

How Adults Learn



There is no one theory which fully explains how adults learn as the field of adult education is vast with many diverse perspectives (Merriam et al, 2007, p. 83). A well-known foundational theory was developed by Malcolm Knowles who detailed a list of assumptions of adult learners to distinguish education for adults from education for children. These underlying assumptions are still seen as a strong basis to adult education as a field and are often outlined as a good starting point for better understanding how adults learn. These assumptions are guidelines, however, and do not provide a ‘recipe’ applicable to every learning context. As Knowles et al (2011, p. 144) explain: These are “flexible assumptions to be altered depending on the situation.”

Assumptions of Adult Learners ¹	What it means for facilitators ²
<i>The Need to Know:</i> Adults prefer to know why they need to learn something before engaging in learning.	Think through and explain to learners why the material they are learning is valuable and useful to them.
<i>Self-Directed Learning:</i> As a person matures, he or she tends to move from a self-concept which is dependent to one which is more self-directed.	Support learners to be empowered in taking ownership of their learning. Be aware, however, that some people tend to think of education as a more passive activity and may need to be encouraged to take a more active role.
<i>Prior Experience of the Learner:</i> Adults possess unique life experience which can be drawn upon for learning.	Prior life experience can be a rich resource for learning and should be valued and respected. Life experience can also form bias which can potentially inhibit new learning. It is important therefore to encourage learners to critically reflect as they learn.
<i>Readiness to Learn:</i> Generally, adults become ready to learn when they feel they need to know something.	Seek to gain insight into the lives of your learners to better understand their learning needs. It is important to also be aware when learners do not feel interested in learning. In these cases, acknowledge this and work with learners to plan how they can better benefit from their learning.
<i>Orientation to Learning and Problem Solving:</i> Adults tend to be most interested in learning knowledge which is immediately applicable to situations in their lives. Therefore, in general they prefer learning which is problem-centered versus subject-centered.	Create content which is responsive to genuine problems which learners are facing. Clarify how content is applicable to the lives of learners.
<i>Motivation to Learn:</i> Adults tend to be more motivated by internal rather than external factors.	Though you can explain to learners how learning can bring about external rewards (such as higher pay etc.), it is most important to help learners discover how their learning can be personally meaningful and intrinsically valuable for them.

¹Please see the following references for greater explanation on these assumptions:

Knowles, M.S., Holton, E.F., & Swanson, R.A. (2011). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Burlington: Elsevier.

Merriam, S., Caffarella, R., & Baumgartner, L. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide* (3rd ed.). San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

²Adapted from Principles of Adult Learning & Instructional Systems Design. (n.d.). *National Highway Institute*. Retrieved September 1, 2015, from www.nhi.fhwa.dot.gov/downloads/freebies/172/PR%20Pre-course%20Reading%20Assignment.pdf