

# Effectively Teaching Servant Leadership to Adult Learners

Servant Leadership Research Roundtable – August 2005

Karen S. Fenton – LeShore, Ph.D.  
Regent University

## Overview of Adult Learning Theory

Research has considerably demonstrated the dichotomy between adult and child/adolescent learning styles (Knowles, 1984; Galbraith, 2004; Merriam, 2001; Brookfeld, 1986; Cranton, 1998; Daloz, 1986; Dean, G.J, 2002; Aslanian, C.B.,2001;Apps, J.W., 1989; Tennant, M., & Pogson, P.,1995). Based on the research, given that adults do not learn in the same manner as children/adolescents, it is reasonable to concede that one cannot teach adults utilizing techniques developed and intended to facilitate the child/adolescent learning experience. To that end, theoretically, teaching adults requires the utilization of what is known as the *process model*, while teaching children/adolescents requires what is theoretically known as the *content model* (Cranton, 1998).

As proffered by Cranton (1998), the content model relies on the teacher to determine what knowledge or skills needed to be learned. This model is particularly governed by the assumption that child/adolescent learning is dependent, inconsequential, based on physical, mental and social development and is typically applied later in the learning experience (Knowles, 1984). Alternatively, the process model relies on a collaborative environment whereby adult learners acquire the necessary resources to obtain information and skills that satisfy their educational needs. Knowles (1984) and Cranton (1998) submit that this model is driven by the assumptions that adult learners enter their learning experience as independent and self-directed. They further assert that the adult learning experience is often categorized as collaborative, mutual and reflective of the adult learner's experiential history.

Effective Teaching of Adult Learners

## Effective Teaching of Adult Learners

Effectively teaching adult learners largely depends on acquiring a distinct balance between an appropriate philosophical vision of teaching and the understanding and implementation of that vision into a practical instructional process and its related elements (Galbraith, 2004). According to Heimlich and Norland (1994, p. 113), "teaching is a skill and a gift; a talent and a technique." Effective teaching of adult learners should reflect a delicate balance of understanding one's self as a teacher and knowing how to develop learning encounters that are meaningful and useful in the promotion of personal, academic and professional growth (Galbraith, 2004).

In support of this notion, Galbraith (2004) further purports that an effective teaching style should encompass five major knowledge areas: Knowledge of Principle of Practice; Knowledge of Self; Knowledge of Adult Learners; Knowledge of Content and Knowledge of Methods.

The following sections of this article will offer discussion on each knowledge area and; subsequently, fold those areas into the teaching conceptualization of servant leadership to ultimately yield a theoretical and practical framework.

### **Knowledge of Principles of Practice**

Teachers of adults should aim to gain awareness of some of the principles that guide their teaching practice. Knowles (1984) identified seven (7) components of the science of helping adults learn that suggest some principles that the teacher should possess. They are:

1. Establishment of a physical and psychological climate conducive to learning.
2. Involvement of learners in mutual planning of teaching methods.
3. Involvement of learners in diagnosing their educational needs.
4. Encouragement of learners to formulate their learning objectives.
5. Encouragement of learners to identify resources and devise strategies for using such resources to accomplish their learning objectives.
6. Assist adult learners in executing their learning objectives.
7. Involvement of learners in evaluating their learning process.

In addition, Brookfield (1986, pp. 9-11) cites three additional practice principal components:

1. Participation in the learning encounter is voluntary;
2. Praxis should be placed at the heart of effective facilitation; and
3. Facilitation should aim to foster in adults a spirit of critical reflection.

Implicit within these principles of effective practice are general characteristics of a teacher of adults in relation to how a teacher can help an adult learn.

### **Knowledge of Self**

Baptiste (2003, p.9) poignantly postulates that:

As teachers, we are not the same persons in every situation. We think differently about ourselves in different situations; we rank our values and priorities differently and we bring different aptitudes, expertise and resources to different situations.

Teachers of adults should be intimately aware of who they are as teachers. Cognizance of one's belief system, values and attitudes are necessary, particularly as it relates to the teaching experience and overall learning process. Cranton (1998) wisely sums this assumption by noting, "if we don't know who we are as human beings, it is difficult to know who we are as teachers" (p.6). Apps (1996, pp. 63) echoes a similar sentiment as he suggests, "our beliefs and values largely influence what we do and how we do it; in other words, our beliefs and values are a basis for who we are as teachers and influence greatly how we teach."

### **Knowledge of Adult Learners**

Galbraith (1991b) articulates, "...it is the multifaceted physiological, psychological, sociological and developmental aspects of the adult learner that contribute to and make a challenging and enriching educational encounter" (pp. 18). To that end, this articulation encompasses three critical dimensions: Adult learners bring to the educational setting a diversity of prior experiences and preset ideas about what it means to be a learner.

Learners engage in educational activities for a number of reasons such as the need to enhance cognitive interests, social stimulation, professional advancement and vocational interests. Each adult learner who enters the educational encounter has experienced different marker events, life transitions, and professional and familial roles.

Gleaning insights and understanding of the adult learner aids in the journey of enhancing meaningful educational encounters.

### **Knowledge of Content**

Heimlich and Norland (1994) espouse that content is the specific domain of knowledge, skills, abilities and affect addressed during the teaching/learning exchange. Content dictates appropriate teaching

strategies, fosters standards against which to compare proficiency, promotes dialogue and provides flexibility and responsiveness and involves the organization and functioning of the adult group itself.

Congruent with the knowledge area of the adult learner, knowledge of content necessitates that the teacher be concerned with not only *what* will be taught, but to *whom*, which magnifies the human side of the learning equation.

### **Knowledge of Methods**

Methods are those tools to use within the instructional process to enhance the teaching and learning encounter. Knowledge of methods is important in the developing of teacher effectiveness because it marries the other knowledge areas of principle of practice, self, adult learners and content (Galbraith, 2004).

### **Effective teaching of Servant Leadership and Adult Learners**

Robert Greenleaf (1977) coined the concept of a servant leader, a normative theory of leadership. Greenleaf (1977) maintains, “the servant leader *is* a servant first” (pp.27). Parallel with this position is that the servant leader makes sure that, “ other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (pp. 27).

To achieve this, Greenleaf (1977) submits that the servant leader continually query whether his leadership fosters growth in those being served? Do those being served become healthier, wiser, freer and more autonomous? And do those being served ultimately become servants?

From this author’s perspective as a teacher of adults, this servant based questioning along with the areas of knowledge discussed earlier serve as the genesis for effectively teaching servant leadership. By utilizing the areas of knowledge and the servant leadership theoretical tenets, the teacher of adult learners can establish an effective teaching style through the following merged considerations.

### **Knowledge of Principle of Practice/Knowledge of Self and Servant Leadership**

Concisely stated, knowledge of principle of practice encourages the teacher to be aware of those principles, which govern their teaching practice. A large part of the principles highlighted by Knowles (1984) maintains that the teacher “involve” and “encourage” the adult learner in the learning process.

Consistent with the tenets of servant leadership, the practice of “involving and encouraging” fosters growth in the adult learner. This author should note that as teacher of adults, knowledge of self closely interfaced with principle of practice. As noted earlier, knowledge of self requires awareness of one’s belief system, value and attitudes. Before embarking upon teaching servant leadership, this author examined her beliefs, attitudes and value system to only determine that a servant first approach was most closely associated with her personal belief system.

In further support, Galbraith (2004) ascertains that one character of effectively teaching is modeling. This author’s teaching experience has proven that personal awareness of a servant first frame of reference through examination of self and subsequently modeling of a servant first frame of reference not only enhanced the overall learning experience, but also strengthened the principle of practice.

The teacher aiming to emulate servant leadership should adhere to Greenleaf’s (1977) key behavioral and conceptual characteristics. These contextualized characteristics include:

1. **Listening and Understanding:** Being able to remove him/herself from a given situation and allow silence and oftentimes introspection to govern the learning encounter.
2. **Language and Imagination:** The teacher aiming to serve first is able to artfully communicate his/her vision and gain the acceptance of his/her adult learners, particularly if it is consistent with their learning objectives.
3. **Acceptance and Empathy:** The teacher aiming to serve first possesses the ability to accept and empathize, never reject.

4. Foresight: A teacher aiming to serve first is able to exercise a better than average guess about what is going to happen in the future context of the learning experience, particularly as it relates to achieving learning outcomes.
5. Awareness and Perception: The teacher aiming to serve first makes use of his/her sensory experiences. Continually seeking out the opportunity to fold in awareness and perceptions as offered by their senses into their practice principle of teaching.
6. Persuasion: The teacher aiming to serve first seeks to convince adult learners versus coercing or using one's positional authority.
7. Commitment – the teacher aiming to serve first is committed to the growth of the adult learners and believes that the learners have significant intrinsic value beyond tangible contributions.

### **Knowledge of the Adult Learner and Servant Leadership**

Greenleaf (1977) maintains that the servant leader aspires to ensure that, “other people’s highest priorities are served” (p. 27). An effective teacher who ascribes to the servant first approach and models the servant first behavior should be acutely aware of the learning needs of the adult learner. To that end, the teacher assists the adult learner in satisfying cognitive interests in learning servant leadership, achieving professional advancement, social stimulation and any other learning or advancement priorities brought to the learning experience.

### **Knowledge of Content and Servant Leadership**

A traditional part of the teaching process is astute knowledge of the content of the subject being taught. An effective teacher of servant leadership should be intimately aware of its theory base, its potential for practical application and its influence in a larger organizational context. Equally important to the effectiveness of teaching adult learners is inviting the experiential component to the learning experience so as to encourage the learner to identify past and current experiences that may have demonstrated a servant first approach unbeknownst to the adult learner.

### **Knowledge of Method and Servant Leadership**

As noted earlier, the knowledge of methods are those tools used within the instructional process to enhance the teaching and learning encounter. As a teacher of servant leadership, utilizing methods that demonstrate a servant first approach is fruitful. Such methods might include class exercises that allow the student to assess their leadership style (servant versus transformational) or viewing a movie that exemplifies contemporary servant leadership. Class discussions are also useful methods as dialogue is meaningful to the adult learning experience.

### **Conclusion**

A heart for and modeling of a servant first approach enhances and culminates the teacher/adult learner experience and encounter. If the teacher ascribes to a servant first approach with the adult learner and embrace their objectives as paramount, the outcome should yield adult learners that are “wiser, freer, autonomous and likely to serve others.” Phrased similarly by Greenleaf (1977, p.14), but contextualized for the purpose of this article, “natural servant teachers are persons who understand they are servants first. Consequently, they are more likely to define and strive to meet the highest priority needs of the adult learner, than is the leader (teacher) first and who serves out of the prompting of conscience or in conformity with normative teaching expectations.”

## References

- Apps, J.W. (1989). Foundations for effective teaching. In E. Hayes (Ed.), *Effective teaching styles* (pp. 17-27). New Directions for Continuing Education, no. 43. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Apps, J. W. (1996). *Teaching from the heart*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Aslanian, C.B. (2001). *Adult students today*. New York: The College Board.
- Baptiste, I. (2003). Teaching with the grain: A situationally grounded approach to teacher training. *PAACE Journal of Life long Learning*, 12, 1-29.
- Brookfield, S.D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cranton, P. (1998). *No one way: Teaching and learning in higher education*. Toronto: Wall and Emerson.
- Dean, G.J. (2002). *Designing instruction for adult learners* (2<sup>nd</sup>, ed.). Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Daloz, L.A. (1986). *Effective teaching and mentoring*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.
- Galbraith, M.W. (Ed.). (1991b). *Facilitating adult learning: A transactional process*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Galbraith, M.W. (Ed.). (2004). *Adult learning methods: A guide for effective instruction*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant Leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Heimlich, J., and Norland, E. (1994). *Developing teaching style in adult education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Knowles, M. (1984). *The adult learner: A neglected species* (3<sup>rd</sup>, ed.). Houston: Gulf.
- Merriam, S.B. (2001). *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tennant, M., & Pogson, P. (1995). *Learning and change in the adult years*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.