

## Augmented Adult Learning Principles

Contemporary adult learning principles are drawn from the work of Malcolm Knowles, the father of adult learning. In 1980, Knowles popularized the term andragogy, which is the art and science of helping adults learn.<sup>1</sup> His work was a significant factor in reorienting adult educators from “educating” people to “helping people learn.”

The discussion of Knowles’ six adult learning principles that follows is augmented with facilitator instructions as well as a seventh principle that is based on brain research.

### **Principle #1: Need to Know. Goal: Obtain participant buy-in.**

Adults learn because they see the value of the training content to their lives. Use an initial activity that helps participants discover what’s in it for them rather than telling them what it is.

### **Principle #2: Prior Experience. Goal: Build on what the participants already know.**

Adults bring a wealth of experience that must be acknowledged and respected in the training setting. Use activities that enable the participants to indicate and/or demonstrate their level of experience and expertise.

Adults learn and retain information more easily when they can relate it to their reservoir of past experiences. Provide and draw from the participants good examples and stories that connect new learning to the participants’ prior learning and experience.

Adults have previous experience that can obstruct new learning unless it is noted and dismissed. Anticipate and eliminate negative transfer by differentiating the new learning from previous less-positive experiences.

### **Principle #3: Self-Directedness. Goal: Engage the participants.**

Adults have a need to be self-directing and take a leadership role in their learning. Give participants choices regarding learning activities or content to ensure they are relevant to the participants’ interests and needs.

Adults are more likely to believe something if they arrive at the idea themselves. Use activities that enable the participants to discover important information on their own. Launch them on a voyage of self-discovery.

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<sup>1</sup> Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Cambridge.

**Principle #4: Readiness. Goal: Have the participants recognize an immediate reason to learn.**

Adults learn best when they need skills to handle a current problem. As part of the buy-in process, use an activity that will help the participants realize they have a skill gap that needs to be filled.

Adults learn best when practical application is encouraged. Emphasize and demonstrate the immediate usefulness of the learning in the participants' lives.

**Principle #5: Problem Orientation. Goal: Emphasize practical applications.**

Adults prefer a hands-on problem-solving approach to learning. Provide job-related problem-solving activities that actively engage the learners.

Adults want to apply new knowledge and skills. Provide opportunities for participants to immediately practice their new learning in the classroom.

**Principle #6: Intrinsic Motivation. Goal: Tap into the participants' desire to learn.**

Adults want to learn when they recognize how the new learning will help them. Provide an activity that will help the participants find a personal reason to learn even if attending the program was not their idea.

Adults learn best in an informal atmosphere. Create a safe, respectful, and participant-centered learning environment that encourages open discussion and active participation.

**Principle #7: Learning Retention. Goal: Make it easy for participants to learn.**

Adults can learn only a specific amount of information at one time. Avoid cognitive overload. Break complex concepts or skills into smaller segments or chunks. Teach a maximum of 5 familiar and meaningful concepts or a maximum of 3 unfamiliar concepts at one time.

Adults need to recognize that new learning can be used in different situations. Provide at least three examples. Provide one example and draw the other examples from the participants.

Adults need time to reflect on what they have learned. Provide activities that require the participants to consider how what they have learned relates to them personally and how they will use it.

Adults need to learn rules before they learn exceptions to the rules. Provide activities that help the participants discover the rules first. Introduce exceptions only after the participants understand the rules.

Adults need to know how one part of the training relates to other parts. Have an organizing principle and make transitional statements that show how different sections of the training relate to each other.

Adults need time to consolidate learning. Give participants 10-minute breaks approximately every 50 minutes to avoid overwhelming them and to give them time to process what they've learned.

Adults need regular recall of new learning to reinforce and retain that learning. Provide many activities that prompt the participants to remember and apply their new learning.

**Note:** With minor exceptions, all the adult learning principles require the learners to actively participate in their learning experience.