

Adult Learning Theory

A Guide to Theories in Adult Education

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What is Adult Learning Theory?

Adult learning theory, also known as “andragogy,” asserts that adults have unique qualities that make them differ from younger learners. Adult learning theory is based on four key principles and five key assumptions.



Key Principles of Adult Learning

1. **Involvement in Learning:** Adults want to be involved in the planning, delivery, and execution of their learning.
2. **Accessing Past Experiences:** Adults possess a wealth of experiences to help them understand new information.
3. **Problem Solving:** Adults want to solve problems and apply reasoning.
4. **Immediacy:** Adults want to be able to apply information immediately.

Key Assumptions of Adult Learning

1. **Self-concept:** Adults are more independent and self-directed.
2. **Experience:** Adults have prior experience from which they draw knowledge.
3. **Readiness to Learn:** Adults need a reason for learning and are goal oriented.
4. **Orientation of Learning:** Adults want to be able to apply information to their lives and are less interested in general learning on a topic.
5. **Motivation to Learn:** Adults are intrinsically motivated to learn, wanting to improve themselves rather than learn because of others.

What is an “Adult Learner”?

Based on the principles and assumptions above, it is important to remember that adult learners are not simply chronologically adults. They are individuals with motivations and expectations that differ from their younger counterparts.

Adults learn best when they learn by doing and experiencing. Their focus is on being able to apply new information, not just memorize it. Adult learners can be more demanding than their counterparts, as they are goal-driven and need to know what their education will do to help them meet their goals.

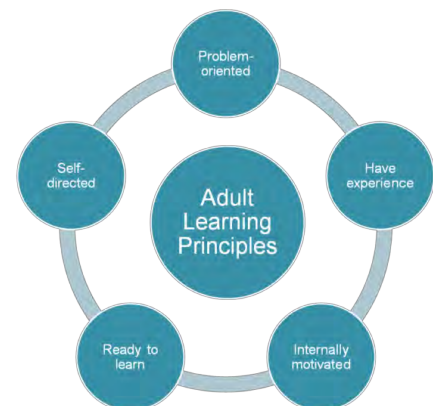


Image from Teaching and Learning Network
<https://www.teachingandlearningnetwork.com/adult-learners.html>

How Should I Design Instruction for Adults?

Problem-based education is well suited for adults, as they are problem-oriented in their learning. Problems are motivating and engaging for adult learners, helping them to develop important skills they can translate into professional practice.



Knowledge is context-dependent, so incorporating real world examples to apply new information with is important in designing learning experiences for adults. Learning is also interconnected, so activating prior knowledge before introducing new concepts will help learners understand and retain information better.

Experiential learning is one way to connect learners to new information. Kolb's experiential learning cycle shows us that people engage in the learning process by experiencing something new, reflecting on that experience, drawing conclusions from the experience, and then testing what they have learned. Providing opportunities for adult learners to go through this cycle in your course will aid in learning.

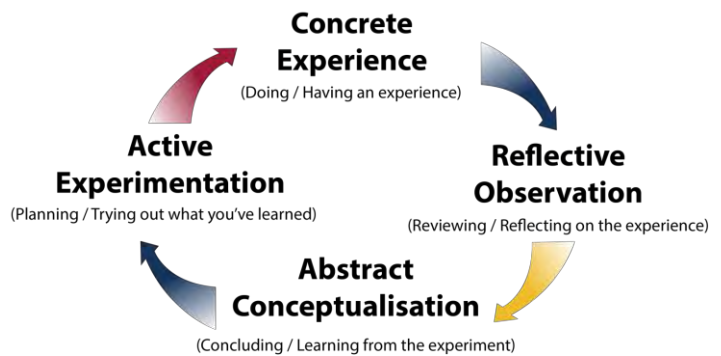


Image from Queen's University <https://www.queensu.ca/experientiallearninghub/about/what-experiential-learning>

Remember, adults are intrinsically motivated and will want to know how the information you are presenting is relevant to their goals. Make those connections explicit.

How do I Support my Adult Learners?

Beyond applying the principles above, it is important to recognize adult learners as unique individuals with their own knowledge, experiences, and goals. Individualizing education when possible provides adult learners the opportunity to tailor their education to meet their needs. For example, providing multiple ways to demonstrate competency on a given topic allows the learner to select the modality that best meets their own needs and goals.



Demonstrating respect for learners' prior knowledge and experiences creates a positive learning environment. Instructors who approach classes with the view that they may learn as well help to create such an environment. While the instructor may have mastery of a given topic, they can often learn from engaging in discussion with their adult learners.

For assistance in designing learning experiences for adult learners, contact us at educational_improvement@mcw.edu.