

Source: Debra Sellers, "Age Buzz," Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, June 2007.

What is "Learning"?

What is meant by the term "learning"? Before you skip ahead, reflect for a moment on what learning means to you. Can you compose a definition? Was coming up with one harder than you thought it would be? Why is it important that you have a working definition?

LEARNING:

...the process of gaining understanding that leads to the modification of attitudes and behaviors through the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values, through study and experience. - Wikipedia, retrieved February 27, 2007

1. *the act, process, or experience of gaining knowledge or skill.*
2. *knowledge or skill gained through schooling or study.*

-The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000.

These two definitions of learning, one from Wikipedia and one from a standard dictionary, represent differences in adult and child learning. The Wikipedia definition is the result of collaboration among adults, learning from each other and drawing upon the life experiences of one another. The second is a transmittal of knowledge from an expert source. Let's explore these differences further.

Do Children and Adults Learn Differently?

Phrases to know

Malcolm Knowles is considered by many to be the father of adult education. He made the term *andragogy* popular, which is the art and science of helping adults learn. Although Knowles initially felt that andragogy was in opposition to *pedagogy* (children's learning), he eventually came to see them as part of an overall continuum. The information in this edition of **Age Buzz** is largely based upon Knowles' work.

Adults and children do have different needs and bring different perspectives to learning.

Children might say:

You know what I need to learn.
You need to teach me.
I have limited life experiences.
I'll use what I'm learning later on.
My learning is oriented to subjects.

I'm learning because I have to learn.

Adults might say:

I need to know why I need to know.
I am a “do-er.”
I have a wide variety of life experiences.
I want to learn things that can help me.
My learning is oriented toward problems or tasks.
I want to learn.

What Are Characteristics of Adult Learners?

Malcolm Knowles developed a set of assumptions about adult learners that have stood the test of time. They are meant to describe the needs and perspectives of adult learners as different from those of child learners within the areas of a person's need to know, readiness, orientation, self-concept, role of experiences, and motivation.

The *need to know* refers to the importance of creating a meaningful context within which the learning process occurs. This is related to *readiness*, or what is sometimes referred to as a “teachable moment.” Adults seek out learning when they have a reason to learn something in particular. This is easily understood when you think of a young couple that finds out they are going to have their first child. Parenting classes may be foremost on their minds. An adult's *orientation* to learning is tied to this idea of “real-life.” Adults need to address problems or challenges that confront them, and when there is an **immediate** need to do so, the openness to learning is greatly magnified.

In the area of *self-concept*, an adult learner views him or herself as a competent individual who can take responsibility for his or her own learning. Adult learners bring with them varied and diverse *experiences* that can benefit other individuals, meaning that as learners, they are also teachers. They also tend to be *self-motivated* in seeking out learning. They are hoping to be able to deal with a problem more effectively, such as becoming a better parent. Thus, the benefit derived from learning comes from an internal place.

Adults are all about reasons—especially when time and attention are finite resources to be distributed carefully among all competing demands.

What Do Adult Learners Need to Enhance Learning?

There are several techniques that can enhance adult learning. Educators of adult learners need to facilitate learning, instead of controlling the process. This can be a difficult philosophy to implement, as it means that the educator frees him- or herself from the responsibility of the amount of learning obtained by adult students. Techniques that you might use to facilitate learning include:

- Act as a mentor and co-collaborator in the learning process
- Provide organization to the process
- Act as a guide to the exploration of learning possibilities
- Show respect to all learners
- Build relationships
- Act as a resource person
- Help develop plans to apply learning to personal lives

Educators of adult learners will also want to create an environment that is comfortable and encourages collaboration among students and the facilitator in the learning process. Techniques that you might use to create this type of environment include:

- Introductions that showcase previous experiences
- Set goals; reinforce progress
- Take into account age-related changes of adult learners such as in vision, hearing, and memory
- Incorporate periodic breaks into the sessions
- Concentration on a few messages
- Use of repetition (it is memory's tool!)
- Use open-ended questions
- Active participation

The need for adult learning to be active is an important one. Sessions that have 15-20 minute sections with a variety of activities are well suited to enhance adult learning. Some suggestions for encouraging active participation include the use of:

- Case studies
- Simulations
- Question & answer sessions
- Games
- Discussions
- Demonstrations
- Role playing
- Problem-solving groups
- Practice sessions

In Summary

Adult educators have an opportunity to think about teaching as a creative and collaborative process. Instead of transmitting subject matter, learning can be a mutually agreed upon experience, where the learner is in control and the educator is a facilitator, guide, and resource person for content.

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