



Principles of Adult Learning*

1. **Adults are often concerned that participating in a group will make them look weak, either professionally or personally.**
 - Design training workshops, educational exercises, and discussion sessions that help people feel **safe** enough to ask questions and **confident** that they will be respected.
 - Don't ask people to take **risks** too early in a workshop or course (for example, engaging in a role play exercise) unless they already know each other well.
 - Provide opportunities and allow time for people to establish themselves in the group.

2. **Adults bring a great deal of experience and knowledge to any learning situation.**
 - Show **respect** for participants' experience by asking them to share ideas, opinions, and knowledge. Verbally **recognize** that they may be a good resource for reaching your teaching goals.
 - A needs assessment can tell you more about the individuals in the group. Or, if you already know the participants, you may realize that particular individuals can provide helpful input before, during, or after your session(s). See number 5.

3. **Adults are decision-makers and self-directed learners.**
 - Do not seek to make people obey you. Adults will do what they need to do.
 - Be the “**guide on the side**” rather than the “sage on the stage”.
 - Listen to what they want and need and **be flexible** in your planning. **Seek feedback** from the group. Change your approach if your agenda or methods are not working.

4. Adults are motivated by information or tasks that they find meaningful.

- Conduct some type of **needs assessment** so that you are aware of what people want (and need) to learn, how much they already know, and the kinds of “generative themes” that might affect their attention span.
 - Generative themes are concerns and issues that are most important in a person’s life.
 - Generative themes may enhance or challenge a person’s ability to learn.
 - They could include such things as the fear of losing a job, the health of a loved one, the desire for a promotion, the need for a change, the pending birth of a child, problems in a relationship, or new possibilities for growth and development.

5. Adults have many responsibilities and can be impatient when their time is wasted.

- Be **thoughtful** and **kind**.
- Begin and end your session on time.
- Understand who is in the audience and why they are participating.
- Learn what questions they have about the subject.
- Don’t cover material they already know unless there is a good reason for it.
- Recognize that your subject is only one of many that participants may be interested in learning more about.

*Inspired by writings from *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* by Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood E. Holton III, & Richard A. Swanson, 2005, Burlington, MA: Elsevier.