

Principles of Adult Learning

Adults as Learners

Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding how adults learn best. Compared to children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. Despite the apparent truth, adult learning is a relatively newer area of study.

- **Adults are *autonomous and self-directed*.** They need to be free to direct themselves. Their teachers must actively involve adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them. Specifically, they must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and let them work on projects that reflect their interests. They should allow the participants to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. They have to be sure to act as facilitators, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than only supplying them with facts. Finally, they must show participants how the class will help them reach their goals (e.g., via a personal goals sheet).
- **Adults have accumulated a foundation of *life experiences and knowledge*** that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, they should draw out participants' experience and knowledge which is relevant to the topic. They must relate theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of experience in learning.
- **Adults are *goal-oriented*.** Upon enrolling in a course, they often have a goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Instructors must show participants how this class will help them attain their goals. This classification of goals and course objectives must be done early and often in the course.
- **Adults are *relevancy-oriented*.** They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Therefore, instructors must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins. This means, also, that theories and concepts must be related to a setting familiar to participants. This need can be fulfilled by letting participants choose projects that reflect their own interests.
- **Adults are *practical*,** focusing on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be as interested in knowledge for its own sake. Instructors must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them on the job or in their lives.

As do all learners, adults need to be shown *respect*. Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class.