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Adult Education Principles and Subject-Matter Experts:

Identification of Deficiencies in Instructors at

National College of Business & Technology, Knoxville, Tennessee

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Abstract

Stephen Lieb's (1991) paper, *Principles of Adult Learning*, is considered a classic treatment by adult education professionals. It is one of the most-cited and most-referred (by hypertext link) Web-based documents related to adult education. Using the major points Lieb identifies, this writer compiled a list of expected behaviors of effective instructors in adult education programs.

This writer then compared the distilled list from Lieb (1991) to typical behaviors exhibited by faculty members of National College of Business & Technology (NCBT) in Knoxville, Tennessee. This writer's comparison of effective instructor behaviors and typical SME-instructor behaviors at NCBT identified a distinct learning gap, for which she prepared an instructional needs analysis. Because it is outside the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the needs analysis, identified gaps, and recommended remedies, the writer performed a cursory review of literature to glean suggestions and experiences from academics, instructional technologists, and other two-year colleges.

NCBT is a career college, and its faculty are subject-matter experts (SME's) hired to teach introductory, intermediate, and advanced courses in their fields of expertise. While many of the faculty members hold advanced degrees in their subject areas, few of them have experience in adult education, especially in a vocational/career college. For that reason, most faculty members experience frustration, and their students often express dissatisfaction with their instructors, instructional materials, the curriculum, and classroom activities.

Higher-education accrediting and monitoring bodies expect instructors' deficiencies to be remedied through faculty in-service training. Alternatively, some career colleges utilize both formal and informal mentoring to bridge such a learning gap. Unfortunately, NCBT's budget does not provide for more than cursory "train-the-trainer" activities. Additionally, NCBT's remuneration and incentive structure do not foster interest in participating in voluntary mentoring relationships among faculty members.

Sadly, the NCBT instructors' learning gap can not easily be bridged in the present environment.

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In his highly regarded paper, *Principles of Adult Learning,* Stephen Lieb (1991) writes "Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding how adults learn best." Lieb concisely identified a list of basic tenets that instructors of adults should incorporate when planning their classroom and one-on-one training activities. Lieb incorporates the research of recognized experts, such as Malcom Knowles, in his *Principles* to validate their importance.

As a faculty member and department chair at National College of Business & Technology (NCBT) in Knoxville, Tennessee, this writer has a unique opportunity to observe and critique the teaching methods employed by instructors at NCBT. Because NCBT is a career/vocational college that grants diplomas and two-year degrees at its Knoxville campus, all the instructors are subject-matter experts in their fields. Most have at least a four-year degree, and many hold terminal degrees in their disciplines. However, experience or knowledge in adult education techniques is not a requirement for hiring, and most of the instructors have little or no understanding of the uniqueness of androgogical training.

NCBT's accrediting body and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission expect NCBT to provide a rudimentary background in adult education principles to its instructors through in-service training, which instructors are required to attend. However, budgetary constraints and instructors' outside commitments preclude extensive training. Therefore, many instructors do not understand the primary requirements for successful – efficient and effective – adult education:

• training must be learner-centered because adults are generally self-directed learners;

• training must have measurable value to the learner;

• training must be relevant to the learner and easily linked to previous experiences; and,

• learners must be motivated to and by the training.

Edward Thorndike, a pioneer in adult education theory, identified six precepts of adult learning, four of which illustrate the above-defined requirements:

- "Law of Readiness" – motivation; maximum learning occurs when adults are ready to learn.

- "Law of Exercise" – learner-centered; retention occurs from repetition by the learner, especially when reinforced with appropriate feedback.

- "Law of Effect" – measurable value; sufficient positive feedback encourages learners' feelings of satisfaction.

- "Law of Intensity" – relevance; experiences that provide for direct learner involvement enhance the learner's ability to recognize how learning can be applied (ACHE, 2005).

The level of frustration expressed by both instructors and students in each other (expectations not met), the curriculum, books and materials, and instructional activities has been a cause of distress for this writer throughout her employment at NCBT. After reading Lieb's (1991) paper, *Principles of Adult Learning*, this writer performed an informal needs analysis to more-precisely identify the deficiencies NCBT instructors have in relation to adult education principles.

For the purposes of this paper, this writer has chosen to present these deficiencies in a table (Table 1), grouped according to the principles identified by Lieb (1991). Instructors' deficiencies are expressed in terms of their behavior toward students individually and in the classroom.

| Table 1. Comparison of Lieb's Adult Education Principles and Instructors' Behaviors at NCBT. |

Adult Education Principle (from Lieb)	Inappropriate Instructor Behaviors Observed at NCBT
"Adults are autonomous and self-directed." (Knowles)	• Failing to give students the opportunity to work independently or in small groups to identify and address their individual goals and objectives in a specific class. • Chastising students for failing to achieve instructor- or school-established terminal objectives, without determining whether or not the student wanted to achieve them.
"Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences." (Knowles)	• Dismissing students' experience by ignoring or repudiating students' input or otherwise humiliating them for interjecting during the lesson. A common example is pontificating, wherein an instructor assumes a "Because I say so" demeanor when students question his or her expertise or authority.
"Adults are goal-oriented." (Knowles)	• Failing to define course goals and objectives, both at the beginning of the course and at the beginning of each class session. • Making pronouncements such as "I don't give *A*'s" or "Everyone in my class starts with an *F* and has to earn a higher grade."
"Adults are relevancy-oriented." (Knowles) They "must see the benefit of learning in order to motivate themselves to learn."	• Overloading students with homework assignments using the pedagogical model (task repetition = learning). • Requiring students to purchase additional books or materials. • Instructing students to ignore the books and materials purchased to comply with the approved syllabus.

Adult Education Principle (from Lieb)	Inappropriate Instructor Behaviors Observed at NCBT
"Adults are practical" and focus on aspects of education useful to them. (Knowles)	• Failing to value the career/vocational college as a source of higher education. • Failing to value the level of education or the terminal diploma/degree NCBT students acquire. • Denigrating other students, instructors, administrators, school or governmental regulations, authorities, syllabi, or approved textbooks/training materials in the presence of students.
"Adults have barriers against participating in learning."	• Ignoring personal needs, such as lack of access to technology outside class, full-time work schedule, family commitment (including lack of childcare), or lack of transportation. • Enabling students who have a sense of "entitlement," have negative attitudes, who constantly whine, or who are (for whatever reason) unable to successfully prioritize their life commitments or focus on their goals.
"Adults need to be shown respect." (Knowles)	• Failure to observe scheduled breaks: classes are four or five hours in length, with a required ten-minute break after fifty minutes' instruction. • Coddling certain students whom the instructor feels sorry for or for whatever reason(s) chooses to indulge. • Letting negative personal feelings toward a student affect grading and interaction. • Violating FERPA regulations by failing to guard students' personal information; *e.g.*, tossing class rosters and grade sheets in the garbage instead of shredding them. • Failing to allow students the opportunity to evaluate courses, materials, NCBT administration, administrative procedures and materials, the physical facility, and instructors.

Adult Education Principle (from Lieb)	Inappropriate Instructor Behaviors Observed at NCBT
Adult learners require motivation, including one or more of the following: • Opportunity to develop social relationships • External instigators, such as increased pay • Opportunity to improve social welfare • Internal instigators, such as personal advancement • Opportunity for escape, such as relief from boredom or monotony • "Cognitive interest: to learn for the sake of learning"	• Failing to understand and implement *Bloom's Taxonomy* and/or *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs* in lesson plans and classroom activities. • Failing to encourage students to enter into peer-mentoring or study-group relationships. • Failing to solicit and assist students in identifying and cultivating their individual motivators. • Failing to nurture students, as appropriate, if they lose sight of their motivation.
Instructors should "establish a friendly, open atmosphere" for the lesson.	• Lecturing non-stop, without giving students the opportunity to have discussion or engage in alternate modes of learning that will address their individual learning styles. • Engaging in distracting personal behaviors, such as inappropriate voice volume, pacing, or never moving around the classroom where it is appropriate to do so. • Spending too much time sharing "war stories" (personal experiences) to the detriment of the prescribed lesson outline.
Instructors should establish "an appropriate level of concern," or "tension," to convey the importance of lesson material.	• Failing to write or properly interpret lesson plans to effectively sequence learning; most NCBT faculty are unable to correctly formulate a learning objective, much less an entire lesson plan. • Denigrating or ignoring the approved, accredited syllabus and/or requirements of certification boards that establish competencies. • Denigrating or ignoring the textbook(s) and/or other required training materials students have purchased.

Adult Education Principle (from Lieb)	Inappropriate Instructor Behaviors Observed at NCBT
Instructors should "set an appropriate level of difficulty," so the lesson will challenge students without frustrating them.	• Assigning unrealistic projects; *e.g.*, an instructor who assigned a 10-page capstone paper for a humanities course and told students they should expect to read 100 pages of material for each page they authored. • Responding to individual or class-wide antagonism and "dumbing-down" the material to appease the learners. • Failing to perform needs analyses "on-the-fly," in order to quickly revise lesson activities to address immediate student needs. • Failing to group students as appropriate to encourage peer-mentoring.
Adult learners "need specific knowledge of their learning results (feedback)."	• Failing to perform diagnostic testing and post-learning performance-based testing that is directly related to the course's terminal objectives. • Failing to grade and return timely all tests, assigned homework, or in-class work. • Inappropriately testing students; *e.g.*, reviewing each page of an exam individually, then giving each page to students to complete before moving on to the next page. • Forcing students to hold their questions until the end of a lecture or other lesson activity, instead of allowing them to ask when the question is relevant.

Adult Education Principle (from Lieb)	Inappropriate Instructor Behaviors Observed at NCBT
"Reinforcement is a very necessary part of the teaching/learning process." Instructors "should apply both positive and negative reinforcement … on a frequent and regular basis" to enhance retention of skills and information.	• Failing to observe or interact with students individually to remark on their work; *e.g.*, not spot-checking medical procedures or computer-based functions as students perform them. • Failing to properly provide negative reinforcement, when appropriate, to change undesirable behaviors; this generally occurs when instructors are uncomfortable redirecting adults. • Failing to properly provide sufficient positive reinforcement to reinforce correct behaviors; most commonly, this is exhibited as a lack of response to student interjections in class.
Adult learners "must retain information … in order to benefit from the learning." Instruction is incomplete if retention does not occur.	• Failing to guide students toward conclusions through critical thinking or extrapolate the lesson material to aid in moving information from short-term to long-term memory.
Transfer of learning must occur: adult learners must "understand and be able to interpret and apply" learned skills and information outside the classroom.	• Failing to identify the method and/or environment in which learned skills and information can be applied.

Through a cursory review of literature identified by searching on-line using the popular Web search engine Google, this writer identified methods recommended by curriculum designers and/or employed by other career colleges to rectify similar deficiencies among their faculty and instructional support staffs. A synopsis follows:

- The Thiagi Group (2005) recommends that learners be used as trainers and SME's. Thiagi promotes a game called "Each Teach," wherein individuals become experts at one step in a procedure through instructor-led training. Then, all members of the group cross-train each other to master every step, so every individual can correctly perform every step of the procedure.

- McKay (2005) contends that SME's are effective trainers, if they are used "with careful planning." She writes,

    "Training requires more than having experts stand up and expound. Training skills are not intuitive to everyone. Just because people are experts in their job does not mean that they can successfully train others. Many technical experts are very intelligent, detail-oriented individuals who know their jobs well. However, besides performing well in their jobs, trainers need to have a charismatic personality, be able to deal patiently with people, and be able to explain the basic job steps. This is sometimes difficult for experts to do."

    McKay identifies methods for selecting SME's to be trainers. She recommends the preliminary assessment begin with a question, "Can this person logically communicate his or her ideas?"

- Miner (1998) holds the opposite opinion of SME's from McKay. Miner contends,

    "Training designed by subject matter experts spells disaster in one of two ways: (1) Basic information is left out because the subject matter expert does not recognize what basic means anymore, or (2) the subject matter expert is so hot on their [sic] topic that every possible nuance of the topic is included in the training."

    Miner explains the "misguided logic" of her self-named "Paulette Principle," which states "If you are good at what you do, you must be able to teach others to do it" as primary support for her thesis, "Why Training Doesn't Work."

- West (2004) specifically addresses adjunct college faculty with a very positive perspective:

    "Most adjunct faculty bring enthusiasm and spirit to their teaching assignments. ... Most are eager to share what they've learned with others and experience the intrinsic rewards that come from making a difference in the lives of their students. Additionally, they 'provide an extraordinarily rich source of expertise that institutions might not otherwise find'" (p. 115).

West (2004) recounts the specifics of a successful program implemented at Portland State University to improve performance by its adjunct business faculty while increasing their retention and development. The program encompasses pre-teaching interviews, assessments, and orientation; term-specific strategies, such as telephone and e-mail communication, classroom visits and evaluations, and attendance at an "effective teaching seminar"; and post-teaching student evaluations, correspondence, and a faculty follow-up survey (pp. 116-118).

According to West (2004), Portland State University learned several lessons as a result of implementing this program: (1) adjuncts need an institutional contact who is accessible to them; (2) developing adjunct faculty increases retention; (3) scheduling for adjunct faculty must be flexible; (4) adjunct faculty members' creativity should be recognized and rewarded.

- Williams (2001) describes a similar adjunct faculty development program proposed for a Philadelphia, PA-area, community college as a result of a 1999 study to "develop a paradigm for the teaching of part-time teachers in community colleges." Unlike Portland State University's faculty population, however, Williams' subject community college requires a minimum of two years' college-level teaching experience, "preferably at a community college."

- Freeman (1994) addresses the need for individualized, learner-centered instruction when teaching adults. He cites Bloom's observation "that one-to-one tutorial instruction is the most effective form, and that an average student in a tutorial program achieves more than 98% of students in conventional classroom instruction" (p. 21). Freeman maintains that tutoring is not the only way to enhance learning: "[T]here is another set of solutions for the problem besides the tutoring mode of instruction. These are centered on the use of

instructional materials that address the student directly, without depending on a teacher

for delivery, and that are tailored to individual student needs" (p. 21).

- Writing about the successful outcomes of instructors' self-analysis of their teaching needs,

    Sullivan (2003) cites the dissertation of B. Piasta when addressing the need for faculty

    development to increase instructors' awareness of adult education principles:

    > "First, staff development is one of the basic means by which an
    > organization achieves its goals. It is in staff development that an
    > organization's goals are interpreted and integrated with the teacher's career
    > goals. Second, faculty need to be made aware of new knowledge and skills
    > that can enhance their effectiveness. Finally, staff development increases the
    > teacher's proficiency in both subject matter and educational processes."

    In addition to the articles summarized above, two outstanding publications were located by

this writer in her cursory review of related literature:

- The Virginia Community College System published a 17-page monograph, entitled

    Enhancing Support for Adjunct Faculty, in 1997. The document recognizes the importance

    of providing development opportunities for adjunct faculty. It recommends mentoring as a

    method for supervising and encouraging adjunct faculty members' performance. The

    monograph contains the following sections: "Recruitment, Selection, and Appointment";

    "Professional Development and Orientation"; "Support Services"; "Supervision, Evaluation,

    and Recognition"; and, "Adjunct Faculty Needs Assessment." It is important to note that

    the Needs Assessment is to be completed by adjunct faculty members.

- Lowry & Froese (2001) presented a paper entitled *Transitions: Becoming a College

    Teacher* at the 2001 Pan-Canadian Education Research Agenda Symposium. The paper

    describes successful methods employed by Nova Scotia Community College in molding its

    new faculty members into effective classroom instructors. Dubbed the Community College

Education Diploma Program, it "is a very effective way to help new faculty become more effective instructors while making the transition to a new occupation" (p. [ii]).

The paper also details the methods used by Nova Scotia Community College to develop its program. These include a survey and focus groups, both directed toward faculty members instead of administrators. The focus groups probed three main themes: (1) "establishing an identity as an instructor"; (2) becoming an effective instructor; and, (3) becoming a member of a learning organization" (p. 8).

Summarizing the results of their literature review, Lowry & Froese write,

"[C]ommunity colleges generally do not devote many resources to good teaching, yet faculty identify teaching as the principal reason for choosing colleges. To be effective, instructional training programs require a concerted institutional response" (p. [ii]).

The authors contend that "post-secondary institutions need to have better ways to prepare instructors to teach effectively" (p. 1). The authors conclude their paper with several excellent questions for further study, most notably (1) how the efforts of academic departments support new faculty; and, (2) why there are variations in teaching methods among academic program areas.

NCBT markets itself to non-traditional adult learners with the promise of relevant, valuable education; small classes led by expert and committed instructors; and individualized attention. Unfortunately, many of the SME's hired as adjunct faculty do not understand the school's focus or, as outlined above, the fundamentals of adult education. Each of the activities and philosophies detailed in the selected articles cited above could be easily implemented at NCBT to encourage its instructors to become better adult educators. However, a program of intensive faculty development would require a significant financial commitment that for-profit schools rarely wish to make.

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