

Adult Learning Principles and the Public Safety Trainer

By

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A progressive and contemporary training program for public safety professionals, either at entry-level or in-service, must take into account adult learning theory in order to develop and deliver a realistic, effective and engaging training program, regardless of the occupational sub-topic.

This is essentially a two-part effort. First, it requires the formulation and preparation of a lesson plan embodying adult learning principles (theory). Secondly, and probably most importantly, it demands a classroom delivery of the instructional material using active learning processes by a *facilitator*, rather than the traditional “talking head” instructor (practice).

There are five generally recognized key principles of adult learning: ¹

- The trainee accepts the material presented based on evidence, not blind faith. Trainees need to be assured of the credibility of the information and how it relates to the real-world in which they operate.
- The adult learner is active rather than passive during the learning process. Trainees contribute their thoughts and ideas and relate relevant personal experiences to the subject being taught.
- Each trainee’s individual needs must be addressed. Even though experience and education levels vary, the instructor who *facilitates* discussions well can provide a valuable learning experience for even the most knowledgeable individual in the class.
- The trainees evaluate themselves. As learning progresses, individuals conduct an internal self-assessment of their understanding of the material and how it relates to their personal situation.
- Instructional methods that promote effective adult learning must be used. Discussion, role-playing and the demonstration method of instruction provide an opportunity for trainees to interact with one another and promote an effective learning environment.

THEORY

In 1956, Benjamin Bloom, an educational psychologist, along with a committee of collaborators, developed a taxonomy (or classification system) of levels of thinking functions critical to the human learning process.

Bloom and his colleagues postulated that thinking abilities could be measured along a base-line from simple to complex. This evolved into what is now known as *Bloom’s Taxonomy of*

¹ L. G. Nicholson, *Instructor Development Training: A Guide for Security and Law Enforcement*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Woburn, MA, 1997, pp. 2-3.

Educational Objectives, a seminal work which identified the three overlapping learning domains: Cognitive, Psychomotor and Affective.

Correctional trainers should have at least a “nodding acquaintance” with these adult learning domains (or areas of intellectual activity), which are human processes which define how learning takes place. For the adult learner, the most important domains are Cognitive and Psychomotor.

The cognitive domain basically refers to thinking. It’s how a person absorbs and handles information, concepts and abstracts. The psychomotor domain pertains to how a person physically does things; it involves motor skills, dexterity, and manual coordination.

Bloom’s Taxonomy illustrates of how people absorb, process and respond to different levels of learning stimuli. The taxonomy identified six levels of learning, from the very basic (Knowledge) to the more complex and abstract (Evaluation).

Most learning takes place across multiple cognitive levels and even across the overlapping cognitive and psychomotor domains. By using action or outcome-based verbs that are compatible with these different levels, the correctional trainer can develop reliable learning objectives and prepare trainee tests at different levels of complexity. A few examples:

Levels	Verbs	Objective Example
Knowledge	Define, Label, Name	Define the mission statement of the state correctional agency.
Comprehension	Describe, Explain, Identify	Identify guidelines for prevention of inmate disturbances.
Application	Demonstrate, Employ, Practice	Demonstrate the proper method for carrying and utilizing the riot baton, riot helmet, shield and flak vest.
Analysis	Analyze, Differentiate Construct	Analyze the state correctional agency’s response plan to a power failure in the maximum security block.
Synthesis	Formulate, Plan, Devise	Devise a security plan to transport violent inmates to a newly-designated psychiatric facility for evaluation.
Evaluation	Categorize, Critique, Examine	Critique the correctional agency’s use of force continuum during a cellblock riot.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Before proceeding further, we should discuss training goals and objectives. These are not conceptual oddities from education’s ivory tower, but are instead, critically important standards and guidelines for lesson plan preparation and training delivery.

Let’s go back to basics on training goals and objectives. They are entirely different entities and should not be used interchangeably.

Training goals are “big picture” statements; they broadly explain what the training is all about. Typically, a well-balanced lesson plan can proceed quite nicely with only one or two training goals.

Put another way, a training goal is the overall learning outcome that can be expected at the conclusion of a course of instruction.

Training objectives on the other hand, are more specific and precise (and usually more plentiful). They tell the instructor what is to be taught and they advise the trainee what is to be learned (and sometimes what is to be tested). Ideally, there should be a training objective for every discrete instructional element contained within a lesson plan. A training objective basically indicates what the trainee is expected to know and what he or she should be capable of proficiently accomplishing.

Public safety instructors will obviously be more concerned with training objectives. At some point, every instructor or trainer will have to write training objectives when developing their lesson plan. A training objective normally consist of two distinct parts:

- An action verb that describes the learning that is required, e.g., *identify, recognize, list, describe, apply, demonstrate, etc.*
- The knowledge or skill component of the course topic, e.g., agency policy, searching and handcuffing procedure, inmate processing, etc.

Course development begins with identifying and writing your training goal(s)

Once you have decided on the training goals, it will be necessary to identify, articulate and write your lesson plan’s training objectives. Goals first; objectives next.

When developing training objectives, the instructor should ask: “What specific knowledge, proficiencies or competencies does the trainee need in order to satisfy the stated training goal?” Using that interrogatory as your base, you can then prepare training objectives that will (hopefully) fulfill that training goal.

TESTING

There are two types of training objectives—written, (cognitive) objectives, and practical, (psychomotor) objectives— which are defined by the manner in which they must be tested.

In written tests, the multiple-choice format is preferred because it is a relatively easy test to prepare and mark, and trainees are usually well-acquainted with the multiple-choice testing method and require little pre-test explanation. And hey, while we’re at it, true-or false questions are “junior-high” as are fill-in-the-blank questions, they have no legitimate place in adult education testing. Essay and verbal testing is rarely done and is not recommended.

When developing questions for a written test, attention must be given to the passing mark required by the program. If the passing grade is 70 percent, the instructor should develop at least four written questions for each training objective being tested.

A minimal four-question standard, per objective, will allow a trainee to get three out of four questions correct and still achieve a passing grade. Using less than four questions per objective will require the trainee to get every question right in order to pass.

Testing practical (or demonstrable) objectives involves having the trainee physically demonstrate that he or she can perform the required skill or competency.

Producing practical tests can be more difficult than designing a written test. For practical test exercises, the instructor must first identify and then write-out the stages of the procedure or technique in the order in which they should be performed.

These stages then become the “benchmarks,” or criteria that the trainee needs to sequentially perform in order to demonstrate competency in that training objective. Basically, benchmarks are sequenced-guidelines that direct the actions of trainees in properly performing the test.

A progressive lesson plan will include both written testing for theory and practical testing to verify trainee proficiencies in executing manual techniques and procedures. If tests are planned and designed with careful insight into their relevance to the appropriate training objectives, the testing scheme should accurately measure the trainees’ understanding of the training materials and their performance of the required proficiencies.

Finally, an unbiased and critically honest test evaluation by both training staff colleagues and trainees will help the instructor to determine which parts of the lesson plan are effective and which parts need to be improved upon or completely overhauled.

DELIVERY

Facilitation is the contemporary buzz-word in adult education, particularly in public safety training. Everyone wants you to be a facilitator rather than a dull, dreary “talking-head” lecturer, right?

The obvious question is, “So, how do I facilitate—what exactly do I do different than what I’m doing now?” We suggest the Socratic Method.

Extensively used in law schools, the Socratic Method is analogous with participatory and interactive learning, which pretty much describes facilitated learning. It essentially requires the trainer to *ask* rather than to simply *tell*.

The text books will tell you that facilitated training is speculative, interactive and participatory. So like, ...um, what does that really mean?

Basically, it requires the facilitator-trainer to employ creative teaching aids, combined with a highly personalized coaching style, to create a Socratic-type dialogue with his or her trainees that will result in a heightened and retentive learning experience. How’s that?

The trainer who routinely and reflexively answers trainees' questions loses an invaluable opportunity to allow trainees to help discover the correct or acceptable response on their own volition.

This is precisely the weakness in the lecture-method; it deprives the trainee the option of engaging in the type of critical thinking—questioning, analyzing, reasoning—that can lead to an enhanced understanding and appreciation of an idea that is central to the subject matter.

Facilitated learning in a public safety training setting is an circuitous, group dialogue which is guided, coaxed and tweaked—but never dominated—by the facilitator. The purpose is to inculcate in trainees the inclination to rigorously and critically analyze issues, concepts and problems they will likely encounter in real-world correctional operations.

Interactive learning peripherally involves role-playing, simulations, scenario case studies, panel discussions, guest speakers and improvisational exercises. These techniques encourage trainees to use their imagination and intuitive knowledge to explore the connection between theory and practice and to experience the manner in which important social and ethical issues can arise in even the most seemingly-innocuous situations.

FACILITATED INSTRUCTION

Enough theory! Let's get on to real-world, practical applications.

A reasonably effective facilitation approach using the Socratic Method as a base, is as follows: ²

- Define the lesson you want the trainees to learn. Decide beforehand what idea(s) you want them to come away with.
- Think up a hypothetical situation to use as a point-of-departure.
- Devise a line of questions designed to point the trainees into the desired direction.
- Make the trainees take a personal position by asking: "What would *you* do if...?"
- Complicate the situation by throwing in a monkey wrench: "What if this happened, ...what would you do then?"
- After each step, raise the stakes: "Now what would you do next?"
- Expected the unexpected and prepare to be surprised. Be prepared to think quickly and reflexively.

IMPLEMENTATION

If this is all new to you, you don't have to toss your existing lesson plans, but you may need to seriously re-think how you present your instructional material.

² Elizabeth Garrett, *The Socratic Method: A Lesson Plan*, The University of Chicago Law School, http://www.goodcharacter.com/Socratic_method.html, Internet, Accessed on 4/30/03, 1999-99.

First, you should identify and isolate the central ideas, concepts and principles in your training topic. Next, you need to develop a series of incisive, probing questions that can lead to an in-depth discussion of these pivotal elements.

Let the discussion flow, but don't permit any one trainee (or yourself) to dominate or hog the conversation. A few pointers:

- Establish an ironclad classroom rule: *Every trainee will recite everyday*—No exceptions—this will keep everyone awake, alert and prepared.
- As much as possible, disregard those trainees that are eager to respond. Instead, select the ones that are trying to hide behind their workbooks.
- Make responding trainees stand up when reciting. The others will pay more attention to the stand-up speaker than to the slouching, mumbling one.
- Don't let the discussion drift—stay on top of the central topic.
- Maintain your objectivity. Don't get into personalities or private agendas.
- Pay compliments liberally; encourage creativity and spontaneity.
- Listen without interrupting—listen *to* your trainees, not just *at* them.
- Be enthusiastic rather than pedantic.
- Be persuasive when necessary; negotiate rather than dictate.
- Be a coach; be a counselor, be a diplomat—don't just be a supervisor.
- You should focus on the big picture, let the trainees clarify the details.
- Be flexible; roll with the punches (This is really, really good career advice for the public safety professional, including yourself).
- Don't let your ego (or your rank) get in the way of an open, frank and candid assessment of a training issue.
- Ensure that your discussion adequately covers the central ideas in your lesson plan. Back up and summarize—constantly and continually.
- Remember your fundamentals. Emphasize the professional basics—always!
- Keep asking questions. Your predictable response should always be: “Well, what if...!”
- Take the bad days in stride. Not everyone of your trainees will “get it” everyday. Curb your exasperation and try a different approach next time (...and maybe you're the problem Mr. or Ms Instructor!)

Look, facilitation can't do it all. You still have to saturate your lesson plans liberally with carefully structured scenarios and simulations; they are, after all, the heart of interactive adult learning, much more so than endless discussion, debate and dialogue.

Ditto for all other types of structured learning activities, such as case studies, role play, games and application projects, all of which should be liberally supported by interesting audio and visual aids.

Warning: This stuff is time and labor-intensive and requires lots of careful planning and detailed preparation. The payoff, however, comes with graduating a dynamic group of dedicated and conscientious adults who are well-trained, confident and eager to get on with their public safety careers in professional corrections.