

Teaching for Retention through the Lens of Inclusion

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Abstract: As we interface with a diverse world, it is inevitable that we will use our cultural lens to adapt information. Continuing education material must be developed through the lens of inclusive practice. Therefore, teaching for retention requires a deliberate commitment to an anti-oppressive framework while being mindful of the theoretical perspectives that exclude or marginalize. Providing a holistic approach to teaching will help to develop a diverse group of lifelong learners who mirror the population. This paper will reflect the changing landscape of how we, two professors teaching pedagogy, have been shaped by the deliberate intentions of incorporating inclusion into the academic and continuing education platforms.

Keywords: lifelong learning, practice competency, experiential learning

As the profession of social work continues to evolve, the manner we as trainers and educators expand adult learning should be humanizing. For this to happen, we must first understand that we cannot separate the person from their experiences, as our experiences are culturally framed and shaped. How we experience events may change according to the language and categories of analysis we use, and according to the cultural, moral, and ideological vantage points from which they are viewed (Brookfield, 1996). Therefore, our experiences and lenses through which we view the world shape how we receive and integrate information for learning. Invaluable teaching moments can be lost if we do not carefully examine the varying cultural lenses adult learners bring with them.

The authors of this article include a Black woman and a White middle-aged woman. Each life experience has had influences on how we approach continuing education. As one who develops training, I (Joan) as a White woman must be cognizant of my worldview and privilege so that I can see when my training is neglecting to address others' identities and the life experiences that influence their work. This was evident in a training I recently completed when participants questioned the characterization of an individual within a scenario. As a result, I changed the scenario to exclude information that could appear stereotypical.

The need to examine the best methods to teach in ways that are equitable continues to be an area for further research. Presently, the application of learning is influenced by both predisposing factors, such as environment and one's motivation toward training and learning (Smith et al., 2006). In a study of psychologists, Taylor and Neimeyer (2015) found lifelong learning positively related to competence and linked to a desire for professional skill enhancement. The additional step of having learners reflect on what they learned can enhance future application in practice; because of this, Fletcher et al. (2010) highlighted a model of reflection that incorporated consideration of learning and training development before, during, and after training opportunities. Reflecting on my own actions, I (Joan) did not ignore differences, but instead I recognized and affirmed differences by being open to learn and correct my error.

Fostering a learning environment that gives learners a sense of belonging and makes them feel

safe to share their cultural stories can enhance the quality of their learning. I (Shakira) often allow participants to incorporate their experiences into the session for a more meaningful discussion and higher learning retention. Teater (2011) emphasized incorporating teaching and learning theory into curricular development to promote positive learning outcomes. Attending to the needs of the learner is one way to increase the relevance of the course material to that learner. These needs can be captured using a range of teaching and learning strategies; training and development that includes a clear vision of future application—application beyond the training environment—can enhance the relevance of material to students. Bloom’s (1956) Taxonomy can be helpful in determining the learning outcomes with progressively higher levels of learning, from simply understanding to synthesis of ideas, as training content becomes more advanced.

Interdisciplinary training benefits from heterogeneous groups that allow transfer of learning in complex situations using real-world scenarios and scaffolded learning (Vandenhouten, et al., 2017). Use of problem-based scenarios, case studies, and active learning strategies apply the andragogical principles to the training curriculum.

I (Joan) have applied adult learning concepts to training development, including opportunities for participants to work on a loosely defined problem in small groups. In an evaluation of a training that focused on ethics concerns, a respondent noted that this method “gives an opportunity to actually discuss issues that [they had] previously thought about,” and another shared that such activities “ensure that [they are] making ethical decisions that protect the rights [of their] clients.” These small group activities allow differing perspectives to be highlighted. Comments from one attendee demonstrated this concept, stating the content learned “[made them] more aware of personal biases and what [they] do when in the workplace.” The same outcomes have been noted by graduate students in the classroom. A student explained on the final evaluation for a required ethics course that “the group discussion brought in perspectives and sides [they] wouldn’t have considered[,] which was good.” A student in an online psychopathology course further noted that the “use of case studies [was] challenging at first[,] but [they] believe [the case studies] ultimately encouraged [their] learning of the material the most.”

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning can allow space for excluded voices and perspectives in adult education as it requires a permissive atmosphere in which [adult learners] feel free to put forth their ideas and their questions without the instructor’s reacting in the form of rejection, derision, blame, or authoritarian injunctions to think along certain other lines preferred by the instructor. (Glover & Hower, 1956, p. 14)

I (Joan) have encouraged participatory learning in continuing education sessions. This includes placing the participants in the role of consultant whereby they review material completed by earlier groups of trainees and then provide alternative solutions. This proved particularly useful when a modified World Café (World Café Community Foundation, n.d.) model was used in the training. The solutions developed often take a course of action I as the trainer would not

necessarily have identified but that is equally effective. I also often require a peer review process with large classroom projects. When providing feedback on a group project, each group member assesses the participation of group members.

Consequently, unlike more traditional teaching techniques such as lecturing, experiential learning involves the adult learners (and not only the instructor) in actively shaping the learning process (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). As an instructor (Shakira), my participants have taught me that the learning process is not only a hands-on process, but one that is fluid, where connections to participants' lived experiences increase their knowledge and potentially their retention of the material. An example of this can be seen in students who have gone through this process and return years later to tell me, "I still remember what we learned and I am using it as a professional social worker," or "I never thought about a group of people this way and because of shared experiences, my thinking has changed for the better."

A process of critical reflection allows the individual to link cognitive dimensions to experiences in practice (Jordi, 2011). In developing online continuing education, I (Joan) require participant reflections on content presented. As feedback on one training, a participant noted, "I thought it was helpful to learn the materials and be given the chance to write about what we learned and how to apply it to our daily lives." Consideration of integrative learning allows intentional development of activities—activities which incorporate active means of applying the information taught. Both of us have utilized case studies, problem-based learning, and application through role-playing in training to foster engagement with the material. Following the activity, dialogue about the key learning reinforces concepts and allows discussion for broader application. In further development of ethical practice specifically, attention to this kind of reflection is important to increasing ethical sensitivity and encouraging ethical practice.

There are several ways we as educators can learn from others and ourselves through critical reflection: Kisfalvi and Oliver (2015) suggest taking part, whenever possible, in seminars on leading discussions and handling difficult situations that may arise when teaching with experiential methods. Alternatively, we can identify colleagues whose teaching approaches we admire, sit in on their classes, and discuss observations and reactions. Collaborative team teaching is another way to develop our pedagogy, using the experience to observe each other and to provide feedback. Finally, if adult learners consent, educators can benefit from recording class sessions for self-evaluation or feedback from our peers.

Our experiences with both recording and collaborative team teaching have changed the way we view our teaching and enhanced our knowledge of the benefits of feedback. Continuing education is now being offered in multiple modalities, including digital means. Using learners' existing knowledge structures, encouraging deep learning, increasing question-asking by the learner, developing critical thinking skills, enhancing reading skills, improving comprehension monitoring, and creating a supportive learning environment are just some of the approaches to assess learning. These approaches speak mainly to developing "skills," although the final item addresses developing motivation for learning (Joshi et al., 2001).

In the world of distance learning, recording sessions is not uncommon. Use of recordings is

helpful for adult learners who must acquire the training but have multiple time demands, or for adult learners who need to refresh the training materials later. Feedback to the developer/trainer regardless of modality can include discussion of pace, handling of challenging topics, comfort with silence to allow adult learners to gather their thoughts, use of topic-relevant polling questions to set the session tone, and assignment of responsibilities in breakout groups, including in the online forum. In one instance, I (Shakira) observed how feedback outlined a positive reaction to the approach to policy through the lens of power, privilege, and oppression which concretely demonstrated how policies have impacted various groups of people differently. Such feedback and dialogue enhance my training and online presence and promote subject area inclusion. My (Joan) graduate ethics course is taught as a hybrid mix of face-to-face and online. I have received comments from students in their final course evaluations noting that recorded lectures were helpful, as students could go back to them to ensure understanding of the material.

A collaborative training experience can provide the opportunity for trainers to model for participants. Individually, trainers are dynamic—but collectively, working as a team, trainers are able to model respect for differences, interdependence, and de-escalation skills for training environment management. The process can be a humbling one for the trainers but also allow them to provide mentorship for each other. Sinclair (2007) suggests finding a mentor well-versed in experiential teaching and reaching out to them both before teaching, to discuss the approaches, and after teaching, to debrief. The benefit of following through with these recommendations is that over time one can gauge one's own growth and take confidence from improved abilities to deal not only with challenging adult learners but also with one's own emotions and reactions (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015).

Since many jurisdictions require continuing education on ethics and boundaries on an ongoing basis for licensure, incorporating opportunities for reflection allows the participant to contemplate materials presented and construct appropriate responses using a framework presented by the trainer. I (Joan) have used Congress' ETHIC model (Congress, 2000) applied to a range of case scenarios; adding complicating factors to the scenarios allows a range of skill levels to address ethical issues. Since the scenarios are discussed in small groups, participants gain multiple perspectives when examining these issues. Feedback from participants demonstrates the benefits of scenario work. Discussions expand from the initial scenario to related experiences of the participants, thus expanding conceptual understanding. This strategy is consistent with those supported in the literature as promoting lifelong learning (Laal & Laal, 2012; Scales et al., 2011).

Assessing Effectiveness

A multicultural assessment would address the needs of those with cultural lenses that are different from their counterparts within the learning environment. Adult learners are diverse and learn in a variety of ways; however, the ability to demonstrate what they have learned in specific ways is essential to assessing effectiveness. Different approaches may be used to engage adult learners in the material, but demonstration of an adult learner's knowledge, skills, and abilities is done uniformly in the same assignment or approach (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). I (Shakira) have learned that when I consider culture, race, ethnicity, the adult learner experience,

and self-awareness in the overall learning experience, I must also take into account how learners demonstrate knowledge in their daily lives and with the people around them.

An evidence-based strategy for assessing effectiveness of continuing education includes a pre- and post-test as well as follow-up several months after the training (Parrish & Rubin, 2011). In most instances, however, evaluation is completed immediately following training completion. The Association of Social Work Boards' (ASWB, 2018) continuing education approval requires evaluation of each of the learning objectives as well as evaluation of practice relevancy, currency, and effective presentation of the material. For example, I (Joan) recently completed evaluation of a training curriculum for adult protective services workers. The evaluations—following each of the three days of training—asked respondents to assess their degree of knowledge prior to and after the training of each learning objective for the day. There was a statistically significant difference between perceptions of learning as an outcome of the training by participants. Additional questions included what the participants felt was new learning and what they were most likely to use in future practice. These responses can be assessed for thematic patterns outlining material that is needed in future offerings of the training curriculum. A pre- and post-test score also demonstrated statistically significant improvement in knowledge of the material presented (Groessler, 2018). While not completed due to a variety of factors, a later follow-up to participants could have provided evidence that materials from the training were utilized in practice.

Conclusion

Whether classes are online or in-person, attention to the needs of the learner using andragogical principles is imperative. Models may not address issues related to inclusion, so it is up to trainers to become aware of themselves and their privilege in order to truly incorporate best practices to address the deficiencies in their training. The use of a mentor to improve practice and feedback from the learners themselves will enhance the training as well as inform the implicit messages given to training participants. There is minimal research around critical reflection related to inclusive practices in the training environment. It is through the voices of those impacted by exclusionary practice that the profession can best serve practitioners and the individuals they interact with.

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