

Principles of Adult Education

Community legal education (CLE) aims to assist people to learn about the law, the legal system, legal and related issues and concerns. Through this learning, CLE aims to provide the knowledge, tools and confidence with which people are able to take action or make decisions that will empower them in their dealings with the law and legal system.

What is learning? How can those responsible for CLE ensure that they create the best learning opportunities for the people who participate in their activities?

"The term 'learning' has many interpretations, but it is generally accepted as a change in behaviour or attitude." (Kroehnert, 1990, p1). A measure of successful learning is that the learner is able to recall and apply what they have learned in relevant contexts and situations and in the longer term.

An understanding of how people learn can assist in the design and delivery of effective CLE activities.

This information sheet provides an overview of the following key principles of adult learning and provides practical tips for CLE work:

- Motivation;
- Relevance and Immediacy;
- Personal Experience;
- Context – The Whole and Its Parts;
- Learning Environment;
- Participation and Practice; and
- Learning Styles.

Motivation

People learn best when they are motivated to learn. A person is more likely to want to learn when they are interested in the topic or skills being addressed, and because they can see the benefit or usefulness of the learning.

Internal and external factors provide motivation for learning. Internal factors may include, for example, the desire to broaden general knowledge, to be challenged or to achieve greater job satisfaction. External factors may include wanting to prevent or settle a legal problem, increase job related skills or collect information for a school project.

The motivations of the individuals participating in a CLE activity may vary considerably.

So when doing CLE:

- Do your research. Assess participant motivations and interests prior to undertaking the CLE activity – pre activity survey, discussions with organisers/key people, question participants at the beginning of the activity;
- Involve the target group/participants in establishing learning objectives and in activity design;
- Relate content to the experience and goals of participants;
- Maintain motivation by providing encouragement, feedback and 'rewards' to participants; and
- Undertake evaluations – Did the activity meet the needs and expectations of the target group? What could be done differently next time?

Relevance and Immediacy

Learning is enhanced when the learner is aware of the relevance of the content and when it is 'immediately' applicable to their situation or needs.

So when doing CLE:

- Focus the content of activities around the current interests and concerns of participants;
- Clearly state the purpose and learning outcomes, and identify points of relevance, when promoting and introducing the activity;
- Encourage participants to consider how the new knowledge or skills will assist them to achieve their goals, or to address personal or professional issues;
- Encourage the participants to apply the content to their own or comparable situations by using techniques such as case studies, role plays, questions and discussion; and
- Develop resources that people can easily access if and when they need them.

Personal Experience

People come to learning situations with a wide range of experience, knowledge, skills, values and perceptions. These can provide the basis for valuable personal and co-operative learning. At times, this background may also present barriers and challenges to learning.

So when doing CLE:

- Recognise the experience of participants or the target group in the design and delivery of CLE activities;
- Do your research. Are there specific characteristics of the target group or individual participants that should be considered?;
- Acknowledge 'up-front' that participants may have relevant experience and knowledge and that this may enhance personal and group learning;
- Ask participants to tell you what they know or about relevant situations or experiences they have encountered;
- Relate the content and strategies used in the activity to the past experience and/or current situation of participants;
- Try to identify and pre-empt possible barriers and challenges, such as bad experiences with previous learning situations or a perception that it is impossible to change things; and
- It may be appropriate to take a pro-active approach and plan to constructively raise and address issues. Alternatively, consider how you will deal with certain issues or scenarios should they arise.

Context – The Whole and Its Parts

People prefer to have a sense of the 'big picture', an overview of the topic and how it will be explored before exploring specific components in more detail. This approach provides a context and a framework onto which participants can place and fit together the component parts.

So when doing CLE:

- Provide a general introduction to the topic, issue, expected new knowledge or skills and outline how these will be explored in smaller parts;
- Present aspects of the topic in a logical sequence, review content and check participant understanding prior to moving on to the next aspect;
- Ensure that the various parts are drawn together and linked back to the 'big picture' at the end of the activity; and
- A visual presentation, such as a diagram, may assist in showing the relationship between the whole and the various smaller parts.

Learning Environment

People learn more effectively:

- In a supportive and non-judgemental environment;
- In an environment which promotes sharing and co-operative learning rather than competition;
- When they are encouraged and expected to take responsibility for their own learning; and
- When the physical environment is conducive to learning and when appropriate resources are available.

In CLE activities the educator/facilitator plays the key role in creating the atmosphere, selecting strategies and organising the physical environment for the CLE activity. Careful consideration should be given to how the above points will be addressed, irrespective of the size or relative 'importance' of the activity.

Participation and Practice

Opportunities to actively participate in learning activities and to practice new skills or apply knowledge assist people to learn more effectively.

In CLE activities:

- Thoughtful design of activities can enhance the benefits to participants/users;
- Lecture style presentations or dense blocks of written information should be used sparingly. At the very least they should be interspersed with activities that encourage active participation and application of new skills and knowledge – discussions, questions, problem-solving exercises, completing relevant documents, role plays; and
- Resist the temptation to cover as much as possible in the available time. Balance quantity with quality. It may be more effective to address less points well through input and encouraging active participation, rather than more points, most of which may be quickly forgotten.

Learning Styles

People learn in different ways. These are broadly categorised into learning by seeing, learning by hearing and learning by doing.

People also learn more effectively when more than one of their senses is being used.

So when doing CLE:

- Recognise that very different strategies and techniques may be required in order to get the same message across to different people or groups;
- Cater for different learning styles, stimulate participant senses and maintain interest by using a variety of strategies and tools in the CLE activity;
- Consult with organisers and/or the target group. Can they help you to better understand the learning needs and preferences of the target group? Are they able assist in the design of the CLE activity?;
- Develop your own knowledge and skills – your educator/facilitator 'toolkit'. Identify and become familiar with using a range of strategies and techniques. Be flexible and adaptable, in both the planning and the delivery of CLE activities; and
- Evaluate CLE activities – What worked well? What didn't? How could we do it better next time?

Tip!

There are many publications and web resources that explore adult learning principles. Taking the time consider how these principles can be applied in your CLE work could make a big difference to the real 'learning' achieved by the people who participate in CLE activities or who use CLE products developed by your centre.

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