

6 Core Principles for Adult Learning

Immediacy

Adults are more engaged when they see the immediate usefulness of what they are learning. If they will be using something very soon, they will work harder to learn it. Facilitators can build immediacy by helping participants to discover opportunities for immediate application, and by building opportunities for immediate application into the session.

Putting it into Practice

- Ask participants to visualize and describe when and where they will apply it in the near future— “How do you see yourself using this in the next week?”
- Invite them to create action plans to put the new skill into practice.
- State early on that they will use this learning on a case study later in the day, so that learners know they will be applying it very shortly.

Respect

Learning is risky for adults, and they need feel respected in order to take that risk. Facilitators demonstrate respect when they: acknowledge and use the wealth of experience and knowledge that adults bring to a learning environment, affirm that the adult learners are the key decision-makers in their own learning process, and present content in ways that invite critical analysis, input, and ideas for personal application.

Putting it into Practice

- Don't do or decide what learners can do or decide for themselves.
- Invite learners to add their experience, examples, and knowledge to new content.
- Invite participation rather than calling on people by name.
- Avoid activities that embarrass people.

Relevance

Adults must see a reason for learning new content or they will “unhook” and disengage in the learning process. Good teaching connects new content with learners' daily lives and real needs. Learners will learn faster and more permanently that which is significant to them and their present lives.

Putting it into Practice

- Discover what your learners want and need BEFORE the event. Invite their input.
- Use stories and examples related to their context.
- Invite them to personalize the content. Ask them to relate it to their work and life.
- Avoid creating sessions where the content will be relevant for only a few.
- They have a right to ask the question: Why should I devote my precious time to learning your subject?

Safety

Adults will not learn if the environment feels threatening. The perception of threat can trigger physiological changes in the brain that reduce its capacity for deep thinking. The atmosphere in the room, the design of learning tasks, the way dialogue is structured and facilitated should create a sense of safety, so that adults can take increasing levels of risk with their learning.

Putting it into Practice

- Affirm learners' ideas, questions and (even) resistance.
- Be transparent about why and how an event is running.
- Use warm-ups at the beginning of each day of a workshop to build safety in the group.
- Be attentive to power dynamics in the group.

Engagement

Adults learn when they are fully and actively engaged in the process of learning, not when they are passive recipients of someone else's learning. This active engagement involves their intellect, their feelings, and their physical actions. This may be a noisy process (they are talking), a quiet process (they are thinking, or wrestling with it), or an active process (they are searching, practicing, doing).

Putting it into Practice

- Always give learners time to personalize and do something with new content.
- Use individual, pair, and small group work to ensure everyone is engaged.
- Keep presentations short and appropriately "chunked" so participants spend less time hearing and more time doing.

Inclusion

Adults need to feel included in the learning process, to see that their perspective matters, and to trust that their voice is invited and heard. Facilitators must be sensitive to how the dynamics of gender, age, physical ability, education, culture, religion, ethnicity and community position (e.g. power) influence participation in any given event. They should watch for the balance of voices and perspectives raised in the group and design/facilitate in ways that intentionally draw on the varied expertise and experience in the room.

Putting it into Practice

- Establish clear ground rules for the event.
- Intervene with a participant who tends to dominate the discussion, or shut others down.
- Use small group and pair work to ensure all voices are raised and heard.
- If there is an imbalance of power, less large group work is recommended.