

---

# Today's New Learners – Changing How We Deliver Education

---

By Kathleen M. Edwards, CAE

© 2005 Kathleen M. Edwards & CompassPoints. This article first appeared in the May/June 2005 issue of The Executive, the magazine of the California Society of Association Executives, pp. 6-9. Used with permission.

If you're above a certain age, thinking about school no doubt brings back memories of sitting with your classmates in orderly rows, at desks or tables, listening to the teacher impart wisdom from the front of the room. At periodic intervals, you regurgitated what you heard into pop quizzes, multiple-choice tests, and those essay-test "blue books." There were "right" answers to everything and asking questions that challenged those answers didn't always bring lively discourse about possibilities.

When you moved out into the workplace, you probably started participating in training and professional development programs to enhance your professional skills and knowledge. Likely – until recently, at least – most, if not all, those programs, too, had you sitting in a traditional classroom environment with an "expert" at the front of the room imparting information. You listen for an hour or two, maybe ask some questions, and then move to another breakout session to experience more of the same. Sadly, there are still a lot of associations whose face-to-face education programs fit this description.

## What's wrong with this picture?

Think for a moment: where does the best learning occur at conferences and

conventions? Your answer probably came immediately to mind: in the hallways between sessions! At luncheon tables, or in receptions! During committee meetings! What is it about those environments that make you respond to them?

You're talking with colleagues and peers. You're sharing real-life issues and concerns. You're learning how he solved a problem similar to yours, or how she came up with a really cool new idea that worked.

Why not create education programs that provide the same opportunities?

## Adults learn in different ways than do children

In 1980, Malcolm Knowles introduced a theory of adult learning, called andragogy, to differentiate the ways adults learn from how children learn, or pedagogy. Generally accepted in human performance improvement circles, Knowles' basic principles of adult learning give us a road map for creating effective learning opportunities for members and staff.

- Adults are used to being active and self-directed. They take responsibility for their own lives, and Knowles assumes they also want to take an active role in deciding what is important for them to learn.



- Adults bring their life experiences to learning opportunities. Their different backgrounds and experiences bring a richness to collaborative learning that makes it powerful in ways that never occurred during childhood.

- Adults have a “readiness to learn” based on their own circumstances. Adult learning is driven by specific needs for information. They want or need to learn something that will directly enhance their work or their lives.

- Adult learners need to see a connection between what they’re hearing and their own experiences. They seek relevance to their current situations, and want to be able to apply what they’ve learned immediately.

- Adult learning is greatly enhanced when participants are actively engaged in the learning process. Adults can learn from one another as well as from a presenter. Learning opportunities that provide practical application, discovery, and specific feedback aid adults in learning more effectively. In fact, as stated earlier, some of the best learning occurs outside the formal learning environment.

- Different people learn most effectively in different ways. No two people will learn the same information in the same way. Some may prefer to learn by visually observing a new process over hearing about it lecture-style. Others may prefer a hands-on experience, trying it out for themselves before they feel they have learned it effectively.

What was the most effective learning experience you’ve ever had? Chances are, it had direct application to your work or life,

was delivered in a way that made sense for you, and allowed you to build on your existing knowledge and experience.

## **There are new learners in town**

You’ve probably heard or read that there are now four generations in the workplace, each bringing its own set of expectations and experiences. The two younger cohorts, Generation X and the Millennials (also known as Generation Y), grew up in a vastly different world than did Baby Boomers and Traditionalists. Starting at a young age, they’ve had very different learning experiences. As a result, they have very different expectations of the learning opportunities provided by your association.

These aren’t the only new learners to consider, though. Boomers and Traditionalists are getting more sophisticated about their learning expectations. Through the examples of their younger colleagues, long-standing members are learning the necessity and value of continuous lifelong learning. And as the bottom-line value to organizations of effective learning is increasingly recognized and acted upon, enhanced learning experiences are raising their expectations to new levels.

What are these “new learners” like, and what are they looking for? To begin with, the new learner is comfortable with all things electronic. She gets whatever information she needs via an unlimited on-demand source of information: the Internet. He prefers information in 20-second sound bytes. And they both have a preference for just-in-time learning – deciding what

information they need and getting it only when they need it.

In his book *On-Demand Learning*, Darin Hartley describes today's learners as results-oriented, wanting to improve and being proactive in taking the initiative to do whatever it takes to reach a goal. They collect information, scan it, and use it immediately or store it for later retrieval. Today's learners are confident and flexible enough to take in new knowledge in a variety of ways. They easily learn just in time and just when needed, whether to keep up with what's new or reach new career goals.

### **What does it mean for association education?**

What impact does the new learner have on your association's education programs? Clearly the traditional ways of offering learning opportunities are no longer effective and we'll never go back to the way it used to be. Traditional conference or convention sessions using a "talking head" or "panel of experts" are generally not well-received by today's new learner. This new landscape is forcing associations to look at how they deliver professional development opportunities for members.

Your association has opportunities to provide greater value in learning experiences for members. Done effectively, your members will increasingly look to your association as a critical business partner. They'll view the organization as a vital link in helping them stay current and know what they need to know to be successful in their profession or industry.

So, what will attract these new learners to your association's education programs, whether face-to-face or virtual? Context – the opportunity to explore new, relevant knowledge in a collaborative environment with peers facing similar challenges. How can you provide that context when it comes to planning member learning events?

- Create or redefine a value proposition for your learning opportunities based on solid knowledge of your audiences' learning needs and preferences. Go beyond the typical member needs assessment; build a profile of their learning interests, patterns, and existing resources.

- Develop an overall learning strategy that incorporates the learning opportunities that are of most value to members, whether they are face-to-face or virtual. Consider your mantra to be "content first, format second." Think about how you might offer members non-traditional and informal learning opportunities as well as more engaging formal learning.

- Remain learner-centered at all times; continually monitor and assess your learners' needs, gather effective feedback after each session, and use each learning event as a learning laboratory for the next one.

- Encourage – and assist – your subject-matter experts in developing programs that actively engage participants. Engaging elements might include small-group exercises, scenarios, case studies, or simulations that give learners opportunities to discover solutions together. These types of activities, or variations of them, can be conducted in face-to-face or virtual sessions

as short as 60-75 minutes in length, and will make a huge difference in learners' value perceptions.

- Use questions as learning tools – create supportive and challenging climates that both ask learners to think about relevant questions and encourage them to ask questions of each other and the subject-matter experts.

- Provide appropriate feedback and debriefing of activities so that learners clearly understand and can apply what they have learned. Support member learning in whatever ways are appropriate for your audience.

## The results

A key reason members join your association – and stay – is access to information. The success of your learning opportunities can hinge on how well they provide that information in useful and usable ways. Meet the needs of the new learners, and they'll come back for more while they tell their colleagues about your great programs. You'll have forged an even stronger link between your associations and its members, and over time you will see it reflected in your bottom line.

*Kathleen M. Edwards, CAE, is president and chief navigator of CompassPoints, a Maryland-based firm dedicated to helping associations create effective learning environments and strategies for members and staff. An experienced association executive and accomplished writer, she has been published numerous times in association management literature on topics related to learning, communications, and marketing. Kathi is a past chairman of ASAE's Professional Development Section Council (2003-2004) and is one of four coordinators for The Center for Association Leadership's Professional Development Learning Community.*

*She can be reached at 410-939-1125 or via e-mail at [kedwards@learningevangelist.com](mailto:kedwards@learningevangelist.com)*

