

Facilitating Adult Learning

# Understanding Adult Learners



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**OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF CAREER AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION**

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# **Understanding Adult Learners**

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Curriculum and Instructional Materials Center

# UNDERSTANDING ADULT LEARNERS

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**Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education  
Curriculum and Instructional Materials Center  
Stillwater, Oklahoma 74074-4364**

Project Manager: Laurie Richison

Writer: Jill Bakken

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# Introduction

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Teaching adults can be an exciting and fun opportunity. Most adults are in the classroom because they *want* to learn what you have to teach. These learners are very different from younger learners, and this document will help you better understand the multiple aspects that influence their learning.

## Malcolm Knowles and Andragogy

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Malcolm Knowles is probably one of the most well-known names in the field of adult education. He came up with a theory on how adults learn and named his theory *andragogy*, which means “the art of teaching adults.” This can be related to the word *pedagogy*, which means “the art of teaching children.”

Knowles’ theory of andragogy identified the following five areas that make adult learners distinct from younger learners.

- When people are young, they are dependent; but that as they age, they become independent and self-directed.
- Adults accumulate rich resources of learning through their life experiences, and these resources can be applied to their new learning experiences.
- Social roles affect the readiness for adults to learn.
- Adults are problem-centered learners and want to apply their knowledge immediately, whereas younger people who are more subject-centered and expect to use their knowledge at some future time.
- Internal factors motivate adult learners more than external factors.

# Characteristics of Adult Learners

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There are many definitions as to what qualifies one as an adult learner, but the most commonly accepted criteria include head of household, over 21, or married. If any one of these criteria is true, then one may be classified as an adult learner.

- **Internal factors** - Adult learners are independent, self-directed, and self-motivated. Unlike children, adults participate in the learning process because they *want* to, not because they *have* to.
- **Self-perception** – Adult learners perceive themselves as *doers*, such as workers or parents, and therefore participate in learning to improve or advance in one of their many roles.
- **Diverse** – Adult learners are very different from each other, such as in their background, age, education level, profession, and stage in life.
- **Experience** – Adult learners possess considerable life experiences that they can draw upon during the learning process.
- **Interests** – Adult learners are interested in topics that relate to their stage of life, such as just starting a career, changing a career, or advancing in their career.
- **Motivation** – Adult learners want to solve problems they are currently facing and seek information that can be immediately applied. They also need to perceive the outcome of the learning process as valuable and are focused on the effective use of time.
- **Expectations** – Adult learners have well-formed learning expectations – which may be negative based on past experiences. They may reject or explain away new information that rejects their beliefs.

# Motivation Factors

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Besides wanting to solve their immediate problems, additional factors that motivate adults to learn include:

- Creating new social relationships  
EXAMPLES: Friendships, professional contacts
- Meeting current employment standards or requirements
- Achieving professional advancement
- Increasing knowledge in a particular area of interest
- Pursuing interests and activity outside of home and work
- Adjusting to life changes, such as marriage, parenting, divorce, retirement
- Serving others in the community and improve social welfare

# Barriers to Learning

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Barriers to learning is another factor to consider when working with adult learners. Even adults who are extremely motivated to learn may not participate in learning opportunities as a result of one more of the following three barriers.

## Dispositional barriers

- Feeling too old
- Dislike of study
- Lack of self-confidence
- Uncertain about the purpose of learning something new

## Situational barriers

- Cost of education
- Lack of time
- Home responsibilities
- Career or job obligations
- Childcare needs
- Lack of transportation
- Lack of family support

## Institutional barriers

- Times in which courses are offered
- Lack of information about different programs
- Location of the institution
- Procedural difficulties
- Complicated registration processes
- Lack of support services, such as childcare and career services
- Lack of feeling important by the institution

# Learning Styles

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Often the best place to start when learning about different learning styles is to investigate your own preferences regarding the learning process.

Visit <http://people.usd.edu/~bwjames/tut/learning-style/stylest.html> to take a learning styles inventory. You will learn that you are either a visual learner, auditory learner, or a kinesthetic learner.

## Visual

### Likes

- Looking at pictures
- Studying maps
- Looking at graphs, tables, and charts
- Working with puzzles
- Watching videos and slide shows
- Reading a procedure

### Other traits

- Distracted by visual chaos
- Bored with extensive listening

## Auditory

### Likes

- Listening to others read
- Listening to audio recordings
- Listening to a lecture
- Listening to others describe a procedure
- Talking through a procedure

### Other traits

- Distracted by sounds
- Repeats directions or commands
- Good at following oral directions

# Kinesthetic

## Likes

- Physical, hands-on activities
- Working with a model
- Drawing or illustrating
- Constructing a project
- Role playing
- Participating in games
- Taking things apart

## Other traits

- Learn by doing

Now that you know the differences between visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners, the next question you may be asking is: *How do I teach so that I address all these different learning styles?*

Visit <http://www.youtube.com/v/oNxCporOofo> to watch a short video, which offers some great ideas on how you can be a teacher that effectively addresses all types of learners.

# References

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