

Adult Learning and Participatory Training

*"If we know why we are learning
and if the reason fits our needs
as we perceive them, we will
learn quickly and deeply."*

-- Malcolm Knowles

What is "adult learning?" What are "adult learning principles" and why do we care about them? What are the implications for training?

Simply stated, part of being an effective educator is understanding how your training audiences learn best.

Understanding adult learning principles (ALP) and how to apply them will help you become a better trainer, facilitator and champion of learning. By creatively using combinations teaching techniques and strategies for adult learners, educators can deliver effective training experiences that enhance participants' learning. When adults participate in a positive learning experience that embraces and follows ALP, they are more likely to retain what they have learned and apply it in their work environment.

The design of your training sessions should be influenced by your expected learner population, their learning needs both as individuals and as a group, and the differences and similarities in their learning styles and experiences.

In this section we will review:

- ☑ Some basic adult learning principles and their implications for training;
- ☑ How to develop appropriate learning objectives and design training sessions that accommodate a variety of learning styles; and
- ☑ Some strategies for actively involving learners in training.

Definitions:

Active learning

Learning which focuses the responsibility of learning on learners. Learners engage in intellectually and physically stimulating activities that provide opportunities to meaningfully interact with and reflect upon training content, ideas, and materials.

Adult learning

The processes by which adults learn and build on their existing knowledge and skills.

Participatory training

A variation of "active learning:" in participatory training, learners are active participants in their own learning.

Key Concepts: Adult Learning and Participatory Training

- ☑ Adults bring unique characteristics, varying experience, and different perspectives to the learning environment. Adults also have strong preferences for how and why they learn. They learn best when these considerations are fully taken into account.
- ☑ Adults learn and retain information more easily if they can connect learning to their previous knowledge and experience base.
- ☑ Training design that is consistent with adult learning principles is more likely to be successful.

Basic Principles of Adult Learning

The basic principles of adult learning theory are rooted in the concept that adults are in charge of and need to be active participants in their own learning. Adults bring unique characteristics, varying experience, and different perspectives to the learning environment. Adults also have strong preferences for how and why they learn. To provide successful training experiences, instructors should understand some of the basic principles of adult learning and how to transform them into action for effective trainings.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

Adults have unique characteristics related to learning that set them apart from younger students and more traditional, “formal education” learners. Adult learners bring to the training environment a variety of professional and personal experiences which impact both how and why they participate in training.

Malcolm S. Knowles, one of the early major architects of current adult learning knowledge, popularized the concept of *andragogy*, which he defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn.” Knowles identified the following essential characteristics of adult learners that contribute to their success at learning:

Need to Know

- Adults need to know why they should learn something: either the reason they need to learn something, or how it will benefit them.

Self-Concept or Self-Direction

- Adults are autonomous and as they mature they tend to prefer self-direction.
- Adults are self-reliant learners and prefer to work at their own pace.

Life Experiences as Resources for Learning

- Adults accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
- Adults learn and retain information more easily if they can connect learning to their previous knowledge and experience base.

Readiness to Learn

- Individuals learn best when they are ready to learn and when they have identified their own learning needs.
- Adults’ readiness to learn becomes increasingly oriented to the developmental tasks of professional and social roles.

Orientation to Learning

- Adults are competency-based learners: they want to focus on aspects of learning a skill or acquiring knowledge that are most useful to them in life or work-related situations.
- Adult learning is problem-centered and oriented more toward performance than subject.

Motivation to Learn

- Adults need to understand why they are learning a particular topic.
- As adults mature their motivation to learn becomes more internal.

Describing these characteristics in practical terms, adult learners (in general):

- ▶ Have a wealth of first-hand experience to draw upon for new learning.
- ▶ Want to have a say in what they learn.
- ▶ Are usually focused on specific goals and can be highly motivated to change when the change is relevant.
- ▶ Want to be competent in their application of new knowledge and skill, and need to be able to apply new information in a practical and immediate way.
- ▶ Respond to and learn from reinforcement (especially positive reinforcement) and constructive feedback.
- ▶ May have habits, tastes, prejudices, or strong feelings about the learning situation which can impact their response to and participation in an active learning environment.
- ▶ Do not want their time wasted or their physical comfort compromised.
- ▶ Have varying levels of confidence and assuredness in their learning abilities.
- ▶ May arrive to the learning environment with outside preoccupations or anxieties that need to be effectively managed in order to achieve a successful learning experience:
 - Fear of failure, looking foolish or “out of place,” or other consequences (real or imagined) of participating in group learning or experiential activities.
 - Concern about how relevant the training topic is to their own experience, abilities and current work.
 - Lack of confidence about their ability to learn or to contribute to discussion in a meaningful way.
 - Concern about accessibility issues of the physical space or any limitations that may impact participation in the training.
 - Worry over logistical considerations or costs, such as time, transportation, or family commitments.

Understanding and being sensitive to the characteristics that are unique to adult learners will help you in turn to effectively apply adult learning principles in your training sessions.

Adult Learning Principles

Building upon the identified characteristics of adult learners, Knowles' work introduced the following basic principles of adult learning:

1. Learning is a lifelong process.
2. Adults need to be self-directed learners.
3. For learning to take place, the learner must be actively involved in the experience.
4. Adults learn by doing.
5. Situations, problems, exercises and examples must be relevant, realistic, and immediately applicable.
6. Adults relate current learning to what they already know. Thus, trainers benefit from knowing the background of their participants.
7. There are several learning domains. A variety of learning activities stimulates learning and appeals to the range of learning styles.
8. Learning flourishes in an environment that is:
 - Informal
 - Nonjudgmental
 - Collaborative
 - Based upon mutual trust
 - Open and authentic
 - Humane
9. Supportive learners benefit from an opportunity to identify their own learning needs.
10. The trainer is a facilitator of learning and a catalyst for change. The responsibility for learning and making change resides with the learner.

Training design that is consistent with adult learning principles is more likely to be successful. This means putting process before content when training adults, and being both sensitive to and flexible around the factors that contribute to learning.

The following pages offer a brief summary of how adults learn best, and some suggestions for applying adult learning principles in the training setting in order to:

- Develop training suited to individual and group learning needs.
- Establish a comfortable learning environment that encourages active participation from and is respectful of all learners.
- Support learning through practical application and problem-solving.
- Connect learners' existing knowledge and experience to new ideas, skills, or behaviors.
- Offer learners plenty of choices, self-direction, and opportunities to assess their achievement.

Reality Check

Just because there are adult learning principles does not mean all adults always follow them! Good trainers and facilitators know that not all participants will be self-directed, motivated, problem-solving learners all the time, in every training session. Be prepared to deal with learners “where they are at,” and avoid being surprised by individual or group behavior that does not meet your expectations. Also, do not overdo it when trying out new active learning activities – especially at first or if you are new to the application of adult learning principles.

How Adults Learn Best

- ▶ Adults learn best **in a democratic, participatory and collaborative environment** where they are actively involved in determining how and what they will learn.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when they know why they are learning something** and the learning goals and objectives are considered realistic and important to them.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when new information and skills are directly relevant and meaningful** to their concerns, needs and interests.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when the learning environment is physically and psychologically comfortable**.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when their talents are acknowledged and explored** in a teaching situation.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when they are able to engage in practical, problem-based learning activities** that allow them to draw on and apply prior knowledge, skills and experience.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when they are treated like adults** and their established opinions, values and beliefs are respected.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when instructors use a variety of teaching strategies** to anticipate and accommodate differing learning styles and comprehension rates of learners.
- ▶ Adults learn best **by participating in small-group activities** that provide an opportunity to share, reflect, and generalize their learning experiences.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when they receive constructive feedback** on how they are doing and the results of their efforts.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when coaching and other kinds of follow-up support are provided** to help them transfer learning into sustainable regular practice.
- ▶ Adults learn best **when the learning experience is enjoyable and fun**.

Applying Adult Learning Principles in Training

Here are some suggestions for how to use the principles of adult learning to inform and improve your training practices and programs:

Adult Learning Principles	Teaching Strategies and Applications in Training
<p>Adults are self-directing learners</p>	<p>Actively involve adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ Include learners in the instructional design process. Get participants' perspectives about what to cover and what activities reflect their interests: ask them what they already know and/or want to know about the topic. Tailor your teaching to the specific learning needs and interests of individual participants ☑ Engage in a process of inquiry, analysis, and decision-making with adult learners; avoid merely transmitting knowledge or expecting total agreement. ☑ Expect adult learners to want more than one medium for learning and to want control over the learning pace and start/stop times. ☑ Allow adult learners to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. ☑ Show participants how the training will help them reach their goals.
<p>Adults have years of experience and a wealth of knowledge to contribute to the learning process</p>	<p>Use adult learners as resources for yourself and for other learners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ Connect learning objectives and activities to the existing knowledge and experience base of training participants. Acknowledge and validate the wealth of experience amongst learners. ☑ Encourage participation by using open-ended questions to draw out learners' knowledge and experience relevant to the topic. ☑ Active participation in planned experiences – such as discussions or problem-solving exercises, an analysis of those experiences, and their application to work or life situations – should be the core methodology for training adults. ☑ Encourage participants to share examples from their own experience as appropriate. ☑ Respect the experience of learners in the group. Avoid asking adults to try a new skill in front of a large group. ☑ Provide many opportunities for dialogue among learners.

Adult Learning Principles	Teaching Strategies and Applications in Training
<p>Adults have established values, beliefs, and opinions</p>	<p>Demonstrate respect for differing beliefs, value systems and lifestyles, and experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Take time to clarify learner expectations of the training and experience with the content. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Design programs and learning activities that allow varying viewpoints to be shared. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Acknowledge that learners are entitled to their values, beliefs and opinions, and that everyone in the room may not share these ideas. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Allow debate and challenging of ideas.
<p>Adults expect to be treated as adults</p>	<p>Support learners as individuals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Treat questions and comments with respect. Acknowledge or thank learners for their responses, questions, and contributions to the training. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Do not expect learners to necessarily agree with your plan for the training. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Listen to and respect the opinions of learners. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Create an environment that is perceived as safe and supportive. People will not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of being put down or ridiculed. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Allow people to admit confusion, ignorance, fears, biases and different opinions. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Avoid jargon and do not “talk down” to learners <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide opportunities for learners to teach each other through discussion and small group work.
<p>Adults are goal-oriented and often have a problem-centered approach to learning</p>	<p>Show immediately how new knowledge or skills can be applied to current problems or situations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Obtain information on learners' goals, and explicitly communicate to participants how the training will meet those goals. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tell participants why a particular training is meaningful, why new skills must be mastered, and how the new learning will be useful to them on the job. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Use participatory learning techniques such as case studies and small-group problem-solving exercises to emphasize how learning can be applied in a practical setting. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Anticipate problems in applying new ideas, and offer strategies to overcome problems. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide a variety of activities that offer participants opportunities to assess their own learning. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide immediate and relevant feedback to reinforce new learning and redirect learners when they stray off course.

Adult Learning Principles	Teaching Strategies and Applications in Training
<p>Adults want practical answers to questions and problems, and expect to learn information that has immediate application to their lives</p>	<p>Orient training content toward direct applications rather than toward theory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ Find out what learners know about the topic, and what they would like to know. ☑ Create learning objectives that address and focus on “real” problems. State objectives and expectations clearly at the beginning of training so learners know how they will be involved in the learning tasks. ☑ Focus on theories and concepts within the context of their application to relevant problems. ☑ Include both time to learn new material AND time to apply new skills in your trainings. ☑ Repeat to participants how the learning can be applied, or how the information will be useful to people in their work. ☑ Suggest follow-up ideas and next steps.
<p>Adults relate new knowledge and information to previously learned information and experiences</p>	<p>Help participants connect previous knowledge and life experiences to new information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ Assess the specific learning needs of your audience before your training or immediately at the beginning of the training session. ☑ Present new concepts one at a time, and focus on their application to relevant practical situations. ☑ Choose training methods that help learners recall what they already know and how it can be integrated with new ideas and information. ☑ Create activities that emphasize learning by doing and call upon participants to use their existing knowledge and experience. ☑ Summarize frequently to increase retention and recall.
<p>Adults have differing learning styles and comprehension rates, and learn best when they are actively engaged</p>	<p>Accommodate differences in style, time, types and pace of learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ To appeal to a range of learning styles and increase everyone’s capacity to learn, include <i>listening</i>, <i>seeing</i> new material, and <i>doing something</i> with the new material in your training. ☑ Use a variety of teaching materials and participatory methods that provide opportunities for participants to work together in both small- and large-group discussions, hands-on practice, or analyzing a case study. ☑ Build in repetition and plan to repeat certain key concepts. Adult learners need to hear something six or seven times to have it sink in.

Adult Learning Principles	Teaching Strategies and Applications in Training
<p>Adults learn best in an informal and comfortable environment</p>	<p>Create a physically and psychologically comfortable environment that encourages participation and supports active learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Create a comfortable space with few distractions where dialogue and privacy are allowed. Establish an environment of mutual trust between all learners, including the trainer. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Plan frequent breaks. Avoid long lectures with no break. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Make sure everyone can see and hear. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Set up the room so that participants can face each other to promote group interaction. Learners will engage in discussion and learn more if they can see each other. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Allow for spontaneous discussions. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide food or drink.

Questions to Consider for Applying Adult Learning Principles

- ? What are some of the ways you can make training relevant to learners' practices?
- ? What are some of the ways you can give participants control over their own learning?
- ? What are some of the ways you can use learners' experience as a resources for teaching and learning?
- ? What are some of the ways you can keep learners stimulated and involved?
- ? What kinds of training materials can you use to support and enhance active learning?
- ? What are some of the ways you can create a safe, respectful and comfortable learning environment?
- ? What are some of the ways you can encourage learners to be more self-directed and to continue learning on the job?
- ? How can you create connections among training participants and their workplaces?
- ? What are some of the ways you can help ensure that learners are successful?
- ? What are some of the ways you can reinforce learning and facilitate feedback?