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Adult Learning: When Miracles Happen

By **Paul Signorelli**

Something miraculous happens when adults commit themselves to learning. We become excited. We become engaged. And change occurs.

This, of course, raises an enormous question: how do we learn?

I believe it begins at the point of need; continues with desire and a sense of commitment; benefits from the support and encouragement of great trainer-teacher-learners and fellow students; and becomes effective in workplaces and other settings where what is learn can actually be applied.

Learning from a Sense of Need

Let's start with the moment of need, and let's look at an example involving a young student since I think successful learning can carry us back to moments of childlike wonder that many of us have forgotten.

While serving as a substitute teacher in a public school system many years ago, I was more or less meant to be a warm body in a classroom full of students who needed to be controlled until their instructor could return. The students were given an assignment designed to be completed with little interaction between them and me. I assured the students that if they needed help, I was more than willing to provide it, so one girl came to the desk where I was sitting and asked me if I could help her find a word in her dictionary.

"Let's start with the key words at the top of each page," I suggested, and was surprised to see that she had no idea what I was suggesting. It only took a few minutes to explain the concept of using those words to help her quickly narrow down the part of the dictionary which had the word she was seeking, and only another moment to find the word itself.

The smile on her face and the knowledge that she had picked up an essential skill she lacked remains with me to this day, and comes to mind when I think about how adults learn because I repeatedly hear the same expressions of delight when adults successfully learn something which they wanted and needed to know.

An example: I've been conducting interviews online, using Google Chat, to complete a variety of writing assignments over the past 12 months. I remember the sense of excitement, wonder, and relief I felt when I realized that a simple online written chat not only was a great way to conduct interviews, but that it left me with a transcript of the exchange as soon as the chat/interview was completed.

Having become a convert to that chat/interview format, I've introduced a number of colleagues in libraries to it and always relish the same reaction I remember receiving from the girl who learned how to more effectively use a dictionary. There is a sense of wonder, a sense of amazement at how easy it is to use with just a little practice and an openly expressed sense of gratitude that a new skill has been passed on in the course of accomplishing something concrete.

Learning from a Sense of Desire and Meaningful Collaboration

Implicit in this sort of learning success story is a sense of desire on the part of the learner and collaboration among instructors and learners.

I'm not going to suggest that reluctant learners will not learn, but I can attest to the fact that those who want to learn are going to learn much more and must faster than their more reticent colleagues.

Any of us who have been participants in or instructors for workshops where attendees are there by mandate rather than by choice knows that this creates an almost hellish situation. The person who was forced to attend might sit sullenly in the back of the room and disrupt group exercises by refusing to participate, or might continually challenge the instructor and even classmates through a combination of antagonistic questions and body language which exudes anger and belligerence. It's almost better to dismiss the class and reconvene another day without the source of trouble present than to have everyone's learning opportunities wasted, but we rarely have that option; great instructors know how to bring reluctant learners around, and if it includes having a frank discussion with the person causing the disruptions, that can easily be accomplished during a quickly called break or through a one-on-one conversation outside the actual classroom while other learners are engaged in a group project which facilitates the learning process.

When everyone present has the need to learn, a well prepared instructor can make a life-changing difference, as I saw when a group of library security guards were sent to a one-time workshop on the topic of working effectively with transgendered library users. There had been difficulties between the guards and transgender patrons, and not all the guards approached that particular session with anything nearing a sense of great anticipation. They recognized, however, that they needed help, and appreciated the fact that their organization had arranged for a first-rate and enthusiastic instructor—who, unknown to the guards at the beginning of the session, had made the switch from being female to male. The exchanges were open and direct; the instructor established an appropriate level of trust with the guards during the session before coming out; and the result was a workshop which was highly rated.

But that isn't the entire story. The most rewarding evaluation came several days later from a security guard who sought me out to discuss the learning experience. He told me he had approached the session with a great deal of apprehension and left with a completely changed—and positive—attitude. "That session changed my life," he told me, and it confirmed for me that we do not need to spend weeks or months with some learners to accomplish significant and long-lasting changes which have positive impacts on libraries, library staff and the people they serve.

Learning Where What's Learned Is Used

My friend, mentor, and informal business associate Pat Wagner (<http://pattern.com/>) says it succinctly: if we want successful learning, we have to have the support and participation of top administrators in our libraries, and we have to provide a setting where what's learned can be applied.

Having a library director, manager or supervisor attend and participate in workshops produces more than hundreds of essays and memos will ever achieve. Expecting lessons to be applied when learners return to their regular work sites produces impacts many only dream are possible.

The library learner's lament is straightforward: I loved what I learned, but there's no way I can use it in my library.

This raises a fundamental question which is all too infrequently posed: why are we sending people to workshops and providing them with other learning opportunities if we're not going to support the change those opportunities are meant to provide?

The equation for success seems apparent: if we take a basic learning need, add to it a student's desire to learn what is needed, combine that with engaged instruction and enthusiastic learning partners and provide a workplace which values and encourages the use of what is learned, the result should be obvious: the miracle of positive and sustainable change. And that's the least we should expect.

*A resource for those wanting more information: **The Adult Learner**, by Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson.*

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