

# Adult learning theory

[Education](#), [Learning](#)



Adult learners attend school for various reasons. Oftentimes, their professional development learning and their occupations and day-to-day activities are related and relevant (Speck, 1996). While some would like to achieve professional growth, others are satisfied in acquiring new knowledge and skills.

Their learning motivation may be influenced by their desire to increase their circle of friends and association, to fulfil the expectations or recommendations of a person with authority, to be of service to mankind and to their community, to achieve job security or to relive boredom and have a break from the usual routine of home or work (Lieb, 1991).

Instructing the adult learners require knowledge on the subject matter as well as the skills in understanding how adults learn best. Lessons for these learners are usually structured to provide support from peers and to reduce fear or judgment during learning (Speck, 1996).

In as much as adults want to learn, there are many barriers that may interfere in their learning, e. g. financial concern, family obligations, insufficient time, lack of confidence or interest, problems with schedules, child care and transportation, and lack of information about opportunities to learn (Lieb, 1991).

Providing the proper motivation and reinforcement and assisting the learners in retaining and using the information and applying their knowledge in a different setting is a task that instructors must achieve to help the adult learners benefit from their education.

## **Adult Learning Theory**

Adult learning differs from children's learning in that it is self directed, problem centered, experienced based and relevant to life (Lara, 2007). Malcolm Knowles, the founding father of adult learning contrasted the concept of pedagogy, the "art and science of helping children learn" with andragogy, "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Knowles has premised the andragogy on the five assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners: adults need to direct themselves, adults need to learn experientially, adults approach learning as problem solving, adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value, and it was later added that adults receive their motivation to learn from internal factors (Lara, 2007; Lieb, 1991; Smith, 2002).

In practical terms, andragogy means that instruction for adults needs to focus more on the process and less on the content being taught (Theory into Practice, n. d.).

In adult education, teachers are not the source of knowledge or information. They are the facilitators of learning as they guide the students in acquiring knowledge. For instance, if the students are learning about economic recession, they can be divided into groups and they are free to select a topic for research, discussion and class presentation.

Each group may share information about the causes, effects, and prevention of economic recession. In this self-directed learning method, the adults become self directed and they are in charge of their own learning without

the need to rely on their instructor. They develop a deep need to be seen as being capable of taking responsibility for themselves (Knowles, 1996).

The adult learners have a reservoir of knowledge gained from their life and work experiences. They want to use what they know and want to be acknowledged for having that knowledge (Fidishun, n. d.). Experience for the adults is the chief source of self-identity and failure to maximize or explore their skills and experience may give them a feeling of rejection (Knowles, 1996).

To make each lesson meaningful and permanent, the instructor must help these learners relate the information or subject matter to their life experiences. For example, in discussing the principles of business management, each group may come up with their own business concept based on their interest, skills, knowledge, and work experience.

Those who have experience in sales and advertising may be assigned to do the marketing and promotion of product or services. Some may survey the area where they want to set up the business. Adults who have bookkeeping, accounting or finance background may determine the cost of establishing a business.

The architect, interior designer, artist, graphic and web designers in the group may design the business establishment and create the company logo and website. The human resource specialist may be tasked to write about the company hiring policies and worker's compensation. Small group activities provide an opportunity to share, reflect, and generalize their learning experience and accommodate diversity (Speck, 1996).

Combining all the knowledge, skills and talents of the adult learners and applying what they have learned by creating a project is more interesting, meaningful and realistic than just reading about the principles and theories of business marketing, management, advertising and human resource development.

The adult's readiness to return to school and earn a degree may be due to their personal desire to have a college diploma, earn a promotion, or assume a new social role. An assistant automobile mechanic may not be promoted to a chief mechanic if he does not earn a diploma in mechanical engineering.

A volunteerteacher-aide parent must have a degree in education if she wants to teach in a school and make a difference in the lives of the children. The adult's goal in earning a promotion or getting a degree serves as a motivation in completing their studies.

Adults have a strong inclination to learn what will be of immediate use to their personal life and work. They must see a need for training before learning will take place (Knowles, 1996).

In learning abouttechnology, they will appreciate the functions and importance of the computer and internet if they understand how it will benefit them in terms of communicating with their friends and loved ones, searching for information, getting updated news and current events or feeling the convenience of doing online shopping and banking as well as monitoring the stock market.

They will value the cost saving feature of calling up their overseas friends, families or relatives using the computer and internet instead of using the

costly telephone services. They will also appreciate the ease of using the computer for preparing documents, storing records and using the spreadsheet in computing their taxes and other household or business expenses.

Incentives such as increased job satisfaction, self-esteem and quality of life are the internal factors in giving adults a reason to learn (Fidishun, n. d.). The adult learners will respond more positively if these incentives can be related to the class projects and activities that are fulfilling and relevant to their personal and professional needs.

For instance, given a class has a project on environmental protection, the adults may be given the opportunity to choose a community where they are willing to serve or get involved with. They can create a program to teach community members to prevent global warming by reducing energy consumption.

The learners can also raise funds from the collection of recycled materials and use the money in building a playground for the children in the community.

## **Conclusion**

The adult learners enrol in a course and attend classes with defined goals and expectations. Although there are barriers to learning, the success of adult education requires a great responsibility on the part of the instructor.

The adults are usually motivated to learn due to their interest and the benefits that they will reap after the completion of their course or degree. To make learning interesting, relevant, meaningful and lasting, it is important

for the instructors to accommodate diversity and to help the adult learners explore and apply their skills, knowledge and experience in their chosen endeavour.

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