The Information Battlefield

Trainers who combine technology with application of Malcolm Knowles' adult-learning characteristics have a strategic advantage in capturing their learners' attention in an environment of information overload. **BY NATE KELLY**

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In 1970, Malcolm Knowles identified six characteristics of adult learners that became—and remain—the backbone of many Training departments' learning strategy. In today's learning environment, which resembles more of an information battlefield than a classroom, those characteristics might be the most important weapons trainers can wield as they compete for the time and attention of would-be learners.

First, let's examine the information battlefield. Your students, live or online, are inundated with information. Think about it. How much information has competed for your attention today? Between your smart phone, laptop computer, radio, TV, tablet PC, and print media, how much information did you purposefully consume? On top of that, how many radio, print, billboard, television, and Web-based advertisements fought to capture your attention? How much more information could you possibly consume?

How does this information overload manifest as classroom distractions? For live classroom sessions, constant e-mails, calls, and texts compete for your students' attention. When courses are delivered online, there are infinitely more attention grabbers, including instant messaging and the allure of the Web browser.

The information battlefield lines have been drawn, and as communication technology innovation moves forward at break-neck speed, the fight will only get more intense. Learning professionals, therefore, are in a contest to capture attention and effectively pass much-needed knowledge and information to their constituents. Traditionally, many learning professionals have relied on Knowles' adult-learning characteristics to design training that captures learners' focus and ensures important information is disseminated and put into practice. Let's review three of Knowles' adult-learning characteristics to ensure that we are competing with modern approaches and tools in an effort to win the information battle and further our organizations' strategic initiatives.

1. Learning Characteristic: Adults are autonomous and self-directed.

What if your homework were the lesson and your classwork were the practice? Organizations such as the Khan Academy (www.khanacademy.org) are flip-flopping the traditional learning paradigm in this manner. Through simple, easy-to-understand videos, they are showing that someone can learn the basic conceptual frameworks of complex ideas on their own. Class time then can be used on learn-by-doing exercises with experts there to help self-directed learners when needed. Learners benefit from one-to-one training or small group training in the classroom, at the time they need help. The availability of affordable screen capture software and digital video cameras means learning professionals now have the opportunity to deliver lessons in consumable chunks outside the classroom. Is your organization taking advantage of this technology? Would your learners be more engaged and focused if they had the ability to control the pace of their lessons?

2. Learning Characteristic: Adults are practical.

Adults want to be able to apply what they learn to what they do. If adult learners cannot make the connection between the information presented during class and the work they do, it is likely you will lose their focus. Technology is making it possible to address the importance and practical nature of training, before training begins. Send short videos (ideally two minutes or less) about how lessons can be applied to day-to-day work in advance of a training exercise. These videos can be simple. For instance, you might ask a respected individual to discuss the goal of training and how it should be applied to work in an interview setting and capture it on video. By focusing on the learners' motivation to learn and tying the training to their daily work, you ensure learners begin training with an understanding of why they should be focused on the material.

3. Learning Characteristic: Adults are relevancy-oriented.

Perhaps the best way to ensure you have learners' attention is to deliver lessons that are tailored to exactly what they need, when they need them. What if a system could, based on your performance, offer lessons that are relevant to you at that moment? Sound futuristic? It is happening now in other industries.

Netflix (www.netflix.com) suggests movies based on categorization and past selection. Retailers send coupons or suggest products based on data received through their affinity card programs. These companies are leveraging data to make their service more convenient and increasing sales. They are capturing your attention with what is most relevant to you and at the moment you are positioned to use it. Many organizations collect performance data. The next step, however challenging, is to transform that data into information that can improve performance. Learning organizations already are considering the possibilities of true workflow-relevant learning. In the battle for attention and focus, the ultimate weapon for learning professionals is contextually relevant information delivered at the point and time of need. Are there support systems or processes in which your organization might be able to embed just-in-time learning based on performance?

THE BATTLE PLAN

The battle for the time and attention of our constituents will become more intense as technology advances. At the same time, organizational initiatives supported by Training departments are occurring more frequently and require lessons that are both more important and complicated. It is critical that learning professionals capture constituents' attention and focus. The good news for learning professionals is technology also is making it possible to leverage adult-learning characteristics, time-tested for their ability to capture adults' attention and create an excellent learning environment in new and exciting ways. Video and Web-based learning technology can flip-flop the learning paradigm, ensuring learning is self-paced and autonomous. Simple videos communicated in advance of training can demonstrate the practicality of lessons. Systems can be put in place to make sure learners are supported well beyond the classroom in a manner that delivers lessons just in time, when they are most relevant.

Combining technology with Knowles' trusted adult-learning characteristics, educators march to battle with a strategic advantage and modern weapons as they seek to win the attention and focus of their colleagues and constituents.