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Basic Characteristics of Adult Learning

Adult learners. How well do we know them? This is a key question for any educator. Who are the learners we will be working with? What are they like? How will they learn? For adult educators these questions are even more important than for school teachers. In a school class all the children will be of more or less the same age. Their background will be the same. With adult education there is great variability in who will be in your literacy or other kind of class. How will you know them so that you can teach them?

When it concerns learning, adults are not over-sized children. Their maturity can bring special characteristics that make adults be motivated to learn. By appealing to the specific qualities of adult learners, more effective and motivating courses should be developed. Adult learners want to be treated as adults. They will not put up with the criticism or humiliation that schoolchildren often get.

This article aims to outline some of the common characteristics of adult learners and draw attention to the practical implications for teaching of these characteristics.

Here is a list of some basic features common to many but not all adult learners.

Training initiative.

Being a part of an initiative, workplace training often involves change. Adults are willing to know the goal of training and the motivation stressing on an organization's training initiative.

Adults come to education with intentions and needs. Some of these are specific, some more general, sometimes related to the subject matter of the course, sometimes not, and sometimes unknown even to themselves. Their motivations may be very varied. (This suggests that adult learners should be encouraged to state their learning needs.)

Purpose -motivated.

Many adults have specific aims which they try to achieve. They take advantage to participating in learning activities that help them to attain their goals.

Often, even within the workplace, they are volunteers and they recognize the need to learn and are willing to learn. Motivation is generally high too, but can be easily lost if their needs and expectations are not met.

They often like to be active and do things with a clear purpose. People learn best when they are actively involved.

Need for Community.

Many self-directed adult learners prefer a learning community with whom they can interact and discuss questions and issues.

Adult learners, particularly those with low skills, are more likely to participate in adult education and training when they believe their investment of time and money will benefit them in the labor market.

This can mean improved job prospects for unemployed adults, or career advancement for adults who are already working.

Yet adult learning providers face challenges in aligning their programming with labor market needs. Even when educational programs respond directly to identified skill shortages, it can be difficult to predict whether there will be enough interest among adult learners in the community to deliver the program.

The process outlined in this toolkit will address these issues by helping adult learning providers identify the skills needed within the local labor force and ensure responsive education and training opportunities.

In its simplest form, a needs assessment is a systematic process for identifying local needs, placing needs in order of priority, and allocating resources to resolve the highest priority needs.

Needs are commonly defined as identified gaps or discrepancies between the current state (what is) and the desired state (what should be). Needs assessments involve making decisions about how important the needs are, why they exist, and how they can be addressed.

Needs assessments can be implemented at three levels: individual, organizational, and community.

The third level of needs assessment, that is community one, is represented by activities conducted to understand the overall community learning needs. This type of assessment involves the collection and analysis of information on the local community including:

Characteristics of adult learners and the local labor market

Issues and trends that have an impact on adult learning and employer needs for education and training, such as new populations moving in and the emergence of new industry sectors

Existing program and community resources available to meet identified education and training needs

The needs assessment specifies where there are gaps, and identifies solutions to address the gaps. The results can be used to guide the planning, development, and delivery of educational programming for adult learners, including levels of staffing and volunteers, program options, location of programs, and methods to deliver services.

The results can also support program funding applications by demonstrating the demand for new programs or services.

Practical knowledge and experiences.

Learning is something that happens to us all the time, yet we are seldom aware of it. If you are aware that you are learning or preparing to learn, you will learn better.

Learning is more effective when you are aware that you are learning something.

Take time to be aware when you are learning something. Take time to reflect on what you are learning. Adults learn best when they remember their learning experiences and remember what it is that they learnt. This is what you do when you revise for tests or exams. You go over the work you learnt during the semester or year.

In the workplace adults prefer practical knowledge and experiences. They consider these factors essential in making their work easier or providing important skills. Therefore, adult learners need personal relevance in learning activities.

Adults will also have entrenched beliefs, opinions, prejudices and positions.

New ideas and material may question their existing knowledge, beliefs and world view. This means that they may well experience learning as painful and risky. (This suggests that adult education programs should always take feelings into account and ensure that the relevance of what is being learned is clear – one may be willing to bear learning pain if the end result is worth it in one's own life.)

Self-esteem.

Adults are eager to gain competence in workplace skills as it boosts confidence and improves mastery.

Adults like to test new ideas in real life settings. They come to a course with different expectations about the learning process.

Some may expect to be taught everything (as in a formal school) and some may wish to find out everything by themselves. They will have different assessments of what they can and cannot do as learners.

Learning by experience.

Many adult learners take advantage to learning by not only listening to lectures but also doing some activity.

Adults bring with them a rich store of experience and values.

They have knowledge of the world and their place in it. They can use their experience and existing knowledge in the learning process but the willingness of individuals to do this may differ.

Adults tend to view and interpret ideas, skills and knowledge by comparing them with what they have experienced in their own lives.

Knowledge is Wealth.

In their life-time from childhood to adulthood, people store a unique accumulation of experiences and knowledge. This depth and breadth of knowledge can contribute to the learning process.

Emotional Barriers.

Through experience, adults may feel anxiety of a subject, have fear about a subject or be angry about forced changes in job responsibilities or policies. These barriers and emotions can interfere with the learning activity.

Focusing on the Results.

Adults are oriented on results. They have certain expectations for what they can get out of learning process and will undoubtedly drop out of voluntary learning if the purposes they are willing to attain aren't met.

Adults generally want their learning to have immediate results. They want what they learn to help meet some of their immediate needs and solve their problems. They want courses to be relevant to their daily lives. (This suggests that the aims and outcomes of any course should be clearly stated at the beginning.)

Outer commitments and responsibilities.

They also have other responsibilities and pressures outside the learning situation. Most adults have numerous responsibilities and commitments to family, friends, community and work. Carving out time for learning activity affects adult learners greatly.

Potential physical limitations.

Depending on their physical condition and age, adult learners may acquire a number of psychomotor skills more slowly than younger students and have more problems when reading small fonts and seeing small images or pictures on the computer screen.

Big Images and Pictures.

Adult learners need the big picture or image view of what they're learning. They want to know how the small parts fit into the larger landscape.

Self-Responsibility.

Adult learners often feel responsible for their own success or failure when learning. Adults already have their own learning styles or set patterns of learning (which may be difficult to change).

Self-direction of Adult Learners.

As a rule, adults typically give a preference to a sense of control and autonomy. They prefer options and choice in their learning environment. If given proper primary support, even if adults feel anxiety from self-direction, they may learn to appreciate this approach.

The other characteristics of adult learners are:

- a) Adults often like to be given some control over the course plan.
- b) They often lack confidence in their ability to learn.
- c) Adults usually prefer non-competitive educational situations.
- d) Adult learners like examples, samples and resources.
- e) They may learn at different speeds.
- f) They often need to ask questions and discuss freely.
- g) They need to see that they are making progress and achieving something.
- h) They appreciate reassurance, positive reinforcement, and helpful feedback.

(This suggests that courses, and in particular assessment, should be designed to give regular, helpful feedback to learners).

i) Adults may be of different ages and older adults may suffer from a number of physical disabilities, particularly in relation to hearing and sight.

j) Adult may be tired from their ordinary work.

We all know that as people get older their bodies do not function as well as when they were young. Does this mean that as we get older we cannot learn as well as we used to? The evidence collected by scientists is that in fact adults can continue to learn perfectly well until they are very old.

The physical decline in older people can be handled though glasses, hearing aids (and less noise in the classroom) and better lighting. Adult education students, especially illiterate or poorly educated ones, may need to have the eyesight tested as many have problems with their vision.

Studies have shown that older adults can learn and that intelligence does not drop significantly with age, though young people perform best on tasks requiring quick insight, short-term memorization, and complex interactions.

As people get older, they accumulate knowledge and develop perspective and experience in applying it.

Older people may process information at a slower pace because they are filtering it through many more years of experience than a young person. They may need an increased time for learning (and also slower presentation of new ideas).

Older people have problems with meaningless learning (they have no motivation to do it) and with complex learning (it takes longer to sort out especially if new information is inadequately associated with what they already know).

Memory is an important part of learning and memory is also relatively stable as long

as material is learned well and new information is related to previously learned material.

There is often a need to reassure older adults that they are still capable of learning.

Lighting in adult learning centers should be bright and venues should be suitable for the hard of hearing.

In moving forward, adult learning and education must be built into a holistic, inter-sectoral approach. This requires working across sectors, guided by the urgent need for deeper partnerships.

Monitoring and evaluating adult learning and education is vital. Because education and learning often happen in undocumented non-formal or informal spaces, it can be difficult to assess with accuracy.

In November 2015, at the 38th UNESCO General Conference, Member States adopted the revision of the Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education (1976). Entitled the 'Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (2015)', this revision will guide the expansion of equitable learning opportunities for youth and adults on a global scale.

The world would pay a high price if it ignored the potential of Adult Learning Education. The slow growth of Adult Learning Education could lead to populations being overwhelmed by global changes that are much larger than any one individual, group or country. Drawing on the evidence gathered recently by different relevant associations, UNESCO encourages countries to look to the future and construct stronger approaches for Adult Learning Education within the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.