

Applying Adult Learning Principles for More Effective Learning

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Part of being an effective small group facilitator involves understanding and respecting how adults learn. Some critical characteristics of adult learners were developed by Malcolm Knowles and are helpful in working with small groups and creating a positive learning climate. Dr. Knowles identified the following characteristics of adult learners:

- Adults need to be shown **respect and consideration**. **Facilitators can meet this need by acknowledgment of their contributions and insights during the training**. The learners need to be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class.
- Adults are **goal-oriented**. When involved in learning activities, they usually know what goals they want to attain and why. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined objectives. The facilitator must demonstrate and share with the participants how this educational experience will help them attain their goals. **Implication for facilitator: the agenda, learning objectives and goals of the learning experience must be done early in the presentation**.
- Adults are **autonomous and self-directed**. They need to be free to direct themselves. The facilitator must actively provide a road map for learning and involve participants in the learning process and serve as process facilitators to keep things moving along. Specifically, they must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and let them work on projects that reflect their interests. They should allow the participants to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. They have to be sure to act as facilitators, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts. Finally, they must allow time for reflection and action planning to facilitate how participants will apply the learning to their back home circumstances and jobs.
- Adults have accumulated a foundation **life experiences and knowledge** that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, they should draw out participants' experience and knowledge which is relevant to the topic. They must relate theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of experience in learning.
- Adults are **relevancy-oriented**. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be practical and applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Therefore, educators must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins. This means, also, that theories and concepts must be related to a setting familiar to participants. This need can be fulfilled by letting participants choose projects that reflect their own interests; such as case studies and presentations.
- **Adults are practical**, focusing on the aspects of a case or lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge or theories for their own sake. Facilitators must involve participants in discovering how the learning will be useful to them in their practice or on the job.