onTrain

Online Training, the treasure within

B. Online Training
6. Experience as a source for learning

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Content

Let's start

Learners experience is the knowledge or practical wisdom gained throughout life. It can be used as a foundation to build new knowledge, linking it with new concepts and helping to potentiate the new skills and competences that are being acquired. Making visible that experience can help to connect and give meaning to new knowledge that now learner is acquiring.

What am I learning here and why?

Because of the adults and seniors citizens' huge life background, the application of andragogical principles to their training makes the learning using their experience not only something convenient, but also necessary to create a course, teach materials and design activities. Furthermore, in asynchronous online activities (compared with face-to-face activities), dynamism can be lost and results in boredom. In this chapter, you will learn how to avoid those risks and take advantage of an approach using learners life experience.

What content will I find here?

The learners will learn more about the principles and advantages of this approach: learning through learners' experiences. You will explore andragogical principles as a foundation to experiential learning, what kind of activities promote this approach and how to use them in class.

Using learners' experience

On adults and seniors' education, one of the andragogical principles proposes taking into consideration learners' experience, that is their life background, prior knowledge as well as existing needs and requirements. It is important to build a target or a vision about how we want to see ourselves in the future as that would help us to increase our motivation. Existing experience can be used as grounding to build new knowledge. We could include here positive aspects of our experience, that is existing expertise, skills and capacities that help us to build new skills connecting and linking with our existing capacities, but also lacks such as needs, errors, misunderstandings or any problem / challenge that happened in the past.

The andragogical approach that uses learners' experiences is founded on the fact that remembering and acquiring new skills is done more effectively if those are linked to and supported with existing knowledge and needs.

Therefore, as trainers, we should facilitate the learner use existing experience as a **resource and as a tool** during the new learning process.

We should promote the learner to make explicit that experience, and help him/her to make links, find similarities, or complements, help to understand new facts and contextualise. In online environments, where the main way of communicating is using text, it can help to reflect and clarify ideas.

Using learner's' experience for experiential learning is closely linked to the constructivism learning theory:

> Constructivism educational theory affirms that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When we encounter something new, we have to reconcile it with our previous ideas and experience, maybe even changing what we believe, or discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, we are active creators of our own knowledge. To do this, we must ask questions, explore, and assess what we know.

On constructivism, the trainers act as a guide and facilitator. First, providing the basic information and resources about a certain topic, later proposing an activity with a certain degree of autonomy to the learner.

You can review the Andragogy chapter about the characteristics of adult learners. Later we will propose some learning examples and practises as a way to fulfill adult learners potentialities. See also Learning Unit 5, where all the different Learning theories are explained in more detail.

From principles to practises

Following are some principles based on constructivism and also in relation with the learning by experience approach. We will link those principles with practises you can apply online, showing how you can take advantage of them. Note that those principles can seem principles, but do not understand them as universal truths, but as clues that will guide you to design and offer educational activities.

Knowledge is constructed, not absorbed. We build the meaning of the things we learn based on our own existing knowledge. We can learn hard skills (as accounting, languages, chemistry, using a machine, etc.) but we soon forget those if we do not practise them in a real place (in a company, while on holidays, in a laboratory, etc.). Then we give the real meaning to the things we learnt (a balance and loss balance, asking for help, dangerous acid, or using the lever efficiently). Learning in a classroom makes it difficult to get this real-life meaning, even more when it is done while learning online. Fortunately, it is possible to propose educational activities that help to give meaning to the knowledge that is being acquired by connecting it with things that have already happened to the learner or that he/ she has already incorporated to his knowledge bag. This can be done by offering activities in which learners can freely participate by incorporating personal information, examples or providing their opinion.

Commonly trainers force learners to provide only knowledge extracted from reliable sources as encyclopedias or papers. That informal source of information should be also valid and

promoted. It can be done in forums or other kind of shared spaces that allow a space for discussion and debate. Trainers in that context can help learners extract that relation by continue asking about that specific experience. It could also happen that other learners feel identified with that situation or to have experienced something similar to what happened to their colleague. A new discussion with anecdotes and living scenarios help to support the main course content, its understanding and verification from the trainers perspective.

Knowledge is personal; each individual has different learning needs and points of view. This is based on personal life experience and the learners' values. Help learners to make those needs and points of view visible. That can be done using activities that promote self-reflection and composition (that is writing) when trying to answer questions such as:

- What do I already know from the subject?

- Why this course is important for me?

- What do I expect to learn?,

- How will I improve when I acquire the new skills and competences? (that is how I see myself in the future), etc.

Online platforms can help to develop this activity by helping learners to write and publish their reflections and to be evaluated by the trainer and others. Evaluation does not mean assessment, but making public those reflections and provide a method where others give feedback for new ways of reaching the personal aims or to increase motivation.

Knowledge is socially constructed. Even the individuals can have different aims, there is a natural process of group formation and performance.

This is what Tuckman proposes: it is possible to join together individual needs to progress and develop as a group but also as individuals. We can say that based on this theory, the best way of fostering personal development is by developing as a group. The individual experience, understood as personal knowledge, is something that can be used for others to learn. Propose activities where learners can share their interests and motivations, but also express what they know and what they can offer to others. You can propose an activity that can be done in a forum where everybody present themselves, but you can go further by designing learning activities in groups, where participants have to negotiate, agree, discuss and exchange ideas related to the topic of your subject. The own experience that all learners have will allow a horizontal learning (among learners).

Examples

In a course about local arts and history, learners are requested to present themselves in a forum.

Usually those presentations were in the form of "Hello, I am ...., from .... I am pleased to be here". This make the presentation phase very boring. Instead of that, we did not call this a "presentation activity" but a "Introduction of the topic". Learners were requested to answer some questions as:

- "do you know and viewed any piece of art that is available to visit in your town" "Did you like it? Did you dislike it? Why?" "What would you like to know more?"

- "Is there any event in your town or region that you heard that was interesting for you?".

Learners should no be forced to answer all those questions, as they can feel intimidated, those would be only as a suggestion about introducing the topic. It will help also to break the ice; as we are proposing they write what they felt or other emotions it is expected not to have correct or incorrect questions, but something they could express and others to add or comment.

In a course about Unesco Natural Heritage Sites, learners are requested to assume a role.

They select the preferred role based on the existing experience (or the role they feel more comfortable): local politician in the area of employment, UNESCO officer, Environmental NGO, enterprise association, turisting association, regional councillor for promoting tourism, (others roles are possible). After roles are distributed, it is time to discuss about a new project of a resort that an enterprise wants to build inside a Natural Park. Each learners have to defend their position and reach an agreement about under which conditions the resort can be build in the Natural Park.

Exercises

We can try to promote learners to use the life experience by providing them some freedom. As said in the previous section, we should understand the life experience not only as their previous knowledge but also mistakes and needs.

Therefore we have to enable the learner to select the topics, the role (in case of a role-playing activity), or the method. Be aware that this can be risky, as development is made outside the comfort zone. Therefore, it could be completely acceptable that for experienced learners to force them to select topics or roles they are not comfortable with, but still providing help and assistance to help cope with this situation using their experience. For example, in a role play activity, for a person that has an engineering background, propose to impersonate a duty or work not related with their existing skills at all.

Make visible the learners' life experience, and help them to use as a resource and as a tool.

Face-to-face activities are more dynamic, interactive in short-time and include non-verbal language. Knowledge and information does not persist, but it is easier to be organised or structured (for example, in whiteboard, or using sticky notes).

Online activities have slower pace, are more reflective, and all information is kept (for example in forums or discussion boards), but it is more difficult to organise it (it is easy to be lost). Use those characteristics of online teaching to potentiate your activity.

Exercise 1: Find your motivation

What topic are you a trainer of? arts, history, sociology, economy...? can you remember when you started to learn that subject? what you felt? why you got engaged in it?

In a forum:

1. Share with us an experience you had when you were learning that subject. Why you keep learning it and now you are teaching it.

2. Can you relate the subject you are teaching to a recent news that appeared on the media? Explain us why you think it is important.

3. Tell us why you would like to keep learning.

4. Read other learners' answers, can you identify yourself with their replies? Or could you suggest or provide feedback to other people?

Exercise 2: Group formation

Based on your subject, think on an activity that could help your learners to learn from each other. It is not only about they write or make a composition in a way of "homework" of a certain topic. Is something they should do during or after that work.

For example, during the work you can propose an activity where each learner has to provide feedback to other people, or after the work done, they can assess or evaluate other learners work. Here the questions you choose are very important, do not ask for this "Assess your classmate work" but "what would you add?" "what would you remove?". Of course the best questions are those that would be related to the topic you are teaching, so think carefully about those questions.

Summary

In this chapter you have learnt why and how learner life experience should be taken into consideration on the activities that trainers design. How those activities can help to set the new knowledge and skills during the course. All that life experience should be applied and put into practise throughout the performance of active activities which involves the learner emotionally and experimentally. Those are complementary and boost each other.

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