

Designing Adult Learning Experiences: Characteristics of Adult Learners

Purpose: Knowing the characteristics of adult learning—often referred to as *andragogy*—is essential for anyone involved in teaching, training, or facilitating learning for adults. Knowing adult learning characteristics helps educators design more effective and engaging learning experiences. It ensures that instruction aligns with adults' needs, such as self-direction and practical relevance. Understanding these traits allows for better motivation and knowledge retention. It also fosters respect for learners' prior experiences and encourages active participation.

1. The first hour after lunch is the hardest time for adults to learn. Adults are digesting food so the digestive system takes priority and causes the respiratory and circulatory systems to slow down, causing drowsiness. Drinking water after lunch is good for the brain.
-Eric Jensen
2. Adults who do not summarize new learning lose it within one hour!
-Bob Garmston
3. Plan for "fresh air" about every 6 – 8 minutes. Examples of "fresh air" or state changers are: change colors, tell a story, change tone of voice, use analogies, use energizers, use a quote, walk around the room, use special gestures, have participants high-five, use music, change seats, ask a question.
- Rich Allen
4. Adults must have immediate relevance to the new learning. (WIIFM) Two brain filters that are unique to adult learners are experience and time. Tell them "why" they are learning what they are learning and "why" they are doing what they are doing.
-Bob Garmston
5. Adults formulate their impression of a learning situation within the first 90 seconds. The number one turnoff is, "It's time to begin." This means that before the presenter is formally introduced, learners have already formed an impression. Attention to the appearance of the room, the organization of the day, and the behavior of the presenter is imperative as participants enter the room.
-Bob Pike
6. Adults suffer from brain chaos. Although the speed with which we learn slows down with age, our ability to learn does not diminish.
-Debbie Estes
7. Adult learners are reluctant to accept and try new ideas. You must have tools for convincing learners that learning something new and different will benefit them. Adults are motivated to learn when they see the immediate applicability of the knowledge and skills to their job functions and career goals.
-Malcolm Knowles

8. Adult learners fear failure and struggle with risk-taking. A participant who participates in front of the group within 30 minutes of the start of the presentation is 40% more likely to be an active participant. Consider having participants participate in this order: (1) alone, (2) in a pair, (3) as a table group, (4) before the large group to increase willingness to take academic risks.
-Bob Pike
9. The average adult forgets 25% within one hour and forgets 85% within one week. It takes 21 attempts at something new for an adult to establish a pattern and 100 times for something to become automatic. (A child – 10 attempts and 85 times to be routine.)
-Judy Arin-Krupp
10. Repeat and associate to ensure multiple exposures with the new learning. Strategies include Colored dots, Pair and Share Journal, Four Corners to discuss with a partner or in a small group, Roll dice and discuss according to the number rolled, buddy with someone from a different group and share with one another what was discussed in your group.
-Ernest Stackowski
11. Adults, like children, don't learn from experience as much as we learn from reflecting on that experience, both successes and failures. Self-reflection, self-assessment and self-direction are critical to professional learning and development.
-Linda Lambert, Dept of Ed Leadership, CSU
12. Adults are creatures of habit. Use an odd number of minutes, like 9 minutes and 22 seconds, for breaks and activities. Post information where people don't expect to see it.
-Eric Jensen
13. Adults dislike repetitive reporting of group work. Instead, consider one of the following: Gallery Walks, Posing the Question, "What would you like to share with the whole group?" What can you contribute that no other group has offered? Cross out anything that has been shared and report only new ideas/information.
-Becky Pike Pluth, Creative Training Techniques
14. There will always be rigid/difficult participants. Consider responses such as, "I understand your feelings about this. We can continue this discussion during break." Also, refer to your Learning Agreements that were presented at the beginning of the session and remain posted throughout the learning time. Have a strategy for handling questions. Use proximity. Use language that acknowledges and invites the participant to discuss it with you at break. Rely on team members to assist you. It is the role of the co-facilitator to redirect the group when it gets off course or strays from the objective. (e.g., "That is a good question, but it is not directly related to our current objective. The team would be more than happy to talk to you about it during break.")
-Robert Garmston
15. When grouping, you will get the best work from adults if groups are no larger than six persons and no smaller than three persons. The ideal size is 4 people.
-Spencer Kagan

16. Adults like choices. Allow them to choose how they will participate in some learning. Examples are:
"You may write your responses on chart tablets or post-it notes." "You may work alone or as a table group." "You may complete your work, then take a break; or take a break, then complete your work."
-Malcolm Knowles
17. Remember, multi-modality instruction is beneficial for adults, just like children and adolescents. Design your delivery so that a variety of auditory, visual, and kinesthetic-tactile experiences are provided.
-Malcolm Knowles
18. We tend to teach to our "handedness." For most of us, that means to the right. Make an effort to teach to both sides of the room. Placing an easel or anchor on the opposite side might be a good reminder. -Stephen D. Brookfield
19. Adults need a break or an energizer about every 50 - 60 minutes. Elevating the elbow above the heart for 10 seconds refreshes the circulatory system.
-Eric Jensen
20. The adult body needs a break before the mind when sitting for long periods of time.
After age 35, adults:
- have more difficulty with their joints when sitting for extended periods of time and need frequent restroom breaks;
- experience sugar as a downer, which is the opposite of how children are affected;
- need snacks that are rich in complex carbohydrates and protein rather than sugar and caffeine.
-Judy Krupp