

ADULTS LEARN DIFFERENTLY

5 Tips to Teach Them More Effectively

You teach adults. You enjoy what you do and you do it well. But, can you explain why what you do works? Do you know where to turn when things aren't going so well?

Whether you have been teaching adults for 2 months or 20 years, there is always more you can learn to be an effective educator or trainer. For many of us, what we know about teaching adults has been gained "on the job" and we have little formal background on best practices.

Luckily, there is a depth of knowledge about how adults learn and how to best facilitate their learning.

Let's explore five ideas that can help you improve your teaching and training practice today.

1 Andragogy

We don't treat adults the same as children, so why would we teach them the same? There is a term for this different approach to teaching adults: andragogy. Andragogy acknowledges that adult learning is situation-motivated and experience-centered. Malcolm Knowles presented six assumptions about adult learners in his seminal work, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy*:



Self-Concept

Adults have a more secure self-concept and can direct their own learning.



Experience

Adults have a great deal of experience to draw from when they learn.



Readiness to Learn

Adults see the value of learning.



Problem Centered

Adults want immediacy of application for what they learn.



Internal Motivation

While many children are driven to learn by external motivators (grades, punishment) adults are more internally motivated.



The Need to Know

Adults need to know the reason for learning something.



Does andragogy seem to describe the adults you teach and train? If so, here are some tips on how to use these assumptions to help adults learn:

Involvement

Involve adults in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.

Experience

Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities.

Immediate Relevance

Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life.

Problem Centered

Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.



2 Self-Directed Learning

As seen with andragogy, adults like to make decisions about their own learning. They may not always be able to choose the topic or how they will learn it. But, they have the maturity to determine how they might approach their learning, and this in turn can result in more meaningful outcomes. These are the hallmarks of *self-directed learning*.

What is our role as educators in self-directed learning?

Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning Model can help us to determine how much self-direction a learner needs and the associated role of the educator.

Stage	Student	Teacher	Examples
Stage 1	Dependent	Authority Coach	Coaching with immediate feedback. Drill Informational lecture. Overcoming deficiencies and resistance.
Stage 2	Interested	Motivator, Guide	Inspiring lecture plus guided discussion. Goal-setting and learning strategies.
Stage 3	Involved	Facilitator	Discussion facilitated by teacher who participates as equal. Seminar. Group projects.
Stage 4	Self-Directed	Consultant, Delegator	Internship, dissertation, individual work or self-directed study-group.

Learning Contract

Another tool to help adults achieve self-directed learning is to create a learning contract. These can be particularly useful if a learner is struggling with a concept or wants to dig deeper into a topic. Independently, or along with you, the learner can create a learning contract by addressing the following questions:

- **What do you need to learn?**
- **How will you learn it (resources, strategies, people)?**
- **What barriers might you encounter?**
- **How will you demonstrate what you learned?**
- **What is the target completion date?**

3 Experiential Learning

The assumptions of andragogy also acknowledge that adults like their learning to be experience-centered, problem-focused, and immediately applicable. A great approach to accomplish this is through using experiential learning techniques.

Through experiential learning, adults directly participate in an activity related to a topic or subject. Simulations, case studies, hands-on activities, and games are all examples of experiential learning.

No matter the technique, the key to successful experiential learning is to ensure the learners:

- ✓ **participate** in an experience,
- ✓ **analyze** the experience to understand what they learned and,
- ✓ **apply** what they learned with the support and tools they need.

An easy way to remember this is that all experiential learning activities need to include a plan for **what, so what, and now what**.



What does an experiential learning situation actually look like?

It starts by choosing an experience or activity. This might include having learners perform a skill, engage in a game, or simulate a real-life scenario. Next, they will reflect on the experience. This allows the learners to understand what was meaningful, what new information was gained, and where they may still struggle. This reflection may be done through group discussion, individual writing, or in consultation with the instructor. Finally, the students need to transfer what they learned to a real-life application. If the learner can't use the information outside of the learning setting, there is little point in learning it at all! Through these steps, the learner directly experiences a topic, which is a way to ensure information "sticks."



4 Motivating Adult Learners

One of the biggest challenges heard again and again when teaching adults is "how do I motivate my learners?" Learners may not show up to a training, or if they do, they are not engaged. They may question the application of what they are learning. They may challenge the instructor or be disruptive. There are many scenarios that are the nightmare of any educator or trainer of adults.

The *Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching*, developed by Raymond Wlodkowski and Margery Ginsberg, is one tool that can help educators address issues of motivation in adult learners. The framework encourages educators to incorporate *inclusion*, *attitude*, *meaning*, and *competence* in the planning and facilitation of adult learning.

✓ Inclusion

Create an atmosphere in which everyone feels respected and connected. This can include doing things like introductory activities and offering opportunities to share.

✓ Attitude

Create an attitude favorable toward learning by helping learners see the relevance of the subject. This includes using strategies to decrease learner anxiety and setting goals with learners.

✓ Meaning

Create challenges and engaging experiences that connect to learners' experiences and knowledge. Varying presentation styles and utilizing relevant problems can be techniques to utilize.

✓ Competence

Help learners see they have been successful in their learning. This can include providing feedback and providing activities that are as close to real life as possible.

Three Tips to Foster Inclusion Among Adult Learners:

Share Something of Value

If you can share your own experience, problem, or learning on a topic, adult learners will better identify and connect with you as a "real person", and not just "the instructor."

Conduct a Learner Assessment

Ask learners at the beginning of a session to share their expectations for a course. This can be done via discussion, real-time technology, or individual responses. This information can help students reveal perspectives on the course as well as any concerns they may have.

Acknowledge Different Ways of Knowing

Adults may be uncomfortable if they feel they know less than others. The reality is they often know things "differently" based on their experiences. Brief learner assessments can reveal these differences and allow you to plan for them in your teaching.



5 Ability to Engage

It is no surprise to anyone who has taught adult learners, or been an adult learner themselves, that adults have many situations that can affect their ability to learn, both positively and negatively.

Adults constantly have to balance their resources available (power) with their demands (load). A surplus of power, beyond what is required to handle the load, results in margin. Having margin helps an adult handle the challenges of life and allows them to engage in projects and experiences, including learning and training.

This can be summed up in a simple equation, called *McClusky's Theory of Margin*: $\text{Power} \div \text{Load} = \text{Margin}$

As educators of adults, we cannot usually change the load or power available to our learners. But, we can understand that adults will sometimes have a greater margin for learning, and sometimes they will have less. And, even more importantly, we can help our learners to understand their power and load and encourage them to use this information to determine when and what they might be able to learn.

Power \div Load = Margin

The load adult learners have can be affected by things like:

- medical issues
- unreliable transportation
- a lack of childcare
- problems with technology
- increased job responsibilities

And power can come from things like:

- family members who can look after children
- money to pay for education costs
- reliable health insurance
- having personal coping skills
- strong social and community connections

What's Next?

Adults have many hallmarks that differentiate them from younger learners. The five concepts presented here are meant to provide a short summary of some of those major differences and also to offer immediately applicable tips you can use today to help you teach and train adult learners.

There is a great depth of information on how adults learn, how to teach and train adults and how to justify the choices you make when educating adults. This article is just the tip of the iceberg on what is available to you.

If you want to expand your depth of knowledge and gain the academic credentials to progress in your career, consider applying to one of the following online programs offered by Colorado State University:



Adult Education and Training Master's Degree

Learn strategic approaches to adult education and how to engage a diverse learning community. Apply what you learn in your courses to your own work environment, bringing your reflections back to share with classmates.



Adult Basic Education Graduate Certificate

Discover proven methods and theories for teaching adult learners new skills, such as literacy, ESL, and more. Learn how to create a more engaging learning environment.



Facilitating Adult Learning Graduate Certificate

Enhance your ability to teach in your area of expertise and gain skills to facilitate the learning process for adults. Examine instructional techniques like collaborative learning and teaching with technology.

