Andragogy: Teaching adults

Adults learn differently than young people. But more importantly, their reasons for learning are very different. Andragogy (Knowles, 1984), the theory of adult learning, attempts to explain why adults learn differently than other types of learners.

Who is and who is not an adult learner?

Adult learners are volunteers. There is no compulsion involved when teaching adults and therefore motivation is not usually a problem. Adults tend to seek out learning opportunities. Often life changes, such as marriage, divorce, a job change, termination, retirement or a geographical change, serve as the motivation for the adult to seek new learning opportunities (Cross, 1981).

Adults often seek out learning opportunities in order to cope with life changes. They usually want to learn something that they can use to better their position or make a change for the better. They are not always interested in knowledge for it’s own sake. Learning is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

These adults bring a wealth of information and experiences to the learning situation. They generally want to be treated as equals who are free to direct themselves in the education process (Zemke, 1984).

What are the differences between andragogy and pedagogy?

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<th>Andragogy</th>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demands of learning</strong></td>
<td>Learner must balance life responsibilities with the demands of learning.</td>
<td>Learner can devote more time to the demands of learning because responsibilities are minimal.</td>
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<td><strong>Role of instructor</strong></td>
<td>Learners are autonomous and self directed. Teachers guide the learners to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts.</td>
<td>Learners rely on the instructor to direct the learning. Fact based lecturing is often the mode of knowledge transmission.</td>
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<td><strong>Life experiences</strong></td>
<td>Learners have a tremendous amount of life experiences. They need to connect the learning to their knowledge base. They must recognize the value of the learning.</td>
<td>Learners are building a knowledge base and must be shown how their life experiences connect with the present learning.</td>
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<td><strong>Purpose for learning</strong></td>
<td>Learners are goal oriented and know for what purpose they are learning new</td>
<td>Learners often see no reason for taking a particular course. They just know they have to</td>
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<td>information</td>
<td>learn the information.</td>
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Permanence of learning

Learning is self-initiated and tends to last a long time.

Learning is compulsory and tends to disappear shortly after instruction.

**Tips and Techniques for Teaching Adults**

- Use problem oriented instruction. Case studies, simulations problem solving groups make the instruction relevant to their situation.
- Instruction should be about tasks not memorization of content.
- Instructors need to put their egos aside and not be afraid to have ideas and instruction challenged. Don't be afraid to give up control.
- Make the environment comfortable and leave time for breaks (every 45-60 minutes).
- Instructors should use open ended questions to bring out the vast experiences of the adult learners.

**Four keys to adult learning**

- Let adults direct themselves in the instructional process
- Integrate new information with previous experiences
- Make sure the information is relevant
- Make sure the information is readily useable for the learner

**For more information on adult learning**

The Teaching Tips Index

Adult learning theory and Androgogy

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