

Innovators, Survivors, and Struggling Innovators: Identifying Learning Behaviors of Adults in a Career Retraining Program

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Abstract

Three categories of learners emerged: innovators, survivors, and struggling innovators. The innovators are highly motivated by the opportunity to learn, prepared to achieve within formal education, and interested in merging the skills taught into a professional narrative. As learners, they are closer to self-actualized, ready for self-directed learning, and seeking to learn additional hard skills. The survivors tend to be self-reliant as makers and believe they cannot succeed in a formal education setting. The struggling innovators share two of the key characteristics with innovators: thinking and self-expression. Members of this group earned initial career success without completing a formal education.

Keywords: Adult learners, learning theory, learner behavior

1. Introduction

Adult learners learn best as self-directed learners. Holistic, psychological theories of adult learning consider self-motivated learning as a component of becoming self-actualized. Adult learners focused on safety and relationship needs will have more difficulty directing their own learning. Project based learning and cognitive apprenticeship require self-directed learning to maximize growth and development. Project based learning includes a three phase approach: launching, performing, and presenting the project.

Three distinct profiles of adult learners (innovators, survivors, and struggling innovators) are discussed in relationship to project based learning and cognitive apprenticeship. Innovators match the established descriptions of self-directed learners whereas survivors and struggling innovators require teacher led instruction during the launch phase of a project and coaching to facilitate reflection during the performance phase of the project. Understanding the psychological needs of adult learners can help create a positive learning environment for all adult learners, especially survivors and innovators.

2. Adult Learning Theories

Adult learning theories provides a variety of characteristics of adults as learners. Adult learning theories follow the major movements of twentieth century thought, such as behaviorism, developmental psychology, cognitive structural, social interactionist, and social constructionism.

2.1 Maslow and Developmental Psychology

Developmental psychological theories of adult learning focus attention on the individual's maturity and quest for fulfillment. Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007) describe Maslow as arguing that the primary goal of learning in adulthood involves assisting learners in becoming self-actualized. Cohen & Dennick (2009) argue that the first two sets of basic needs must be met prior to any change being accomplished. Gobin, Teeroovengadam, Becceea, & Teeroovengadam (2012) summarize key findings of multiple studies which indicate that formal educational institutions impede holistic development in adult learners by intense focus on social needs rather than on psychological evolution and growth. Many students use peer confirmations as their primary means of developing or expressing self-esteem. The sample indicated a sense of having basic needs met (food, shelter, physical safety, etc.). According to holistic, psychological theories of learning, the closer students are to internally motivated self-esteem, the more self-directed their learning experiences.

2.2 Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning explains the role of the learner in helping to design and evaluate the learning experience. Self-direction may be seen as a goal of instruction like in Grow's Stages Model (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007), as an approach to power sharing between instructor and student like the process approach to andragogy (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011), or as a predisposition of adult learners in Brockett and Hiemstra's model (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Edmondson, Boyer, & Artis (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of published studies on self-directed learning to determine its key attributes. Curiosity was the only factor strongly correlated with self-direction in learning; moderate correlations were found for academic performance, future aspirations, creativity, and life satisfaction. The significance of life satisfaction as correlated with self-directed learning matches the assumption from Maslow's theory that self-direction occurs after basic and social needs are met.

Similarly, self-directed learning occurs as the result of certain preconditions. Kvedaraite, Janauskaite, Geleziniene, & Strazdiene (2013) determined two key conditions related to successful self-directed learning: collaboration and social interaction. This contradicts the self-actualization model previously described where focus on social needs impedes self-direction and self-actualization. Kvedaraite, Janauskaite, Geleziniene, & Strazdiene (2013) further reported that problem solving plays a significant role in the learning process. English & Kitsantas (2013) define self-directed learning as the ability for students to set the parameters of learning with minimal instructor intervention. Similar to Kvedaraite, Janauskaite, Geleziniene, & Strazdiene (2013), English & Kitsantas (2013) underscore the value of problem solving as a component of self-regulated and self-directed learning. Problem-based and project-based learning includes three phases (Launch, Performance, and Presentation). English & Kitsantas (2013) provide instructional "structures" to help teachers become more competent at developing students' abilities to control project outcomes, including goal setting. The three phase model condenses the interested and involved learning described by Grow (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007) into the performance phase of the project; and their instructional suggestions match the attributes of the facilitator and delegator models of instruction.

2.3 Cognitive Apprenticeship

In postsecondary education, cognitive apprenticeship is one model for project based learning. Chan, Miller, & Monroe (2009) argue that cognitive apprenticeship develops decision-making skills. Consequently, cognitive apprenticeship should be regarded as an instructional style, especially related to developing professional thinking and judgment. Backus, Keegan, Gluck, and Gulick (2010) explain that "immersive learning" situations match well with the five phases of cognitive apprenticeship: modeling and coaching from the master followed by explanation, meditation, and application by the apprentice. Cognitive apprenticeship can draw upon the attributes of curiosity, creativity, and future aspirations correlated with self-directed learning.

3. Three Groups of Adult Learners

The PRS Certificate Program enrolls adult learners. The students vary significantly based on previous work history, formal educational background, economic resources, and motivation for participating in the program. The VALS (Values in American Life Survey) categorizes consumers into two broad categories: innovators and survivors (Strategic Business Insights, 2009). Innovators possess high resources and are motivated by thinking, achieving, and self-expression. Conversely, survivors lack resources and are motivated by believing, striving, and making. This is a helpful heuristic for describing the students enrolled in the PRS program with a third category of struggling innovators.

3.1 Innovators

The innovators start the program highly motivated by the opportunity to learn, prepared to achieve within formal education, and interested in merging the skills taught into a professional narrative. They tend to enroll in the program prior to their unemployment benefits running out and their situation is physically and relationally secure. They have a professional history and often at least a bachelor's degree. As learners, they are closer to self-actualized, ready for self-directed learning, and seeking to learn additional hard skills as part of a career-in-transition.

3.2 Survivors

The survivors start the program primarily motivated by striving to improve their lives; this group tends to be self-reliant as makers with large gardens, capable of home repair and improvement, and believe they cannot succeed in a formal education setting. The typical survivor joins the program on the suggestion of their workforce center case worker. This groups' work history tends to be in areas that do not exist as readily as in the past, have major job related issues, or sporadic employment. This group is equally balanced between high school diplomas, GEDs, and previous technical certificates. As learners, they expect teacher-centered instruction, think of school as information based instead of skills, and prepared to fail or struggle.

3.3 Struggling Innovators

The struggling innovators share two of the key characteristics with innovators: thinking and self-expression. They value learning in all its forms. Members of this group include college drop outs and associate's degree holders who earned initial career success without completing a formal education. Several of them have held supervisory roles because of their commitment to ongoing learning. Because of significant economic hardship, they strive to return to their former affluence or achievement. Additionally, several of the students in this group have a history of problems associated with substance abuse, criminal records, or both. Many of these individuals have lost their social network and seek to meet their self-esteem and relationship needs through school (Gobin, Teeroovengadam, Becceea, & Teeroovengadam, 2012). As learners, students who match this profile seek peer respect for their past professional success, need to direct not only their learning but their group mates, and want to equate their knowledge and experience with the instructor's expertise. At least half of this group anticipates this program serving as a quick fix to return their career to the fast track.

4. The Projects

Students enrolled in my courses are required to develop a variety of communication plans. In Principles of Public Relations, students individually write a community relations plan from context statement to evaluation. This is a two day in-class project. Students write a comprehensive public relations plan at the end of the course. The comprehensive plan requires five class periods to complete. Both projects in the principles course emphasize completing all sections and making logical connections among objectives, audiences, messages, strategies, and evaluation.

In Mass Communication, students work as a member of team to create an initial communications plan for a plausible, hypothetical new not for profit. Students work from a basic memorandum similar to an initial client statement to develop a complete communication plan and program. Several sections of the plan are turned in as drafts: context, situation analysis, SMART objectives, and media plans. Students work on the project for approximately fifty percent of the class time.

5 Student Reactions to the Projects

5.1 Innovators

The students profiled as innovators match the assumptions of self-directed learning, cognitive apprenticeship, and working to self-actualization because their other needs physical safety and relationship needs are met. This group begins projects as involved or self-directed learners according to Grow's model. They want the teacher to serve as a consultant when they have questions. Innovators expect instructors to model the process for completing a task and to be available to answer questions during project time.

Survivors

Survivors begin working on projects almost exclusively as dependent learners. Generally, they anticipate teaching to be a unidirectional activity where they listen passively and/or take notes. In Grow's model, they need to be moved through all four stages of teaching and learning to become self-directed learners. These students often struggle with physical and relational needs; as such, they do not expect the learning experience to change them. A common lament from this group is "Just tell me what you want!" This group tends to enjoy the hard skill courses and dislike the strategic courses. They resist developing professional judgment and decision-making skills. A majority of these students think of work, or school, as time bound and separate from life itself.

5.2 Struggling Innovators

Struggling innovators often begin the program and projects confident that their prior knowledge and experience is sufficient for completing the tasks in class.

During the initial lecture or project launch phase, they make concrete connections among lecture material and their previous work experience. Struggling innovators want to skip directly to application, or the final component, of immersive learning and cognitive apprenticeship (Backus, Keegan, Gluck, and Gulick, 2010). During the performing phase, struggling innovators express anger and frustration for the new material they must assimilate: some transition into involved learners with curiosity, creativity and future aspiration. Their motivation shifts from replacing the lost career to preparing for a new career; and others asserts total dependence as learners by demanding examples of good work, requiring instructor developed rubrics, and reading instructions as clear cut directions instead of guidelines.

6. Instructional Practices to Address Needs of Survivors and Struggling Innovators

Project based learning can be described as a three phase process: launching, performing, and presenting. Innovators seem well served by the current methods of incorporating these three components of project based learning in my classes. The students met my assumptions about adult learners in that they are self-directed, apply experience to the learning, and seek instructor modeling of the process not the product. Survivors and struggling innovators could be better served by teacher-directed instruction and modeling during the launch phase; the learning experience of survivors and struggling innovators would be improved through more coaching to demonstrate their ability to explain the process or milestone and to reflect upon personal skill growth. At this time, I am unsure of any changes required during the project delivery component.

6.1 Direct Instruction and Project Launch Phase

Both survivors and struggling innovators may be better served by a project launch model developed as direct instruction, such as prepared lectures, significant numbers handouts, and sharing examples of completed projects. English & Kitsantas (2013) claim the project launch period includes directing students to assess what they know and prompting learners to become motivated to learn more about the topic. A greater instructional emphasis needs to be placed on modeling the process; students in this group need to see how a person does the task at hand (Backus, Keegan, Gluck, and Gulick, 2010). I suspect that I have relied too heavily on narrative presentation instead of demonstrating processes.

6.2 Guiding Understanding While Students Produce the Components of a Plan

During the performance phase, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on guiding struggling innovators and survivors to explain how their group moves forward on each component of the communications plan, especially her or his individual role in generating ideas, finding information, and incorporating individual work into the group project. Additionally, the instructor must model self-assessment while facilitating student reflection and self-evaluation of skill attainment and areas needing continued growth. While innovators have generally already developed these skills, survivors have not or unable to apply them to a formal learning environment. During the guided inquiry and performance phase, struggling innovators require instructor affirmations of their personal experience and its value before they can focus on addressing the problems included in project based learning. Instructor affirmation may create a more collaborative environment with enhanced social interaction (Kvedaraite, Janauskaite, Geleziniene, & Strazdiene, 2013) that allows struggling innovators to progress to self-directed learners and competent, strategic thinkers.

7. Conclusion

Adult learning theory posits several assumptions about the attributes of adult learners, especially as self-directed learners. Developmental psychology stresses self-actualization or self-motivated learning as essential adult learner. Adult learners who struggle to meet safety or relational needs do not appear to be self-directed in creating and completing class projects. Both project based learning and cognitive apprenticeships require self-directed learning to be most successful. In this case study, three personalities of adult learners were explained: innovators, struggling innovators, and survivors. Principles of cognitive apprenticeship provide clear recommendations to modify instruction during the project launch and guided production or guided inquiry phases. Ideally, this modified model will better meet the needs of struggling innovators and survivors. Additional research on Grow's developmental model may provide valuable insight for further developing instructional practices.

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