

Adult Learning Assumptions

Malcolm S. Knowles, a well-known expert on adult learning, has made the following assumptions regarding adult learners. Dr. Knowles also suggests how instructors should deal with each of these assumptions.

ASSUMPTION	WHAT IT MEANS TO ME
<p>Adults want to know why they should learn.</p> <p>Adults are motivated to put time and energy into learning if they know the benefits of learning and the costs of not learning.</p>	<p>Develop “a need to know” in your learners—make a case for the value of the learning in their lives. Help learners answer the question, “What’s in it for me?”</p>
<p>Adults need to take responsibility.</p> <p>By definition, adult learners have a self-concept of being in charge of their own lives and being responsible for their own decisions, and a need to be seen and treated as being capable of taking responsibility.</p>	<p>Realize that despite this self-concept and need for responsibility, once they enter a classroom many adults revert back to their school and college days when they tended to be passive learners. Do not fall into a trap of assuming that they want to learn passively. Empower them to learn and to take responsibility for learning. Enable learners to assess their own learning, similar to the self-assessment and feedback that you experienced during the Instructor Development course.</p>
<p>Adults bring experience to learning.</p> <p>That experience is a resource for themselves and for other learners, and gives richer meaning to new ideas and skills. Experience is a source of an adult’s self-identify.</p>	<p>Experience is both a plus and a minus. It is a plus because it is a vast resource. It is a minus because it can lead to biasness and presuppositions. Because adults define themselves by their experiences, respect and value that experience.</p>

ASSUMPTION	WHAT IT MEANS TO ME
<p>Adults are ready to learn when the need arises.</p> <p>Adults learn when they choose to learn and commit to learn. That desire to learn usually coincides with the transition from one developmental stage to another and is related to developmental tasks, such as career planning, acquiring job competencies, improving job performance, etc. Often, however, adults perceive employer-<i>provided</i> training as employer-<i>required</i> training.</p>	<p>Be aware that some learners might not want to be there. In which case, be honest. Acknowledge that fact and the fact that nothing can be done about it. Then, agree to make the most out of training nevertheless. On the other hand, be aware that for those who want to be in the class, training is important and they must walk away with something.</p>
<p>Adults are task-oriented.</p> <p>Education is subject-centered, but adult training should be task-centered. For example, a child in a school composition class learns grammar, and then sentence and paragraph construction. An adult in a composition training program learns how to write a business letter, a marketing plan, etc.</p>	<p>Organize content around tasks, not subjects.</p>

See "Adult Learning," by Malcolm S. Knowles, *The ASTD Training & Development Handbook: A Guide to Human Resource Development*, Robert L. Craig, editor, 1996