Adult Learning Theory: Principles to Practices

Experience is the adult learner’s living textbook. - Eduard C. Lindeman, The Meaning of Adult Education

Adult Learning Theory, or andragogy (adr- meaning “man”) and (agogos meaning “leading”) has been explored since the early 1830s, when a German teacher named Alexander Kapp used the phrase to contrast Plato’s education theory with traditional pedagogy, designed for teaching children (Dover, 2005). Since that time, the “art and science of helping adults learn” has emerged in psychology, sociology, and education theory and been applied in fields ranging from community college certificate programs to information technology and human resources training. Throughout this work, a central tenet of adult learning theory is that a lifetime of experiences, motivations, and established learning styles influence adult learning—and, if this is true—call for unique approaches to adult teaching and training.

Embracing these ideas, teachers and trainers around the world have experimented with ways to bring learning alive for (and with) the adult learner. The literature is rich with their experiences. Based on this work, some argue that many of the strategies recommended by adult learning theory would also improve teaching practice for children. As an example, just as adult learning theory advocates building on adults’ existing experience, so pedagogical theory recommends that “scaffolding” (Vygotsky) expands children’s mastery by building on something they already know.

Adult Learning Theory, like any educational theory, however, cannot be presented without some caveats. First, adulthood constitutes only one learning characteristic. Learning is always shaped by a range of factors—from gender, to race, cultural background, and prior training. Second, theorists such as Pogson and Tennant (1995), emphasize that life course “varies for different individuals…therefore trainers and adult educators should be wary of definitive views of adults and their behavior” (Dunn, 2000). In the end, adult learning theory, then, is best used as one framework among many to create effective, powerful learning experiences. In this spirit, five principles of adult learning theory are outlined below, as one of many ways to assess and improve adult training.
Five Principles of Adult Learning Theory

#1: Relevance of the Topic

Adults tend to perceive themselves as decision-makers in what they learn and accomplish, and need to know why it is important to learn something new. With full, busy lives, adults often weigh the value of any given training against all the other ways they might spend their time. Adult learning theory suggests that as adults tend to be independent/autonomous, learning activity should strive to be problem-centered, facilitate active participation, and be highly meaningful to participants. As an example, a training in MS PowerPoint for an adult learner is far more likely to be effective if the participant has an upcoming presentation due in a few weeks.

#2: The Role of Experience

With a lifetime of experience, adults tend to integrate new learning with what they already know. Adult learning theory suggests that adults not only want to use what they know but to have their experience affirmed—to be acknowledged for their expertise. For this reason, valuing learners’ perspectives and drawing their expertise “into the room” can be one of the most powerful ways a trainer can engage adult participants. As a related theme, adult knowledge is generally infused with the habits and biases of past experience (Mezirow, 1991). Effective training gives adult learners opportunities to examine their assumptions in new ways, moving them to an understanding of new resources, possibilities and solutions.

#3: Learning Styles

Education theorists have long sought to identify distinct adult learning styles and typologies and analyze how these might impact teaching and training. Many suggest that a unique set of stylistic differences shape cognition, conceptualization, affect and behavior (Cartney, 2000). Understanding unique learning styles can help a trainer “start where a participant is.” As many typologies are useful, but no single set perfectly captures human diversity, two different sets are outlined below, along with some ideas for tailoring trainings to meet unique preferences and styles.

Honey and Mumford (1986): Preferred Actions and Behaviors:

Activists—operate in the “here and now.” They enjoy the challenge of new experiences but are bored by implementation.
Reflectors—observe and evaluate situations from a range of perspectives before reaching a definitive conclusion.

Theorists—integrate observations into complex, but logically sound theories. They think through problems systematically.

Pragmatists—enjoy trying out new ideas and theories and testing how they can be applied to practice. They like to act quickly and adopt a practical, problem-solving approach.

Endorf and McNeff (1991, in Stroot et al) Emotional and Sociological Attributes are Key:

Confident—self-directed, goal-oriented learners who prefer interaction and participation

Affective—likes the feeling and process of learning, education is seen as end in itself, does not question the expertise of the instructor

Learner in Transition—developing independence in thought is top priority, prefers interactive learning, rejects idea of being fed information

Integrated—primarily interested in personal success, prefers collaborative learning environments, demands to be recognized as a contributor

Risk Taker—enjoys new ventures and is eager to learn

#4: Motivation

Adult learning theory suggests that adults seek out learning to cope with life changing events and often view training as a means to an end. Fidishun notes that “while adult learners may respond to external motivators, internal priorities are more important,” emphasizing that “job satisfaction, self-esteem…quality of life” and “a sense of accomplishment” are frequent motivators for adults.

Lieb (1991) suggests that the adults are most commonly motivated to participate in training for the following reasons:

- Social relationships: to make new friends, to meet a need for associations and friendships.
External expectations: to comply with instructions from someone else; to fulfill the expectations or recommendations of someone with formal authority.

Social welfare: to improve ability to serve humankind, prepare for service to the community, and improve ability to participate in community work.

Personal advancement: to achieve higher status in a job, secure professional advancement, and stay abreast of competitors.

Escape/Stimulation: to relieve boredom, provide a break in the routine of home or work, and provide a contrast to other exacting details of life.

Cognitive interest: to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, and to satisfy an inquiring mind.

#5: Self-Concept

Adult learning theory proposes that adult self-concept is often bound up with the learning experience. Theorists suggest that adults are more likely to take success and failure personally—that “self-esteem and ego are on the line when they are asked to risk trying a new behavior in front of peers and cohorts.” Adult beliefs about autonomy and self-direction can also shape learning. Knowles noted “adults resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them.” Further, adults are often preoccupied by concerns about situations outside the training, may be influenced by bad experiences with earlier education, or positive/negative feelings about expertise and authority.

Principle to Practice: Just as adult learning theorists frequently recommend that trainers imagine themselves as “facilitators,” they also suggest an enlarged role for the learner—one in which he/she is encouraged to take responsibility for learning success. Enlarging each learner’s sense of involvement in his/her own training is a powerful way to identify and leverage participants’ unique motivations.

Lieb recommends that the best way for trainers to motivate learners is to understand their fundamental reasons for participation, enhance their reasons for enrolling and decrease any barriers to learning. Examples of types of motivations and strategies include:

- Social welfare motivation — emphasize long term value, vision, and mission of the work and how participants contribute to it
- Social interaction motivation — include time for networking
- Motivated by cognitive interest/stimulation — know as much as possible about training participants’ needs, skill levels; create varied, interesting, fun training

Additional Resources/Perspectives on Adult Learning:


The New Update on Adult Learning Theory: New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 89. Sharan B. Merriam (Editor).

References