

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATIONS

WHAT ADULT EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT APPRENTICESHIP

Amber Gallup
University of New Mexico

ABSTRACT

Apprenticeship is an internationally recognized model of learning receiving increased attention as it evolves to meet the needs of modern workers, employers, and the labor market. As apprenticeship expands, and new industries explore the model, adult educators are being asked to help develop programs and pathways, write curriculum, serve as teachers, and troubleshoot to help diverse learners succeed within the model. This article, based on both evidence and the author's long practical experience in apprenticeship programs, discusses what adult education practitioners need to know to be effective contributors to learner-centered apprenticeships.

Keywords: apprenticeship, adult education, workforce learning, registered apprenticeship, adult learning

INTRODUCTION

What comes to mind when you read the term *apprenticeship*? For many of us, the word is closely tied to the building trades labor unions and brings to mind young plumbers and electricians working and learning under the guidance of older, more experienced journeymen. For others, the term conjures up an ancient image of apprenticed cobblers, bakers, and tailors, learning from and often living alongside master craftsmen. Apprenticeship, with roots in both the Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution, is indeed an old and venerable model of learning.

Despite its long history, apprenticeship is not generally well understood in the United States. In many other countries, including Canada, Australia, Germany, the U.K., and Denmark, apprenticeship is a common, highly respected form of work-based learning (Fuller & Unwin, 2013). Though systems of apprenticeship vary widely, all integrate classroom instruction with on-the-job learning. These dual components of the apprenticeship model reinforce each other, and resulting gains in knowledge and skill are clearly tied to career advancement and raises in pay (Lerman, Eyster, & Kuehn, 2014). In other words, apprentices earn while they learn and

progress up a career ladder. The apprenticeship is designed so that learners can directly apply what they learn in the classroom to their daily work, while their daily work informs their understanding in the classroom.

In this essay, I describe the strengths of apprenticeship as a model for promoting the acquisition of work-based knowledge and skills in precisely the populations we serve in adult basic education. I also begin to address a gap in our knowledge and skills. As apprenticeship expands in the United States, adult educators are increasingly being asked to play a part in that expansion: as teachers, experts, curriculum developers, and program designers; and as employees of community colleges, CTE programs, and vocational schools that partner with employers, unions, and joint labor-management partnerships. Though we adult educators may respond gamely to these requests, not many of us have a background in apprenticeship or organized labor. As such, we do not fully grasp the complexities of this work-based learning approach and how it differs from the more traditional educational contexts to which we and our students may be accustomed. As adult educators, our experience and expertise are needed. We can promote and safeguard the elements of apprenticeship that can benefit diverse learners. We are uniquely positioned to advocate for the learner-centered orientation to teaching, learning, and instructional design that we know is best practice. With this essay, I mean to raise awareness among educators in our field about the power and potential of apprenticeship for adult learners, as well as the responsibility we undertake when we choose to lend our expertise and energy to such an initiative.

A ROBUST, PRACTICAL MODEL OF LEARNING ON THE RISE

As a model of learning, apprenticeship can be powerful; its resilience attests to its effectiveness. Apprenticeship's work-based approach encourages learners who do not thrive in a traditional classroom context and feel they learn best by hands-on application. At the same time, employers can use the model to invest in a diverse, adaptable workforce that is strongly enculturated in company values and processes (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). Apprenticeship is also cost-effective for disadvantaged students. For the worker-learner, an apprenticeship costs much less than a college education, is more likely to lead to a marketable work credential (Lerman, 2016), and is linked to high rates of employment retention after the learning experience ends (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). In their investigation in Washington State, Hollenbeck and Huang (2013) found that both short-term and long-term impacts for apprentices are very positive, and that the net benefit of apprenticeship to the public and individuals is much greater than any other type of training funded by public dollars in that state.

The building trades—particularly the building trades unions—have always dominated apprenticeship in the United States; the construction industry as a whole is responsible for two thirds of all registered apprentices in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). The unions are a formidable force in apprenticeship, and we can learn much from their example. While percentages of apprentices in the workforce do not approach those in Germany and many other countries, the U.S. is now experiencing an apprenticeship boom—and not only in the building trades. Apprentices have increased by over 707,000 since January 2017

(U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). These are largely registered apprenticeships, a form of apprenticeship certified by the U.S. Department of Labor as meeting specific federal standards for classroom instruction, on-the-job learning, regular raises in pay, and a clear path to career advancement. With this increase, the apprenticeship landscape is beginning to change.

NEW APPRENTICESHIPS ENGAGE THE LEARNER POPULATIONS WE SERVE

In recent years apprenticeship has been expanding into new industries and companies that have not traditionally used the model in the U.S., including healthcare, long-term care and home care, and hospitality (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). With this incipient expansion, workers in occupations labeled *low-skill*, *low-wage*, or *low-prestige* are engaging with the apprenticeship model for the first time. Knowledgeable educators will take issue with the accuracy of some of these labels, but we recognize that the populations who often hold these positions overlap significantly with the learner populations we know well from our careers in adult education. For example, in the homecare industry—which is beginning to embrace apprenticeship—one quarter of workers were born outside of the U.S., nearly one quarter live in households below the federal poverty line, and more than half have no formal education past high school (Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, 2016). These demographic characteristics suggest potential challenges in both language and literacy for some learners.

Over the last 15 years, I have worked within a number of apprenticeship programs. Early in my career, I taught trade-focused English as a second language for foreign-born apprentices in local unions of Ironworkers, Electricians, Insulators, Laborers, and others. Later, I designed curriculum for these and several other building trades labor-management training partnerships and international unions. More recently, I have worked on teams to design pre-apprenticeship programs and registered apprenticeships for workers in frontline healthcare occupations such as home-care workers, hospital-based janitors, and dietary workers. In all these programs, many of the students have been members of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. While these apprentices have been highly competent workers in their occupations, many have struggled with foundational and digital literacy, with numeracy, or with understanding and using English in the classroom and on the job. Many worker-learners excelled in the hands-on portions of the apprenticeship but struggled to comprehend long PowerPoint-aided lectures, textbooks written in college-level English, and standardized multiple-choice tests that were common in the classroom-based component of their program.

For these reasons, I have always interpreted one element of my role as that of advocate, when needed, for apprentices with learning differences, with lower levels of literacy, and those who speak English as a second language. I have made the point to stakeholders that these characteristics do not disqualify an apprentice for success, and that the program and curriculum can be designed to accommodate and support these learners. I also make a point to speak with employer stakeholders about the time investment that learning requires. In my experience, employers who are less experienced with workplace learning programs often believe the desired outcomes will be achieved in unrealistically short amounts of time; my job includes helping employers understand the principles and processes of adult learning.

I mention these roles of mine because, in a stark departure from the way building trades apprenticeships are typically designed, the newer apprenticeship and workplace learning programs commonly partner with community colleges and CTE programs. As such, many adult educators around the country are now taking on the same roles that I have had in my career.

WHAT ADULT EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT APPRENTICESHIP

The unprecedented boom and decentralized nature of apprenticeship in the United States means that adult educators across the nation can and do play important roles in apprenticeship programs. In the paragraphs below, I offer some considerations for effective engagement with this learning model and the multiple stakeholders that often accompany it. These recommendations assume that adult educators have some kind of role in the instructional design or delivery of the classroom portion of the apprenticeship program.

Design Contextualized Curriculum and Instruction Collaboratively

In apprenticeship, the curriculum must be closely tied to *apprentices*' needs, interests, daily work, and career aspirations, as well as to the needs of several stakeholders. Goals, learning objectives, curriculum, and instructional materials should all be clearly linked to the outcome of a needs assessment and developed in a close collaboration with stakeholders. These stakeholders may include the employer representatives, direct supervisors, union representatives (if present), worker representatives, and instructional designers, teachers, and other instructional or programmatic staff. Stakeholders may also include funders, specialists in the target occupation, representatives of upper-level management with an interest in the outcomes of the program, and perhaps still others. Clearly, many people have a legitimate interest in the design and delivery of any workplace learning program, and particularly an apprenticeship.

Responding to and balancing the interests of so many people is challenging and carries the potential for conflict. Excluding or disregarding the needs and priorities of any stakeholder group could seriously jeopardize the success of the program. For example, I once made the mistake of communicating only with upper-level management when seeking employer input on the instructional design process. I did not think to engage the workers' *immediate* supervisors and obtain their buy-in. Immediate supervisors often have the authority to grant or deny leave from work. Excluding them from the design conversations could—and in this case, did—carry serious repercussions for the apprentices' ability to participate in the program. As adult educators, many of us are accustomed to autonomy in our instructional design and classroom delivery. Ideally, the designer/instructor should exercise less autonomy and more collaboration in an apprenticeship context; this is not easy for many of us. I have experienced conflicts with adult educators who do not welcome the input of so many stakeholders. Nonetheless, success for the apprentices depends largely on the ability of program designers and contributors to effectively collaborate. Remember: first and foremost, an apprenticeship is a job, not a class. Stakeholders will be prioritizing the learners' roles as workers.

Consider Much More Than Job Skills in Your Instructional Design and Delivery

Apprenticeship is workplace learning. However, the modern workplace is not the cobbler's shop of yesteryear, and the shifting, volatile job market calls for nimble, well-prepared workers. Today's apprentices need to develop not only specific skills for their current positions, but also the foundational knowledge, critical reflection skills, and authentic learning experiences that will prepare them for novel problem solving in unforeseen contexts (Poortman, Illeris, & Nieuwenhuis, 2013). Too often, apprenticeship and other forms of workplace learning are designed "top-down" to meet only the immediate needs of the employer, without building and maintaining a solid foundation upon which learners can continue to develop competencies. Adult educators can advocate with program stakeholders for a more "bottom-up" approach that meets worker-learners' needs for lifelong learning skills.

As I mentioned above, apprenticeship can be a helpful learning model for those who are not fully served by traditionally academic, classroom-based learning. Historically, apprenticeships help socialize people into work (Vickerstaff, 2003). Modern forms of apprenticeship are informed by social theories of learning and occupational identity formation, such as Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning in communities of practice, Mezirow's (1990) theory of transformative learning, and Illeris's (2003) approach to learning, which includes social, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Poortman and colleagues (2013) argue that though traditional education and training emphasize the content dimension of learning, the social and emotional dimensions are equally important, and the design of an apprenticeship should take into account all three dimensions. For example, designers and teachers should quickly connect to learners' prior knowledge and personal motivations. They ought to attend also to the social atmosphere in the learning environment as well, carefully building community among learners and between learners and compassionate instructors.

Materiality is another crucial element of a high-quality modern apprenticeship. The material conditions, the environment in which workers learn, and the materials with which they interact (the tools and other items they use as they learn), are critical to the learning process and the development of professional identity. Alongside the theoretical, social, and reflective components of learning, apprentices must have continued opportunities to interact with the material world of work in the classroom as well as in the job-based portion of the apprenticeship (Jaarsma, Maat, Richards, & Wals, 2013). Depending upon the field, incorporating real-life materials in the classroom context may mean not only interacting with tools but also role-playing job tasks and typical interactions in a realistic environment and visiting job sites.

Own Your Expertise and Advocate for Learners With Differences

As adult educators, one of our potential contributions to apprenticeship programs is our knowledge about how people learn, how to design learning environments that promote success for all, and how to accommodate those with barriers. We must advocate for workers with learning differences, emerging literacy or numeracy, and particular needs (such as those who speak English as a second language), which may not be as well understood by other stakeholders. In my career, I have known many well-meaning apprenticeship program staff

and stakeholders who have unfair expectations for learners. High expectations are necessary, but they must be fair. Our advocacy may be particularly important when potentially flawed or inappropriate assessments serve as key gatekeeping functions in the program. For example, a computer-based standardized test is not appropriate for an apprentice who lacks digital skills.

Of course, learning does not necessarily happen automatically in even the most well-designed apprenticeship. Here, too, adult educators can use their pedagogical skills and experience to make a difference. Filliettaz’s (2013) research shows that guidance by experienced workers, supervisors, and other mentors can help apprentices learn; however, the guidance should be of high pedagogical quality (which we are qualified to provide). Adult educators may consider agitating for opportunities to mentor other stakeholders—particularly those who have direct, guiding contact with apprentices on the job—in *how* to give guidance in a way that aligns with principles of adult learning.

Hold the Line for a Truly Worker-Centered Apprenticeship

In any workplace learning context, there is always tension between the needs of the learners and the needs of the employer. Being responsive to the needs of all stakeholders is essential to effective adult education programs. The employer and the union, where present, are integral contributors to the program. I have observed too many situations in which adult educators and well-meaning program staff tend to “side” with the employer and present themselves as gate-keeping authority figures for students. Still others have given workplace advice to students that contradicts the employer or the union. Both of these are inappropriate positions for adult educators to assume.

Adult educators accustomed to traditional classrooms with power imbalances can take inadvertently patronizing stances toward learners. We often work with learners who are disadvantaged compared to us, which can exacerbate our unconscious tendencies to believe we know better and must transmit our superior knowledge to willing and passive students. We need to recognize and actively work against this tendency in ourselves, when it exists. In apprenticeship, even more than in other adult education contexts, the students are our peers, our fellow workers, and co-creators of their own meaning and futures. Our job is to support them in the hard work they are doing to move ahead, and to recognize that they, not we, define their own success. Humility, a sense of partnership, a respect for the worker and a willingness to take their lead, can help make apprenticeship a learning model for our future. ☞

Amber Gallup is an adult educator and instructional designer specializing in meeting the learning needs of adults with limited literacy and those with limited English proficiency. A consultant, her areas of expertise include second language acquisition and instruction, workforce learning, and apprenticeship. She is a doctoral candidate at the University of New Mexico in the Department of Organization, Information, and Learning Sciences, and holds an MA in Spanish Linguistics and an MA in TESOL and Applied Linguistics, both from Indiana University. Amber lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with her husband and daughter.

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