

An Understanding of the Principles of Adult Learning

The following points are summarised and adapted from: Zemke, R.S. (1981) '30 Things We Know For Sure about Adult Learning'.

1. Adults seek out learning experiences in order to cope with specific lifechange events e.g. marriage, divorce, unemployment or new job.
2. The more life-change events an adult encounters, the more likely he or she is to seek out learning opportunities. Learning is a coping response to significant change.
3. The learning experiences adults seek are directly related to the life events that triggered the seeking (e.g. if 80% of the change encountered is work related then 80% of the learning experiences sought are likely to be work related).
4. Adults are generally willing to engage in learning experiences before, after or even during the actual life-change event. Once convinced that change is a certainty, adults will engage in any learning that promises to help them cope with the transition.
5. Most adults seek learning because they have a use for the new knowledge or skill. Learning is a means to an end, not an end in itself.
6. Increasing or maintaining self-esteem and pleasure are strong secondary motivators for adult learning.
7. Adult learners prefer to learn a single theory or concept, and apply this to relevant problems (instead of briefly surveying many theories).
8. Adults need to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep, and use, the new information. Adults learn slowly if new information has little 'conceptual overlap' with what they already know.
9. Adults also integrate new information more slowly if it conflicts sharply with what they hold to be true (i.e. they have to re-evaluate beliefs).
10. Adults prefer to be accurate and tend to take errors personally (which affects their self-esteem). They tend to apply tried-and-true solutions and take fewer risks than younger learners.
11. Adults have different value 'sets', and their values continue to grow and change. So a course or program needs to be designed to accept viewpoints from people in different life stages and with different value sets.
12. A concept needs to be 'anchored' or explained from more than one value set and appeal to more than one developmental life stage.
13. Adults prefer self-directed and self-designed learning projects (where they can control the pace and start/stop time) over group-learning experiences led by professionals.
14. Self-directed learning does not mean isolation. Self directed projects involve an average of 10 other people as resources, guides, encouragers and the like.
15. Adults have expectations about formal classroom learning, and it is important to take time to clarify and articulate all expectations before getting into content. Both trainees and the instructor/facilitator need to state their expectations.
16. The appropriate role of the teacher/instructor is to facilitate learning, by providing opportunities for adult learners to:
 - actively participate
 - discuss and share experiences with peers
 - solve problems
 - practise new skills, apply new knowledge
 - integrate new concepts
 - experience different learning media
 - participate in shaping the content of a course/class session
 - use peers as resources
 - take personal responsibility