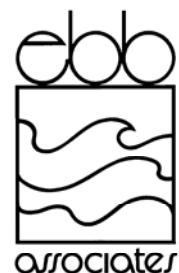# Adult Learning Theory: Examples for Design and Delivery
For Web Courseworks
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Malcolm Knowles' work provides trainers with guidance for ensuring that we build the concepts of Adult Learning Theory into our training—in both the design and the delivery. Here are six Adult Learning principles posed as questions learners ask with suggestions for how trainers can ensure that they meet the adult learners' needs.

1. **"Why do I need to know this?"** Adults have a need to know why they should learn something before investing time in a learning event.

   Design
   - Plan time at the beginning of the course to address the purpose of the session.
   - Build in time to respond to questions about the need to know.
   - Be prepared to respond to questions about the organization's ulterior motives.
   - Ensure the objectives are clear and directed at what the participants will learn.
   - Decide if a listing of expectations is required for the session.
   - Design a self-evaluation.

   Delivery
   - Write the purpose on a flipchart page and post it on the wall.
   - Give participants time to vent if necessary.
   - Be prepared to respond to comments such as, "my boss should be here."
   - Link the content to the participants' jobs and particular issues they may be facing.

2. **"Will I be able to make some decisions or are you going to recreate my grade school memories?"** Adults enter any learning situation with a self-concept of themselves as self-directing, responsible gown-ups.

   Design
   - If a self-assessment has been designed, be sure to allow time for participants to process their results by themselves or in a small safe group.
   - Avoid words in materials that hearken of "school." For example, do not use the words: students, teachers, workbooks, lessons, education, report card, grade, test, desk, classroom, etc. that remind participants of their school experience.
   - Design a bright ideas board where participants can post names of books or ideas that can help other participants with their unique concerns.

   Delivery
   - Welcome participants with a warm greeting and a cup of coffee.
   - Announce that participants can get up, move around, get a cup of coffee, or whatever it takes to be comfortable.
   - Make the point that questions are encouraged—all questions.
   - Allow participants to establish their own ground rules.

3. **"Why am I here? Why is she here? What do they think they can teach me?"** Adults come to a learning opportunity with a wealth of experience and a great deal to contribute.

   Design
   - Interview participants prior to designing the session to identify typical participant expertise and experience.
   - If something has changed, identify ways to allow participants to "let go" of the old and welcome the new. Sometimes journaling or self-guided questions address this concern.
   - Build in time for discussion.
   - Design an icebreaker that allows participants to get to know each other and what they have to contribute.

   Delivery
   - Allow participants to add to the learning objectives.
   - Use teach-backs as one learning method.
   - Allow for differences of opinion.
   - If everyone in the session understands the content, speed up. If most do not understand, repeat the portion. If some know it and some don't find ways to tap into the expertise in the room to be beneficial to everyone.

4. **"How is this going to simplify my life? How will this make my job easier?"** Adults have a strong readiness to learn those things that will help them cope with daily life effectively.

   Design
   - Address issues participants face on the job.
   - Develop case studies, critical incidents, and role plays that focus on real daily work issues.
   - Interview participants before designing to obtain specific examples.

   Delivery
   - Allow time for participants to ask questions about implementation back on the job.
   - Make yourself available at the breaks, at lunch, and after the session to discuss unique situations with individuals.
   - Establish your own credibility without bragging and couple this with an I-want-to-help-you attitude.

5. **"Do I want to learn this? Do I need to learn this?"** Adults are willing to devote energy to learning those things that they believe will help them perform a task or solve a problem.

   Design
   - Build in a problem-solving clinic where participants bring up their own problems that need solving.
   - Allow time in the design for self reflection so participants can revise their thought process or can adapt the material to their own situations.
   - Design experiential learning scenarios that link the material to why a participant might either want to or need to invest the time to learn the content.

   Delivery
   - Use yourself as an example to share why you wanted to or needed to learn the information.
   - Post a "parking lot" to encourage participants to post their questions and add ideas.

6. **"Why would I want to learn this? Am I open to this information and if not, why not?"**
   Adults are more responsive to internal motivators such as increased self-esteem, than to external motivators such as higher salaries.

   Design
   - Plan activities that help participants to explore their own motivation, journaling, or small group discussions may be useful.
   - Participants can be intrinsically motivated if they know how they fit into the bigger plan, organizationally.
   - Find ways for participants to explore their personal growth and development needs.

   Delivery
   - Create a safe learning climate that allows participants to be themselves.
   - Get to know all participants in some one-on-one time.

What About eLearning Situations?

Yes, eLearning in a virtual situation can be a bit different, and building in the same adult learning strategies can be more of a challenge. However, that does not mean a trainer can ignore the need. Trainers need to implement the same kinds of things listed in the first part of this handout—sometimes with minor adjustments for the virtual setting. Trainers have annotation, whiteboards, polling, chat, breakout rooms, and other tools at their disposal. Here are some additional thoughts for virtual settings.

Getting Involvement and Interaction
- Open discussion when the facilitator unmutes everyone to ask for verbal responses or shout outs
- Participants can give a green check for "yes" and a red "x" for no
- Participants can raise their hand
- If participants have pointers with their names, they can point to a choice (or correct answer) on a slide
- Each participant could have a different "color" to write text on a whiteboard or on a slide
- Facilitator or producer can capture verbal responses/shout outs on the whiteboard (like capturing on a flipchart)
- Participants can type responses/answers/brainstorms in the Chat area with debrief
- Polling (participant respond to multiple choice questions,
- Participants can read or answer questions individually from a handout, come back and do any of the above to debrief as a large group
- In longer sessions breakout groups can be effective
- Participants can write something on a sheet of paper in their workspace
- Participants can look at something on the screen or in a handout and simply reflect
- For large group events, participants can be 'filtered' (i.e. first letter of their name, shoe color, etc.) when they are asked to collaborate on any activity to help keep the volume of responses at a manageable level
- A web link can be placed in chat and participants can browse to the website and review it on their own
- Capture their attention with meaningful pictures, quotes, and personal stories

- Use participants' names when reading Chat comments
- Use "guiding" slides for times you want participants to ask or respond to questions
- Ask two participants to unmute their phones and read role plays
- General rule is to use more slides not less