

Adults as Learners

Characteristics of Adult Learners

1. Adults have a broad base of experiences to draw from and share with others.
2. Adults have many other things going on in their lives: family, job, community, and social responsibilities.
3. Many adults face barriers to learning such as unlearning, unrealistic goals, poor self-image, and diminished vision and hearing.
4. Adults may not risk failure in learning situations.
5. Adults want information to be relevant to their needs and immediately applicable.
6. Adults respond better when the material is presented through a variety of teaching methods and when information is understood through different sensory experiences.

Teaching Adults

Adults are a challenge to teach. They're intelligent, inquisitive, and usually highly motivated to learn. Adults want their learning to be problem-centered and personalized. A good teacher of adults is accepting of their need for self direction, personal responsibility, and involvement in the learning process. Many adults enjoy learning and are challenged by new ideas and information. They're lifelong learners who usually did well in school and are still comfortable in adult life in "school-like" situations. Other adults aren't. Some have negative feelings about their school experiences and are uncomfortable being in the "dependent-learner" role. As a teacher of adults, you'll see a wide range of differences in the adults you teach. A question adults frequently ask is "What's the fastest, easiest, and cheapest way for me to learn to? Attending your workshop or training session may be the very answer needed.

Adults are Unique

- They know a lot, from their many experiences.
- They have definite opinions, values, and beliefs.
- They're highly time-conscious.
- They learn by a variety of methods.
- They like to actively participate.
- They're seeking answers to current problems.
- They won't return if the training provided doesn't meet their needs.

For most adults, learning is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Adults who attend your training do so because they have a current need for the knowledge or skills being taught.

Barriers to Learning

Resistance to Change – If what you are teaching is in conflict with the belief system of the adult learner, she/he will resist "buying into" the concepts or ideas you are presenting. Unlike children, who come to school eager to learn and are open to new ideas, many adults have definite mind-sets which resist new ideas in all sizes and shapes. Helping an adult change is like dealing with an ice cube. First you help them melt the idea and then you reshape the idea as in refreezing the water into another shape. Be sensitive to opposing viewpoints. There are many "right ways" to accomplish the same task. As a trainer of adults, you have an opportunity to continue to learn and grow also. Encourage your learners to try new ideas and expand their horizons. Make learning an enjoyable experience, an opportunity to explore together, and to learn from each other in an accepting environment.



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Negative Self-Image – People who feel good about themselves produce good work. This is true for adults and children. It's hard to learn when you are afraid to ask questions or feel your intellectual abilities are limited.

Be sensitive to put-downs. They have no place in your training session. As a teacher of adults, never use criticism or sarcasm to make a point. What you will make, instead, is an enemy – and an adult learner who will not return to your training sessions. Strive to enhance the self-esteem of your participants. Simple ways to do this are:

1. Learn their names.
2. Respect their time – start and finish according to schedule.
3. Be interested in their accomplishments.
4. Acknowledge their contributions.
5. Encourage their opinions and participation in class discussion and activities.

Fear of Failure – Adults, even more than kids, are sensitive to failure and looking foolish in front of their peers.

Although we are capable of learning new things at all ages of our lives, some adults feel insecure and will not participate so as not to look inadequate in a group situation.

Other adults participate frequently and use the group situation as a platform for their own performance. The key to being a successful teacher of adults is balance and control. The skilled teacher learns to balance the presentation of new material, debate and discussion, sharing of participants' ideas, with the clock.

A key to success is to be flexible when developing your teaching plans and methods. Always have a "Plan B" should you want to adjust your group lesson to accommodate the needs of the group. Always be supportive in providing positive feedback and encouragement – and help your adult learners grow beyond their fear of failure.

Adults "vote with their feet." If the training is meaningful and has application to their present concerns, they'll return for the rest of the series. If not – you'll have a "no-show" at your next training session.

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Adult Characteristics/Implications

Characteristics of Adult Learners	Implications for Adult Learning	Implications for Trainers
<p>Self Concept: The adult learner sees himself as capable of self-direction and wants others to see him the same way. In fact, one definition of maturity is the capacity to be self directing.</p> <p>Experience: Adults bring a lifetime of experience to the learning situation. Young people tend to regard experience as something that has happened to them, while to an adult, his experience is him. The adult defines who he is in terms of his experience.</p> <p>Readiness-to-Learn: Adult developmental tasks increasingly move toward social and occupational role competence and away from the more physical developmental tasks of childhood.</p> <p>A problem-centered time perspective: Young people think of education as the accumulation of knowledge for use in the future. Adults tend to think of learning as a way to be more effective in problem solving today.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify what the learners want and need to learn in a climate of openness and respect. • Most adults enjoy planning and carrying out their own learning exercises. • Most adults need to evaluate their own progress toward self chosen goals. • Use more experiential techniques. • Discovering how to learn from experience is vital to self-actualization. • Mistakes are opportunities for learning. • To reject adult experience is to reject the adult. • Adults need to identify the competencies of their occupational and social roles. • Adults readiness-to-learn and teachable moments peak when a learning opportunity links with the need-to-know. • Most adults can identify their own teachable moments. • Adult education is better if it is problem-centered. • Find out what the learners need to learn. • Adults need the opportunity to apply their learning quickly. 	<p>Trainers recognize participants as self-directing . . . and treat them accordingly. The trainer is a learning reference for the participants rather than a traditional instructor. Trainers are therefore encouraged to “tell it like it is” and stress “how I do it” instead of telling participants what they should do.</p> <p>The trainer avoids “talking down” to participants who are experienced decision-makers and self-starters. The trainer tries to meet the participants’ needs.</p> <p>Since the adult is his experience, failure to use the experience of the adult learner is equal to rejecting him as a person.</p> <p>Learning occurs through helping participants identify gaps in the learner’s knowledge.</p> <p>No questions are “stupid”; all questions are “opportunities” for learning.</p> <p>The main emphasis in a session is on learners learning, not on teachers teaching.</p> <p>Involvement in things like problems to be solved, case histories, and critical incidents is usually better for adults than “talking to” them.</p>

More recently, Knowles has stated that “adults and kids are pretty much the same not only in terms of self-directedness, but also in their motivation, orientation, and readiness to learn. Kids have just as much need for learning to be life-centered, task-centered, and problem-centered. It’s just that the nature of their tasks, problems, and lives are different. The only universal characteristic of adult learners is the quality and quantity of their experience. It’s doubly important in a group of adults to take into account the individual’s experience.”



Adult Characteristics/Implications

Adult Learners

Characteristics	Implications
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adults come to your programs with a wide range of familiarity with the subject matter. Some may even know more about the subject than the presenter. Adults have a broad base of experience to draw from and to share with others. They are very heterogeneous. 2. Adults have many other things going on in their lives: family, job, community, and social responsibilities. For most adults, education is secondary. Time is limited for participation in learning opportunities. 3. Many adults face barriers to learning such as unlearning, unrealistic goals, poor self-image, and diminished vision and hearing. 4. Adults are extremely sensitive to failure in learning situations. Some may feel tension or stress in a classroom setting. 5. Adults want information to be relevant to their needs and immediately applicable. Adults are very "now" oriented. Adults are interested in solving problems. 6. Adults learn best when they are participants in the learning process. 	<p>Plan ways to involve adults with expertise in your presentation. Allow sharing time and encourage participation. Provide a variety of learning opportunities.</p> <p>Learning opportunities must be offered on a flexible time schedule, designed to meet learner availability and needs. Short term commitments are more realistic and more readily agreed to.</p> <p>Helping adults acquire confidence and a more positive self-image is sometimes necessary to change performance. Be aware of any physical limitations and adjust accordingly. Adults reach full maturity by their early 20s. Until the late 40s they usually experience no major physical changes other than those induced by accident, illness, stress, childbirth and lifestyle. During the middle age years, some adults may experience diminished vision and hearing. Provide visuals with large print. Arrange room so that everyone can hear and see.</p> <p>Ask if participants can hear/see. If not, adjust the environment. Sometimes older adults need more time to learn something, however, experience and efficiency compensate somewhat. Also, using a variety of teaching methods that involve all of the senses will add interest as well as accommodate individual needs.</p> <p>Assist with helping adults unlearn information if this is necessary for learning new ways. Help adults set realistic goals.</p> <p>Provide opportunities for adults to achieve success during your presentation. Encourage sharing of successful situations. Create an informal environment. Allow time for participants to meet and talk informally.</p> <p>Be sure to help adults understand how they can use the information you are sharing immediately. Adults in a "skills" learning session need to leave the first session with a direct experience in the subject. Provide many problem-solving experiences.</p> <p>Instructor-centered learning and lecturing is least effective for most adult learners. Diversify your teaching methods. Learn new methods which allow for participation and sharing of knowledge by participants.</p>

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