

Adult Learning: *An Oxymoron?*

Professional Perspectives — Tools and Techniques of the Trade. The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Lori Hedstrom at 651/687-5891 or lori.hedstrom@westgroup.com.

Is “adult learning” an oxymoron? It certainly seems that way sometimes, but of course adults learn just as well as children. They just do it differently. It may seem a bit simplistic, but I like to compare the difference in the ways children and adults learn to the difference between pure and applied research. When children learn, they are doing it for the sake of learning. At the same time that they are learning facts about the world, they are also building a construct of the way the world works. Anyone who has ever been around small children know what I’m talking about.

Adults have already developed their own construct of the world. They learn best when they are interested or motivated or need to know. **Adults thrive at applied learning**, which is like applied research in that it is learning in order to solve a specific problem. That is why one doesn’t really teach adults so much as set the climate for learning to take place. What they are taught then needs to fit into their construct of the world, and they have to want it to fit. Librarians try to make them want the information they think adults need by the way their libraries set up the learning environment, present the materials, and engage the learner in various activities.

Adult learners have different learning and personality styles. I used to think I had the concentration span of a gnat. I couldn’t sit still during a traditional classroom lecture. I had to get up and move around, or talk to my neighbor, or doodle, or *do* something. But then I found out that I was a kinesthetic learner, who typically learns through doing.

There are basically **four different learning styles**, and to teach adults, it is necessary to appeal to each one. Librarians need to provide flowcharts and screen shots for the visual learner. Kinesthetic learners excel with exercises and anecdotes. Librarians need to give the aural learners a chance to talk because they learn best by repeating what is said to them. We should

even try to appeal to the more traditional read/write learners, even though they have historically fared very well with the classic law school curriculum.

Different **personality types** also affect how individuals learn. There are four basic personality types, each motivated by different learning strategies.

Guardians, who are organized, stable, and always prepared, are motivated by what they should or ought to do. They like defined rules and roles, deadlines and goals. There should always be an agenda for the guardians in a group. The teacher should also get directly to the point. When preparing materials for guardians, have structured summaries of the high points.

Analytics also like details, but they love facts, and they are more introspective. They have to know everything and have a genuine thirst for knowledge. Material prepared for analytics should always include footnotes and appendices. Most information technology people are analytics. They like to figure things out by themselves. Social interaction should be minimized. Online tutorials are good for analytics.

Idealists are also introspective, but they like to avoid conflict. They are sympathetic, almost empathetic, caring and nurturing, creative and enthusiastic. Idealists are not impressed by hierarchy but are nice and friendly to everyone. Idealists appreciate humor and creativity. They automatically understand the big picture but are not so great with details.

Artisans are the free spirits of the bunch. They are flexible and appreciate options. They are expressive and like the bells and whistles, such as the prizes sometimes used in training. Artisans like variety in training techniques; to interest them, the speaker really needs to keep the lessons moving.

This brief summary of learning styles and personality types was compiled from notes I took the first morning at a fantastic

AALL Professional Development Workshop, “Boot Camp for Teachers of Electronic Research,” May 17–18 in Atlanta. Lisa Pontius and Maryanne Gerber conducted one of the best workshops I have ever attended. They covered how to assess the learning styles of an audience and tailor instructional programs to each member, establishing realistic training goals, evaluating which electronic resources to use for each presentation or class, developing supporting materials, team teaching, and how to be a better presenter. There were plenty of role-playing exercises and small group discussions for the idealists and artisans; charts, graphs and tabs for guardians; and handouts and bibliographies for analytics.

Given all the different and sometimes contradictory adult learning styles and personality types, how does one create an environment that motivates everyone to learn? Is it even possible? **The teacher should try to reach each of the learning styles and personality types present** at a presentation, and be prepared for the fact that not everyone is going to like everything that he or she does.

For example, my first “alternative” presentation was a 1997 production of the School House Rock tune “I’m Just a Bill.” I’d been teaching legal research for three years and was tired of giving the same old boring lecture on legislative history. So I thought I’d try my hand at something that was more like a play that showed the process of enacting a bill. I think it worked for the visual, aural and kinesthetic learners. The idealists and artisans enjoyed it. But the read/write learners and guardians just thought it was stupid. The analytics didn’t even bother showing up.

After that, I was still determined to do something different, but I didn’t want to repeat the mistakes I made with “I’m Just a Bill.” So I proposed a program for AALL that was part “play” and part straight expert speaker. The Annual Meeting

A Desktop Learning Opportunity

Program Committee had asked for a program on team building, and I thought it would be interesting if the program had an actual “team” in it (I learn by doing, remember?). All I needed was a project, something that every member of a library staff would work on. I came up with “Bringing up OPAC.” In the play, the first act showed the librarians arguing about how the OPAC should work, each with only their own interests in mind. In the second act, Susan Freeman, a team building expert, came out and asked the audience what went wrong and suggested ways it could have gone better. The third act demonstrated some conflict-resolution techniques and, of course, had a happy ending.

While creating this play, Freeman also taught me about the value of visual slides and music. She put the PowerPoint show together and made the titles look like the scenes in a silent movie.

My next “play” was for my first legal-research class in the fall of 1998. I had read “Legal Bibliography Presentations Can Be Murder: An Alternative to the Lecture,” by Joe C. Morris and Rhea Ballard-Thrower in the summer 1998 issue of *Legal Reference Services Quarterly* (16 L.R.S.Q. 23 (1998)) and thought it was brilliant. Morris and Ballard-Thrower had written a take-off on a murder mystery, *Throw the Book at Them*. The play, designed to introduce nonlaw librarians to the basic titles in a Georgia law library, made extensive use of audience participation. I decided to adapt it to Tennessee law.

What have I learned from trying “alternative” ways to teach adults? Well, the **first thing is to get a theme**. With a theme, everything else really will fall into place. What is the major idea to be presented? For example, last spring we did a program aimed at summer clerks and new associates on “Tips for Your First Legal Job” at the University of Connecticut Law Library. We had an hour to impart an incredible amount of information. To get their attention, I used a “Survivor” theme. At the time, “Survivor II: The Australian Outback” was on TV, so we called the program “How to Survive in the Outback of Your First Legal Job” and used the logo and music from the show in the PowerPoint Presentation. We also gave them a

“Survival Kit,” which included a handout comparing how much various LexisNexis™ and WESTLAW searches cost and handouts on looseleaf services; research strategy; administrative law; legislative history; and Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts sources, among others. We touched on each subject briefly and emphasized that they had plenty of material to refer to later and that, if they had any questions at all, they shouldn’t hesitate to call upon the Reference Desk.

How does one choose a theme? Well, basically I steal from others. Parodies are relatively easy and almost always have auditory and visual tie-ins. Also if it’s really a parody, the presenter has a better copyright infringement defense. But seriously, I get most of my ideas from other people, talking to colleagues, reading about what others have done and going to conferences. I’ve found that people are actually flattered when asked if someone can borrow their ideas (with attribution of course).

The second thing I’ve learned is that **timing really is everything**. Ninety percent of the success of such a presentation is showing up on time. Much of the point of the format is lost if things aren’t kept moving. The average attention span of an audience is nine seconds; it is necessary to switch between methods, present new material, or do something interactive or attention-getting to keep the audiences’ attention. Whenever I first have a skeleton of a “script,” I run through it and time it so I know where I need to add and where I need to cut. It may seem odd, but I figure out the timing first. People get increasingly bored over time, so at first the time between a change in the material or presentation method is longer. Then the blocks of time between changes get shorter and shorter as the program goes on. I actually have times written on the script: We begin at 1:45 p.m.; this commercial starts at 2:00 p.m., etc.

This brings up another very important point. This kind of presentation is not the kind of thing that can be done without a lot of help. It pays on several levels to work with other people. For one thing, one particular personality type may not appeal to everyone in the audience, and more people can be reached if a

co-presenter has a different personality type. We tend to teach to the same learning style that we have; the more learning styles you can appeal to, the better. Also a co-presenter can keep an eye on the timing and the audience and give hand signals if the main presenter is going too slow or not making sense to the audience and needs to backtrack. Finally, having different people speak is just another way of changing material or presentation method; it helps keep the audience’s attention.

The third thing I’ve learned is **the need to practice, practice, practice**. Make sure everyone knows what they are supposed to do ahead of time and run through it, especially the transitions, together. The more prepared you are, the more flexible you can be when something goes dreadfully wrong, which it inevitably will. Artisans will be impressed with your flexibility.

I was asked to write this column on creative ways to teach adults because of the skits I have done, but there are many other creative presentation formats. I attended Dartmouth College’s Biomedical Libraries Fourth Annual October Conference last year. (I really enjoy seeing what librarians other than law librarians are doing; I get a lot of ideas that way.) The theme of the conference was “Creative Marketing: Promoting Library Resources and Services.” Rae Helton, director of information literacy at the University of Louisville in Kentucky, was one speaker in particular who had a lot of fantastic ideas. She talked about how she staged game shows based on “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” to market the library to students. When the library got a new OPAC in Louisville, it had a New Orleans-style funeral for the card catalog. The librarians borrowed a casket from the Drama Department and marched it around the library with the jazz band following behind playing a dirge.

Christine Ryan of Vermont Law School attended this conference and was inspired to make a video called “The Legal Research Project,” a take-off on the movie “The Blair Witch Project,” as an

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orientation guide for first-year law students. The premise is that some students are lost in the library, but the reference librarians come to save them. Ryan held auditions, which helped to publicize the library; found a law student who used to be a script writer; and even got the dean to appear in the video. The video should be on the VLS Web site by the time this article is published.

I also discovered interesting and different formats for programs at the 2000 Federal Depository Conference and Fall Depository Library Council Meeting last October. One program was in the style of the “McLaughlin Group.” The moderator asked a question and picked a member of the panel to answer it. Other panelists

could then join in. I “borrowed” this format for a program I coordinated at the 2001 Annual Meeting in Minneapolis, “The Death of the Reference Desk.” The response was quite positive. Since the speaker changed every few minutes, the audience paid more attention than it would have if there had just been three heads talking for 20 minutes each.

Finally, I’d like to mention one of the many really creative things that Joan Shear of Boston College Law Library has done to reach adult learners. Shear realized that projecting a large picture of a book behind her while she was lecturing was better than just holding up the book itself in front of the room. So she incorporated scanned images of books in

her PowerPoint presentations. The other librarians loved using them and began scanning even more images. They decided to share these images with law librarians around the country, so now anyone can go to http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/law/lawlib/aall/pictures and download them for use in presentations.

So what have you done that is a little bit different? Did it work? If so, why? If not, why not? The Professional Development Committee would like to know so they can reach as many members as possible.

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