



Teaching Advocacy: Understanding Adult Learners

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Learning Goals:

- Identify six characteristics of adult learners
- Identify three modes of learning
- Explain how adult learning principles influence how you design educational experiences to teach adults to be Extension advocates

Advance Preparation:

- Review lesson plan
- Review handouts, PowerPoint slides, activities and scenarios
- Review and utilize companion pieces "Building Partnerships and Communicating with Policymakers" and "Advocating for Extension: Storytelling" for enhanced advocacy efforts
- Make copies of handouts and evaluation form

Materials Needed:

- Computer and projector
- PowerPoint presentation
- Flipchart stand and paper
- Markers
- Colors
- Masking tape
- Handouts

Time Needed:

- Preparation: 2 hours
- Presentation: 45 minutes to one hour

BACKGROUND

Extension education extends beyond the formal classroom and involves more than just professional Extension educators. The Extension education process frequently involves adult volunteers teaching other adults, children and youth. Adult volunteers bring unique life experiences that add meaning to the experiential learning methods commonly used in Extension education. While a formal teaching degree may not be required, an understanding of the basic principles of adult learning characteristics can lead to a more successful learning experience for both the teacher and the learner.

As an Extension advisory leader, you may be called upon to train other volunteers how to fulfill their role as advisory council or committee members. You can empower others as they learn how to become effective advocates for Extension by putting adult learning principles into practice when you teach.

Ancient African Proverb

If your vision is one year, plant crops

If your vision is ten years, plant trees

If your vision is one hundred years, teach people

Adult Learners: Six Core Principles

To facilitate adult learning you, the educator, must understand the learner. Adults learn differently than children and it is critical that you know the characteristics of adult learners before planning an educational experience for adults. A pioneer in the field of adult education, Malcolm Knowles (2005), identified six core adult learning principles.

Reason to Learn

- Adults are relevancy-oriented. Adult learners must see a reason for learning. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Learning must have a practical or useful purpose. They need to know how the educational activity will benefit them in their current life situation.
- As an educator your role is help adult learners identify how the educational activity will help them reach their goals and what value the educational activity has for them. Relate the purpose and objectives of the educational activity to what they do or what they will do. Explain why, what, and how the learning activity relates to real life situations.

Self-Concept

- Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Their self-concept depends upon being seen by others and treated by others as being autonomous and capable of self-direction.
- In addition, adult learners may lack confidence in their ability to learn or have anxiety about learning. These feelings may be related to age, past learning experiences, the content itself, or something else.
- Your role as an educator is to act as a facilitator by actively involving the learners. This helps the learners to know, understand and apply the content, rather than just giving them the facts. Identify the learners' perspectives about the topic. Allow the learners to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. Allow adult learners to express their anxiety. Design the learning environment to minimize anxiety.

Prior Experience

- Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experience and knowledge. They come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youth learners by virtue of simply having lived.
- As an educator it is important to recognize that adult learners bring many different experiences to an educational setting. Some of these experiences aid learning, while others do not. Acknowledge and respect them as equals in experience and knowledge. Allow them to voice their opinion and share experiences by relating their experience and knowledge to the topic. Experiential techniques that tap into the learners pre-existing knowledge base, such as group discussion, simulation exercises, problem-solving, case-studies, and peer-helping activities may help you connect the learner's experience to the subject matter.

Readiness to Learn

- Adults come to educational settings ready to learn concepts which will help them cope effectively with their real-life situations.
- Adults juggle family, work, and social responsibilities. As an educator it is critical to time learning to meet the adult learners' need to address life situations or perform a task. Design learning experiences that are tuned in to the learners needs.
- As an educator, some basic criteria you should consider when designing a learning experience for adults are the place, pace, and time for learning. Where can they meet most conveniently? At what pace would they like to learn? Is one time of day better than another?

Orientation to Learning

- Adults are life-centered (or task-centered or problem-centered). Adults are motivated to learn when they can see how learning will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations. They learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when educational activities are related to real-life situations.
- As an educator it is important that you identify the learning goals of the adult learners involved in the educational activity. Match learning goals and objectives to those of the learners. Show learners how the educational activity will help them develop competence and attain their goals.

Motivation to Learn

- Adults are motivated to learn because of internal factors such as the desire for increased job satisfaction, improved quality of life, increased self-confidence, increased recognition, etc. External factors such as pressure from a supervisor, a salary increase, a better job, or a promotion are less important. Learning is a means to an end, not an end in itself. As an educator your role is to identify the factors that motivate adult learners to participate in an educational activity. Ask, “Why are you here”? Then related learning to the identified reasons.

Facilitating Adult Learning

In addition to the methods for addressing the unique characteristics of adult learners described in the section above, there are also specific strategies to consider for enhancing adult learning situations. Using some of the following approaches may help you, as the educator, successfully facilitate learning.

Adult learners are *autonomous* and *self-directed*. Adults are independent learners and like to take an active role in learning. They prefer to guide or control their own learning by helping to select or decide what they would like to learn. Be prepared to give choices for learning. “Would you like to know more about adult learning principles or modes of learning?” Allow adults to select the project or activity that is of the most interest to them. This may mean preparing more than one learning activity. Your role as an educator may be more of a facilitator of learning than a teacher.

Adult learners are *goal-oriented* and *relevance-oriented*. Learning has a purpose. To ensure that you help adults meet their learning goals take time to ask “Why are you interested in this topic?” This may require you to be flexible and quick on your feet. You may need to adapt or change your lesson plan on the spot to meet their expectations.

Adult learners are *practical*. Adults expect learning to be useful. Address the questions “How is this going to help me?” and “What is in it for me?” - at the beginning of a lesson. Adults want to know how they can apply how what they have learned, immediately. Explain how they can use what they have learned. Asking adults to develop an action plan to address what, how, when, where, and with whom they plan to use what they have learned may help the make the connection between the new learning and its application to life.

Adult learners are *problem solvers*. Adults learn when they have the opportunity to solve a “real-life” problem. Scenarios, role-plays, hands-on-projects, and discussion groups are good ways to facilitate adult learning.

Adults have *life experience*. Adults have accumulated experience and knowledge as a result of having lived. Their knowledge and experience may be related to work, family responsibilities, civic or community responsibilities and previous education and training. New learning should be related to what they already know. Find out what they know about the topic you are teaching. You may have a broad range of experience in a group of learners. Keep this in mind if you break the group into small groups for learning activities. You may want to include experienced and non-experienced learners in each group.

Learning Modes

When planning a learning experience for adults you will want to consider how they as individuals learn best. Even though adults have some common learning characteristics they also have preferred modes of learning. There are three primary learning modes.

Visual Learners

- Visual learners prefer seeing what they are learning. Pictures and images help them understand ideas and information better than verbal explanations. A drawing may help more than a discussion about the same. Videos and movie clips are also effective with visual learners. When someone explains something to a visual learner, he or she may create a mental picture of what the person talking describes.

Auditory Learners

- Auditory learners prefer spoken messages. The less understood auditory learners need to hear their own voice to process the information. The more prevalent type, ‘Listeners,’ remember things said to them and make the information their own. They may even carry on mental dialogues and determine how to continue by thinking back on the words of others.

Kinesthetic Learners

- Kinesthetic learners want to sense the position and movement of what they are working on. Tactile learners want to touch. “Enough talking and looking,” they may say. “Let’s work with this stuff. Let’s get our hands dirty already.” Even if kinesthetic or tactile learners don’t get much from the discussion or the written materials, they may catch up by working through scenarios and hands-on activities.

It is important to recognize that adults have many different preferred ways of learning. As an educator, the more variety you provide in teaching/learning situations, the more effective the learning experience will be for more learners. Use a variety of educational methods and techniques: hands-on learning, listening, storytelling, problem solving, visual materials, reading, starting with the ‘big picture’, starting with pieces of the big picture, individualized learning, learning with others, learning in a step-by-step fashion, and learning intuitively.

INTEREST APPROACH

Character Drawing (20 minutes)

Draw a picture that characterizes an adult learner. Divide the group into small groups of four or five. Provide a sheet of flipchart paper, markers, and masking tape for each group. Give the following instructions:

- Think about who you are as a learner – what characteristics describes you as a learner?
- Share these characteristics with your group
- In your group draw a picture that characterizes how an adult learns incorporating some of all of the characteristics described by the group members – 10 minutes
- Identify someone in your group to describe your picture to the whole group – 2 minutes for each group

Ask each group to give a two minute presentation describing their illustration of an adult learner. Use the masking tape to tape drawings up around room, so that everyone can see them. After each group has presented, look at all the drawings and ask the group to identify the characteristics that were common to all groups.

Design a Coat-of-Arms (15 minutes)

This is an alternate activity to the “Character Drawing” activity that you can do with your group in 10 to 15 minutes, especially if you get the learners started as they arrive.

- Give each learner a copy of Handout 5 “Design a Coat-of-Arms Directions” and a copy of Handout 6 a blank “Coat-of-Arms.
- Provide color crayons and markers

As people enter the room, give the following directions: Design a coat-of-arms to express your identity and represent how you see yourself as an adult learner. You may use symbols, colors, words, and/or numbers to create your design. These are some questions that may help you begin your design:

1. What do you value about learning?
2. What is your greatest success as a learner?
3. What is your primary strength as learner?
4. What has been a significant influence on your learning?
5. Who are your supporters when you learn?
6. Who do you support as they learn?

After the learners have completed their designs have them share one or two items from their coat-of-arms, from the questions above. Write common responses on a flip chart. This can help the group begin to identify some of the characteristics of adult learners.

LESSON

- Use the PowerPoint “Teaching Advocacy: Understanding Adult Learners” with notes to guide presentation.
- Introduce lesson. (Slide 1)
- Review the learning goals. (Slide 2)
- Introduce and explain “Character Drawing” activity to help learners become engaged in the lesson. (Interest Approach) The “Design a Coat-of-Arms is an alternate interest approach activity.
- Handout and discuss copies of “Adult Learners: Six Core Principles.” Help learners draw connections with their adult learner character illustrations. (Handout 1 and Slide 4)
- Review ways to facilitating adult learning. Ask learners for other ideas and discuss. (Slide 5)
- Handout and discuss “Learning Modes.” (Slide 6; Handout 2)
- Provide each learner with a copy of the “Rainbow County Scenario” and with a copy of the “Rainbow County Extension Council Members” list. (Handouts 3 & 4)
- Conduct the Rainbow County Scenario activity with group as described in the Application section of lesson plan. (Learning Application; Slide 7)
- Summarize lesson. (Slide 8)

LEARNING APPLICATION

Rainbow County Scenario (20 minutes)

The Rainbow County Scenario will help the learner connect what they have learned about learning modes and the characteristics of adult learners and discuss the implications for planning educational experiences.

- Divide the group into small groups of four or five people.
- Ask each group read the Rainbow County Scenario and the Rainbow County Extension Council Members list and ask each group to answer the following questions:
 - Describe the characteristics of the learners in the scenario.
 - How can you address the three learning modes as you a plan learning experience?
 - How will these characteristics affect your approach to planning a learning experience for them?

Tips for Using this with your Council

- If limited for time ask each group to share the response only one question. Ask each group which question they prefer to share, but make that all three questions are discussed

- Ask each group to share with the group their responses to the questions.

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HANDOUTS

- Adult Learners: Six Core Principles - Handout 1
- Learning Modes – Handout 2
- Rainbow County Scenario – Handout 3
- Rainbow County Extension Council Members – Handout 4
- Design a Coat-of-Arms Directions – Handout 5
- Blank Coat-of-Arms – Handout 6

POWERPOINTS

- Teaching Advocacy: Understanding Adult Learners

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