Reflections

Adult Learning Principles in Corporate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Training

DJ Jeffries, MA

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Over the past 3 years, the number of companies making commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has skyrocketed. All top 100 companies in the Fortune 500 have publicly committed to pursuing DEI (Colvin, 2022), and a third of all companies require DEI training for their employees (Estrada, 2021). Companies understand DEI can no longer be ignored, and many have identified education as a key pillar in their DEI strategy. Even as companies champion these efforts, there is still work to do to ensure that these policies and procedures are truly effective in creating lasting change.

Companies often fail to fundamentally understand the purpose behind DEI, relying on DEI professionals to *educate* the workforce, as if DEI

> " ADULT LEARNING THEORIES AND APPROACHES SUCH AS CONSTRUCTIVISM, TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF ANDRAGOGY OFFER USEFUL INSIGHTS."

work was only a set of static learning objectives. While a common strategy in management training, DEI training cannot easily be condensed in this way. As early as 1994, DEI researchers acknowledged this form of training differs from other forms of management training (Lindsay, 1994): DEI training requires empowering learners to be adaptable in an ever-changing environment, where they are the topic. Further, unlike other management skills, it is difficult to conceive the specifics of the ideal end-state. As a result, I propose that learning professionals in the DEI space look to existing theories of adult learning for new ways of thinking about DEI learning. In this reflection, I will outline a few adult learning connections for DEI training, underscore

a different way of thinking about DEI, and offer implications for adult educators.

Adult Learning Connections for DEI Training

At the core, creating an inclusive culture that best serves employees, clients, and stakeholders is a learning challenge of unprecedented scale. The learning professional in this space is challenged to empower learners to collaboratively build something that does not exist today and may look different tomorrow. This work must be done in conjunction with the learners, as instructors cannot possibly have all the answers. Many precedents for this type of learning can be found within the adult learning.

One such example is the constructivist approach, a mainstay in the field of adult learning, that posits individuals construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through their experiences and interactions with it (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Indeed, the challenges DEI learning must address require learners to make sense of their place in a world they share with others from different cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs.

We may also look to transformative learning theory, which suggests individuals can undergo a profound and lasting change in their perspectives and ways of understanding the world through experiences that challenge their assumptions and beliefs (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). For learners, becoming aware of differing perspectives and gaining awareness of how deeply held attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions can hinder us can be a powerful driver for change and support DEI training.

Additionally, andragogy, a theory that argues adults learn best when they are self-directed and motivated, offers some insights (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Particularly, when it comes to DEI training, learners must understand why it matters. Both learners and facilitators must also understand all participants bring something unique to the conversation, and learning to accept and include different perspectives is both beneficial and necessary.

We all reside on a continuum of making sense of cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs. Consequently, in an ever-changing, complex environment, we simply cannot tell learners how to deal with these changes. Although we can ensure they understand the importance of this work, the work of constructing new, more open, and inclusive ways of being, must start first with the learners themselves and then in collaboration with their leaders, colleagues, and peers. In this charge, theories of adult learning can introduce new ways of thinking about the work.

A Different Way of Thinking About DEI Training

As a challenge, current models of formal DEI training often rely on some authority with whom the learners rarely have a relationship. The type of transformative learning required to reimagine our workplaces does not thrive in these environments. Thus, models relying on the learning professional as the sole facilitator, acting as an expert, will not lead to the outcomes we need. Learners must have these conversations alongside the diverse communities that make up their workforce; they must have these conversations with respected leaders, colleagues, and peers. When we create environments for learners to engage in serious dialogues with people they know, like, and trust, there is greater potential for deep examination of uncritically absorbed values and assumptions (Cranton, 2006). These sorts of spaces where learners can engage in transformative DEI dialogues are incredibly valuable for deepening understanding and creating lasting change in the workplace.

Of course, there is also space for formal instruction in DEI training. Often in formal instruction, which I define as the spaces where people learn key concepts related to DEI, employees learn about topics such as unconscious bias, microaggressions, intersectionality, discrimination, and even how systemic racism permutates society's institutions. These concepts can be hard to conceptualize and are important concepts for learners to understand. Still, it can be difficult for adults who

do not see themselves as impacted by them to understand their importance.

DEI training also cannot be a check-the-box exercise. It cannot be shiny programs and no action. DEI training requires sustained organizational investment and commitment to the process—the messy, unpredictable, disappointing, and fulfilling process that forces us to be better, to share experiences, to assume positive intent, to believe each other's experience, to nonjudgmentally listen, and to commit to growing alongside one another. Because, among other reasons, we must. This task is increasingly difficult. Asking people to critically examine their experiences and to construct new ways of being is incredibly challenging. Yet, precisely because the task is challenging, it must be done.

Implications for Adult Educators

The connections between adult learning and DEI professionals are clear. Adult learners need to be actively engaged and involved in the learning process, be allowed to make new meaning through collaboratively exploring assumptions, and be empowered to navigate tensions and discomfort. For adult educators, this means finding new ways of thinking about DEI training that do not rely too heavily on traditional management instructional methods. Adult educators can also find ways to give learners more agency in the process and empower them to be more comfortable with the tensions that may arise in DEI training.

I recommend adult educators consider methods that offer time for both dialogue and reflection and be aware of and incorporate the different perspectives and experiences of adult learners in the training design. Furthermore, adult educators should recognize DEI is a lifelong learning process, and one-off training may be insufficient. Follow-up sessions and resources should be provided to support learners in their ongoing development. Lastly, adult educators may look to the deep body of adult learning research for transferable applications for DEI. I have mentioned a few areas of interest here, but there are likely many more relevant theories and frameworks in the field that could be useful in the area of DEI.

Conclusion

The work of building a multicultural, inclusive, and equitable workforce has never been done to the extent we aspire. This work by nature is ambitious, at times seemingly impossible, and perhaps one of the most important challenges of our times. Although the challenges are ample, never in history have we been as well resourced, had so much intellectual capital focused on DEI, and viscerally understood the importance of this work in the world. We understand now, better than any time in the past, this is the time to rise to the occasion.

In this reflection, I have illustrated a few connections between adult learning theories and DEI training. As companies continue to invest in DEI training, the effectiveness of these trainings remains a challenge. Adult learning theories and approaches such as constructivism, transformative learning theory, and the principles of andragogy offer useful insights. As adult educators develop these trainings, they must find new models of instruction that do not shy from difficult conversations nor rely on the instructor as a sole expert. The rich field of adult learning can be instrumental as we undertake the process of growing into a functional, multiethnic, and truly diverse and inclusive workplace.

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ORCID iD

DJ Jeffries https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9022-7056

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Author Biography

DJ Jeffries is a doctoral student at Columbia University in the Adult Learning & Leadership program, where he serves as the Digital Strategy & Transformation Officer for the Adult Learning & Leadership Network. He holds an M.A. from Columbia University in Adult Learning & Leadership and a B.S. in Organizational Communication from Southern Illinois University - Carbondale. Outside of his studies, he works full-time in Learning & Development for Citibank, and is the Founder of the Leadership Development blog, Led2Win.com.