

Continuous Improvement

In the world of adult education and learning, we often encounter challenges and opportunities to bridge gaps and share learning opportunities. The separation between pedagogy and andragogy is thin, and elements of both can be found in adult learning; there are times where we learn fundamentals, much like a child (thus, pedagogy), but most experienced clinicians rely on the internal motivation to learn (as opposed to being told to learn), and the depth of previous experiences is used to illustrate and contextualize new learning goals, which is the basis of androgogy, or adult learning. For the adult learner, context, practicality, and clear outcomes are important to a successful andragogical learning process.

As described in previous editorials, we tend to go to various continuing education (CE) courses that reinforce what we already know rather than probe into unfamiliar territory. The adult learner enters into a voluntary learning environment and engages with self-directed learning (SDL), a form of adult learning that has become more understood since the 1970s. In fact, Allen Tough (1936–2012) at the University of Toronto discussed a few key points about the adult learner that we should consider when preparing a presentation. In the Adult Learning Project, Tough and his team observed that the most enriched learning occurs outside of being directly taught by an educator, with 70% of learning being SDL and occurring by oneself.¹

While it is hard to measure the concept of SDL, it is embedded in the commonly used term of “life-long learning” that we tell our students they should expect to do. Adults learn in order to improve, not just to do the job. The key to this process is to understand the root cause of clinical failures, learn from them, and adapt to change the outcomes. As I sit in a CE session, I may or may not be ready to listen and create a mental framework for understanding and building on the material. Without that step of actively creating a mental model of the issues and providing relevant context that applies to you, listening can be a very passive learning method. With that in mind, the first key idea of SDL is understanding each adult learner has a different readiness to engage, and the presentation must therefore be a format that engages with and is placed in context that matters to the individual learner, not the presenter. To give a framework to this, an example: A good 50-minute presentation should have two 15-minute lecture blocks with a 20-minute activity (question and answer, reflection, one-sentence essay on the main concepts, etc) in the middle to allow

the learning to move to long-term memory through the process of mental rehearsal. Rehearsal occurs when the learner can put the idea(s) into experiential or emotive context. SDL can be very useful in large lectures when the presenter creates situational context by telling a short, personal story of a patient encounter that is highly relevant, thereby creating a situation for any learner to engage with both the emotion and the content of the message in their own way. SDL can also occur in teams, especially when you contextualize an event for your team where each team member can contribute. A presentation when the speaker takes the time to present a brief, highly organized (and appropriate) illustration of the issues at hand builds trust between the presenter and the audience, which can lead to SDL as a useful outcome. Lastly, SDL, while important to all learners, is most important for the health professional.

Recently, a new set of students started at my dental school and at orientation I told them that in this profession they will need to be prepared over their career to repeatedly “ReUp.” What do I mean? Much like how the military wants to keep expanding the skills and knowledge of their workforce, the profession of dentistry must be continuously learning new skills, and, especially with the rapid evolution of technologies and innovations, must learn how to provide new and more efficient services to their patients. Thus, we must *reskill* and *upskill* throughout our career. We must therefore be prepared to “ReUp” throughout our careers. It makes it exciting to hop out of bed in the morning!



Clark Stanford
IJOMI Editor in Chief

REFERENCES

1. Tough AM. The Adult's Learning Projects: A Fresh Approach to Theory and Practice in Adult Learning, ed 2. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1979.