Title

Learning Environments for Adult Learners: Implications for Teacher Development

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Deming (1986) insists that successful organizations must institute training and encourage education and self-improvement for everyone. Difficulties in providing quality teacher workshops in ESL programs come from a variety of factors. Conflicting work and out-of-work schedules, scheduling workshop time in a busy teaching day, and little or no pay for workshop attendance all contribute to the problem of how to provide teacher workshops. Participation, content, and organization of staff development programs are frequently discussed at presentations at ESL conferences, but few of these presentations deal with the needs of the teachers themselves as adult learners. One such need is a climate conducive to learning (Knowles, 1973). If institutions are to provide quality training for their faculty, what can one learn from studies of the learning environment for adults? How important is environment? What makes a positive learning environment? Knowles says that setting the appropriate climate is a crucial element in educating adult learners. What role does environment play in teacher in-service programs?

There have been numerous discussions of the role of climate and environment in the education of adult learners (Hiemstra, 1991; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Various dimensions of the learning environment have been described and discussed (Langenbach & Aagaard, 1989; Ennis et al, 1989; and Sisco, 1991). There is little agreement on terminology or on categories. Operational definitions overlap in their categories or dimensions. However, Knowles' (1973) division of climate into three categories—the physical, interpersonal, and organizational environments—allows the inclusion of results from many researchers.

Physical Environment

Fulton (1991) says that adults are more influenced than children by the physical environment. It can motivate adult learners, or create barriers. In many educational programs, teacher workshops are held either in a student classroom or in the staff lounge.

The classroom creates a formal learning environment that is less productive for adults. Andragogy (cited in Knowles, 1973) suggests informal structures are more useful offering the ability to set chairs in a circle, engage in group discussion, and create a collegial atmosphere. When student desks are lined in rows, teachers may expect to be taught, rather than to be active participants in learning. In addition, the room may "belong" to another teacher, making other teachers feel less comfortable.

Faculty often prefer the lounge because it is more friendly and convenient for lunch meetings. However, the lounge contains many distractions. The setting may be too informal with food, dirty dishes, magazines, and clutter. The temptation to get up and get some coffee or water is great. Blackboards may be absent; crowded conditions with little room to take notes or rearrange seating for group work restrict the types of activities that can be undertaken.

Vosko (1991) says that many people are often blind to their surroundings, but that the surroundings influence learning nonetheless. If a suitable on-site setting is not available, off-site facilities should be considered if they are available and more appropriate. The choice of room should not be made lightly. (Vosko suggests that an assessment and analysis of space attributes might be conducted to find out what the needs are for workshops.) Considerations as to the type of activity, whether refreshments will be served, what distractions are present, and whose room it is should be made to select the most suitable setting for learning. If choice of the room is entirely left up to the participants, some will choose the most comfortable setting not for learning, but for relaxing and socializing. For some, socializing may create rapport among staff; for others their primary goal may be to "get it over with," not to learn from the workshop. While lowering the affective filter for adults is important, much more than creating a comfortable climate is necessary for effective learning to take place.

Interpersonal Environment

Although the physical environment is important, James (1985) reports that instructor (teacher trainer) behavior and attitudes are more important contributors to the total environment. The workshop leader makes many demands on the participants. These demands may consist of demands to participate, to pay attention, or to attend. The history (often referred to as

loads in the literature) of relationships also places demands on the participants. The load on an individual can be equated to the demands made on that individual not only by the workshop leader or instructor but also by the self or by society.

Nearly 80% of the load instructors place on students comes from instructor behavior (Imel, 1991). After handling this load, the power available to the individual determines whether there is sufficient margin left for success in the undertaking. Instructors were found to be generating many types of load on the student (Imel, 1991; Jacobs & James, 1985; James, 1985). Load placed on workshop participants is reflected in their comments such as "Treated as an inferior," "Scratching his back on the wall while he lectured," and "Over explaining" (James, p. 12). Disrespectful and demeaning behavior by the instructor diminishes the effectiveness of any presentation.

In an ESL program, if a supervisor or administrator is conducting the workshop, many other types of load are brought to the session as well. The whole history of the relationship between the supervisor and teachers can be a load that creates barriers and obstacles to learning. At odds with the need for a positive learning environment (Sisco, 1991) are any conflicts or negative relationships that arose in the past. These conflicts can preclude any learning taking place.

Supervisory styles may also contribute to the burdens placed on the learner. Does the supervisor's style interfere with teachers' learning styles? Does the supervisor make efforts to "drive out fear" as Deming (1986) suggests, or does he or she rule by fear? This style is a factor whether the supervisor is conducting the workshop or not. Required attendance or other expectations can place obstacles in the way of learning. The dual roles of supervisor as evaluator and coach also interferes in staff development. Teachers are unwilling to acknowledge weaknesses, indeed, are fools to do so, if the supervisor also performs an annual performance appraisal that determines salary increases or continued employment.

Effective workshops, then, demand much more than a well-organized workshop. Staff development encompasses everyday relations, supervisory practices, and interpersonal behaviors of all the staff in the school.

Organizational Environment

The organizational environment includes not only the organizational structure of the workshop but also the organizational structure of the institution. Ennis et al. (1989) state the need for shared decision making. Vosko (1991) encourages varied communication patterns between teacher and student, and among students. Lecture, whole group, cooperative group, and individualized instruction can all be used. Johnson & Johnson (1994) and

Jacobs & Joyce (1994) stress the need for collaboration and cooperative structures in successful learning environments. Deming (1986) urges organizations to break down barriers between staff areas. In ESL programs barriers often exist between faculty and administration. Efforts to remove barriers can be effective in improving rapport. What is common to all these is the desire not only to create more involvement by everyone, but also to learn from everyone. Every member of the organization has valid viewpoints that should be recognized. Active participation by all allows an individual's experience and knowledge to contribute to the progress of others.

Jacobs & Joyce (1994), in comparing workplace groups with groups in education, list group skills that must be developed in either setting for effective collaboration to take place. These include reducing competition and increasing cooperation, planning on a long-term rather than a short-term basis, and reducing time pressures to allow collaborative efforts to succeed. Johnson & Johnson (1994) develop specific and detailed structures and exercises to create a "cooperative school" where teachers participate in many aspects of the program, especially in staff development and decision making. Shared decision making, collaborative learning, and cooperative groups are three key elements that can increase adult learning.

Recommendations

Deming (1986) says that everyone is already doing the best he or she knows how. What individuals lack is profound knowledge that will change what and how they do their jobs and live their lives. Organizations should remove barriers that rob people of "pride of workmanship" (p. 77). For ESL teachers, this includes not only pride in one's job, but opportunities to grow professionally. Knowledge of learning environments leads to four recommendations that can improve the effectiveness of teacher workshops in ESL programs.

First, care should be given in choosing the physical location of the workshop. An informal setting that will allow cooperative groups should be selected. Distractions should be minimized. A clean, attractive location that suggests an atmosphere of learning is preferred. A conference room with blackboard, comfortable chairs, and a seating arrangement that allows all participants to see each other is ideal. Off-site locations should be considered if feasible.

Second, interpersonal relationships will affect the desire to participate in the workshops. Management, that is, administrators and supervisors, should adopt methods of Deming's total quality management or similar approaches that respect the individual, drive out fear, and encourage teamwork. Performance appraisals might be assigned to someone other than the

ones responsible for organizing workshops, or perhaps even abolished (Deming, 1986).

Third, shared decision making regarding the content and structure of the workshops should be implemented. One example of shared decision making used at the ELS Language Centers/San Diego is a questionnaire on which teachers marked the strengths and weaknesses of the program. From the information gathered, staff assisted in the organization and presentation of workshops for the coming year. These workshops addressed long-standing issues that were of concern to them.

Fourth, cooperative groups and collegial teams (Johnson & Johnson 1994) should be used. Use of groups and teams encourages greater participation by all staff. While some teachers are eager, or at least willing, to lead workshops, almost all teachers can participate in small groups and pairs and lend their expertise to the discussion. Cooperative groups, properly structured, require mastery of the material by everyone. It is not possible to sit in the corner passively. Cooperative groups also build positive interdependence (Jacobs & James, 1994) among staff and lead to greater teamwork and job satisfaction in other areas of the job.

Conclusions

The learning environment may have a more profound effect on the success of teacher workshops and teacher development than many realize. Efforts to improve workshops through better content, guest presenters, faculty presenters, and paid in-service workshops are all worthy efforts. However, if efforts are not made to improve the environments of learning—physical, interpersonal, and organizational—success may not come. Knowles (1973, p. 108-109) cautions that if a staff developer sees himself essentially as a teacher and administrator, managing the logistics of learning experiences for collections of individuals, he will have little influence on the quality of the climate of his organization. Only if he defines his client as the total organization, and his mission as the improvement of its quality as an environment for the growth and development of people, will he be able to affect its climate.

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