

10 Characteristics of Adults as Learners

The following information was taken from course content written by Dr. Gary Kuhne for "ADTED 460 - Introduction to Adult Education," a course offered through [Penn State's World Campus](#).

Characteristic #1 - Adults Generally Desire to Take More Control Over Their Learning Than Youth

Adults tend to be self-directed in their lives, although responsibilities with jobs, families, and other organizations can remove a degree of their freedom to act. Adulthood brings an increasing sense of the need to take responsibility for our lives and adults strongly resent it when others take away their rights to choose. This fact is clearly seen in educational efforts among adults. When not given some control over their learning, most adults will resist learning and some will even attempt to sabotage education efforts. They do not like being relegated to a "passive" position.

Implications:

- Always seek to include the adult in the planning of educational efforts.
- Allow for self-assessment and evaluation
- Understand adult learners desire a peer relationship with instructors, rather than a hierarchical one.
- Recognize that adults also expect greater availability of instructors.

Characteristic #2 - Adults Draw Upon Their Experiences as a Resource in Their Learning Efforts More Than Youth

The adult's experience is a key resource in any learning effort. Adults have a greater reservoir of life experiences simply because they have lived longer and seen and done more. This is a critical distinction between adults and traditional learners. Consciously or unconsciously, adults tend to link any new learning to their prior learning, a body of knowledge that is rooted in their life experiences. They evaluate the validity of new ideas and concepts in light of how the idea or concept "fits" their experience.

Implications:

- Take the time to get to know more about the experiences of our learners and seek to help them to link new ideas to such prior learning.
- Encourage discussion on how new ideas fit the experience of learners.

Characteristic #3 - Adult Tend to be More Motivated in Learning Situations Than Youth

Higher motivation is linked to the fact that most adult learning is voluntary. Adults are making personal choices to attend schooling, even when such schooling is tied to professional development or job skills. Whenever an individual is able to choose to learn, s/he is much more motivated to learn.

Implication:

- Spend less effort trying to motivate adult learners and concentrate our time on facilitating the learning they are already motivated to pursue.

Characteristic #4 - Adults Are More Pragmatic in Learning Than Youth

Adults are particularly motivated to learn information that seems immediately applicable to their situation and needs. They tend to be frustrated with "theory" that needs to be stored away for future use or learning for the sake of learning. Certainly there are exceptions to this principle, but the percentage of exceptions is quite low.

Implications:

- Tie the content of programs to the application needs of the learners.
- Always use needs assessment strategies
- Weigh the content of education toward the utilitarian, not the theoretical.

Characteristic #5 - In Contrast to Youth, the Learner Role is Secondary for Adults

For most adults, the "student" role is a minor and secondary role. This is in sharp contrast to traditional age learners for whom the learner role is both their primary social role and the main basis for their self-identity. Adults fulfill multiple roles and these multiple roles inevitably create conflicting and competing demands on the adult learner. Multiple roles will cause most adults to have far less time and energy to read, study, or learn.

Implications:

- More flexibility in adult education programs than in traditional education.
- Give assignments far ahead of time
- Accept that jobs and families can create obstacles for the learner, and be willing to extend deadlines for assignments.
- Accept that the learners will not see their educational efforts as necessarily the highest priority in their lives
- Accept that learners will be preoccupied at times with other roles and responsibilities.

Characteristic #6 - Adults Must Fit Their Learning into Life's "Margins"

Adult roles take energy and time to fulfill. Everyone faces the reality that there are limits on their energy and time. An important principle to understand is that learning takes time and energy. If an adult is going to undertake a learning activity, s/he must realistically evaluate his/her life and see there is actually room for the added demands of the learning. Adult learners must learn to carve out some margin in their lives to allow learning to occur, a process of priority setting. If the existing demands on an adult require all the energy they possess, then the learning will be compromised.

Implication:

- Adult educators must prioritize student advising to provide guidance to help learners to be realistic about the demands of learning and provide time management and study suggestions.

Characteristic #7 - Many Adults Lack Confidence in Their Learning

Many adults have had somewhat negative learning experiences in their traditional schooling. For a variety of reasons, they feel inadequate when comes to learning through formal educational programs. Still other adults, who may have done well in their earlier schooling, still lack confidence for further schooling efforts due to what they perceive as rusty study skills, poor reading skills, test anxiety, or other such learning barriers.

Implications:

- Employ learning strategies that build higher confidence in adult learners.
- Take the time to teach better study skills and ways of improving reading comprehension.
- Use collaborative learning approaches in the classroom can do much to alleviate anxiety.(i.e., turn the classroom from a competitive environment to a collaborative one)

Characteristic #8 - Adults are More Resistant to Change Than Youth

Learning often involves changes in our attitudes or actions. Adults tend to be somewhat resistant to such changes because life itself teaches us that change is not always for the better and that many of the outcomes of change are unpredictable. Youth tend to be more idealistic and are often open to change just for the sake of change.

Implications:

- Adult learners need more explanation of the "why" of changes, not just the "how."

- Link new concepts to older, understood, and accepted concepts for adult learners.
- Seek for incremental changes through our education efforts rather than global changes, allowing the "proof" gained from such incremental change to encourage the adult learner to explore yet more change.

Characteristic #9 - Adults Are More Diverse Than Youth

Adults vary from each other as learners in terms of age and experiences much more than traditional age learners. Such differences can be used as a powerful resource for adult learning. Through collaboration in small groups, adults can benefit from their variety of experiences. Dialogue with other adults enables adult learners to perceive more nuances of application, and possible problems with new concepts, then could ever be gained from private reflection.

Implications:

- Allow more time for interaction between adults to allow learners to network together to sharing of perspectives and experiences.
- Make effort to present material in a variety of ways to accommodate different learning styles.

Characteristic #10 - Adults Must Compensate for Aging in Learning

Aging brings with it a number of physical complications that can impact on adult learning efforts. The percentage of such complications increases with age. As we will see later, such complications are not really due to intelligence. Although the speed of learning tends to decrease with age, the depth of learning tends to increase. In other words, adults tend to learn less rapidly with age, but what they learn is learned at a deeper and more integrative level. As adults age, vision and hearing can also create barriers in educational programs. As adult educators, we must pay much more attention to sound and lighting when dealing with adult learners.

Implication:

- Pay more attention to the physical learning environment to compensate for aging issues.