BECOME AN ADULT LEARNING PRO

BY CATHERINE LOMBARDOZZI

It is quite a privilege to support learning in organisations. As a learning professional, you impact employees at critical junctures in their careers: when they get a new job, when their skills need updating, when they are trying to position themselves for future opportunities – and more. They are counting on your expertise to make their learning efforts effective and efficient. And leaders in your organisation are relying on your knowledge base and skill set to enable critical capabilities.

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Are you the pro you need to be to meet these expectations? Professionals in any field are counted on to obtain and maintain their expertise. Some professions require licensure and continuing education, but that isn't the case in learning and development. Nonetheless, you need to be an expert in your specialty and in the dynamics of adult learning – the foundational knowledge base across our entire field.

Becoming an expert isn't always easy. Expertise is built from both study and extensive practice. You are developing foundational knowledge and skill even as you are actively working on projects and expanding your tools and techniques.

There are three ways you can deepen your understanding of adult learning in the midst of a demanding job. Think of it as becoming a 'PRO'; you develop expertise in adult learning by being:

- **P**roactive
- **R**eflective
- **O**mnivorous.

BE PROACTIVE: Study up on the theories needed to support your upcoming projects and initiatives

Whenever you have new projects, set aside time to look for theory, research and frameworks that can be used to shape your strategy. Explore what the research says about critical factors for success and expected outcomes. Review case studies from fellow practitioners (often in journals, podcasts and conference presentations) and reach out for more details if possible.

You might be surprised to find there's a rich store of research on many learning and development interventions: mentoring, building communities, new employee orientation, learning from experience and self-directed learning, to name but a few. You'll also find research on techniques: visual design, gamification, online course design, discussion board management and more.

Admittedly, it can be hard for practitioners to access academic resources. Seek help from a research librarian (at your alma mater or local university) to locate books or literature reviews that summarise the academic literature to date. Use Google Scholar to find useful resources and ask authors for copies of their papers. If you are an AITD member, you have a subscription to the EBSCO database which provides access to a range of business and academic journals.

Be sure to search for critiques of the theories and frameworks as well so you can know their weaknesses and make considered judgments about their application.

BE REFLECTIVE: Articulate your theories and deliberately learn from your own experiences

There is a lot of wisdom in ongoing practice. Reflective practitioners maintain a habit of evaluating their actions and their projects and taking lessons learned forward. They experiment and they collect data on their own activities so they can draw accurate conclusions. They compare their actions and results to well-known frameworks – and they work to align and reconcile the two as part of their ongoing development of expertise. They also ask vendors and peers to share the theory and research behind their recommendations.

Reflection isn't necessarily a solitary action. As a reflective practitioner, you should seek input and

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feedback from others and discuss your thinking with like-minded peers. In this way, you can test your ideas or conclusions and gain from the insights of engaged collaborators and skilled colleagues. You might also find it helpful to get a fresh view from people outside of your professional circle.

Learning professionals can benefit from adopting educators' habit of documenting their teaching philosophy. To that end, continuously compile and update the adult learning principles that are most applicable for your situation. What do you believe generates learning and performance outcomes? What are the factors that you find most important to attend to as you craft designs and strategise recommendations? What are your design principles?

In putting your personal guidelines together, ground them in the literature base of our field, both academic and practice-based.

BE OMNIVOROUS: Stretch your exposure to a wide range of learning theory

You are not likely to become a deep expert in all of the learning theories and frameworks that underpin our work. But at the same time, it's important to have a wide understanding so that you'll know where to look when novel projects come up. Career development professionals have coined a concept they call 'T-shaped development' – they recommend that we have deep levels of expertise in our specialty areas (the vertical line of the T), but wide familiarity with related areas (the cross of the T).

For example, some practitioners may most often need deep understanding of memory and retention theory while others need expertise in social learning. Other areas of deep specialty may be transformative learning, experiential learning or communities of practice. Even when you rely most heavily on a short list of specific learning theories to guide your work, it's useful to be aware of many other theories so you'll recognise when a different line of theory and research may be useful for a given project and you'll be able to better integrate your work with other ways that people learn.

You can cross your T on learning theory by reading textbooks as well as keeping an eye out for articles, podcasts and videos that give overviews of specific theories. Take courses or workshops that focus on theory and evidence-based practice. Make it a point to look into the theories that support other practitioners' work. Start keeping track of what you've seen so you can reference the materials later, using an online bookmarking tool like Diigo – www.diigo.com – or keeping electronic files. Along the way, you may well discover emerging or new-to-you theories that you'd like to study further.

To maintain and strengthen your deep area of learning expertise, read books and specialty journals and find opportunities to interact with experts. When you can, attend conferences and seminars for advanced practitioners. Seek out the subject matter experts in your specialty area and follow them on social media or set up alerts for new publications from them. Identify the thought leaders and keep track of what they see on the horizon.

Embracing the scholar-practitioner in you

Just as academics study the dynamics of adult learning and the myriad techniques we apply in our field, they also study what it means to be a professional and to be a scholar-practitioner.

A scholar-practitioner is one who is well-grounded in the theory and research of the field, who understands the nuances of theory application in a real-world environment and who constantly engages in the dance between research and practice. Deepening your expertise in adult learning will undoubtedly make you more effective and more confident in your recommendations.

Learning professionals often worry about 'having a seat at the table'. The fact is, you get invited to the table when you have something unique to contribute. Be the adult learning pro you need to be by continuously deepening your knowledge of the dynamics of learning. We have a rich and valuable theory and research base that can help us to ensure we are doing all we can to make the workforce ready for what the future holds.

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