and nurtures this movement.
The learner's experience	*Of little worth.* Hence teaching methods are didactic.	*A rich resource for learning.* Hence teaching methods include discussion, problem-solving, etc.
Readiness to learn	*People learn what society expects them to* so that the curriculum is standardised.	*People learn what they need to know,* so that learning programmes are organised around life application.
Orientation to learning	*Acquisition of subject matter.* Curriculum organised by subjects.	*Learning experiences should be based around experiences,* since people are performance-centred in their learning.

Principles of adult learning

Adults learn with Head, Heart and Hand. We can call this "all - inclusive" approach which is very important otherwise adults will not be very motivated to learn.

On the basis of the work of Knowles, we can recognise several principles of adult learning:

Adults are independent and self-directed in what they learn

Adults have the potential to be free to direct themselves. They are not children! As a trainer, you must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and let them work on projects that reflect their interests. You have to be sure to act as facilitator, guiding participants to attain their own knowledge rather than simply supplying them with facts. When adults are learning at their own pace, they can use the speed or rate of learning that best fits their own learning style. Different learners learn at different rates. Adults are unlikely to begin learning at exactly the same place and so trainers have to adapt the learning to accommodate different starting points.

Practical implications

- Actively involve adult learners in the learning process from the design stage. Ask them what they are expecting.
- Show adult learners how the training will help them reach their goals (e.g. use personal development plans).
- Make sure you allow enough time for discussion and sharing.
- Remember that adults learn also outside training courses.
- Handouts and materials that you provide during your teaching should help your adult learners to continue to learn on their own after your session is over.
- When you organise small groups for work or discussion, take into account the different ages of the participants: adults who are beginning their career, those in mid-career, and those who are well established in their career. Sometimes you might organise them according to their stage of life in different groups in order to facilitate the work; sometimes you'll mix them in order to enrich the sharing by intergeneration dialogue.

Adults have considerable experience to draw upon

Adults have accumulated a wealth of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities and previous education. They construct meaning from information and experience based on their unique perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Trainers must relate theories and concepts to the participants and recognise the value of experience in learning.

Practical implications

- Provide opportunities for adult learners to work together and share their ideas/experiences with each other in small group discussions.
- Ask the adult learners to use their unique experiences to help provide possible solutions to problems and questions that are presented.
- Draw out the experience and knowledge that is relevant to the topic - try to hear from everyone in the group.
- Don't assume that you're the only one with the answer – try having them also provide answers to each other.
- Try to understand the experiences of your learners.
- Offer them the chance to take responsibility for presentations and group leadership during the training.

Adults are most interested in information that can be immediately applied

Adults are goal-oriented. When enrolling in a course they usually know what they want to achieve. Therefore, they appreciate an educational programme that is organised and has clearly defined elements. Adult learners need direct, concrete experiences in which they can apply the learning in real life. As a trainer, you must show participants how the training session will help them attain their goals. This classification of goals and course objectives must be done early in the course.

Practical implications

- Try to focus on ideas that your adult learners can put to use immediately after the training is finished.
- Ask them how they will intend to use or apply the ideas and information presented.
- If they are not clear about how they will use the learning, you will need to meet this challenge.
- It's easier to adopt new competencies when referring to previous experiences. Provide after-training support, coaching and other kinds of follow-up in fact any support needed to help your adult learners transfer learning into daily practice so that it is sustained.
- When you advertise a training opportunity, communicate the contents clearly. Adults will participate if they can see that the content is useful.

Adults are relevancy oriented

Adults need a reason to learn something. They need to realise that the learning is relevant and relates to their day-to-day activities. Therefore, as a trainer you must identify objectives for your adult learners before the course begins and at all stages throughout. Application in the real world is important and relevant to the adult learner's personal and professional needs. This means, also, that theories and concepts must be related to a familiar setting. Let them choose projects that reflect their own interests.

Practical implications

- Provide opportunities for your adult learners to talk about why an idea or concept is or is not important to them.
- More information does not necessarily mean more learning. Adult learners seek to create uses for information based on their relevance and regardless of how much information is presented.

Adults are most interested in information and ideas that solve problems they are currently facing

Each adult learner's experience is unique and different. Adults are practical. They focus on those aspects of a lesson that will be most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. As a trainer, you should be explicit about how the lesson will be useful on the job.

Practical implications

- Try to make your presentation problem-focused rather than just information-focused.
- Start your presentation by identifying the problems that you will be helping your adult learners to solve.
- Give them the opportunity to add their own problems to those that you propose to deal with during your session.
- Provide time for questions and urge them to describe their own specific situation and the unique problems that each of them faces.
- Try to focus your session on responding to the problems that they identify.
- Create opportunities for interaction during which they can respond to the unique problems that each of them brings to the session.

- Organise small group activities to provide an opportunity to share, reflect and generalise individual learning experiences.

Adults are motivated from within

Learning is an excellent way to help bring about change in life. People want to learn. Individuals are naturally curious and enjoy learning. Offering rewards for learning usually doesn't work very well with adult learners. They are most creative when learning is challenging and meets their individual needs. Adult learners learn best in a friendly, socially interactive and diverse environment. An adult learner who is in transition from one developmental stage to another is more apt to want to learn than someone who is at a stable period in life. As with all learners, adult learners need to be shown respect.

Practical implications

- Recognise and respect those things that the adult learner values.
- Let your adult learners know that you are concerned about those things that they value.
- Structure the training to provide support from peers and to reduce the fear of judgment during learning.
- Build training activities that allow your adult learners to practice the learning and receive structured, helpful feedback.

How do adults learn?

Every adult learns in a unique and different way. We should take this into consideration. Here are some of theories about learning and an overview of the most relevant (D. Kolb learning cycle, Honey and Mumford model etc.) is provided in the Appendix.

Visual, audio and kinaesthetic learners

In terms of practical training methods, there are three types of dominant learning styles: visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. Each of them requires special attention and an alternation of methods during training, in order to have best results and satisfy all participants.

Visual learners

Visual learners are those who generally think in terms of pictures. They often prefer to see things written down in a handout, text or on a projector. They find maps, graphs, charts, diagrams, illustrations and other visual learning tools to be extremely effective. They remember things best by seeing something written. If you cannot draw or write, you can help the learning of visual learners by using descriptive language. 'Show me', is their motto. They often sit in the front to avoid visual obstructions and to watch the trainer. They want to know what the subject looks like. You can best communicate with them by providing handouts, writing on the white board, and using phrases like: 'Do you see how this works?'

Auditory learners

Auditory learners are those who generally learn best by listening. They typically like to learn through lectures, discussions, and reading aloud. 'Tell me', is their motto. They will pay close attention to the sound of the trainer's voice and all of its subtle messages, and they will actively participate in discussions. They remember best through hearing or saying items aloud. You must use a lively voice. Auditory learners are easily disturbed by noise. You can best communicate with them by speaking clearly, asking questions, and using phrases like: 'How does that sound to you?'

Kinaesthetic learners

Kinaesthetic, also called tactile, learners are those who learn best through touching, feeling, and experiencing that which they are trying to learn. They remember best by writing or physically manipulating the information. Their motto is 'Let me do it.' They trust their feelings and emotions about what they're learning and how you're teaching it. They want to actually touch what they're learning. They are the ones who will get up and help you with role-playing. It is important that the learning environment feels comfortable. You can best communicate with them by involving volunteers, allowing them to practice what they're learning, and using phrases like: 'How do you feel about that?'

How to effectively use learning styles

It is often hard to include auditory, visual and kinaesthetic learning styles in a training session. But you can be careful, for example, to have instructions written on the flipchart and also say them aloud while showing what to do. For kinaesthetic types, you could include games and exercises, simulations, role-playing, debate.

Each of these classifications, including Kolb's, and Honey and Mumford's classifications, has developed questionnaires that can show what kind of learners the adults you want to train are, individually. Questionnaires can be useful for adapting the training methods. Learners also use their own specific methods to learn, for example:

- Kinaesthetic learners will write down information that they are to learn.
- Visual learners might create word webs, diagrams, or other visual presentations of information.
- Auditory learners may read a passage out loud from their textbook or from handouts.

Gender issues

The University Duesseldorf, Prof. Dr. Heiner Barzhere states that there is a difference between how adult women learn and how adult men learn. He says that this might look like stereotyping, but declares that it is not. Here are some topics from the research showing a central tendency

How adult women learn

- More intense
- More structured
- More time effective
- More patience
- More deliberative
- More perfectionist
- More communicative
- More complex
- More in the area of humanitarian subjects and socio-scientific
- More gifted in languages

How adult men learn

- More determined
- More self confident
- More chaotic
- More learning by doing
- Less differentiated
- More selective
- More facts
- More natural scientific

Gender considerations in adults' training

In order to have a better picture in relation to gender differences, the overall participation rates at the various levels of training should be examined. Do the gender participation rates differ between regions and different training modules offered in your organization? What are the broader social and economic factors that influence access to training? To promote equal access to training, an analysis of attitudes towards certain roles and responsibilities in Scouting and the resultant expectations of men and women is important. There are some key areas for your consideration:

Access to training

Non-discriminatory training benefits both men and women and ultimately equalises relations between them. To become leaders and volunteers who provide high quality service to young people and/or adults in Scouting, women and men must have equal access to training opportunities. Furthermore, the training venue and time availability of men and women has to be considered in order to fit into their routines which are sometimes different.

Quality of training

Relevance of the topics, opportunity for personal development, encouraging talents and supporting men and women to develop their self-esteem and respect, proper needs assessment of potentially diverse participants, mixed planning teams, training time and duration should be appropriate for both genders.

Segregation of roles and duties in Scouting

Although it can be argued that the gender segregation of different responsibilities in Scouting into typically male and female is declining, we still need to keep a careful watch. In some societies, according to social expectations, women are more likely to work with the Cub Scout section or alternatively, adult men are less likely to attend training in general, since it is considered less masculine as opposed to practical work, etc. Organisations have to be aware of those trends and approach them more strategically in order to play a role in promoting a unique experience to men and women that will serve better youth programme implementation and reduce stereotypes.

Also the environment impacts learning

The organisation, teams, committees etc. can promote or discourage learning. As adults learn by doing and from mistakes, Scouting needs to provide the possibility to fail - and to learn from it. Many times we set deadlines by which time the adult learner must deliver some outputs. Such time pressure can either accelerate or slow down learning, depending on whether the pressure is experienced as motivating or threatening.

Different cultures emphasise different kinds of tools, skills and social interaction e.g. who can participate in which activities. Adult training in Scouting happens within the cultural framework of Scouting. If the adult learners don't have a history in Scouting you, as a trainer, must consider how the training looks through eyes of a non-Scout.

Conclusion

Adults do not learn in the same way as children. The methods you use with children in Scouting are not the best methods to use with your adult learners. Adults also have distinct learning barriers. A week-long training course may not be possible for an adult who has a family and a job. Also, not all adults learn in the same way. There may have several learning styles. When you are planning a training session try to use the methods preferred by different learners. Adults can learn independently and adults will learn independently if there is a need. Therefore it is important to understand what motivates them to learn. Adult learners need to know why the skill you are teaching is needed.

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This material was produced by the Adult Resources Core Group, WOSM - European Region. We thank Jussi Lares, Gražina Kačergyte, Ib Jammer, Adriana Popescu, Etienne Père, Olga Rebordão Oliveira Cunha, Dragan Ančevski, Zorica Skakun, Mary Murphy, David McKee and Milutin Milošević for contributing.
Photos: Milutin Milošević

© March 2010

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Appendix

Kolb learning cycle

David Kolb created a model and transposed it into a four-stage experiential learning cycle:
(1) Concrete experience, followed by
(2) Observation and experience, followed by
(3) Forming abstract concepts, followed by
(4) Testing in new situations.

David Kolb and Roger Fry (1975: 35–6) argue that effective learning entails possessing four different abilities: concrete experience abilities, reflective observation abilities, abstract conceptualisation abilities and active experimentation abilities. Most of us orient towards one of the poles of each dimension. As a result, Kolb and Fry developed a learning style inventory (Kolb, 1976) that was designed to place people on a line between concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation; and between active experimentation and reflective observation. Using this, Kolb and Fry proceeded to identify four basic learning styles:

Diverging (feeling and watching) – People who are able to look at things from different perspectives. They are sensitive. They prefer to watch rather than do, tending to gather information and use their imagination to solve problems. They are best at viewing concrete situations from several different viewpoints. Kolb called this style *diverging* because these people perform better in situations that require ideas-generation; for example, brainstorming. They have broad cultural interests and like to gather information. They are interested in people, tend to be imaginative and emotional, and tend to be strong in the arts. People with the diverging style prefer to work in groups, to listen with an open mind and to receive personal feedback.

Assimilating (watching and thinking) – People with a concise, logical approach. Ideas and concepts are more important to them than other people. These people require good clear explanations rather than practical opportunities. They excel at understanding wide-ranging information and organising it a clear logical format. They are less focused on people and more interested in ideas and abstract concepts. People with an *assimilating* learning style are more attracted to logically sound theories than approaches based on practical value. People with this style prefer reading, lectures, exploring analytical models, and having time to think things through.

Accommodating (doing and feeling) – People who rely on intuition rather than logic. These people use other people's analysis, and prefer to take a practical, experiential approach. They are attracted to new challenges and experiences, and to carrying out plans. They commonly act on gut instinct rather than use logical analysis. This learning style is prevalent and useful in roles requiring action and initiative. People with an *accommodating* learning style prefer to work in teams and actively work in the field trying different ways to achieve an objective.

Converging (doing and thinking) – People who can solve problems and who use their learning to find solutions to practical issues. They prefer technical tasks, and are less concerned with people and interpersonal aspects. They are best at finding practical uses for ideas and theories. They can solve problems and make decisions by finding solutions to questions and problems. People with a *converging* style like to experiment with new ideas, to simulate, and to work with practical applications.

Honey and Mumford model: activist, reflector, theorist and pragmatist

When trying to explain the Kolb model, Peter Honey and Alan Mumford designed four profiles that correspond with the four stages in the Kolb model.

As a learning cycle, the four profiles could be assimilated with:

1. Having an experience = **Activists**: here and now, gregarious, seek challenge and immediate experience, open-minded, bored with implementation.
2. Reviewing the experience = **Reflectors**: stand back, gather data, ponder and analyse, delay reaching conclusions, listen before speaking, thoughtful.
3. Concluding from the experience = **Theorists**: think things through in logical steps, assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories, rationally objective, reject subjectivity and flippancy.
4. Planning the next steps = **Pragmatists**: seek and try out new ideas, practical, down-to-earth, enjoy problem solving and decision-making quickly, bored with long discussions.

There are some characteristics of the four profiles that we should take into account when training adults:

Activitists (Do)

- Immerse themselves fully in new experiences.
- Enjoy the here and now.
- Are open minded, enthusiastic, flexible.
- Act first, consider consequences later.
- Seek to centre activity on themselves.

Reflectors (Review)

- Stand back and observe.
- Are cautious, take a back seat.
- Collect and analyze data about experience and events, slow to reach conclusions.
- Use information from past, present and immediate observations to maintain a big picture perspective.

Theorists (Conclude)

- Think through problems in a logical manner, value rationality and objectivity.
- Assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories.
- Are disciplined, aiming to fit things into rational order.
- Are keen on basic assumptions, principles, theories, models and systems thinking.

Pragmatists (Plan)

- Keen to put ideas, theories and techniques into practice.
- Search new ideas and experiment.
- Act quickly and confidently on ideas, gets straight to the point.
- Impatient with endless discussion.