

Applying Adult Learning Theory to Strengthen Co-operative Education in the Workplace

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Abstract: Adult learning states that adults learn differently than children and therefore require learning experiences that meet their specific needs. This paper explores the impact that existing adult learning theory and concepts have on enhancing co-operative education for co-operative enterprise employees. The initial research focuses on adult learning theory from adult learning theorist, Malcolm Knowles, and his theory of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners. The research also explores how different organizations, both co-operative and non-cooperative, are using adult learning theory to enhance workplace education for adults. The paper concludes with key insights that share why all co-operative organizations should be applying adult learning theory to their educational programs to ensure that their organization is effectively supporting the International Co-operative Alliance's (ICA) 5th Co-operative Principle, Education, Training and Information.

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1. Introduction

This research explores adult learning theory and how it can be applied to enhance co-operative education for employees within co-operative organizations. The paper also shares examples of how both co-operative and non-co-operative organizations have designed learning experiences based on the six characteristics of adult learners created by Malcolm Knowles to enhance employee education within the workplace. Recommendations are then provided with ways to enhance existing training and education in a variety of co-operative organizations.

Figure 1. Six Characteristics of Adult Learners



Source: Malcolm Knowles, 1978

2. Research and Methodology

2.1 Research Question

The research addresses the following question: What adult learning principles can be used to support and enhance co-operative education at co-operative enterprises so that employees engage with the co-operative principles and values and can apply them to their work?

2.2 Significance of Research

Research conducted on adult learning theory is important because it provides evidence that learning experiences need to be designed based on andragogical principles rather than pedagogical principles. Despite evidence that workplace learning needs to be designed for the specific needs of adult learners, there is still workplace learning based on pedagogical methodology.

Research into corporate adult learning can lead to increased motivation and employee retention. As Marko Radovan (2024) argues, effective employee learning “is a crucial mechanism for retraining and upskilling individuals across various sectors, serving a dual purpose: keeping pace with the changing world and empowering individuals to thrive” (p. 2). Without research showing why and how co-operative education needs to be enhanced, co-operative employees, managers, members and internal learning and development teams may not see anything wrong with the training currently being delivered.

2.3 Adult Learning Theory to Enhance Employee Education

A critical component missing from existing workplace education is the consideration of adult learning theory, specifically around Malcolm Knowles’s principles of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners. Despite knowledge and theories that prove that adults learn differently than children, many organizational courses and programs continue to be developed on pedagogical principles where the teacher is the center of the learning instead of the learner, which Wendy Conaway and Barbara Zorn-Arnold (2015) argue is not an “approach suitable for adults” (p. 41).

As such, the purpose of this research is to explore the impact that adult learning theory can have on co-operative education for employees of co-operative enterprises. The research conducted focuses on journal articles and media that discuss adult learning theory and the importance of considering the principles of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners when designing workplace education for adult learners. The research also explores effective adult learning being delivered within the workplace to employees at both co-operative and non-co-operative enterprises, providing insight into the recommendations made at the end of this paper.

2.4 Research Implications

The practical implications of the research are that the findings can be applied to enhance existing co-operative workplace educational programming. The paper concludes with recommendations on how co-operative enterprises can use adult learning theory to create engaging co-operative education, that increases employee knowledge of the co-operative model. Redesigning existing co-operative education with consideration of adult learning theory will not only increase employee knowledge within co-operative organizations but will help support a strong co-operative culture. For employees to embody and speak to the co-operative values in the decisions they make, they need to be involved in more learning experiences, including simulations, games and case studies which would allow employees to engage with the learning and connect it to their lived experiences and knowledge involving co-operatives, rather than passively hear about the co-operative difference (Audebrand et al., 2017 p. 108).

2.5 Methodological approach

Answering the research question entailed exploratory qualitative research on adult learning theory and co-operative learning being delivered to employees at a large consumer co-operative in North America and within other organizations. Through the first stage of research, secondary sources were collected that focused on adult learning theory, effective workplace learning experiences in co-operative organizations, and effective adult learning being delivered in other organizations. On a smaller scale, secondary sources on effective adult education delivered outside of the western world were reviewed. Qualitative primary research was completed through three informal

discussions with employees at a large consumer co-operative in North America. These discussions provided insight into the quality of co-operative education being delivered to employees in a co-operative organization.

3. Background

3.1 Adult Learning Theory

If the only learning provided within organizations is passive and presentation based, then knowledge retention decreases (Fazey & Marton, 2002). Studies show that when people are involved in learning experiences and have opportunities to apply what they learn and collaborate with others, knowledge retention increases from 10% to 70% (Ghoshal, 2024). For those who have studied andragogy and the theory of adult learning, this information should not be surprising. For decades, theorists like Malcolm Knowles, and many others, have created models and promoted the benefits of experiential learning and learner-centered education, specifically designed for adults. While the methods and theories created by Knowles and other theorists may not be applicable to all organizations, these models can be used as a starting point to evaluate if the co-operative education currently being delivered to employees is effective.

3.1.1 The History of Andragogy

While Malcolm Knowles did not coin the term andragogy, his theory of andragogy “evolved into a sort of movement within academia” (Bouchrika, 2025). Malcolm Knowles challenged the idea that pedagogical methods were appropriate for adult learners by “drawing from knowledge provided by a number of prominent learning and developmental theorists” (Conaway & Zorn-Arnold, 2015, p. 38). Knowles further developed the theory of andragogy by building on two key points, that “an acknowledgement of the knowledge and experience gained by adult learners and the idea that the learner – rather than the instructor – is central to the process” (Conaway & Zorn-Arnold, 2015, p. 38).

Figure 2: The history of the theory of andragogy



Source: Bouchrika, 2025

3.1.2 Characteristics of adult learners

Knowles' (1978) six characteristics of adult learners are:

- **Experience:** Adults learn from their previous experiences. Adults have been through more experiences that they can use to support their learning.

- **Need to Know:** Adults want to understand why they are learning something and how it will benefit them before engaging in the learning experience.
- **Self-Directed:** Adults want to participate in deciding what and how they learn.
- **Readiness to Learn:** Adults want to learn material that is relevant to their lives
- **Orientation to Learning:** Learning for adults should be problem centered. They want to solve the problem rather than simply be told about a subject.
- **Intrinsic Motivation:** Learners engage in learning because of internal factors rather than external rewards.

3.2 Adult Learning Theory and Co-operative Education

Reviewing Knowles' (1978) work on andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners could inspire co-operative organizations to reflect on whether their current programming meets the needs of the learners. If it does not, then organizations need to find ways to create learning that does. Without effective and engaging co-operative education, co-operative enterprises may start to prioritize profits over people in the face of isomorphic pressures to be competitive with non-co-operative businesses within their industry. As many co-operative organizations are following the 5th principle, Education, Training and Information, in different ways, it is critical to research the importance of ongoing and beneficial co-operative education for employees and to see what adult education is being used to support knowledge of the co-operative difference within different organizations.

Figure 3. The seven co-operative principles



Source: Agro Global Bank, n.d.

Research into how adult learning theory can enhance co-operative education and support commitment to the 5th principle will also contribute to organizations making decisions that are committed to the co-operative difference and put people ahead of profits instead of making decisions that align with capitalist organizations. As one of the research interviewees put it, if proper education that is intentionally designed for adult learners is ignored and we don't proactively fight against isomorphism, "there's a real fear that the Co-operative difference at co-operative enterprises will erode".

3.3 The learner-centered approach

There is a lot of pressure on organizations to provide effective and engaging learner-centered education for adults to increase operational efficiencies and support employee development. Unfortunately, many adult educators

develop learning in the way they were taught, which is a pedagogical approach used through elementary, secondary and post-secondary education. This style of learning focuses on the facilitator instead of the learner and has proven to be a mostly ineffective way for adults to learn (Knowles, 1978, p. 9). Knowles (1978) argued that “in conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum; in adult education the curriculum is built around the students’ needs and interests” (p. 10). He noted that while adult education should be built around the learner, often it is not. There are a variety of reasons for this, for example, building learning that is centered around the needs of each learner requires more time, more money and more creativity compared to throwing together a passive presentation or an eLearning module that includes a few knowledge check questions to test the learner’s retention of the required material. However, more time and money need to be invested so that learners can share their experiences with others and learn from being included in the learning event rather than simply being a passive participant. To create an experience that engages learners, educators need to promote and support co-operative education within their organizations and all co-operatives need to ensure they are considering the needs of their learners when designing and implementing their programs. If the needs are not considered, adults will not be motivated to attend future learning events. Providing opportunities for learners to engage in decision-making processes, to interact with other co-operatives and to discuss the co-operative difference with other people can all be effective ways to support the ICA’s 5th principle of Education, Training and Information (ICA, n.d.).

3.4 Co-operative Principle 5 – Education, Training and Information

According to the ICA, the 5th principle requires co-operatives to “provide education, and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives” (ICA, n.d.). While the principle is effective and shares the importance of education within co-operative organizations, there is little information provided on what impactful and effective education looks like within a co-operative enterprise.

Figure 4: The ICA’s 5th Principle, Education, Training and Information



Source: Garland, Light & Power Co., October 2020

The lack of information leaves the interpretation of effective education open to each individual business. In some cases, like the partnership between Co-operatives of the Americas and the confederation of Co-operatives of Paraguay, co-operative education has been a priority within their co-operative organizations and educational programs have been designed to raise “awareness of co-operative values and principles among co-operative employees, members of the boards and members of co-operatives” (ICA, 2014). To effectively raise awareness and continue to promote and implement co-operative education, “the two organizations signed an agreement to elaborate a common methodology on co-operative education for the organizations members” (ICA, 2014). While some organizations have committed to creating continuous co-operative educational programs, other organizations have not.

3.5 Co-operative education at a consumer co-operative

Interviews conducted with employees at a consumer co-operative indicated that employees attend a short presentation about the co-operative difference when they first join the organization. This presentation includes an overview of the co-operative values and principles along with a brief history of co-operative decision making within the organization. While there is valuable content within the presentation, this content “only goes so far” in educating employees about the co-operative difference according to one interviewee.

An interviewee noted that another challenge with hosting a live presentation is that even though it is mandatory for all employees “the participation rate is currently sitting at 50% for employees” . With no additional mandatory education provided for employees, this means that 50% of employees at this organization have likely received no co-operative education. With minimal to no education about the organization’s co-operative difference, it is not surprising that employees have felt a decline in the co-operative culture. An interviewee observed that, in recent years, this decline has been publicly recognized in conversations between employees and leadership. While enhanced education may not be the only solution to bring back the co-operative culture within this organization, it is a strong starting point to ensure employees, leaders and members all understand the co-operative difference and how they can contribute to ensuring the co-operative principles and values are followed.

3.6 Different co-operative education being delivered

The two previously discussed examples of a consumer co-operative organization in North America and Co-operatives of America demonstrate that while many organizations state they are following the co-operative values and principles there are significant differences between co-operative organizations who are actively prioritizing the values and principles, particularly around education, information and training. Many organizations like the ICA and The International Co-operative and Mutual Insurance Federation (ICMIF) work to provide education for co-operative organizations by posting media and blog articles and hosting advanced management courses, biennial conferences and a young leaders forum (Tarbuck, 2024). Despite these available offerings, many co-operative organizations are not participating in these events and are not utilizing these resources to enhance co-operative education for employees within their own companies.

3.7 Existing problems with Workplace Education

3.7.1 Passive learning

The interviews with employees from a large consumer co-operative, suggested that passive learning provided to employees is common even though this type of learning has been proven to be an ineffective way to educate adult learners. Worth and Stephens (2011) argue that “returning adult learners come into the learning environment with reasonable clear educational goals accompanied by murky expectations of how the learning experience has changed since their last exposure” (p. 23). When individuals begin their careers at a co-operative enterprise, like the employees interviewed, many are simply asked to attend a presentation or complete independent online learning with no opportunity provided for application, reflection, feedback, or discussions about the content. New employees should learn about the co-operative difference by participating in robust educational experiences. Instead, they are given learning that resembles every other tedious learning experience that they have had throughout their lives. To create motivated and passionate employees, co-operative organizations should be looking at adult learning theory and implementing educational programs that create opportunities for employees to experience the co-operative difference.

3.7.2 Lack of continuous education

Another problem involving the existing workplace co-operative education is that it is not always continuous. Learning needs to be consistently reinforced for the learner. Without constantly hearing about the importance of the organization's co-operative identity, it is easy to forget the values and principles when deadlines are approaching and pressures to increase profits arise. To enhance their commitment to the co-operative principles, particularly to the ICA's 5th principle, co-operative enterprises of all sizes need to prioritize the creation of new learning opportunities for employees whilst promoting existing events, offered through other co-operative organizations, like ICA and ICMIF. ICMIF offers plenty of collaborative learning opportunities like Advanced Management Courses open to any of the members of these organizations (Tarbuck, 2024). Attendance will allow employees to engage in a variety of learning experiences through different stages of their careers.

4. Analysis/Discussion/Results

4.1 *Andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners*

There are multiple theories that study the ways adults learn and process new education. Arguably one of the most famous adult learning theorists is Dr. Malcolm Knowles. Malcolm Knowles is well-known for supporting and promoting the theory of andragogy (Henschke, 2012, p. 44). The theory of andragogy focuses on the unique ways that adults learn and calls for adult educators to design programs built around the needs of the learners as opposed to conventional education where "the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum" which is common practice for education that is built for children (Knowles, 1978, p.10). Knowles (1978) argued that adults bring experiences and previous knowledge to their learning events and therefore need to have the opportunity to relate their learning to their experiences (p.10). He said that traditional teaching practices seen in elementary classrooms like, "authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking" and "pedagogical formulae have no place in adult education" (p. 11). Not only is Knowles accredited for his work on promoting and developing the theory of andragogy, he also developed six characteristics of adult learners (Figure 1) that help educators understand the need to develop learner-centered educational experiences that differentiate from traditional classroom approaches where the facilitator is at the center of the learning experience. The "six principles upon which Knowles (1984) constructed his formal andragogical concept are: the role of experience, self-directedness, the learner's need to know, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and intrinsic motivation" (Conaway & Zorn-Arnold, 2015, p. 38). Understanding such adult learning theory provides adult educators an opportunity for reflection. Recognizing that adults learn differently than children can lead educators to reflect on existing programming and look for ways to redesign their programs to ensure they are engaging and achieve the objectives of the learning program.

4.2 *The importance of learner centered education – beyond Knowles*

Malcolm Knowles is not the only adult education academic that has spoken out for the need for unique, engaging and interactive education for adult learning. Many individuals who study the adult learning process have shared their thoughts on creating engaging adult learning. David Cotton (2004), who writes about his experiences with adult learners, shares that, "unless you are an absolutely riveting speaker, able to engage the masses with your sparking wit and repartee, avoid featuring yourself speaking as the principal attraction" (p. 3). Many adult educators and those who have studied adult education agree that it is only under very rare circumstances, like being a riveting speaker, where the learning should be centered on the facilitator and not the learner. Even in these cases the learning still needs to include an application component or an opportunity for the learners to engage with each other and share their own experiences as "adults need consideration of their prior experience. The instructor should acknowledge this prior experience.

"Adults need to connect new knowledge to past events" (Knowles, 1978, p. 11). When learners are not at the center of instruction there is a risk of reduced knowledge acquisition and a decline in motivation to attend future learning events (Fazey & Marton, 2002). Wendy Conaway and Barbara Zorn-Arnold (2015) share that despite the understanding of the need for learner centered design for adult students "traditional college courses continue to develop curricula based on pedagogical principles, but this approach is not suitable for adult learners" (p. 41). Not only is this happening at a college level, it is also seen throughout many organizations.

4.3 Arguments against Knowles

While most of the research explored in this paper aligns with Knowles' beliefs about the theory of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners, there were a few criticisms. Timothy Clapper (2010) highlighted some critiques Knowles received for assuming that all adult learners learn in the same way, ignoring systems of oppression and the effects of culture on learning and development" (p. 8). Gary McLean (2006) also questioned Knowles' beliefs by arguing that one adult learning theory to categorize all adults is impossible as "we are all a mix of several cultures—national, family, religious, ethnic, local, gender, and so on. We each bring this mix to the workplace when we learn. Insofar as it is possible, and it is difficult to do, each adult learner must be treated as a unique learner with unique needs and unique processes that work best for him or her." (p. 419). These criticisms are valid because it is difficult to group a cohort of people and discuss how they learn when they have all had different previous learning experiences. As adult educators, it is important to consider the differences among the learners when building and developing co-operative adult education in school systems and in the workplace.

Another critique Knowles received is that his theory of andragogy creates a black and white divide between pedagogy and andragogy (Clapper, 2010, p. 9). Ian Moll (2024) clearly shows the distinction between Knowles's definitions of pedagogy and andragogy in the table below (Figure 5). In the arguments against creating a clear divide between andragogy and pedagogy, many academics believe that like adults, children would also benefit from less teacher-centered learning approaches where they have more opportunities to participate in discussions around their learning and share their experiences on the topics. Timothy Clapper (2010) does not distinguish between the way children learn and how adults learn and instead shares that all learners, regardless of age, need to "organize the learning experience into a transformative process based on experiential learning and reflection that might lead to more meaning making and understanding" as opposed to simply projecting "some slides on the wall and have learner's practice a particular skill" (p. 13).

Figure 5: The Distinction between Andragogy and Pedagogy

Table 1
Knowles' distinction between andragogy and pedagogy

Psychological state	Andragogy	Pedagogy
Self-concept	Adults are self-directed learners, moving towards independence.	Children are dependent beings; teachers are responsible for their learning.
Learning process	Adult learning is generated by past experience, and therefore ideally problem-centred.	Children's learning is based on the instruction of unfamiliar subject content.
Readiness	Adults want specific learning about their work and other roles in society.	Children need generic learning to prepare them for the future.
Orientation	Adults are interested in "just-in-time" learning immediately related to their lives. They learn what they want to learn.	Children's learning is "just-in-case" preparation for an adult future. They learn what society expects them to learn.
Motivation	Adults are internally motivated.	Children are externally motivated.

Note. Contents distilled from Knowles (1968, 1973); adapted from Moll (2023).

Source: Moll, 2024

4.4 Adult Learning in the workplace

Researching how adult learning theory has contributed to successful workplace learning is important as this information can be utilized when building co-operative specific education within co-operative organizations. Many organizations are researching andragogy and the characteristics of adult learning to enhance knowledge retention and increase motivation towards participating in learning events by building learning that is learner-centered and not simply a passive presentation with minimal application. One reason that companies are investing time and resources into new and engaging educational programs is because “adult education has emerged as a crucial mechanism for retraining and upskilling individuals across various sectors, serving a dual purpose: keeping pace with the changing world and empowering individuals to thrive” (Radovan, 2024, p. 1). Investing in adult learning has multiple benefits not only does it teach a specific skill but as Radovan (2024) argues, “it contributes to a more skilled and competitive workforce, which in turn stimulates economic growth, fosters innovation, enhances social cohesion, and supports personal development” (p. 1).

4.5 The Non-Western Perspective

While the research for this paper largely focuses on the western theories of adult learning created and promoted by Malcolm Knowles, Henschke and Han (2008) share a “need for more research on helping students from non-western cultural backgrounds become more interculturally competent and successful” in their adult learning experiences in Canada and the US (p. 28). Not only does researching non-western adult learning theory and strategies help non-western learners, but it also provides new and engaging ideas that could support enhanced, diverse, and inclusive co-operative education in the workplace for all adult learners. For example, Frederick Nafukho (2006) shares the positive impacts that applying the African principle of Ubuntu has had on education in African countries. The principle of Ubuntu encourages people to “expose ourselves to others, to encounter the differences of their humanness in order to inform and enrich our own” (Nafukho, 2006, p. 410). This principle “refers to the willingness to learn from others as a way of building our own knowledge base and wisdom” (Nafukho, 2006, p. 410). While there are similarities to western strategies, there is a stronger emphasis on community support and caring for others which aligns with the beliefs of co-operative organizations.

In another example, Sebastian Koren Francis (2008) shares how studying Indigenous communities and their commitment to lifelong learning sheds more light on the theories of adult learning (p. 87). In his findings, Francis (2008) concluded that “as a person matures, he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource of learning” which supports Knowles’ (1978) theories about the six characteristics of adult learning. However, Francis (2008) discovered that there was a greater focus on not just individual growth through adult learning, but also a greater consideration for development and growth of the entire community (p. 87). Researching adult learning theories outside of the western world can encourage growth and development as a group rather than on an individual basis. More research about non-western learning strategies would be beneficial to co-operative organizations who hold similar beliefs about strengthening communities through cooperation.

4.6 Effective co-operative education in the workplace

4.6.1 Business Example 1: Co-operative Education in a Non-Co-operative Organization

While research on effective formal co-operative education is limited, there are multiple articles that contain examples on how both co-operative and non-co-operative organizations are supporting and designing co-operative learning that is built around the needs of adult learners. As a way to teach the benefits of paradoxical thinking in management education, Audebrand et al. (2017) share how one non-co-operative business used the co-operative business model as an example, as “co-operatives have as a central feature the democratic principle—often defined as the “one member = one vote” principle—which is not systematically implemented in other types of organizations. This principle generates several paradoxes, including the tension between economic efficiency and democratic participation, or between direction and empowerment.” (p. 218). This learning was effective as it went beyond a basic PowerPoint presentation, to learn about the co-operative business model (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 218).

To effectively teach the co-operative paradox, this organization focused on four learning methods that met the needs of most adult learners to ensure they understood the co-operative model and the importance of paradoxical thinking in management.

The four learning methods were:

1. Case method
2. Games
3. Simulations
4. Service learning

In case method, learners were actively engaged in discussions with other employees and had “an opportunity to experience and work out particular aspects of management practice” (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 231). Using the games method, rather than creating a new game, learners played Co-opoly which teaches about the co-operative business model in a game similar to Monopoly (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 232).

Learners also engaged in simulations where they were responsible for running and operating their own co-operative. The simulations were effective because “the intense, hands-on experimentation of running a co-operative forces student to leave their comfort zones and think in new ways. One of the major shifts they make is related to the actualization of their co-operative’s mission: In contrast with typical firms, a worker co-operative’s mission is to maximize working conditions rather than profit” (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 233). Such transformative learning is rarely achievable without actively engaging with and experiencing the concepts being taught (Spencer & Lange, 2014, p.77).

The final type of learning involved service learning which consisted of visiting co-operative businesses and presenting solutions to existing problems the businesses were facing “to the co-operative’s board of directors” (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 234). The service learning was beneficial because as “students expose their findings; they frequently encounter the shock between theory and practice. Real-life situations display much richer intricacies and contradictions than they expect: What appears to be theoretically the best solution might not be supported by the co-operative’s general assembly” (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 234).

The example of a non-co-operative business teaching paradoxical thinking through learning about co-operatives demonstrates the importance of continuous learning that is designed around the principles of andragogy and how adults learn. In this example of effective workplace learning, all of the learning focused on the needs of learners and their experiences. Malcom Knowles (1978) argues that “the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience. If education is life, then life is also education” (p. 10). The experiences involved in teaching paradoxical thinking in management through learning about the co-operative business model exemplify how impactful education can be when the needs of the participants are met, and the learning goes beyond passive presentations and basic knowledge checks.

4.6.2 Business Example #2: Informal education within a worker co-operative

While formal, ongoing adult learning about the co-operative difference is critical to the continuous development of adult learners in the workplace, research shows that informal education can also help support co-operative learning for employees. In Argentina, Marcello Vieta (2014) shared that some of the most effective learnings came out of conversations between employees who took over troubled firms and converted them into worker co-operatives. When these businesses were first converted to worker co-operatives, not many employees knew what a worker co-operative was, as the workers characterized it “they became co-operative in the act of ‘doing’ self-management” (p.186). The workers shared that they “learned cooperativism...on the path of doing” (p.187). The experiences shared by Vieta show the importance of partnering non-formal education with formal learning experiences.

In large organizations it can be difficult to provide informal learning to large groups of people. To support continuous informal learning outside of formal learning events, employees should be encouraged to continuously talk about the co-operative differences with their teams, in brainstorm sessions, meetings and in casual conversations. Simply asking questions like “how does this decision impact our members” or “how does this decision support our co-operative principles and values” can spark a debate which can enhance the learning of all employees in the room.

4.7 Research Analysis: Key Insights

- **Researching and applying adult learning theory leads to successful employee learning.** Researching adult learning theory and redesigning existing programs require more time and resources. However, if the investment is not made in designing education that meets the needs of the learners, there is a risk of reduced knowledge acquisition and a decline in motivation to attend future learning events (Fazey & Marton, 2002).
- **Consider the theory of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners in every learning experience designed for adults.** One way to check if a learning experience designed for adults meets the learning needs of the intended audience is to reference theory of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners. Every program should consider the experience of the learner, their need to know, readiness to learn, intrinsic motivation, orientation to learning and whether the learning includes self-directed elements.
- **Multiple learning methods are effective.** To effectively engage and teach adult learners through the application of adult learning theory, multiple methods should be considered like simulations, games, discussions, and case studies. These formal methods of learning should also be accompanied by a strategy to promote informal learning opportunities that encourage employees to continue to talk about the co-operative difference and share the formal learning they have been involved in to promote continuous co-operative learning, after the formal event.
- **Non-Western Strategies can further enhance learning experiences for employees in the western world.** There is a need for further research on enhancing workplace learning experiences for employees that come from different areas of the world. This learning not only benefits people from different cultures, but it also provides an opportunity to create engaging and diverse and inclusive education for all learners! Many learning theories that exist in Africa, Asia and Indigenous communities are based on the principles of learning together and prioritizing community development and strength, which align with the beliefs of the co-operative model. Utilizing non-western adult learning theory and strategies to enhance co-operative education within the workplace can teach employees the importance of community, caring for others and cooperation.

From these insights, what follows is a series of recommendations that support the development of enhanced co-operative education that can be applied in multiple co-operative organizations.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are a sequential step-by-step plan to enhance co-operative education within a co-operative enterprise.

A Redesigned Co-operative Learning Program for Co-operative Organizations

1. **Start from the beginning.** To properly equip employees to make decisions that consider the co-operative principles and values, co-operative organizations should start from the beginning and create a new learning program for their employees. Existing learning needs to be evaluated to ensure that the program provides employees with an opportunity to engage in discussions about what it means to be a co-operative organization and allows them to share their experiences working in and learning about co-operative organizations.
2. **Create a dedicated learning team.** To ensure that the learning program is designed with the considerations of the learners, a project team should be formed. Prior to designing any co-operative education, it is critical for this project team to complete research and training and have a discussion about adult learning theory, andragogy, and the six characteristics of adult learners to ensure that the new co-operative educational programming will consider the needs of the learners and move away from designing programs in the passive way they were designed in the past.

3. **Make a plan.** The learning team should build a full learning path where employees continue to enhance and refresh their knowledge of the co-operative model and the importance of considering their organization's co-operative identity through mandatory learning events required during different stages of an employee's career. To keep the audience engaged and to ensure the learning is impactful, the learning should use a variety of different engaging learning strategies, like playing co-operative games and going on field trips to visit some of businesses of other co-operatives within their communities. More variety would also be beneficial such as by having learners engage in role-play and simulations where they participate in decisions, similar to how worker co-operatives operate, where there is a strong emphasis on employee democracy.
4. **Immediate opportunities to enhance co-operative education.** While a complete redesign of existing co-operative education could take a long time, in the interim organizations should look into different learning opportunities offered by ICMIF and the ICA. Having more employees involved in seminars like the ICMI Advanced Management Course and The Young Leaders Forum will help fill the need for immediate and enhanced co-operative education (Raboy, 2024).
5. **Creating effective learning experiences.** Each learning event should be properly evaluated to determine how effective the learning is and to identify what modifications are needed. Creating a brand-new co-operative education program that is based on the principles of andragogy requires resources, time and money. However, without dedicating time to enhancing employee knowledge around the 5th principle of education, training and information, co-operative organizations could be at risk of losing their co-operative advantage.

6. Conclusion

Not only is enhancing education within co-operative enterprises important because of the co-operative value and principles, it is critical to the success of the organization. As Nagore Ipiña (2022), Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences of Mondragon University, argues: "education can be key to rebuilding, the co-operative culture within an organization" (p. 1). In the face of isomorphic pressures, it can be difficult to continuously prioritize and discuss an organization's co-operative identity. However, education that is designed based on adult learning theory reminds employees why they started working for a co-operative and helps guide them to make decisions that put people ahead of profit when competitors are focusing on profit maximizing for their shareholders. To resist isomorphic pressures, engage the workforce and create a strong co-operative culture, new co-operative education, designed specifically based on the needs of the employees, needs to become a priority for all co-operatives.

6.1 Future Research Ideas

There are many different adult learning theorists with different methods and ideas that can be effectively used to enhance adult education within co-operative organizations aside from the theories of Malcolm Knowles. More exploratory research should be conducted on the theories of other adult learning strategies in both the western and non-western worlds. Learning from effective workplace education in other countries can enhance education by diversifying the learning experience so that more of the individual needs of the participants are met during the learning experiences.

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