

# HOW TO TRAIN TEACHERS OF CHILDREN WITH DEAFBLINDNESS A JOURNEY OF TRAINING TO LEARN AND LEARNING TO TRAIN

*Aline Hanning-Zwanenburg (ahzwanenburg@yahoo.com)  
Perkins International*

*Maui Gabriel Resources  
for the Blind Inc.*

## **Abstract**

Adults learn differently from younger students. Adults have specific needs as learners and these needs should be taken into consideration when planning a training course for adults. This paper is a practice-based report on how six principles of adult learning have been applied when training a group of teachers from the Philippines. These principles guide and support a trainer to create effective training experiences that will enhance the learning of participants. In addition this paper also explores new ways of keeping in touch with teachers from a distance through technology.

**Keywords:** deafblindness, teacher training, adult learning principles

## **Introduction**

Teachers play a crucial role in the education of the next generation. Their knowledge, skills and attitudes will have a great impact on the students they work with. Therefore it is critical to pay close attention to how to train and support teachers. Besides acquiring rich knowledge of the subject areas they teach, they also need to develop an understanding of how to teach in order to make teaching successful. The latter is particularly true when teaching children with deafblindness. How does one teach children who are deaf as well as blind or only have limited use of their hearing and sight? Effective teacher training in the area of deafblindness providing teachers with specific knowledge, insights, experience and skills will prepare teachers and will give them confidence to design activities and build programs that fit the needs of each of their students.

When planning and designing a training course for teachers the following questions arise: ‘How to train and prepare teachers effectively in the field of deafblindness?’ ‘What makes a training course effective?’ ‘What elements should a good training course include?’ and ‘How does one know the teachers have benefitted from the training?’ These are all crucial questions to bear in mind when planning and conducting a training

course. However, there also needs to be the awareness that adults learn in different ways from children. Therefore teaching, training and supporting adults requires a different approach. Six principles of adult learning provide guidance in how to design and develop a training course for teachers. This paper will outline how each principle has been applied when training a group of teachers in the Philippines.

The training of a group of teachers in the Philippines was conducted over a period of two and a half years. There were several phases; first, there was an initial course in the capital Manila where all teachers came together for a 3-day training. The initial course was followed up with monitoring visits. Each teacher that participated in the course was visited by the trainers for observations and discussions at their school in their classroom about half a year after the course. About 8 to 10 months after the visits there was a second course, this time a 2-day training again in the capital Manila.

### **Applying the principles of adult learning**

In the early 1970s Malcolm Knowles introduced the term andragogy to describe the differences between children and adult learners (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005). Andragogy focuses on the needs of adult learners and Knowles identified the following 6 principles of adult learning:

- Adults are internally motivated and self-directed
- Adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences
- Adults are goal-oriented
- Adults are practical
- Adults are relevancy-oriented
- Adult learners like to be respected

#### *Adults are internally motivated and self-directed*

Adults like to be the captain of their own ship and like to set their own course. When they feel that others are imposing information or ideas on them they often tend to resist learning. Therefore, participants of a training course should be included as active participants rather than passive listeners.

Lectures with long PowerPoint presentations are often not the most effective way of teaching a group of adults. When getting a group of teachers together for a course or workshop key concepts to keep in mind are 'engage' and 'involve'. The aim should be to get the participants actively engaged and to involve them in different ways rather than to lecture to them. If possible try to get them involved already in the planning phase of the training, for instance by sending out a pre-training questionnaire or task. If this is not possible make sure to review the program and discuss expectations at the beginning of the course.

On reflection, the first 3-day course held in Manila had quite a few lengthy PowerPoint presentations. Although there were some group discussions and assignments, there were hardly enough to fully engage and involve the audience. During the second course the presentations were kept to a minimum and there was a much larger focus on participant involvement by adding activities like simulations, reflective exercises, video analysis, case studies and the exploration of available resources on the

web. This aimed to foster the adult learner's internal motivation to learn as well as to provide opportunities for more self-directed and responsible learning.

*Adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences*

It can be argued whether formal training courses are the most effective way of training people, however, there is great value in bringing a group of teachers together. Teachers of children who are deafblind often feel quite isolated as deaf blindness is a low-incidence disability and often there aren't any other teachers in the nearby neighbourhood to consult and share with. A formal course provides a wonderful opportunity to meet other teachers, develop relationships, to share experiences and to learn from each other. Each teacher brings a wealth of experience and insights to the group and a trainer should tap into this wealth by creating opportunities for discussions and sharing. Enabling each participant to reflect and build upon their own existing foundation of knowledge and experience, to generate new knowledge, concepts and ideas and sometimes even to challenge existing misconceptions.

It's been a joy to see relationships between teachers grow and friendships develop over the course of the training knowing these connections are often unique and rare but so necessary in the small field of deaf blindness. During the course teachers were keen to share their experiences; for example, each teacher shared about the functional activities they do with their students back home giving culturally fitting and appropriate ideas and inspiration to others.

*Adults are goal-oriented*

Adults get ready to learn when they experience 'a need to learn'. They want to know why and how the information and learning experiences provided are useful to them. A trainer needs to facilitate opportunities that connect the dots between theory and practice. Throughout the course there should be times for reflection where the participants are encouraged to ask themselves questions and have opportunities to discuss in pairs. A practical tool to help teachers reflect on what is learned and how to connect and apply this to their own classroom situation is by keeping a reflection diary. After each topic of content every teacher fills out a page answering questions to summarize the newly gained knowledge and insights and reflect on how it relates to their circumstances in their own school. During the second course, to make this exercise more meaningful, a brief time for discussion was added where the teachers in pairs shared the answers to their questions with one another.

At the end of the course these reflection diary pages can then be used to make a three-point action plan on how to use and implement knowledge, insights, ideas and experiences from the course to the school and classroom situation back home.

Unfortunately during the monitoring visits it became clear that most of the action plans made at the end of the first course were often worded in vague terms and the document mostly just remained a piece of paper in a file rather than a pinpointed set of objectives to work on in the near future. In order to make the action plan a dynamic set of objectives, a clear explanation of the expectations of an action plan should be given

at the start. The plan should also be reviewed together with the teacher at the end of the course.

### *Adults are practical*

Through hands-on exercises and collaborative brainstorming, adults move from classroom and textbook mode to hands-on problem solving where they can recognize first-hand how what they are learning applies to the context of their work. Throughout a course there should be opportunities to practice and apply newly-gained information and knowledge. This could be done in a number of ways; for instance when a form has been introduced, an assignment could be given that allows the participants to practice using that form. Watching and analysing videos also create good opportunities for hands-on practice. Videos of exemplary practice can be inspiring and will help participants identify steps towards good practice. Other videos could be used for brainstorming sessions answering questions like: ‘What could be done differently to try to improve the situation?’ Another practical way to engage and involve participants is through case studies. During the second round of training in Manila the topic of functional assessment was addressed. Several days prior to the training one of the teachers was visited and video footage was taken of her and her student while doing different activities. That footage was used during the course as a case study to practice doing functional assessments in several areas. This learning experience proved to be very effective especially because the teacher herself was present and able to answer questions from the other participants and to provide background information that was not observed in the footage taken.

### *Adults are relevancy-oriented*

Adult learners want to know the relevance of what they are learning to what they want to achieve. The reflection diary and action plans mentioned above are tools that support the adult learner in their quest for identifying relevancy. A pre-training questionnaire or task, a review at the start of the training (both previously mentioned) as well as regular checks for meaning, understanding and relevance throughout the course, will enable the trainer to determine and align with what content and learning experiences are most relevant to the participants.

The follow-up monitoring visits approximately half a year after the first course added an extra dimension to relevancy. These visits provided rich opportunities for individual coaching, specific feedback and recommendations that were relevant to the students, the classroom set-up and the setting of the school. A visit started with observations; the teacher was asked to give a lesson or do an activity with her student(s). After the observations time was scheduled for discussions and questions. There were often lively discussions with many questions back and forth and with many ideas and suggestions shared between trainers and teachers and to collaboratively brainstorm or solve problems with the teacher. These monitoring visits also gave feedback to the trainers on whether the participants were able to use and implement the information, knowledge and skills covered during the first training, if the content had been relevant but also to generate ideas for relevant topics for the second training.

### *Adult learners like to be respected*

Adult learners like to be viewed as equals and treated more as colleagues than students. Trainers should demonstrate respect by taking an active interest in the participant's development and by acknowledging their wealth of experience. Trainers should encourage the participants to express their ideas, thoughts and feedback throughout the course. These contributions should be valued and appreciated.

Regarding the monitoring visits, it could be rather intimidating for a teacher to have two or more people in her classroom to observe her every move. Therefore, it is extremely important that teachers feel respected and are treated as an equal and expert in their classroom during the visit. A very helpful question to introduce the discussion time is: 'What went really well during this activity or what were you particularly proud of today?' as it provides the chance for the teacher to share her insights and thoughts, allowing her to set the course and tone of the conversation.

### **Challenges**

The main challenges for organizing and conducting a series of trainings as mentioned above involve costs and time. Gathering a group of teachers from all over the Philippines together in Manila and accommodating them in a hotel for several days involves significant costs. For quite a number of teachers it involved a plane journey, others had to take ferry crossings and long bus journeys. Monitoring visits can also be relatively expensive and time-consuming, especially when it involves travel to different islands and remote areas from one teacher to the next. Therefore, it is worth exploring new areas of keeping in touch with teachers and monitoring from a distance. One of the teachers that participated in the course was willing to try out 'monitoring via Skype'. After some discussions, it was decided that the most effective way is for her to film and send short clips of video footage of herself with her student while doing an activity. This footage is viewed by the trainer who prepares questions and suggestions or recommendations on the interaction, the activity, the setting and so on, which are to be discussed during the Skype meeting. The four try-out sessions that have been done so far prove to be successful with lively discussions, many questions and lots of ideas and suggestions shared. Factors that enabled this success include: established relationship between teacher and trainer, technology-savvy teacher and co-operative school management. On the down side, there are also challenges when the internet connection sometimes suddenly drops, the signal is not strong enough to support video conferencing, or when video files are too big to be sent or in a different format. However, as technology is developing fast, monitoring via Skype could potentially be a way forward to keep in touch with teachers from a distance.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, as adults learn differently to children thoughtful consideration needs to be given to how to fully engage and involve a group of teachers when conducting teacher training. The principles of adult learning will guide and support a trainer to effectively include participants from the early stages of planning a training course till the implementation stage. Technology (like Skype and video sharing) can provide new ways of keeping in touch with teachers from a distance. As these are cost effective and less time consuming they are certainly worth further exploring.

The active learning credo by Mel Silberman (1996) sums up the journey of training to learn and learning to train:

What I hear, I forget.

What I hear and see, I remember a little.

What I hear, see, and ask questions about or discuss with someone else, I begin to understand.

What I hear, see, discuss and do, I acquire knowledge and skill. What I teach to another, I master.

### **References**

- Knowles, M. S., Swanson, R. A., & Holton, E. F. III (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development (6th ed.)*. California: Elsevier Science and Technology Books.
- Silberman, M. (1996). *Active Learning: 101 Strategies to Teach Any Subject*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.