

ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES

Adults As Learners

Planning an effective CME activity involves understanding how adults learn best. Compared to children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. The field of adult learning was pioneered by Malcom Knowles. He identified the following characteristics of adult learners:

- Adults are *autonomous* and *self-directed*. Teachers must actively involve adult participants in the learning process & serve as facilitators for them, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts. Finally, they must show participants how the class will help them reach their goals.
- Adults have accumulated a foundation of *life experiences* and *knowledge* that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/ experience base. To help them do so, they should draw out participants' experience and knowledge which is relevant to the topic. They must relate theories and concepts to the participants & recognize the value of experience in learning.
- Adults are *goal-oriented*. Upon enrolling in a course, they usually know what goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Instructors must show participants how this class will help them attain their goals. This classification of goals and course objectives must be done early in the course.
- Adults are *relevancy-oriented*. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Therefore, instructors must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins. This means, also, that theories and concepts must be related to a setting familiar to participants.
- Adults are *practical*, focusing on aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Instructors must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them.
- As do all learners, adults need to be shown *respect*. Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult brings to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class.

Motivating the Adult Learner

Another aspect of adult learning is motivation. At least six factors serve as sources of motivation for adult learning:

- **Social relationships:** to make new friends, to meet a need for associations and friendships.
- **External expectations:** to comply with instructions from someone else; to fulfill the expectations or recommendations of someone with formal authority.
- **Social welfare:** to improve ability to serve mankind, prepare for service to the community, and improve ability to participate in community work.
- **Personal advancement:** achieve higher status in a job, secure professional advancement & stay abreast of competitors
- **Escape/Stimulation:** to relieve boredom, provide a break in the routine of home or work, and provide a contrast to other exacting details of life.
- **Cognitive interest:** to learn for sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, & to satisfy an inquiring mind.

Barriers and Motivation

Adults have many responsibilities that they must balance against the demands of learning. Because of these responsibilities, adults have *barriers against participating in learning*. Some of these barriers include lack of time, money, confidence, or interest, lack of information about opportunities, scheduling problems, and problems with child care and transportation.

Motivation factors can also be a barrier. What motivates adult learners? Typical motivations include a requirement for competence or licensing, an expected (or realized) promotion, job enrichment, a need to maintain old skills or learn new ones, a need to adapt to job changes, or the need to learn in order to comply with company directives.

The best way to motivate adult learners is simply to *enhance* their reasons for enrolling and *decrease* the barriers. Learn why students are enrolled (motivators); discover what is keeping them from learning. Then plan the motivating strategies. A successful strategy includes showing adult learners the relationship between training and an expected promotion.

Learning Tips for Effective Instructors

Educators must remember that learning occurs within each individual as a continual process throughout life. People learn at different speeds, so it is natural for them to be anxious or nervous when faced with a learning situation. Positive reinforcement by the instructor can enhance learning, as can proper timing of the instruction.

Learning results from stimulation of the senses. In some people, one sense is used more than others to learn or recall information. Instructors should present materials that stimulates as many senses as possible in order to increase their chances of teaching success. There are four critical elements of learning that must be addressed to ensure that participants learn. These elements are

1. motivation
2. reinforcement
3. retention
4. transference

Motivation. If the participant does not recognize the need for the information (or has been offended or intimidated); all of the instructor's effort to assist the participant to learn will be in vain. The instructor must establish rapport with participants and prepare them for learning; this provides motivation. Instructors can motivate students via several means:

- **Set a feeling or tone for the lesson.** Establish a friendly, open atmosphere
- **Set an appropriate level of concern.** The level of tension must be adjusted to meet the level of importance of the objective. If the material has a high level of importance, a higher level of tension/stress should be established in class. However, people learn best under low to moderate stress; if the stress is too high, it can be a barrier to learning.
- **Set an appropriate level of difficulty.** The degree of difficulty should be set high enough to challenge participants but not so high that they become frustrated by information overload.

In addition, participants need specific knowledge of their learning results (*feedback*). Feedback must be specific. Participants must also see a *reward* for learning. The reward does not necessarily have to be monetary; it can be simply a demonstration of benefits to be realized from learning the material. Finally, the participant must be **interested** in the subject. Interest is directly related to reward. Adults must see the benefit of learning in order to motivate themselves to learn the subject.

Reinforcement. Reinforcement is a very necessary part of the teaching/learning process; through it, instructors encourage correct modes of behavior and performance.

- *Positive reinforcement* is normally used by instructors who are teaching participants new skills. As the name implies, positive reinforcement is "good" and reinforces "good" (or positive) behavior.
- *Negative reinforcement* is normally used by instructors teaching a new skill or new information. It is useful in trying to change modes of behavior. The result of negative reinforcement is *extinction* -- that is, the instructor uses negative reinforcement until the "bad" behavior disappears, or it becomes extinct.

Reinforcement should be part of the teaching-learning process to ensure correct behavior. Instructors need to use it on a frequent and regular basis early in the process to help the students retain what they have learned. Then, they should use reinforcement only to maintain consistent, positive behavior.

Retention. Students must retain information from classes in order to benefit from the learning. The instructors' jobs are not finished until they have assisted the learner in retaining information. In order for participants to retain the information taught, they must see a meaning or purpose for that information. They must also understand and be able to interpret and apply the information. This understanding includes their ability to assign the correct degree of importance to the material.

The amount of retention will be directly affected by the degree of original learning. Simply stated, if the participants did not learn the material well initially, they will not retain it well either. Retention is directly affected by their amount of practice during the learning. Instructors should emphasize retention and application. After the students demonstrate correct performance, they should be urged to practice to maintain the desired performance.

Transference. Transfer of learning is the result of training -- it is the ability to use the information taught in the course but in a new setting. As with reinforcement, there are two types of transfer: *positive* and *negative*.

- Positive transference, like positive reinforcement, occurs when participant uses the behavior taught in the course.
- Negative transference, again like negative reinforcement, occurs when the participants do not do what they are told not to do. This results in a positive (desired) outcome.

Transference is most likely to occur in the following situations:

- *Association* -- participants can associate the new information with something that they already know.
- *Similarity* -- information is similar to material that participants already know; it revisits a logical framework.
- *Degree of original learning* -- participant's degree of original learning was high.
- *Critical attribute element* -- information learned contains elements that are extremely beneficial on the job.