The Adult Learner

Instructional Training for the Public Health Professional

THE ADULT LEARNER

This module provides instructor participants a definition of learning, a definition that lays the framework for much of the material in this manual. The module identifies characteristics of the adult learner and builds upon these characteristics to better understand adult learning theory.
Module Objectives

By the end of this module, participants will understand the meaning of learning and apply the characteristics of the adult learner to adult learning theory.

- Explain the definition of learning
- Recognize the differences between the adult learner and the child learner
- Identify the various processes and approaches used by the adult learner

Performance Objective

By the end of this module, participants will be able to explain the meaning of learning and apply the characteristics of the adult learner to adult learning theory.

Enabling Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, the instructor shall accomplish the following learning objectives in support of the performance objective:

- Explain the definition of learning
- Recognize the differences between the adult learner and the child learner
- Identify the various processes and approaches used by the adult learner
In its simplest meaning, learning can be defined as the acquisition of knowledge. But this meaning falls well short of understanding the adult learner. Learning is defined by Klein (2004) as “a stable and persisting change in knowledge, skills and attitude”. Let’s break this down to the component parts: 

**Breaking Down the Definition**

**Stable**
- A steady and constant process where learners build on prior learning and create a scaffold that supports future learning

**Persisting**
- A change that is not temporary
- An evolving process

**Change**
- The act of making or becoming different

Stable. In the context of learning, stable is applied to be steady and constant. It is an active process where learners build on prior knowledge and create a scaffold that supports future learning.
Persisting. For learning to be of value, it must persist over time. There must be a change that is not temporary – going back to the place you were. It must be noted that the term permanent was not used to describe the change. Change may continue to evolve.

Change. Change is the act making or becoming different.

Knowledge, Skills and Attitude. Through the work of Dr. Benjamin Bloom and a committee (1956), three domains or categories of educational activity (learning) were identified. The three domains include cognitive learning (mental skills or knowledge), psychomotor learning (manual or physical skills - skills) and affective learning (growth in feelings or emotional areas – attitude).

**The Knowledge Domain**

Knowledge describes the cognitive domain associated with the development of intellectual skills. There are six major levels or categories in the cognitive domain. The six domains depicted in Figure 1 below are considered Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy and is the work of Anderson and Krathwohl in 2000.

Remembering, what is often called the first rung of Bloom’s ladder to mastery learning, demonstrates the skill of recall – the facts. The second rung of the ladder is the skill of understanding – rephrasing and summarizing. The mid level of the taxonomy is the skills of applying and analyzing. The third rung in the ladder demonstrates the skill of applying – use the concept in a new situation. The forth skill is analyzing – break down the concept to its component parts for higher comprehension. The highest two levels in Bloom’s taxonomy is evaluating and creating. The evaluating skill demonstrates the ability to make judgements about the concept – compare and critique may be operable concepts associated with this skill. The highest level in the taxonomy is the skill of creating – depicted by using the concept to create a new model.
The Skills Domain

The second stable and persisting change we seek is to the concept of skill, oftentimes referred to as the psychomotor domain. This domain is associated with psychomotor learning and includes physical movement, coordination and motor-skill development. The psychomotor domain has at least three predominate models that have been developed. A simplified and combined taxonomy of Harrow (1972), Dave (1970) and Simpson ((1972) is provided below.

- Observing, the lowest rung on the ladder, is the act of the watching the more experienced person perform a task.
- Imitating is the first step in learning a skill. The learner is observed and provided feedback on their performance. At this stage the movement is not automatic or smooth.
- Practicing is the act of trying a task over and over. The skill is repeated and a sequence of skills is performed repeatedly. Movements appear more automatic and smooth but an entire routine is not fluid.
- Adapting is the stage when minor adjustments are made in the activity to move towards perfection. At this stage, a coach may be necessary to provide improvement in the skill.
The Attitude Domain
The attitude domain, often referred to as the affective domain includes the manner in which we deal with things emotionally. Concepts such as value, enthusiasm and motivation are found in this domain. Following Bloom’s Taxonomy, the affective domain was developed by Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia (1973) and as is depicted in Figure 2 below.

### Instructional Note
An example explaining this domain is dancing. In becoming and expert at dance, one first observe others, they may then take lessons or read to learn some of the actions, they would then practice a skill and then combine the skill into a series of actions to achieve harmony and consistency of action. The last step is the perform until it become second nature or natural. Only an expert will make changes to skills at this point.
The first level in the domain is receiving phenomena. It is the concept of awareness and willingness to hear. The second level is responding to phenomena and is demonstrated by active participation. A class discussion or questioning new ideas would be examples in this level. The third level in in the taxonomy is valuing. Valuing is demonstrated by the expression of behaviors associated with a certain phenomenon or behavior. Organization is the fourth level in the affective domain. Organizing one’s values into a set of priorities. An example of this would be the establishment of a work-life balance. The final level is internalizing values. This step is characterized by creating a value system that controls behavior. This is the most important characteristic of the learner. Mastery at this level allows the learner to work productively in group and adjust judgement based on new information.

Adult Learning Theory

The adult learning theory comes from the work Malcom Knowles and many others on the theory of adult learning, or andragogy. This contrasts to pedagogy, the term describing the child learner. Andragogy, adult learning theory, can be considered more of a process model whereas pedagogy is more of a content model. There are six assumptions associated with the model:

- Self-concept.
- Experience.
- Readiness to Learn.
- Orientation to Learn.
- Motivation to Learn.
- Need to Know.
The instructor will use this slide to highlight adult learning characteristics from the six assumptions of the model. Mention to the participants that each assumption is explored in much more detail in the manual. From the top box, moving to the right:

- **Self-concept.** Adult learners are generally more self-directed as they believe they are responsible for the outcome of the lives.
- **Level of experience.** Adult learners use prior life experiences as a basis for learning and use prior experiences to learn new concepts.
- **Readiness to learn.** Adult learners are more driven to learn if the information being conveyed has value to them. Subject matter must have relevance.
- **Learning orientation.** Adult learners are more driven to learn if the information being conveyed has value to them.
- **Motivation to learn.** Adult learners’ motivation to learn is internal, referred to as intrinsic motivation. They want to learn for personal satisfaction, enjoyment or interest in the subject matter.
- **Need to know.** Adult learners may need to know why certain subject matter has relevance to them without any preconceived reason to learn.
Self-Concept
Children are dependent learners. As a dependent learner, they rely on others to provide them the information they learn. During the earliest stages of development, the dependent learner takes the information in a “one-way” format. A dependent learner would prefer a lecture environment with structure with externally-defined goals and reinforcement. As a person matures, they move from this dependent model to one being more self-directed.

Adult learners are generally more self-directed in their learning approach. Adult learners believe they are responsible for their lives. The adult learner wants to be in control over their learning. They have self-defined goals and may require reassurance from others that they are achieving their goals.

The self-directed adult learner:
- Takes initiative in learning
- Self-directed learning assumes that the natural orientation of adult learners is task or problem-centered.
- Expect the physical environment to be comfortable and adult-oriented
- Expect a psychological climate of mutual respect and trust in an atmosphere of collaboration.

Level of Experience
The child learner is generally considered to lack experience and there is no reliance on the reinforcement of learning with “real life” examples. Since there is an assumption that the child learner is devoid of experience, they are told what they need to know. To the child learner, experience is something that happens to them.

The adult learner uses prior experience as a basis for learning and are capable of using prior experience to learn new concepts. Instruction to the adult learner should include discussion, and problem-solving activities. To the adult learner, experience is who they are.

The experienced adult learner:
- Their maturity in the learning phases is in-tune with the natural process of psychological development. That is, the learners’ experiences become an increasingly rich resource along a maturity continuum.
- May give meaning and authenticity to subject matter.
- May create an active learning process whereas the inexperienced learner will be passive as they have no experiences to draw from to inform learning.

Readiness to Learn
The child learner is driven extrinsically to learn. They learn more to satisfy a rigid system, such as completing a curriculum and getting a grade, possibly to please someone else such as a teacher or parent. It is more about transferring a foundational knowledge and evaluation of what is learned.

The adult learner is more driven to learn if the information being conveyed has value to them. The adult learner does not want to spend time in a learning environment that is irrelevant to their own needs and desires. The adult learners’ readiness to learn may be characterized by the following:
• The social role” of the adult can be a major reason adults engage in learning. Examples of this may be a mother-to-be may be motivated to learn parenting skills whereas there may have been little desire to learn parenting skills prior to pregnancy.
• Curiosity or the enjoyment in learning new things
• Desire to overcome a problem
• Looking for connections between well-understood concepts and newly-recognized learning opportunities.
• Educators of adults must create a readiness to learn with techniques that are experiential in nature.

Learning Orientation
An instructor-centered approach is generally the approach used with the child learner. There is very little input by the child learner and it is more about “pushing in” content to the learner with very little regard to drawing out from the learner.

The adult learner prefers instructional approaches that are learner-centered with a focus on problem solving. Leaning methods are best when they incorporate exercises and role-playing. They prefer real-life situations and tend not to want deep discussions related to theory. Adult learners prefer flexibility and to be in control when approaching objectives set out for learning.

The learning preferences of the adult learner are characterized by the following:
• Drastic move from subject-centered learning to problem-centered learning
• Learning experience is enhanced with real-life situations.
• Desire immediate application of knowledge learned

Motivation to Learn
The child learner is generally extrinsically motivated to learn. That is, they are motivated to perform in order to earn a reward or to avoid punishment.

As a person matures in relation to the learning process, motivation to learn is internal, referred to as intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is occurring when a person wants to do something such as for personal satisfaction, enjoyment or interest in the subject matter.

The adult learners’ motivation:
• Is internally motivated to learn.
• Learning leads to personal growth and fulfillment. “Fully-Functioning Adult”

Need to Know
The child learner is not so concerned with the relevance of the subject matter to their daily lives but have a sense of wonder and exploration. The child learner is often powerless to change the subject matter and do not make any demands to know why they are learning the subject matter.

The adult learner may learn a subject matter due to its relevance to an immediate situation. More importantly, the adult may need to know why certain subject matter has relevance to them without any preconceived reason to learn. There are situations where learning is mandated or where the learning is
in preparation for some future application. This is an important concept with the adult learner and may pose a considerable challenge to the adult educator. From an instructional perspective, the question of “What’s in it for Me” should be considered when preparing for the adult learner.

The adult learner and their need to know:

- Necessitated by a reason for learning
- In the absence of an immediate need to know, the question “what’s in it for me” must be answered.

Activity

**Readiness to Learn**

Describe a time where learning was desired:

- To fulfill a social role
- For curiosity or enjoyment
- To overcome a problem

Activity

Take five minutes to fill out the information requested. Space is provided in the manual.

Instructional Note

This activity will reinforce the “Readiness to Learn” assumption of the adult learner. Ask participants to review the section on “Readiness to Learn” above and fill in their responses in the spaces provided below. Participant time to fill in responses should take no more than five minutes. Call on willing participants for responses.
This activity will reinforce an important assumption of the adult learner – Readiness to Learn. Please review the section on readiness to learn above and fill in your responses in the space provided below.

I exhibited a readiness to learn to fulfill the following social role:

_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

I exhibited a readiness to learn for curiosity or enjoyment:

_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

I exhibited a readiness to learn to overcome a problem:

_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Comparison of Adult and Child Learning:

The table below contrasts the adult and child learner using the six assumptions of Knowles and others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Self-Directing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Experience</td>
<td>Inexperienced</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness to Learn</td>
<td>Related to human development phases</td>
<td>Related to changing roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Orientation</td>
<td>Subject-centered</td>
<td>Life/Problem(Task centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation to Learn</td>
<td>Extrinsic</td>
<td>Intrinsic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to Know</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Relevance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning Processes and Approaches

There is a vast multitude of research that can be accessed describing learning preference or learning style. A learning style is not to a personality trait. A learning style that is generally developed through an experiential process. Learning style has various elements that will help to understand its importance to instruction. One element of learning style to be considered is how information is process. How does the learner perceive, organize and store information? This may be referred to as sensory learning process. Another element to be considered is preference for instruction. Does the individual have a certain preference for learning in a certain way? This can be considered the learning approach.

Sensory Learning Processes

The sensory learning process is usually broken down into the sensory processes of visual, audio and kinesthetic or VAK. Most learners will have a predominate sensory learning process, but most learners will mix and match, oftentimes based on the instruction received. The importance of understanding these processes to the instructor rests with the understanding that how people learn is generally how they will instruct. Creating balance in delivery only occurs when instructors understand the characteristics of each of the sensory learning processes.
The Visual Learning Process

Visual Learning Process

- Prefer directions to be written
- Participants with the greatest facial expressions and pick up on facial expressions of others
- Prefer visual aids such as charts and illustrations during instruction
- Provide highlighters and allow space for notetaking on materials provided

The Audio Learning Process

Audio Learning Process

- Participants are good at remembering what they hear
- Participant may not read body language well
- Use questioning to draw out oral responses
- Prefer to have instructions read aloud
- Instructors should be aware of voice inflection and modify volume as a means of emphasis
The Kinesthetic Learning Process

**Kinesthetic Learning Process**
- Prefers hands-on activities to reinforce what is written or said
- May undertake tasks without reading or hearing directions
- Participants need frequent breaks and do not discourage standing during instructional periods
- Write out information during lecture
- Provide hands-on exercises to reinforce learning objectives

The following table will break down each of the three processes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensory Learning Process</th>
<th>Visual Characteristics of Learners</th>
<th>Audio Characteristics of Learners</th>
<th>Kinesthetic Characteristics of Learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Prefer directions to be written.</td>
<td>*Good at remembering what they hear.</td>
<td>*Prefers hands-on activities to reinforce what is written or said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*May draw or doodle during lecture.</td>
<td>*May not be great note-takers.</td>
<td>*May undertake tasks without reading or hearing directions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Tend to be the participants with the greatest facial expressions and pick up on facial expressions of others.</td>
<td>*Will retain information better if there is discussion.</td>
<td>*May have difficulties remaining seated during lecture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*May seem stoic in the instruction environment and may not read body language well.</td>
<td>*May avoid reading aloud.</td>
<td>*May be perceived as active or athletic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| Strategies for Learners | *Use visual aids such as charts and illustrations during instruction | *Review aloud. intention of instruction | *Instructors must move while they lecture or read. |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>*Use questioning to draw out oral responses.</th>
<th>*Use exercises that use hands-on activities.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Strategies for Instruction** | **Provide clear, concise written instruction**  
* Slides and other illustrative material must be visually appealing using color as appropriate.  
* If possible, provide highlighters and allow space for notetaking on materials provided. | **Read instructions aloud.**  
* Use recorded audio when possible.  
* Be aware of voice inflection and modify volume as a means of emphasis. |
| **Learners will generally lean towards one of the sensory learning processes, but learners are able to utilize all three in the learning process. Instruction should incorporate all three processes and it may be more important to match the process to the most appropriate means of delivering the subject matter.** The activity which follows will introduce the participants to the VAK model. The survey utilized in the activity is one of several surveys available. Two other on-line surveys are provided here: | | **Use demonstrations during instruction.**  
* Provide hands-on exercises to reinforce learning objectives.  
* Encourage active participation. |


https://www.webtools.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/
Activity
Take 10 to 15 minutes to fill out the survey. A brief discussion will follow the exercise.

VAK Survey
This survey is intended to identify your preferred method of learning. Fill out the provided survey and fill in the total of each section in your instructor manual.

Instructional Note
Instruct participants to fill out the survey and total each page. The total of each page is then copied into the manual in the table provided. Once all participants have completed the table in the manual, ask their general impression of the survey and if the style or process fits what they believed was their style prior to the survey. Some participants may be balanced in their scoring and others, not. The main purpose of this exercise is two-fold. It first tells you that all learning style will be represented in a classroom, and learning styles and instructor styles will be similar. That is, if you tend to be an audio style learner, you may prefer instruction techniques that fit those processes. You may enjoy questioning and audio presentations as an instructor. Remind participants that we instruct to the entire class and a balanced approach to sensory process is best.
Total each section and place the sum in the blocks below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VISUAL</th>
<th>AUDITORY</th>
<th>KINESTHETIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number of points:</td>
<td>number of points:</td>
<td>number of points:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While you prefer to learn by using the method with the highest score, you will normally learn best by using all three processes, rather than just your preferred learning style.

Learning Approaches

Learning approaches move past sensory processes and focuses on how information is assimilated into knowledge, skills and attitude. It can be equated to the higher rungs of Bloom’s hierarchy past just remembering and understanding. There are numerous preferences and styles that can be mentioned here but this document will focus on a few approaches most important in face-to-face settings.

The problem-solving learning approach incorporates activities that requires learners to solve problems that reinforce learning objectives. A problem-centered approach, whether real-life and simulated will reinforce learning objectives. From and instructional perspective, problem solving may be conducted by an individual or in group settings and is more dependent on the subject matter that individual characteristics.
The competitive learning approach where individuals or teams compete with each other to introduce or reinforce a learning objective. The competitive approach generally can be equated to playing games. For example, a Jeopardy-style game can be used effectively in adult group learning settings. In a very simplistic approach, questioning may be considered a competitive learning approach with some learners.

A collaborative learning approach utilizes activities in which individuals or teams collaborate to achieve an objective. This is contrasted to a competitive learning approach whereas learners are encouraged to bring their various knowledge, skills and attitudes to the process to enhance outcomes.

Another important aspect of a learning approach in which individuals work apart from others in the learning setting is the reflective learning approach. This inward reflection on past experiences may reinforce learning objectives. This individual time may provide learners important time to formulate thoughts and, in turn, enhance group learning activities.

Summary

By the end of this module, participants will understand the meaning of learning and apply the characteristics of the adult learner to adult learning theory. To support this performance objective, the following enabling learning objectives were created:

- Understand the definition of learning
- Recognize the differences between the adult learner and the child learner
- Identify the various processes and approaches used by the adult learner
Coming Up Next

Instructional Design and Strategies