

# Teaching Adults: What Every Trainer Needs to Know About Adult Learning Styles



**Family Advocacy and Support Training (FAST) Project**  
a project of PACER Center

By Helen W. Post  
Executive Director, Utah Parent Center

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## Adults Aren't Empty Vessels

Teaching adults isn't like teaching children. Traditionally, children are viewed as empty vessels into which teachers can pour knowledge. Parents and teachers try to control the information that goes into the classroom to determine the quality of learning that comes out. Trainers cannot control adults this way.



Children have little real world experience upon which to base their learning. Adults have a great deal of accumulated experience that can enrich their education. Adults can compare and contrast new knowledge against past learning.

What we learn in childhood forms the foundation of what we learn as adults. Our life experiences can add to that, thus creating a substantial reservoir of information.

Developing insight into how adults learn helps trainers become more successful!

## Pedagogy vs Andragogy

The term “pedagogy” was derived from the Greek words for “child” and “leading”, thus being defined as the art and science of teaching children.

The term “andragogy” was coined by researchers of adult learning in order to contrast their beliefs about learning to the model of teaching children. (Malcolm Knowles first introduced the concept in the US in 1968). The term was derived from the Greek word for “man, not boy.” The concept of andragogy implies self-directedness and an active student role, as well as solution-centered activities<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *National Training Coordinating Council (NTCC) and AARP/Legal Counsel for the Elderly, Inc., 1993*

<sup>2</sup> *Belletti, February 16, 1999*

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## Differences Between Children and Adults as Learners:

CHILDREN	ADULTS
Rely on others to decide what is important to be learned.	Decide for themselves what is important to be learned.
Accept the information being presented at face value.	Need to validate the information based on their beliefs and experience.
Expect what they are learning to be useful in their long-term future.	Expect what they are learning to be immediately useful.
Have little or no experience upon which to draw – are relatively “clean slates.”	Have much experience upon which to draw – may have fixed viewpoints.
Little ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource to teacher or fellow classmates.	Significant ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource to trainer and fellow learners.

## Understanding and Using Learning Styles

Individuals are most effective when they are taught in their personal learning style. There are several diverse views on learning styles and related literature. For the purposes of this document, we will review three major types of learners. While most individuals can learn using any one of these styles, most people have one which they prefer. (Kelly, 2010) Training for adult learners will incorporate presentation methods to engage as many of these styles as possible to be effective for a group of diverse participants.

### A Look at Three Learning Styles

**Visual Learners** – Visual learners are those who generally think in pictures. They often prefer to see things written down in a handout, text, on an overhead or PowerPoint slide. They find maps, graphs, charts, and other visual learning tools to be extremely effective. They remember things best by seeing something.

**Auditory Learners** – Auditory learners are those who generally learn best by listening. They typically like to learn through lectures, discussions, and reading aloud. They remember best through hearing or saying things aloud.

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**Kinesthetic Learners** – Kinesthetic, also called tactile, learners are those who learn best through touching, feeling, and experiencing that which they are trying to learn. They remember best by writing or physically manipulating the information. (Kelly, 2010)

A variety of tools and tests are available online and in print to help individuals understand their best personal learning style.

**Remember:**

The key to teaching adults is understanding how they learn.

Focus your attention on the group's special characteristics.

Don't ignore adults' needs, insights and skills when planning an educational experience.

## **What Makes Training for Adults Work?**

### *What's in this for me?*

The trainer's job is to motivate adults to learn. You can awaken their motivation to learn; you cannot force it. Adults learn effectively when they want:

- ✓ To develop a new skill
- ✓ To acquire new information
- ✓ To fulfill inner desires
- ✓ To improve professional competence

Adults learn best when what they are taught seems useful. Most attend training because they want to be there and because they've chosen to learn something new. However, they need to buy into the value of training. Trainers need to uncover issues that will motivate adults to participate.

### *How is this going to help me achieve my goals?*

Adults need a practical approach to learning. They may understand the importance of keeping up with changes impacting their life or their profession, but they are rarely satisfied to learn about some skill or information for future use. They want immediate applicability. They learn best when they perceive there is a connection between the training and their goals.



### *How does this relate to me?*

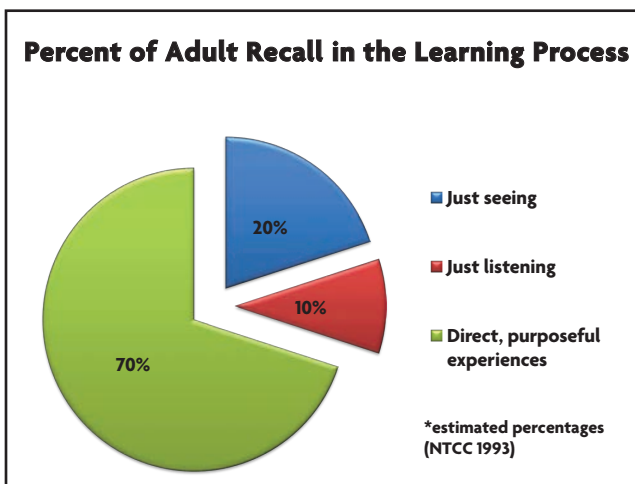
Adults are problem and task oriented. They want hands on experience in things they can use now. Successful adult learning must relate to a lifetime of experiences. If it does not fit in with what adults already know, they may reject it.

### *When can I try this out?*

“Practice makes perfect!” Adults retain knowledge longest when they practice what they learn. Their deep and powerful drive for self-direction makes them want to be in charge. Plan repeated opportunities for adults to put ideas and skills to work.

Involving participants in training creates an environment where they can support each other and receive feedback from their peers.

Your training methods either capitalize on the way participants



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learn best or frustrate it. In general, the more a training method deals with real-life issues, the more it reinforces the feeling that “this learning applies to me and can be useful.”

As trainers working for Parent Centers, we have the benefit that adults who attend training we provide are already motivated by personal or professional interest in acquiring information and skills. However, we must not ignore the important aspects of adult learning that will impact the ability of participants to retain and use what we are teaching.

**Remember:**

Practice, variety, and reinforcement are important elements in a successful adult training program.

*I am not a child!*

Adults learn best when they are treated like adults. Mutual respect, trust, comfort, collaboration, and freedom to participate should characterize their learning environment. The training event should also encourage learners to view one another as resources. Parent Centers typically understand the value and effectiveness of this aspect of providing training and information services. By utilizing a parent-to-parent or peer model, Centers offer training events that capitalize on this characteristic of effective adult learning styles. Including time for breaks and encouraging informal dress tells participants to relax and join with their peers in learning.

To create an effective learning environment for your presentation, it is necessary to understand the factors that limit the adult learning process:

- Adults have less time available to be engaged in learning due to their many responsibilities. The time they spend in training sessions must be viewed as a worthwhile investment.



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- Pressures of normal day-to-day tasks limit the adult's attention span.
  - Adults do not necessarily view the trainer as an authority figure, but rather as a resource for information.
  - An adult's willingness to learn is not related to his or her ability to learn.
  - Adults do not view themselves as learners; they are parents, spouses, breadwinners, and/or professionals.
  - People do things for their own reasons.

### *What was that you said?*

Adults like variety. Use a variety of activities to help participants learn. Studies show that some prefer to receive their learning through visual stimulation like DVDs, videotapes, PowerPoint presentations, or handouts. Others prefer more auditory presentations like lectures. Trainers reach more participants, and achieve more successful training, by accommodating this need for variety.

### *Am I doing OK?*

Remember that adults tend to set exacting goals for themselves. Adults can be impatient with their own errors or become discouraged if they do not think they are making progress towards their goals. Give them an opportunity to identify achievable goals related to what they are learning, to express their goals making a commitment to themselves and others for what they will do, and provide strategies and opportunities to assess their own progress.

## **Putting Theory Into Action**

Plan events to take advantage of participants' intellectual, social and cultural resources. This takes preparation and planning. Assess the make-up of participants to determine how to design and deliver training. Look at issues like:

- ✓ Familiarity with the topic
- ✓ Resistance to learning
- ✓ Expectation levels
- ✓ Outside classroom commitments
- ✓ Motivation to learn
- ✓ The likelihood of participants using the training immediately personally or in their profession



## Tips for Teaching Adults

- Create a comfortable learning environment.
- Emphasize the training's applicability to address their issues, concerns, needs, or interests.
  - Give practical examples or let participants role play or practice activities that will help them apply the new information.
  - Relate training to their needs. The material presented to adults must be intended for direct and immediate application in order to keep their interest. Begin with ideas and concepts familiar to the participants as a first step to the new ideas you plan to teach.
- Keep them actively involved.
  - Adults have a low tolerance for sitting and listening. After making a major point, ask participants to think how it could relate to their situation.
  - Utilize a variety of training methods to vary the presentation of information and help participants understand the meaning of the new knowledge or skills.
- Encourage them to share ideas and information.
  - Explain the information and encourage and answer questions.
- Get feedback, reinforcing the positive and redirecting the negative.
  - Since learning is an act of changing, give feedback to the participants on how they are doing.



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- Provide opportunities to practice what is learned to assist retention (e.g. role-plays or simulations).
  - Use a variety of training methods that aid adult learners:
    - Team teach—use co-presenters.
    - Use visual aids.
    - Use PowerPoint effectively.
    - Make diagrams of key concepts.
    - Guide note-taking.
    - Encourage and use questions and provide answers.
    - Encourage group discussion.
    - Use brainstorming.
    - Involve learners through written participation.
    - Use role-plays or simulations.
    - Illustrate with a case study or practical examples.
    - Structure a lecture to solve a problem.
    - Prepare supplementary handouts.
    - Guide follow-up and summarize.

As a trainer, be prepared with optional activities and strategies to incorporate as your training progresses in response to participants.

*(National Training Coordinating Council (NTCC) and AARP/Legal Counsel for the Elderly, Inc., 1993) (AARP/Legal Counsel for the Elderly, 1994)*

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- Principles of Adult Learners: From “Getting the Most out of Your AIDS/HIV Trainings” East Bay AIDS Education Training Center, Adapted from: California Nurses Association, AIDS Train the Trainer Program for Health Care Providers (1988) <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-1/htm>

*Note: Several sources were accessed on the internet in February 2010. Resources may or may not remain available indefinitely.*

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## Online Information to Help Assess Your Personal Learning Style

The following resources have information addressing only visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles. Because these are online resources, they may or may not remain available indefinitely. Of course, there are many others to choose from. If you are interested in other types of learning styles, research on the internet can be helpful by searching using the key words “learning styles.”

### Learning Styles

This chart helps you determine your learning style; read the word in the left column and then answer the questions in the successive three columns to see how you respond to each situation. (*Adapted from Colin Rose (1987). Accelerated Learning.*)

<http://www.chaminade.org/inspire/learnstl.htm>

### About.com

*Learning Styles - Know and Use Your Personal Learning Style*

By Grace Fleming, About.com Guide

<http://homeworktips.about.com/od/homeworkhelp/a/learningstyle.htm>

### FamilyEducation.com

*Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic Learners*

By Terry Farwell

<http://school.familyeducation.com/intelligence/teaching-methods/38519.html>

### Suite101.com

*Identify Your Learning Style*

*Kinesthetic, Visual and Auditory are Different Ways to Learn*

Apr 16, 2008, Julie Refnov Mortensen

[http://studyskills.suite101.com/article.cfm/learning\\_styles](http://studyskills.suite101.com/article.cfm/learning_styles)

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