

Adult Learning Styles

Implications for Traditional and Online Learning

Adult learning, particularly technology-enhanced learning, is still in development stages. We are learning more about HOW we learn as we delve into new content areas themselves! What a great time we are in for becoming more of who we are on an individual level, as people, as professionals, as learners!

As we grow in our understanding about what it takes to teach adults effectively, we are seeing distinct patterns in how adults tend to learn. This article does not attempt to exhaust all of those patterns (since learning is inherently a personal quest, and therefore, individuals may have other learning patterns), but it does attempt to identify some of the most common and critical patterns to know prior to developing adult learning opportunities.

Adult Learning Pattern One

Adult learners tend to expect learning to be delivered in a traditional, teacher-led way, and to expect the faculty member to do the “work” of the learning. The adult learner is there to absorb the learning.

Now, this does NOT say that this is an effective way to teach adults. This is saying that most of us, for years, have been taught via a certain method, namely, faculty-led instruction. We have not been expected to be part of the hands-on learning process. This is a pattern that is in the process of being broken down; however, we are talking about breaking down a pattern that has been in existence for decades, even centuries. This mindset is not going away easily, and to expect adult learners to automatically embrace a brand new way of learning immediately, or without proper orientation, is expecting too much.

Adult Learning Pattern Two

Adult learners who tend to undertake a project on their own (as opposed to being assigned the project) do so with the purpose of solving a problem, or applying the information right away, as opposed to learning a new subject for the sake of learning it.

This may be a factor of our “hurry up” culture; our plates are full with home, work, and family responsibilities. Any free time we have in our lives should be used as economically as possible... and we can see how this carries over into adult education. It’s no wonder that many online courses, for example, are viewed primarily as good “training” courses, and not necessarily “educational” courses. (This is not to slight the efforts of universities or other institutions whose mission is education rather than training; however, this is the perception that many have toward online learning at this time.)

Adult Learning Pattern Three

Motivation for adult learners in education tends to come from a need to fill a professional gap or a direction from superiors.

So, this pattern should come as no surprise, based on the fact that pattern two illustrates the “practicality” mindset that adult learners have toward continuing education. Cross (1981) advises that this may be dependent on where adult learners are in different professional stages of their lives, though. The higher up the individual may be on the professional ladder, for instance, the more likely the individual may wish to learn new subject matter for the sake of learning it.

Adult Learning Pattern Four

Adult learners tend to rely on colleagues or friends who may also be experts in their professional field for advice when seeking advice on learning or embarking on a new educational venture.

This has both positive and negative consequences: obviously, if we have colleagues who share our learning interests and who have had positive experiences, we want to know more about those experiences and apply that potential to our own lives. We trust and know these individuals to help us make a significant decision that will impact our free time, finances, and professional development.

On the other hand, reliance on other opinions (and not doing the work of discovering our own personal likes, dislikes, and preferences) instead of our own may result in disappointment when the learning experience is not all what we expect it to be. A word to the wise here would be to seek out opinions of others, but balance them with the knowledge of our own preferences.

Adult Learning Pattern Five

Adult learners tend to appreciate – and continue learning – in courses where they feel they have a significant contribution to make to the discussion, and that their contributions are acknowledged and appreciated by the group as a whole.

What this means is that when we develop courses, regardless of whether they are online or traditional in nature, they will be more successful when there are activities built in that allow students to take on some leadership role. For instance, have an adult learner lead an online discussion one day; act as a virtual tour guide; contribute handouts or interesting documents from their workplace that are relevant to the content, and so forth.

The next step, for us as educators, is to know how to appreciate and work with these patterns as they show up in our adult learner population. Of course, there will likely be other patterns not addressed in this article; that's why your input in the discussion on this subject here (and in other discussion areas) is so important in our efforts to craft the effective educational environment for adult learners.