

## Chapter 6

# A Word About Adult Learning Theory<sup>1,2</sup>



There are many great educators and they all have one thing in common. It is not that they are the best among the best in their own field. Instead, they are the ones who know best how to facilitate learning. Teachers may be experts in their respective niche, but if they do not possess the facility to assist students in the learning process, it does not matter how much they know or how skilled they are. The same may be said about adults and their experiences as participants of a facilitated process. Skilled facilitators recognize and understand the need for adults to participate at various levels and in various ways. Use the following information to better understand how adults learn and prefer to interact during that process.

## Andragogy: What is it?

Malcolm Shepherd Knowles (1913 – 1997) was an American educator well known for the use of the term “andragogy” as synonymous to “adult education.” According to Knowles, andragogy is the art and science of adult learning. He theorized that there are **five assumptions** concerning the characteristics of adult learners, and **four principles** concerning adult learning (andragogy).

Despite the fact that Knowles’ adult learning theory assumptions and principles were introduced in the 1980s, each can be used today to help teaching professionals create more meaningful learning experience and facilitators to create a more meaningful interactive experience for adult participants.

The term andragogy can be used in a similar way to the term pedagogy. Andragogy in Greek means man-leading in comparison to pedagogy, which in Greek means child-leading. However, it should be noted that the term pedagogy has been used since the ancient Greek times while Alexander Kapp, a German educator, originally used the term andragogy in 1833.

## Five Assumptions of Adult Learners

**Assumption 1: Self-concept** – As a person matures, his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality to one of being a self-directed human being.

**Assumption 2: Adult Learner Experience** – As a person matures, he/she accumulates a diverse reservoir of experiences that become an important resource for learning.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from <https://elearningindustry.com/6-top-facts-about-adult-learning-theory-every-educator-should-know> by Aditya Pullagurla

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from <https://elearningindustry.com/the-adult-learning-theory-andragogy-of-malcolm-knowles> by Christopher Pappas



**Assumption 3: Readiness to Learn** – As a person matures, his/her readiness to learn becomes increasingly focused on the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.

**Assumption 4: Orientation to Learning** – As a person matures, his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his/her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness.

**Assumption 5: Motivation to Learn** – As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal (Knowles 1984:12).

## Knowles' Four Principles of Andragogy

In 1984, Knowles suggested four principles that are applied to adult learning:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning about subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented. (Kearsley, 2010)

## Six Main Characteristics of Adult Learners

There are six main characteristics of adult learners, according to Malcolm Knowles (1980, 1984)

1. **Adult learning is self-directed/autonomous** – Adult learners are actively involved in the learning process such that they make choices relevant to their learning objectives. As such, adult learners also direct their learning goals with the guidance of their mentors. As an educator, it is important to facilitate the process of goal-setting. Students need to be given the freedom to assume responsibility for their own choices. When it comes to workload, they also need to be proactive in making decisions and in contributing to the process.
2. **Adult learning utilizes knowledge and life experiences** – Under this approach educators encourage learners to connect their past experiences with their current knowledge-base and activities. Learners are taught ways to bring to their current placement past knowledge, opinions, and experiences. Educators need to be well-versed in how to help students in drawing out relevant past knowledge and experiences. In addition, educators must know how to relate the sum of learners' experiences to the current learning experiences.



3. **Adult learning is goal-oriented** – The motivation to learn is increased when the relevance of the lesson through real-life situations is clear, particularly in relation to the specific concerns of the learner. The need to acquire relevant and adequate knowledge is of high importance. With this in mind, adult learning is characterized as goal-oriented and intended learning outcomes should be clearly identified. Once the learning goals have been identified, it is now essential to align the learning activities such that these objectives are fulfilled within a certain period of time. This approach is a great way to maximize a student's learning experience.
4. **Adult learning is relevancy-oriented** – One of the best ways for adults to learn is by relating the assigned tasks to their own learning goals. If it is clear that the activities they are engaged in directly contribute to achieving their personal learning objectives, then they will be inspired and motivated to engage in projects and successfully complete them.
5. **Adult learning highlights practicality** – Placement is a means of helping students to apply the theoretical concepts learned inside the classroom into real-life situations. It is very important for educators to identify appropriate ways and convert theoretical learning to practical activities! Learning is facilitated when appropriate ways of implementing theoretical knowledge in real life situations are made clear.
6. **Adult learning encourages collaboration** – Adult learners thrive in collaborative relationships with their educators. When learners are considered by their instructors as colleagues, they become more productive. When their contributions are acknowledged, then they are willing to put out their best work.

## Adult Learners' Traits

**Self-direction** – Adults feel the need to take responsibility for their lives and decisions and this is why it's important for them to have control over their learning. Therefore, self-assessment, a peer relationship with the instructor, multiple options, and initial, yet subtle, support are all imperative.

**Practical and results-oriented** – Adult learners are usually practical, resent theory, need information that can be immediately applicable to their professional needs, and generally prefer practical knowledge that will improve their skills, facilitate their work, and boost their confidence. This is why it's important to create a course that will cover their individual needs and have a more utilitarian content.

**Less open-minded, and therefore more resistant to change.** – Maturity and profound life experiences usually lead to rigidity, which is the enemy of learning. Thus, instructional designers need to provide the "why" behind the change, new concepts that can be linked to already established ones, and promote the need to explore.

**Slower learning, yet more integrative knowledge** – Aging does affect learning. Adults tend to learn less rapidly with age. However, the depth of learning tends to increase over time, integrating knowledge and skills to unprecedented personal levels.

**Use personal experience as a resource** – Adults have lived longer, seen and done more, have the tendency to link their past experiences to anything new, and validate new concepts based on prior learning. This is why it's crucial to form a class with adults that have similar life experience levels, encourage discussion and sharing, and generally create a learning community consisting of people who can profoundly interact.



**Motivation** – Learning in adulthood is usually voluntary. Thus, it's a personal choice to attend school in order to improve job skills and achieve professional growth. This motivation is the driving force behind learning, and this is why it's crucial to tap into a learner's intrinsic impetus with the right thought-provoking material that will question conventional wisdom and stimulate his mind.

**Multi-level responsibilities** – Adult learners have a lot to juggle: family, friends, work, and the need for personal quality time. This is why it's more difficult for an adult to make room for learning, while it's absolutely crucial to prioritize. If his life is already demanding,

then the learning outcome will be compromised. Taking that under consideration, an instructional designer needs to create a flexible program, accommodate busy schedules, and accept the fact that personal obligations might obstruct the learning process.

**High expectations** – Adult learners have high expectations. They want to be taught about things that will be useful to their work, expect to have immediate results, seek for a course that will be worth their while and not be a waste of their time or money. This is why it's important to create a course that will maximize their advantages, meet their individual needs and address all the learning challenges.



Publications from Kansas State University are available at [www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu](http://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu)

Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved. In each case, credit the authors, *Master Community Facilitator Notebook*, February 2018.

**Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service**

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, John D. Floros, Director.