

Adult Learners in Higher Education

Higher education institutions define adults by using chronological age and additional factors such as delayed post-secondary enrollment, part-time attendance, full-time work while enrolled, financial independence, single parenthood, military service, and lack of a standard high school diploma. The literature surrounding adult learners suggests that learning across the lifespan, culture, personality, political beliefs, and ethnicity are additional factors of far more significant than chronological age.

What are some characteristics of the adult learner as suggested by adult learning theory and practice?

Primary Assumptions

- Independent/self-directing
- Usually has a ready-made motive or purpose when enrolling in higher education – therefore enrolling in higher education is of great consequence
- Desires learning results that are of immediate personal benefit
- Prefers to acquire and retain a high degree of self-confidence/success

Adults as Learners

- Are dependent vs. independent
- Are self vs. “other” directed
- Tend to prefer practical, applicable, relevant, goal-directed learning
- Will cease to attend if they feel that their time is being wasted
- Have less available time for everything, including homework, although they usually manage to do it
- Exhibit broad versus limited range of life experiences; therefore individual differences must be considered in course/program design and teaching
- Are quick to evaluate and appraise good teaching
- Are the fastest-growing population in higher education increasing 170% between 1970 and 2000

Adults in the Classroom: The Benefits

- Raising the bar – adults get higher grades and take academic work seriously
- Adult experience brings different forms of learning into the classroom; faculty also become learners.
- Adults may take on some of the instructor’s role - if they are bored, intrusive, or too talkative ask for their assistance

Teaching Methods Tailored to Adults

- Self-directed Learning In this teaching method, individuals take the initiative to diagnose learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify learning resources, select and implement learning strategies and evaluate outcomes. 90% of all adults have at least one self-directed learning project per year. Educators and institutions facilitate this tendency by creating partnerships with the learner via techniques such as learning contracts or work/community projects. Instructors help manage the learning experience rather than act as an information provider.
- Experiential /Situating Learning This method highlights knowledge/skills learned in context versus acquisition of general information. Experiential/situating learning methods are means for relating subject matter to the needs and concerns of students; they place thought and action in

a specific place and time as well as create conditions in which participants experience the complexity and ambiguity of learning in the “real” world. In many cases, adult learners create their own knowledge when this kind of learning environment is available. The theoretical premises surrounding this type of learning environment are grounded in the ideas that a) learning occurs when connected with the acts connected to everyday situations; b) knowledge is acquired in context and transfers to similar situations; c) in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge, learning is the result of social processes that encompass ways of thinking, perceiving, problem solving, and interacting

- Learning to Learn or Meta-cognition Embedded in educational psychology, meta-cognitive learning strategies involve becoming skilled at learning in a range of different situations and through a range of different styles. Learners develop insight into their habitual ways of learning and come to possess an awareness of how it is they come to know what they know including an awareness of the reasoning, assumptions, evidence, and justifications that underlie their beliefs.
- Critical Reflection This method is the major idea for educators who believe some processes of learning are distinctively adult. This framework of teaching/learning focuses on the inter-related processes of a) questioning then reframing assumptions previously uncritically accepted as representing wisdom or commonsense; b) adapting alternate perspectives on ideas, actions, forms of reasoning and ideologies previously taken for granted; and c) recognizing the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values. Critical reflection, perspective transformation, and transformative learning are three closely connect adult learning theoretical frameworks. All three see an instructor’s role as establishing a trusting and caring atmosphere that facilitates the development of sensitive yet respectful relationships among learners

Best Faculty Practices for Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education

- Assess prior learning - promote opportunities for prior learning credit
- Reconsider assumptions about semester-bound, campus-based lecture-driven education when assessing curriculum/course design and delivery
- Become managers and facilitators of student learning, not primarily information dispensers. Instructors take on a blended role by managing learning.
- Capitalize on the experience of participants.

Emerging Trends

- Experiences with cross-cultural learning compel educators to examine some of their most strongly held, paradigmatic assumptions. Ethnicity is increasingly seen as a factor in adult learning within higher education institutions. Framing cultural diversity around a White/non-White dichotomy oversimplifies and disparages people’s complex realities. Research suggests reexamining the assumptions, inclinations, and preferences of the Western canon about “natural” and theoretically mainstream adult learning/teaching styles. For some learner populations, for example, self-directed and individual locus-of-control practices are dissonant and anxiety producing. Emerging research also suggests that adults do better when taught by educators drawn from their own ethnic communities.
- Distance Learning. Course/curriculum delivery for adults has become strongly linked to technological advances. The demographics data about online students are that they are older than traditional age college students and have more college credit hours and more degrees completed. In parallel with traditionally delivered courses, adults studying online have a higher GPA than traditional counterparts.

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