Adult Learning

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A noted educator, Dr. Malcolm Knowles, devised a theory of adult learning. Before Dr. Knowles published his theory, most educators assumed that adults learned just as children did and that the teacher's role was to teach and the learner's role was just to learn. The teacher was to take full responsibility for the teaching/learning process. S/he made all of the decisions about what should be learned; **how** it should be learned was purely a result of the teacher's knowledge and expertise. In the 1960's, Dr. Knowles and others theorized that children and adults learned differently and he made the following assumptions that characterized adults as learners:

Adults as Learners

1. Adults have a need to know why they should learn something.

Adults are motivated to learn when they are convinced that learning the new knowledge, attitude, or skill is important. Learning is a more meaningful experience for adults if they can understand why they "need to know."

2. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.

"The psychological definition of an 'adult' is one who has achieved a self-concept of being in charge of his or her own life, of being responsible for making his or her own decisions, and living with the consequences."[i] Adults have a strong need to take responsibility for their own lives, including deciding what they want to learn. Dr. Knowles speculates that when adult learners are treated as children, they withdraw from the learning situation. However, self-directed learning doesn't necessarily mean learning without help. Adults often need help in making the transition from seeing themselves as dependent learners to becoming self-directed learners. Trainers are still responsible for the plan or approach, but throughout the training, the trainer involves the participant.

3. Adults have a greater volume and different quality of experience than youth.

The longer we live the more experiences we have. This affects learning in several ways. Adults bring to the learning experience a wealth of experience which can be used to enrich their learning and that of other participants.

Adults have a broader base of experience to which to attach new ideas and skills and give them richer meaning. Tying learning activities to past experiences can make them more meaningful and will help participants remember them better.

Adult learners come together in a group having had a wide range of experiences. They will have a wide range of differences in background, interests, abilities, and learning styles. Because of these differences, adult learning must be more individual and more varied. A wise trainer will find out what the trainees already know and build on these experiences.

There is a potential negative effect of greater experiences—"It tends to cause people to develop habits of thought and liaises to make presuppositions to be less open to new ideas." This potentially negative effect must be taken into account in planning learning experiences. Techniques must be developed to try to counter this tendency.

4. Adults become ready to learn when they experience in their life situation a need to know or to be able to do in order to perform more effectively and satisfyingly.
Adults learn best when they choose voluntarily to make a commitment to learn. In order for them to choose voluntarily, the trainer needs to help them understand why the information is included or why they need to develop a particular skill.

5. Adults enter into a learning experience with a task-centered orientation to learning.
Children learn through a process of acquiring subject matter needed to pass tests, so the content of courses for children needs to be organized into subject-matter courses such as history or science divided into specific periods of time. In adult education the content needs to be organized around life tasks, problems or situations. The content should focus much more on "how-to" and "problem-solving." In this way participants will see the program as much more relevant to their lives and will learn the content with the intention of using it.

6. Adults are motivated to learn by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations.
Almost all adults are motivated to learn something. Allen Lough, who conducted research on how adults learned in real life, could not find a single subject who had not engaged in at least one major learning project (a minimum of seven hours of intentional learning) in the preceding year, and the average learning projects were over seven.

Adult learners respond to extrinsic (external) motivators such as wage increases, promotion, or praise from their boss, but they also respond to intrinsic (internal) motivators such as the need for recognition and self-esteem, natural curiosity, an innate love of learning, broadened responsibilities, and achievement.

The only difficulty is that participants may not be motivated to learn what we wish to teach them which is why it is important to develop in them a need or wish to know.

A variety of activities, based on the characteristics of adult learning, can be used in the teaching process. Some are listed below:

Adults have a need to know why they should learn something.

- **Provide** real or simulated **experiences** through which the learners experience the benefits of knowing and the costs of not knowing.
- Start training by creating a **climate of mutual trust** and by **discussing expectations** with the learner.
- Allow participants to engage in self-diagnosis by using questionnaires and assessment instruments both before and during training.
- Help participants see how the training will help them.

Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.

- **Allow for** as much **choice** as possible in making decisions during the learning experience.
- Create a **mechanism for mutual planning**. Help adults diagnose their needs. Set objectives and design learning activities suited to their needs.

Adults have a greater volume and different quality of experience than youth.

- Encourage participants to **share their experiences**.
- Try to **link** new learning activities to the participants' experiences.

Adults become ready to learn when they experience in their life situation a need to know or be able to do in order to perform more effectively.

- Any training course will be more effective if the content is related to meeting their need for knowledge or a particular skill. Often participants are sent by their organization/ company and do not "**choose to attend.**" When participants are "sent" for training, there are **two mechanisms for reducing their resistance:**
    1. State publicly that you realize there may be some participants who are not in the course because they want to be and that you are sorry because this gets in the way of learning, and
    2. Explain that since they have no choice but to be in the course, to try to find some value in learning what the course has to offer.
- Participants should be told why a particular topic or session is included and why they are expected to learn a particular skill or adopt a certain attitude.

Adults enter into a learning experience with a task-centered orientation to learning.

- Case studies and role play techniques help participants feel they are working with "real" problems and accomplishing "real" tasks.
- Developing and carrying out "re-entry" plans help participants learn how to apply the lessons learned.

Adults are motivated to learn by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators.

- As trainers, we can set the stage and do much to orchestrate an environment conducive to learning, however, it is also an internal process.
- Positive reinforcement enhances learning.
- Link training with promotions, added responsibility, power, and esteem.

How Adults Learn

1. Adults have many previous experiences that are pertinent to any educational activity. Ignoring them causes resistance to learning.

2. Adults have a great many preoccupations other than what you may be trying to teach them. If you waste their time, they will resent it.

3. Adults are faced with real decisions to make and real problems to solve. If training does not help them with either, it may be wasted.

4. Adults react to authority by habit according to their experiences. You cannot force someone to learn.

5. Adults are proud and self-directing. Learning is most efficient when it is the learner's idea, and meeting his specific needs.

6. Adults have real things to lose. Learning must enhance their position, their esteem, or their self-actualization. Otherwise there is too much risk.

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[i] **Source:** Donaldson, L. and Scannell, E. *Human Resource Development.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1986.