Professional Learners

Differentiating for Adult Learners

By Melissa P. Johnston

This issue’s focus on differentiating to address the needs of learners got me thinking that in the case of providing professional development, we have to differentiate for our adult learners as well. In looking back at the columns from this past year, we have talked about a variety of strategies you can utilize when working with adult learners, but I was just reading a new study that finds that the attention span of the average adult has now dropped to about eight seconds (Gracey 2016). After just eight seconds, teachers are going to be chatting with their neighbor, texting, checking emails, and/or looking at their social media feeds instead of paying attention to you. So how do you hold the attention of teachers in a professional development session?

**Differentiate for the Needs of Your Learners**

Differentiated instruction refers to a “systematic approach to planning curriculum and instruction for academically diverse learners” (Tomlinson and Eisdon, 2003, 3). Differentiated instruction is based on the assumptions that students differ in their learning styles, needs, strengths, and abilities, and that classroom activities should be adapted to meet these differences. Differentiated instruction involves giving learners a range of ways of accessing instruction and assessment; interacting and participating in the global classroom; demonstrating and expressing what they learn; and understanding and taking in information (Powell and Kusuma-Powell 2011). We all know that these are best practices when it comes to teaching our students, but why does it seem that professional development for teachers is still a “one-size fits all” experience?

When dealing with adult learners it is important to remember that:
1. Adults need to know why they need to learn something.
2. Adults need to learn experientially.
3. Adults approach learning as problem-solving.
4. Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value (Knowles 1980). Fontichiaro (2012) also found these same elements when she surveyed school librarians on their best professional development experiences, finding characteristics that included relevant, varied, responsive, and a time allowance to experiment and practice. If most of us think back on all of our professional development experiences, we would probably come up with these same thoughts, just as we can also define what makes for a bad professional development experience.

“Change is more likely to happen when we are active contributors to the change process; it is not something that can be done to us” (Couros 2015).

All too often, professional development is something that is done TO teachers, but it is imperative that you involve the learners. Teachers want professional development that meets their needs, which is usually about what their students need. Adult learning theory calls this “readiness,” in that when learning aligns with their needs or interests, adults are more motivated to participate. Just as the needs of our students vary greatly from student to student, so do the needs of teachers, and therefore it is only fitting to differentiate for the needs of our teachers when it comes to professional development.

Begin with the teachers’ needs. Poll teachers ahead of time and actually ask them what types of topics they need and want to learn about. This gives everyone the opportunity to be involved and addresses that “why do I need to know this” question that often comes up at professional development sessions. Once you know the needs and interests of the teachers, you can plan and create targeted and focused professional development sessions specific to these needs. One way to do this might be to offer mini-sessions before and after the school day that would give teachers a choice in the scope and depth of their involvement. Also don’t forget the numerous digital tools that can be utilized to provide professional development. You could create quick tutorials on certain areas of need, while some topics may require more in-depth training modules. This way not only are you addressing what teachers need to know, but you are also giving them the freedom of choice of when to participate in an online PD experience. Time is a very precious commodity to teachers and they will appreciate not waiting for something that could be done online.

Teachers have a wealth of prior knowledge and past experiences to offer! When you survey teachers you could assess prior knowledge on certain topics or ask them if they have a special area of expertise. Then, to involve teachers even more in the professional development experience, you could try out the edcamp approach where you let teachers lead groups and contribute based on their expertise. Develop the sessions and send out information ahead of time so that teachers can choose what is going to be most relevant for them.

One Size Does NOT Fit All

Just as our students have different learning styles, so do adult learners. Adults remember 10% of what they hear, 65% of what they hear and see, and 80% of what they hear, see, and do. Adult
learners learn best with a mix of learning involving strategies that combine visual, auditory, and kinesthetic approaches that help anchor new skills and knowledge.

There are four main learning styles for adult learners. First is converging (doing and thinking). People with this learning style use their learning to make decisions to find solutions to practical problems/issues. They like to experiment with new ideas, to simulate, and to work with practical applications.

Second is diverging (feeling and watching), which involves looking at things from different perspectives. These learners prefer to watch rather than do, gathering information and using imagination to solve problems. People with the diverging style prefer to work in groups, to listen with an open mind, and to receive personal feedback.

Third is assimilating (watching and thinking) and these learners prefer a concise, logical approach. People with this style prefer readings, lectures, exploring analytical models, and having time to think through things.

Fourth, accommodating (doing and feeling), is hands-on and relies on gut instinct rather than logic. These learners are attracted to new challenges and experiences, but tend to rely on others for information rather than carry out their own analysis (Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis 2001). Think about how you can incorporate strategies that will appeal to these varying types of learners into the professional development experiences you develop.

**Model Strategies**

Model differentiation practices in the professional development you provide for teachers. You could do something as simple as a learning styles inventory ahead of time. Also think beyond learning style to their level of knowledge. Why should you make a teacher that has been teaching for 20 years sit and learn about basic teaching strategies or have teachers that don’t even use the most basic technology learn about advanced digital tools? Again going back to that needs assessment, you can group them by skill and knowledge level so that the professional development is tailored to their needs and they aren’t bored or overwhelmed. You can also group by subject area, grade level taught, or similar topic so that there will be a connection between the learners and the topic being addressed, a deeper investment in the learning, and the potential for continued collaboration and learning past the PD experience.

Finally, model utilizing digital tools for differentiation in the professional development you provide to give teachers some of those takeaways that they can immediately put into action in their classrooms. I recently saw a great idea about creating the agenda using Thinglink or Piktochart (Conley 2013) so that not only are you giving the adult learners information ahead of time, but also introducing them to ways to use digital tools. And finally, use digital tools such as Kahoot or Socrative to do a quick exit survey to give teachers the opportunity to give you feedback. The research continues to show that teachers need and want more training in utilizing technology, providing a great opportunity for school librarians to step up and lead. Teachers want training to help them stay current on emerging technology, but this training needs to be from someone who is an educator and can provide hands-on experiences applying technology to teach and learn.

So in this last column of the school year, hopefully you are finding ways to enact the leadership role of supporting teacher professional development in your school, as well as in providing engaging professional development for teachers that models best practices and focuses on authentic teacher learning so your learners don’t tune you out after 8 seconds!

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**Works Cited**


