Learner Retention Strategies for Adults:

Teaching for Long Term Results

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Abstract

As educators of adults, we employ a variety of methodologies to present information to and stimulate learning within our diverse student base. An understanding of the dynamics of adult learning is a critical first step in this process. However, the methods we employ are not the end, but rather the means to an end, and that end is long-term desired results. Hence, any teaching strategy must focus on maximizing learner retention so that what is taught today is not forgotten tomorrow. Long term, intended, positive results are the only true measure of our success as educators.

This paper, a team collaboration, identifies five strategies designed to increase learner retention of information, presents suggestions for incorporating these strategies into the teaching/learning experience, and provides supporting documentation and references for each strategy. Specifically, we cover the following learner retention strategies:

* Strategic Questioning.
* Role Play
* Using a Generational Approach
* Strategic Timing and Learner Relevancy of Training
* Continuation Training

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Arguably, the purpose of education is enlightenment, and enlightenment is a process. That process begins with the direct or indirect transfer of knowledge from educator to student. In theory and practice, the instructor teaches the lesson and the student gains or enhances their understanding of the subject matter - at least for that moment in time. However, the true effectiveness of the teaching and learning can only be accurately assessed over the long term.

Will the student remember the lesson over the long term and will the student apply that knowledge constructively and beneficially moving forward? As educators, how can we maximize our effectiveness to produce positive long-term results? Like the farmer planting crops, how can we as educators best plant the seeds of knowledge to ensure germination and the eventual, successful harvest – the enlightenment of our students?

This paper will address these questions by presenting five teaching strategies designed to increase long term learner retention. Specifically, we will address Strategic Questioning, Role Play, Using a Generational Approach, Strategic Timing and Learner Relevancy of Training, and Continuation Training.

**Strategy #1 - Strategic Questioning**

Socrates is generally credited with pioneering the technique of teaching through questions. Questions are a cornerstone of teaching and learning. Asking strategic questions can help facilitate learner retention. It is obvious that instructors naturally ask questions in class, but there are several techniques that help learner retention. When you prepare for class, prepare specific questions that you will ask your students that increase student participation and encourage active learning.

First of all, be prepared and plan ahead as you prepare each lesson. Always keep in mind course goals. For example, do you want to develop critical thinking skills? The questions you ask should help them practice these skills, as well as communicate the facts, ideas, and ways of thinking that are important to their learning in your course. Do not ask a leading question that suggests its own answer and discourages students from thinking on their own. Benjamin Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956) provides a useful way to think about when and how to use questions in teaching. According to Bloom, it is important to emphasize the how and why so students understand a topic not just try to memorize it. When you plan each class include notes of when to pause to ask and answer questions. Asking questions throughout the class will make the class more interactive and improve retention.

Ask a variety of different kinds of questions. Questions are not just a measure of comprehension and retention. Questions throughout a lesson develop interest and motivate students to become actively involved in lessons. Rather than beginning with a single question that is complex, use a sequence of questions to build depth and complexity. Facilitate a class discussion that encourages students to participate and to elaborate and build on each other's ideas. Open-ended questions that can prompt different answers are very effective in encouraging discussion and active learning.

Active learning extends beyond the classroom and therefore helps learner retention.When you ask questions in the classroom, you are modeling a process that students can and should use themselves. Use questions to inspire learners not just test them.

**Strategy #2 – Role Play**

Another powerful technique for retention of learning is the role play. The concept of role playing has been around for a long time. Without even knowing it we use a form of role play in our everyday lives when we consider “what if” scenarios. The act of projecting ourselves into an imaginary scenario where, while not necessarily being able to control the outcome, we can anticipate some of the conditions and rehearse our actions in order to influence the outcome, is a form of role play.

In recent years there has been greater interest in using active learning techniques like role playing in the classroom. The National Teaching & Learning Forum (2010) states that, “Faculty are recognizing that learners gain knowledge and insight through action.  In addition, professors are more aware of differences in learning styles, and the importance of using a variety of instructional techniques to address as many of these as possible.  There has also been increased emphasis on creating community in the classroom, whereby students learn through interactions with each other and assume joint ownership of the educational experience” (para. 2). Role playing addresses these considerations.

The charm of this method is grounded in the notion that we retain more when we practice by doing. There are studies upholding the value of various forms of interaction over more passive forms of learning. Some studies (Metiri Group, 2008) suggest that retention can be as high as 75% when we practice by doing. The ancient Chinese proverb, “Tell me and I’ll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I’ll understand” (Thinkexist, 2010) is applicable in this context since role playing is about involving the learner in the learning process. Intuitively, one would expect retention rates to be higher in these active learning methods.

The ChangeFactory (2010) offers, “Good role plays will structure the background of the individuals, the behavior of the individuals, the environment in which they are operating and the responses required to specific situations of at least one of the participants of the role play. The discussion at the end of each role play will be similarly structured, looking for observation about content, not style” (para. 6). Some additional tips offered by Robinson (2009) for effective role plays include, grouping participants into triads where two people take roles and the third person is a reviewer, providing clear, brief guidelines and instructions for each of the roles, providing a template or process for the role play interaction, and considering demonstrating a conversation.

While students often dread the role play, when designed appropriately it can have a dramatic impact on the overall learning experience and the retention of learning. Role playing provides a more engaging experience than merely talking about a problem.

**Strategy #3 – Using a Generational Approach**

To increase a learner’s retention of information and skills, a facilitator can use a generational approach to determine an effective learning strategy based on an adult learner’s age. Strauss and Howe have explored the factors and the process that shape each generation’s “peer personality” and have found that it can be used to understand student’s needs, how they function as groups, and how they collectively respond to and shape the learning environment. However, caution is given that this perspective should be used with the understanding that each learner is unique and that it should not be used to stereotype or over-generalize learners (Coomes & DeBard, 2004).

Both in the workplace and in adult education, Americans have never been so diverse in age, race, gender, and ethnicity (Lovely & Buffum, 2007). The following chart describes the four most common generations that are currently present in adult learning communities as well as the characteristics and learning strategies that facilitators can use to increase learning retention for their target populations using a generational approach.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Generation** | **Common Traits** | **Learning Strategies** |
| Millennnials  (1982-2002) | -Believe it is cool to be smart & fascinated by technologies  -Racially & ethnically diverse.  -Goal oriented, positive attitude, collaborative learning style, & multitasking (McGlynn, 2005) | -Group activities  -Experiential learning  -Provide structure  -Use technology  (McGlynn, 2005) |
| Generation X  (1961-1981) | -Raised in era of soaring divorce & struggling economy  -Skeptical of authority  -Nontraditional orientation of time & space (Lovely & Buffum, 2007) | -Structured & carefully laid out plans and expectations  -Prime learning time is in the evening (Cambiano, DeVore, & Harvey, 2001)  -Prefer to work alone (Coomes & DeBard, 2004) |
| Baby Boomers  (1943-1960) | -Grew up in optimistic times  -Think of themselves as “stars of the show”  -Covet status & power  -Tend to be competitive (Lovely & Buffum, 2007) | -Hands-on learning using 3-D and manipulative materials (Cambiano, DeVore, & Harvey, 2001)  -Emphasize big picture thinking  -Build upon the past (Lovely & Buffum, 2007) |
| Silents  (1925-1942) | -Formed worldview during hard times  -Believe in duty before pleasure  -Embrace values of home, family, and patriotism (Lovely & Buffum, 2007) | -Prime learning time is in the morning (Cambiano, DeVore, & Harvey, 2001)  -Use a personal touch since they respond better to socialization than technology (Lovely & Buffum, 2007) |

**Strategy #4 – Strategic Timing and Learner Relevancy of Training**

Strategic timing and relevancy of instruction are critical for long term learner retention. Instruction must not only include the presentation of information, but also address relevancy to the learner and be presented at a point in time where the learning can be applied immediately. Immediate application of learning that directly benefits the learner facilitates long term usage. In this sense, when and why the lesson is taught are as important as what is taught.

According to Wilson and Hayes (2000),“The most effective learning is that which takes place in authentic real-life situations” (p 55). This is not always possible, but the successful educator will factor in context and timing with content when planning and presenting a lesson. How successful these elements are integrated into the learning situation directly impacts the successful retention and application of the subject matter by the learners in both the short and long term. Useful information presented without context and/or proper timing is less likely to produce the intended training benefit. Ideally, the learner can apply the lesson immediately following training and understand why it bears relevancy to them personally.

The phrase, “use it or lose it” accurately describes the dynamics of learning and long term retention. There is a scientific basis for this phenomenon described by the term “transience.” Transience is the way the brain forgets information over time. According to a Harvard Medical Publication, the more a memory is used the less likely it is forgotten. This is not a bad thing because the brain eliminates the information it does not use (para 5). Because of transience, information is not retained if it is received but not applied immediately, rendering the learning/training ineffective.

Along with proper timing, effective training must address the question, “What is in it for me?” The learner must understand, accept and internalize the reasons why they have a vested interest in learning and applying the lesson. Wilson and Hayes (2000) found that educators often struggle in presenting information that a learner needs to be successful in relevant and authentic ways. This leads the learner dismissing the information as theoretical or out of touch with real-world situations (Wilson & Hayes, 2000). To combat this, the educator must successfully convey to the learner why learner needs to know the material, how they will benefit, and how they can utilize the knowledge immediately.

In sum, instructors can best promote learner long term retention through the timely and effective presentation of information that addresses not only content but also context. When learners accept lessons as relevant to them personally and can apply those lessons immediately, they are most likely to remember what is taught.

**Strategy #5 – Continuation of Training**

In her book, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, Jane Vella talks about several principles to begin and nurture dialogue concerning the student-centered design of the learning experience. One of those principles is praxis (Vella, 2002, p. 4). “Praxis” according to Vella, “is doing, with built in reflection” and “demands a hard look at content, the re-creation of it to fit a new context, and essentially the testing of it to prove its usefulness.” (p. 14). Continuation training is a form of praxis. Once offered the training, the learner then “does” and reflects on the learning as a part of some form of continuation learning experience. Although not always practical, continuation training is a great way to keep the learning growing through praxis. There are several ways to keep the training fresh and foster reflection in the minds of the students.

**Blogs**

Blogs can prove to be very useful in keeping the conversation about the training continuing as an on-going type of refresher training. A blog for students will keep them connected to the training and as the students put the theory and learning to practical use, they can reflect about their experiences, building upon each other's successes and reflect on the failures. Blogs can keep the creative juices flowing and the brainstorming takes on a life of its own as theory meets real life.

**Follow-on Sessions**

Much like a blog, after teaching a concept, a follow-on session will reinforce training after the fact. It gives students time to apply the learning, then to come back together and share experiences. Depending on the environment and topic, follow-on sessions can be at periodic intervals. When I taught leadership principles in the Air Force to new Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), we would have an afternoon session each month for the first 3 months, then at the sixth month and one more at a year.

**Refresher Training**

Refresher training is a session where the instructor reviews the topics trained previously, but not in as great detail. During a refresher session, the instructor highlights the main points, just to bring them to light again and review the important topics. This session also allows for discussion around the experiences of the group in applying the information in the real world. As opposed to follow-on sessions, refresher training is more instructor focused and generally only one session that is designed to hit and reinforce the highpoints. Follow-on sessions are more "free-flowing" and based on the students needs.

**Repetitive Training**

While not always a popular notion, periodic refresher training does serve a purpose in aiding retention. One method to prevent the doldrums often associated with this type of training, is to keep it dynamic and fresh. Try different techniques. If you originally did a lecture, next time try a classroom exercise role play where the students experience the training. If this is mandated recurring training, try a different aspect each session. Whether it is recurring safety, diversity, or qualification training always focus on the positive side and not symptoms. For example: Harassment training. This year could teach about prejudicial/preferential treatment, while the next may cover sexual harassment while all sessions discuss valuing others, which focuses on the underlying causes and prevention of harassment, not the results of harassment.

**Advanced Training**

Advanced training allows for students to take previous training to the next level. As you build upon foundation of the initial training, the concepts are reinforced and even expanded in advanced training.

**Conclusion**

As adult educators, we need to think strategically when designing and executing any teaching experience. For the lesson taught today to have significance for our students tomorrow, we must employ methods that facilitate long term retention and application. Our teaching must not only have substance but purpose. In this paper, we have examined five ways to increase learner retention.

Through strategic questioning, we not only expose learners to information, but actively engage them by moving beyond the regurgitation of facts into the realm of critical thinking skills that can be applied in the classroom and beyond. Role play entailing active student participation in the learning process creates experiential learning that reshapes student understanding of prior experiences while guiding present and future experiences. By using a generational approach to teaching we better recognize, identify, and incorporate strategies aligned with learner motivations unique to our students’ age-group characteristics. By effectively demonstrating the relevancy of the lesson to the student personally and timing the training for immediate application of the lesson by the student, we can promote the long term retention of the lesson as well. Finally, by employing continuation of training through a variety of methods, we increase learner retention through praxis, the periodic revisiting and reapplication of previous lessons to new situations.

Through the application of these and other learner retention strategies, we can maximize our effectiveness as educators, not just presenters of information. We can help our students achieve more than just a temporary grasp of facts and figures, but instead facilitate long-term understanding that they can apply in their careers and their lives. We can not only explain for today, but enlighten for tomorrow and beyond.

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