

Characteristics of Adult Learners

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Introduction

Between 2000-2005, the number of adults participating in educational programs increased 79 percent world wide. This kind of growth in adult education is been stimulated by a broad demographic, economic and societal trends such as

- The increased realization that adults continue to change and grow through out their lives and frequently seek assistance in dealing with these changes.
- The greater proportion of adults in the total population due to increased longevity and declining birthrates.
- The growing need for job retraining caused by economic and technological changes that have eliminated some jobs and revised the nature of many others

(Source: Guidelines for working with adult learners. ERIC Digest No 77)

Adults possess characteristics that influence how they learn and that should be considered when developing instructional programs for them. An effective instructor of adult learners should understand how adults learn best. Malcom Knowles, Paulo Freire, Robert Gagne, Jack Mezirow and Carl Rogers are some of the educationalists who concentrate on adult education. In the following we discuss the thinking of Knowles and Rogers.

Malcom Knowles's theory of Adult Learning

Malcom Knowles (1975, 1980) pioneer of the field of adult learning initially distinguished sharply between the way in which adults and children learn(He further identified characteristics of adult learners that affect learning, and which provides guidelines for developing educational programs for adults in any setting.

The main principles of Knowles's theory of adult learning are:

- the self concept moves from dependence towards self-direction
- there is a reservoir of accumulated experience which becomes an increasing resource for learning
- readiness to learn is increasingly directed towards social roles (adults want to learn in the problem areas with which they are confronted and which they regard as relevant)
- their orientation towards learning becomes less subject-centered and increasingly problem centered.

Knowles says that in a conducive environment, adult learners can learn very quickly because of the **characteristics** they possess. However, if teachers are not aware of their strengths and weaknesses they will not be able to motivate adults for learning which may lead to failure in their study programmes. Understanding of the following characteristics identified by Knowles would help the teachers of adults to organize suitable teaching learning strategies for their student group.

Characteristics of adult learners identified by Malcolm Knowles

- Adults are autonomous and self-directed. They need to be free to direct themselves.

Self-directedness will be present in every learner to varying degrees, but it is more evident in adults than in young learners. Therefore the teachers/instructors of adult learners should actively involve them in the learning process and serve as the facilitators for them. They must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and allow them to work on projects that reflect their interests. Students should be given opportunities for presentations and group leadership. Instructors/teachers should not give them facts, but guide the participants to their own knowledge while acting as facilitators. Finally they must allow the participants to realize how the teaching-learning situations help them to reach their goals.

- Adults have inner motivation

Knowles has studied the nature of adult learning agree that adults tend to be more self-motivated towards formal learning than children. They have an inner motivation, which is not imposed from outside as in the case of young children. Their motivation can be due to *an intension to satisfy a felt need*. Adults come into learning to satisfy a felt need. This need motivates them and encourages them to sustain the activity until the need is fully satisfied. Satisfaction of a need is normally a pleasant experience.

Response to a life event

According to Knowles motivation to learn is usually a response to a life event. (may be a 'calamitous event' such as having lost one's employment, experiencing the death of a parent, sibling or spouse or coping with a divorce.)

- Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education.

As mentioned in Knowles adult learning theory, previous experiences occupy a major place. It is considered to be the major resource and a prerequisite for learning. Adults possess a wealth of experience developed throughout their lives and that experience will form a strong foundation for learning. Adults need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base they possess. In order to do that instructors/teachers should draw out student's experience that is relevant to the topic during the teaching-learning process.

- Adults are goal- oriented

Adult learners in enrolling in a course, know the goals that they need to attain. Therefore these students appreciate a program which is well organized with well defined elements. Therefore the classification of goals, objectives and content of the courses should be clearly stated at the beginning of the course, and instructors must brief them how the class will help them attain their goals.

- Adults are relevancy-oriented.

Adult students always should have a reason for learning something. What they learn should be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Therefore the instructors/teachers should always try to relate the theories and concepts to settings familiar to participants. This need can be fulfilled by letting participants choose projects that reflect their own interests.

- Adults are practical

They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. They always focus on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. Instructors must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them on the job.

- Readiness to learn

Motivation and orientation provide the learner with the driving force to start learning. One other major factor which promotes learning is readiness to learn.

Motivation itself is considered as one aspect of readiness. Readiness is directed by:

- The amount of previous learning and experience that is related to the proposed new learning, and
- The ability and capacity to learn.

Readiness to learn is not specific to adults. Even children possess a readiness to learn, which is seen by Knowles, as a function of biological development and academic pressure whereas in adults it is a function of the need to learn.

- As do other learners, adults needed to be shown respect.

Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in the learning experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in the class. (Lieb. S,1991)

Knowles also put forth the differences in characteristics of children and adult learners, which are follows,

Assumption about Learning	Children	Adults
Learner's concept	dependent	Independent, self-directed
Learner's experience	inconsequential- to be added to more than used as a resource	a rich resource for learning by self & others
Learner's readiness	based on physical, mental, social development	based on needs developed from life tasks & problems
Relevancy	later application	immediate application
Curriculum environment	subject-centered, Authority oriented Formal, competitive	problem-centered collaborative, informal, respective
Planning	by teacher	mutual
Motivation	by external rewards & punishments	by internal incentives & curiosity
Role of the teacher	authority figure	guide & facilitator

Carl Roger's theory of Adult Learning:

Carl Rogers was an American psychologist and his works reflect the humanistic concerns of adult education. Rogers identified two types of learning. The first type, **cognitive**, which corresponds to rote knowledge such as learning concepts which gives factual information. He considered this type of learning to be meaningless in the long run.. The second type, **experiential**, refers to applied knowledge such as repairing a car to learn about engines. This he considered to be of the utmost importance.

The principal distinction between cognitive and experiential learning is that experiential learning stems from the needs and wants of the learner. According to him the following qualities characterize experiential learning:

- personal involvement
- self-initiated
- evaluated by learner
- Pervasive effects on learner.

The related factors emphasized by Rogers in adult learning are self-involvement, need orientation and experiential learning. He does not totally displace the teacher but attaches more emphasis on facilitating learning rather than direct teaching for adult learners. Rogers also shares with many other theorists on adult learning, the importance of experiential learning in adults. He has identified the following principles of experiential learning applicable to adult learners.

- i human beings have a natural potential for learning
- ii significant learning occurs when the learner perceives the relevance of the subject matter.
- iii learning involves a change in self-organization and self-perception.
- iv learning that threatens self-perception is more easily perceived and assimilated when external threats are at minimum.
- v learning occurs when the self is not threatened.
- vi much significant learning is acquired by doing.

- vii learning is facilitated when the learner participates responsibly in the learning process.
- viii self-initiated learning involves the whole person.
- ix independence, creativity and self-reliance are all facilitated when self-criticism and self evaluation are basic.
- x much socially useful learning is learning the process of learning and retaining an openness to experience, so that the process of change may be incorporated into the self.

Rogers further states that experiential learning is equivalent to personal change and growth. All human beings have a natural propensity to learn. Education should help students discover how to learn and also support them as they learn to embrace change.

Therefore Rogers suggested that the role of the teacher is to facilitate experiential learning. This includes:

- (1) Setting a positive climate for learning.
- (2) Clarifying the purposes of the learning.
- (3) Organizing and making available learning resources.
- (4) Balancing intellectual and emotional components of learning.
- (5) Sharing feelings and thoughts with learners but not dominating.

He further explained that learning is facilitated when:

- (1) The student participates completely in the learning process and has control over its nature and direction.
- (2) It is based upon practical social, personal or research problems of interest to the learner.
- (3) Self-evaluation is the principal method of assessing progress.

Rogers' ideas are most applicable to adult learners.

The above discussion on adult learners would help the teachers/instructors to identify the characteristics of their student group. This would facilitate planning designing, developing and organizing the teaching-learning situations suitable to the adult student group. The method you can apply to understand the characteristics of your learners are briefly discussed in the next section.

How to find out about your learners

Whether our teaching will be done almost entirely through pre-prepared materials or whether we will occasionally be talking with learners face-to-face or online, we need to obtain information about them before they begin. Otherwise it cannot affect the teaching and learning as much as it should. I can see four main ways of building up a picture of your prospective learners.

- Reflect on your previous experience of your learners that are based on your observations of learners behaviors and consult colleagues –and the learners’ Sponsors or whoever is commissioning the course (if appropriate).The star burst chart below shows the kind of picture one may get from a personal group brainstorm on ‘what do we do know about learners?’
- Meet some of the prospective learners and discuss with them (individually or as group) what they would like from the course or programme, and what they already know and feel about the subject.
- Send a questionnaire to prospective learners, seeking the information you need. If this can be followed up by discussion with learners, whether face-to-face, online or on the telephone, so much the better.
- Listen to your learners, e.g. on the telephone, at meetings, online, or by reading or commenting on their assignments, once they are working on the course and; be prepared to customize the course in the light of what you hear. In Latchem and Lockwood (1998, p.144), Christine Randell and Eli Bitzer describe how some South African teachers came to realize that they had not been listening to what their learners had to tell them about their ‘underlying assumptions, concerns and difficulties’.

Terry Evans (1964, p.125) suggests in addition, that we should draw on our own experience of being learners. However, I would urge caution: since we are acknowledge experts, we possibly mastered our subject more easily than newcomers will and, anyway, we may never have experienced learning at a distance. In Lockwood (1994, Chapter 2), Alan Woodley and Alison Ashby discuss several ways in which a profile of learners can be built up and the ways such information might be used.

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(www.papathways.org/PDFs/CharacAdultLearnPrinciples.pdf)

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(<https://courses.worldcampus.psu.edu/public/faculty/adults.html>)