



Knowing the Learners

Principles of Adult Learning

Adult learners are capable of defining, planning and assessing their own learning throughout their lifetime. They are individuals who:

- Have a particular problem of interest in mind.
- Draw heavily on their existing knowledge and previous experiences.
- Want to acquire knowledge and skills that are relevant to their education needs.

From a cognitive perspective, effective adult learning occurs when new learning is:

- Connected to prior knowledge and elaborated through discussion, review, questioning and reflective exercises.
- Situated in a context as close as possible to the potential situation(s) in which it will be applied. This facilitates storage in memory in a way that can be readily retrieved and applied.

From a social perspective, the following implications for adult learning should be considered:

- Learners are continuously and dynamically interacting with the environment. Both learners and those with whom they interact are affected by those exchanges so that the learning environment is continually changing.
- Learners perceive and react to less obvious influences in the environment, such as the hidden curriculum. They see incentives and rewards in the environment, which gives powerful messages about which actions and outcomes are valued and which are not.
- Learners observe the actions of others as well as the effects of those actions. This emphasizes the importance of role modeling and its powerful effects on how learners think and act.
- Learner's perceptions of self-efficacy affect the development of competency and autonomy. Learners should be motivated to continually assess their needs and set new goals based on their self-assessment.

To promote a learning-centered education the following pedagogical principles should be considered:

- Taking a developmental approach and adapting teaching to the learner's level. This helps learners develop increasingly complex and sophisticated knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- Setting up clear expectations with the learners by involving learners in setting goals and working towards them. This helps learners develop lifelong learning skills.

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- Giving learners the opportunity to assume increasing responsibility and make decisions. This helps learners build confidence and competence in making decisions and monitoring their outcomes.
- Creating a safe and welcoming learning environment that encourages learners to express uncertainty and keep questioning their knowledge, skills and attitudes. This promotes learning for understanding and helps learners develop lifelong learning skills.
- Engaging learners actively in learning by having them working with knowledge (for example, discussing and making connections) and applying it to their context of practice. Also, exposing learners to authentic tasks, such as those they encounter in practice. This promotes learning for understanding and transference of knowledge/skills into practice.
- Having the teacher think aloud. This helps learners understand the teacher's thinking and approaches.
- Giving learners the opportunity to apply their learning in practice. This helps learners keep building on their knowledge and developing more complex skills and knowledge.
- Helping learners develop the ability to learn from their practice and to reflect on their learning. This helps learners develop lifelong learning skills.
- Giving formative and continuing feedback. This helps learners know their progress, set goals and work toward them.
- Taking learners active involvement in learning as an opportunity to see how learners are developing. This helps teachers monitor learner's learning.
- Aligning course objectives, teaching and assessment strategies. This helps learners and teachers achieve their educational goals.
- Being aware of:
 - The teacher's impact as a role model
 - The impact of the assessment system on learners' learning. The assessment system conveys what is valued and must be aligned with learning objectives.
- Reflecting after a teaching session on how it went, what went well and what could be improved, as well as asking the learners for feedback on the session.

Reference

Mann, K. (2002). Thinking about learning: Implications for Principle-Based Professional Education. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Health Professions* 22: 69-76.