

# ADULT LEARNING

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Can we really “teach an old dog new tricks”? According to the research and literature on adult learning and education, the answer is an overwhelming “YES”! Through a wide variety of settings, content, past experiences and personalities, the word is definitely out that adults do indeed learn—and they learn well.

This chapter will provide a very brief overview of the history of adult learning; aspects of an adult learner; the variety in ways learning can take place; its implications for adult educators, and suggestions for presenting content in our increasingly technologically savvy world.

## A Brief History of Adult Learning

Before an educator steps up to the task of presenting material to adult learners, the question of whether the content will indeed be “learned” is of considerable concern. Just what constitutes learning has been a topic of debate among educators for quite some time. The central question of how an *adult* learns and how he/she learns *best* has occupied the minds and attention of researchers since adult education became a professional field of practice in the United States in the 1920’s.

Androgogy, or “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, p. 351) was actually first practiced in nineteenth-century Germany for on-the-job education for its workers. However, in America, early research on adult learning was framed under the context of whether or not adults could learn well *at all* (Thorndike, Bregman, Tilton, and Woodyard, 1928). Adult subjects were systematically tested under timed conditions on various learning and memory tasks. When compared to young people, under timed conditions, the results did appear to show that young learners were indeed “better” learners. What became evident in the data, however, was that many of these older adults had less formal education than their younger counterparts; therefore they had much less practice in developing test-taking skills. Moreover, when the researcher focused only on the adults’ *ability* to learn,



without timing the rate of learning, (removing the pressure of time) adults up to age seventy *did as well as* younger adults (Lorge, 1944, 1947).

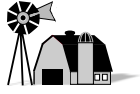
Intelligence tests, or IQ tests, also were developed around this time frame, with younger students again fairing better than their adult counterparts. Since that time period we have learned that measurement of intelligence is a very complex equation; life experience and life-practice serve as important indicators for scoring well on some sections, but lower on others depending on use and relevancy of content. Today it is recognized that as adults age, they will score better on some aspects of intelligence, and worse on others, but *overall* results remain in a remarkably stable composite of intelligence well into very old age (Schaie and Wills, 1986).

In the 1970's and 1980's, there was as much rallying as there was criticism around the variety of ways adults learn and which ways they learn best. Five basic assumptions underlying androgogy were developed that describe the adult learner as someone who:

- 1) has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning
- 2) has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences which is a rich resource for learning
- 3) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles
- 4) is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge
- 5) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors.

From these assumptions, it was proposed that the classroom climate should be one of “adulthood” where the adults feel respected, accepted and supported” (Knowles, p. 4) Also, there should exist a feeling of mutual inquiry, where both teacher and students are guiding each other through their goals and learning process (Merriam and Caffarella, 2001).

Of course, consistent to the development of theories is the criticism that quickly follows. The criticism that followed these assumptions is the extent to which they are characteristic to *adult learners only*—there are instances where some children take on the aspects of adult learners, and vice versa. Some adults are highly dependent on the teacher, as young learners often are, while some children are highly independent, self-directed learners, like adults. Similarly, one cannot always assume that adults are intrinsically motivated, as some adults may be externally motivated to learn to keep their job; children are not always externally motivated to learn, as many are internally motivated by curiosity or the simple pleasure of learning.



## **What Does All This Conflicting Theory and Research Say About Adult Learning?**

With the inclusion of a greater and wider diverse population of participants and environments, it has become clear that “there is no such thing as one kind of learner, one learning goal, one way to learn, nor one setting in which learning takes place” (Kilgore, p. 53). It would indeed be much easier if everyone learned in the same manner and in the same environment as educators could then follow the “one ideal lesson plan” and know their students would acquire the required amount of knowledge. However, it would be reckless and irresponsible to believe that our individual and adult learning styles are generic without regard to race, class, gender, culture, emotions, and unique social and life experiences. From this end, the well-armed educator is one who will assist the adult learner with a variety of opportunities for their unique learning style as well as their unique life experiences to emerge and expand into new areas of skill, knowledge, ideas and reflection.

## **Recognizing Individual Learning Styles**

It is most successful for an educator to teach in a style that is most successful for the student. In many cases, due to the number of students, this means offering a variety of instructional methods so each student has an opportunity to learn in the style or method best suited for them. Learning styles themselves, have been the subject of a great deal of research and debate (Merriam and Caffarella, p. 209). Terms such as “global learners”, who look for the “big picture” and who absorb and observe the lesson all at once, were contrasted with “analytical information processors” who like information in a step-by-step process (ibid., p. 208). Again, it would be unfair to label individuals as always using one style or another, as the unique factors of setting, mood, materials, culture, goals, and classroom dynamics play an integral part in every learning/teaching experience. Theories such as these, albeit helpful, are “probably not complex enough to capture the essence of individual differences among human beings.” (Bonham, p.15). There are four categories of learning styles, however, that have seemed to survive the test of time and scrutiny, and may provide some use for the educator. They are as follows:

### **Auditory**

These learners comprehend best when hearing information and sounds from the environment. They are excellent listeners.



## Visual

These learners collect data by observing and watching. They examine, inspect and scrutinize their environment. They retain information best when they *see* it.

## Kinesthetic

These learners need to interact with the knowledge or skill to retain it well. They are tactile and remember through touch and manipulation of materials.

## Integrated or Combination

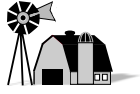
These learners use a combination of sensory inputs. They would learn to bake a cake by reading the recipe, watching a chef on TV, then blending the ingredients firsthand. They learn through experience.

With these styles in mind, the educator can construct the presentation using a variety of examples and discussion to encompass each learning style. For example, an auditory learner may remember facts by the intonations of your voice, or by a story related to the information; the visual learner by your eye contact and use of pictures, power point presentations or overhead materials. The kinesthetic learner would learn well with items they can touch (as in bringing in samples of equipment) or materials they can examine. An integrated learner needs a combination of all of these with an opportunity to experience or practice what they have learned.

What seems to occur, as we age and accumulate a greater variety of experiences, we determine which learning method will be most successful in each situation. Perhaps without specifically realizing it, we, as adults, have learned to incorporate new and more efficient methods of learning that are directly suited to our current and future situations (Merriam and Caffarella, 2001).

## Characteristics of A Successful Adult Educator

What types of characteristics are essential for a successful teaching and learning interaction? Having the knowledge and techniques is important, but not enough for a successful classroom climate in which both the educator and learners are at their peak performance. Knox (1980) suggests that an adult educator should possess three specific areas of knowledge: knowledge of content, knowledge of learners, and knowledge of methods. The adult educator also must possess personality characteristics and interpersonal skills that encourage participation, risk-taking, motivation, and acceptance of others in the classroom. Personality traits include a caring attitude, self-confidence, informality, enthusiasm, responsiveness and creativity. Apps (1981) found that the best adult educators were ones that showed an interest in their students and subject matter, had the ability to make the subject interesting and were



objective in dealing with the students.

Knowles and Associates (1984) identified the following seven components that adult educators or facilitators should use for a successful learning experience:

- Establish a physical and psychological climate conducive to learning
- Involve learners in mutual planning of methods and curricular directions
- Involve participants in diagnosing their own learning needs
- Encourage learners to formulate their own learning objectives
- Encourage learners to identify resources and to devise strategies for using such resources to accomplish their objectives
- Help learners to carry out their learning plans
- Involve learners in evaluating their learning.

Success in the classroom, no matter if the presentation is a short, one-time in-service, or a semester-long course, the above characteristics of the educator are ultimately tied to a successful learning experience by both students *and* the educator.

## A Few Suggestions Before You Begin Your Presentation

There are a few facts about your audience that may be helpful before starting your presentation and can guide your class time with your students. Asking the following questions in an informal discussion or introductory survey may prove successful for the adult educator:

- Why have they come to class? (occupational reasons or topic interest)
- What would they like to learn from the class? (goals)
- What do they already know about the topic? (experience level)
- What types of presentation works well for them? (lecture, discussion, slides, hands-on materials, combination)
- How can you best meet their learning goals?

## Internet, E-mail, and the World Wide Web

We all know that our world has changed dramatically the last twenty years with the introduction of home computers and the wide variety of uses they provide. From balancing your home checking accounts to accessing the latest technological advancements, computers and the internet now can afford



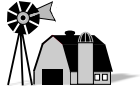
anyone information that was previously held by only a fortunate few. In this light, why would anyone, then, come to class when they could easily learn some of the same material at home?

Those adults who choose to come to class are probably attending because they enjoy personal interaction, discussion and learning from others' experiences. Although there is nearly unlimited information on the internet, it is still only *information*—which can lie flat and stale during the learning process. Interacting with teachers and peers with the *accent* of technology can provide a well-rounded, up-to-date learning experience for everyone in class. Keep in mind, however, that new technology and computer programs can be very attractive and even glitzy—but the message can easily be lost. Make sure to maintain discernment of whether the dimensions of your material actually accents your goals, or whether it leaves the learner passively dazed by the end of your class. Elizabeth Burge, author of *Synthesis: Learners and Learning Are the Issues* advises keeping the following points in mind when using technology in your classroom:

- Use technology to cue and support your material and cognitive strategies; do not use it as a passive presentation of your information.
- Remember the power of your voice; a well-modulated voice can maintain attention span and increase interest in your material.
- Remember to pause for questions during your presentation; place slides with questions throughout the presentation as a cue to engage your audience and to check their comprehension and learning. It also brings people together to learn from each other.
- The printed word/printed material maintains durability to your presentation and allows further review and reflection of your material at home. It is still a useful tool to accompany new technological programs.
- Inquire about your audiences' competency with regard to computers. It would be unfair to assign work at home or in the classroom with computers when there may be a wide gap in computer literacy.

Overall, we, as adult educators are there for *learner support*—we are given the opportunity to guide adult learners and facilitate their learning of new knowledge, skills and ideas. In general, adult learners “want whatever works best for them. Ignoring the new learning technologies is not an option, but...use them appropriately *alongside* traditional teaching and learning media” (Phillips and Kelly, p. 20).

Adult learners are an increasingly important segment of the population of students in the United States (Long, 1987). Adult educators have an increasingly important task in training and teaching adult learners, as adults are continuing their education for reasons that include both occupational and



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personal enrichment. The opportunity for both educators and students to learn from each other lie in the vast and interesting past experiences, learning styles, personalities, materials and motivation of all that participate in class. Let the enrichment begin!



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