



Adult Learning: Challenges for Instructors of Adult Learners

No. TR-2014-6 November 6, 2014

Learning Objective: The student will be able to identify five challenges of adult learning.

Those who teach adults experience different challenges to engage learning from those who teach children. The process of engaging adult learners is known as andragogy. When teaching adults, it's important to understand requirements for adult learners to engage in learning. The process for engaging children in learning is referred to as pedagogy. The bottom line is that adults and children learn differently.

Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer in the study of adult learning, observed that adults learn best when:

- It is clear why something is important to know or do (why).
- There is freedom to learn in one's own way (how).
- Learning is experiential (what).
- The time is right to learn (when).
- The learning environment is positive and encouraging (where).

Understanding adult learning challenges is essential for providing successful adult training programs.

Why: Adult learners want their lessons to be interesting, practical and applicable. Instructors must use meaningful and purposeful learning activities, ask stimulating questions, use appropriate and relevant multimedia tools/technology to engage students, and incorporate real-life and application-based examples, as well as interact with students and effectively manage group discussion.

How: Adults primarily learn through at least one of three general learning styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic.

- **Visual:** Learners rely on pictures, graphs, diagrams and illustrations. These learners often sit in the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions and to watch you, the instructor.
- **Auditory:** Learners listen carefully to all sounds associated with the learning. They will pay close attention to the sound of your voice and all of its subtle messages, and they will actively participate in discussions.
- **Tactile or kinesthetic:** Learners need to physically do something to understand it. They trust their feelings and emotions about what they're learning and how you're teaching it. They want to actually touch what they're learning.

What: Adult learners want their instructors to communicate clearly and identify course expectations, learning objectives, specific assignments or activities, and expected learning outcomes for the course. Adult learners expect that the course advertised meets their specific learning requirements.

When: Manage your time; working adults are pressed for time. They are time-conscious and therefore value punctuality and well-paced classes.

Where: Where an adult learner learns is not necessarily the physical environment, rather it is the emotional environment; adults appreciate approachable and patient instructors. Use empathy, and understand the challenges faced by adult students. Treat adult learners as mature students, be friendly, build a good rapport with students, and motivate and encourage learning. It's important to remember that a positive and encouraging approach is not the same as being condescending. Always respect your students, as they are adults who expect respect. Speaking to them in the tone of voice you might use with a child is offensive, and the damage done by condescension can be very difficult to overcome. Genuine encouragement from one person to another, regardless of age, is a wonderful point of human interaction.

Resources: Knowles, M.; Holton, E. F., III; Swanson, R. A. (2005). The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development (6th ed.). Knowles, M. (1980). The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy.

For archived downloads, go to:

http://www.usfa.fema.gov/training/coffee_break/