**THE ADULT LEARNER**

**A Brief Overview of the Characteristics, Motivations and Needs of the Adult Learner**

**MOTIVATIONS OF THE ADULT LEARNER**

Adults must have the desire to learn.
Adolescents will learn in response to external demands. Adults, often, will not. Adults learn most effectively when they have a strong inner motivation to develop a new skill or to acquire a particular type of knowledge. Their desire to learn may be awakened or stimulated by outside influence, but it can never be forced upon them.

Adults will learn only what they feel a need to learn.
Adolescents can be induced to learn many things for which they can see no immediate use. Adults are much more practical in their approach to learning. They want to know “How is this going to help me right now?” Many times they can be persuaded, through wise counseling, to learn things that will help them in the foreseeable future. But most often they learn best when they can get immediate results.

Adults learn by being involved in the learning process.
Research has shown that retention of new knowledge or skills is much higher if the adult has immediate and repeated opportunities to practice or use what he has learned. This finding explains why “on-the-job” training is often very effective in adult learning situations.
Adult learning focuses upon realistic problem solving. You can teach adults best by using specific problems, drawn from worldly experiences, and by developing practical solutions from which basic principles may be deduced. The importance of realism in adult education cannot be overstressed. Adults simply will not put their minds to work on a problem that has been contrived for school purpose.

Experience affects adult learning. The most conspicuous difference between adults and adolescents as learners is the adult’s vast experience with life. This background of experience, this fund of knowledge acquired in the experience of living can be a great asset; but, it can also be a liability.

If new knowledge does not fit into the framework of what the person already knows, or thinks they know, the adult can very easily reject it. Past experiences may actually prevent adults from perceiving and absorbing new knowledge and data.

Adults learn best in an informal, varied environment. Adult learning occurs most successfully in an atmosphere which encourages people to be active; that promotes individual discovery and meaning of ideas; which recognizes an adult’s right to make a mistake; which encourages openness of self rather than concealment; which permits confrontation as well as cooperation; and which provides opportunities for self evaluation.

A variety of methods should be used in teaching adults. There are numerous teaching methods that can be used in imparting knowledge. In adult education, the teacher should attempt to use a variety of teaching methods, provided they adequately fulfill the learning objectives.

Adults need guidance—not grades. Research has shown that academic competition has a negative effect upon most adult learners. Most adults are apprehensive about their learning capacities, and they have been told repeatedly (and falsely) that “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” When faced with tests, grades, and other comparative evaluation forms, they will withdraw from the learning experience. It is also misleading for an instructor to “give” adult students higher grades than earned; instead of encouraging the adult student, such practices undermine the relationship the adult student typically seeks to develop with the instructor. The practice puts adults in a stratum they will not feel comfortable with, and learning will actually be stifled.
Adults may have physical handicaps that prevent learning. Hearing and sight impairments are the most common causes for poor learning in adult education programs. The lack of muscular coordination and the presence of poor health are also important considerations to adult learning defects.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ADULT LEARNER**

A study compared learning a variety of skills by three groups: 20-24 years, 25-35 years, and 35 years and over. Every individual did learn the required task, yet the level of performance was highest in the younger group, slightly lower in the middle group and much lower in the older group. For old people, at least, learning ability is not identical with learning rate. This curve of "learning" in relation to age primarily describes learning efficiency which was at its peak at 25 years of age and declined a little less than one percent per year for 70 years.

**Speed of reaction.**
That individuals slow down as they grow older is a fact established by much evidence. Beginning as early as 1884, data shows that reaction speed was found to increase from early childhood to the 20s and 30s and to have a fairly significant decline beyond the 40s. Adults learn a variety of tasks but there is a difference between younger and older learners in speed of performance. In addition, data suggests that sometime after the 40s most individuals, either consciously or unconsciously, adapt a slower tempo in doing work, maintaining a pose that gives more uniform performance with lessened stress and strain. Because of the measured decline in speed of reaction, curves of learning performance might underestimate the learning potential of those in the wide age range beyond the 30s.

**Hearing and seeing.**
Data shows a decline in auditory acuity from a peak between 10 and 14 years. Speed of hearing also has decrement with age so that the older the adult the longer the time required to hear a full message. Further, the older person’s inability to hear may lead many in the latter half of life to develop personality quirks in their own self-concepts harmful to their own well-being.

Data collected in a national health survey show different patterns in the decline in hearing of men and women. Women lose auditory acuity of low tones, men lose auditory acuity of high tones. As a result, men will tend to understand the speech of women less well, and vice versa.
Other data show that, from the maximum visual acuity in the late teens or early 20s, there is a slow but steady decline to the middle 40s when the presbyopic (bifocal vision) decline brings a sharp and continuing reduction in relative visual acuity. Some studies show an accompanying slowing in the speed of seeing. Shifts from far to near or vice versa take increasing time as age increased. In the classroom, looking from the blackboard to notes and books takes time.

**Intelligence does not decline.**
Bright people of 20 do not become dull by 60, nor do dull young people become moronic by 60. Individuals at 60 can learn the same kinds of knowledge, skill, and appreciation at 60 that they could at 20 years of age.

Age as age probably does little to affect an individual’s power to learn or to think. Performance may be reduced because of changes in speed, sensory acuity, self concept, or shifts in value, motivation, goals, and responsibilities which come with aging. Adults learn much less than they might, partly because of the self-underestimations of their power and wisdom, and partly because of their own anxieties that their learning behavior will bring unfavorable criticism. Failure to keep on learning may affect performance more than power itself.
PRINCIPLES AND CONDITIONS

Underlying Definitions
The principles and conditions of learning as they are delineated here reflect the following definitions:

Helping Relationship—Process which helps people to help themselves to learn and solve problems themselves.

Learning—Changing behavior in a positive direction. Refers to learning necessary for the solution of practical economic, social, political, and personal problems of living encountered by individuals, groups and communities.

Behavior—Attitudes, ideas, values, skills, interests.

Positive Direction—Direction which enhances the self, others and the community.

Goals of Learning—To enable individuals, groups of people and communities to become more fully functioning, effective, and productive entities in society.

PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING

Principle 1: Learning is an experience which occurs inside the learner and is activated by the learner.
The process of learning is primarily controlled by the learner and not by the teacher (group leader). Changes in perception and behavior are more products of human meaning and perceiving rather than any forces exerted upon the individual. Learning is not only a function of what a teacher does to or provides for a learner. More significantly, learning has to do with something which happens in the unique world of the learner. It flourishes in a situation in which teaching is seen as a facilitating process that assists people to explore and discover the personal meaning of events for them.

No one directly teaches anyone anything of significance.
If teaching is defined as a process of communicating an experience or a fragment of knowledge, then it is clear that little learning occurs as a result of this process and the learning that does take place is usually inconsequential. People learn what they want to learn, they see what they want to see, and hear what they want to hear. Learning cannot be imposed. When we impose on people we train them. When we create
an atmosphere in which people are free to explore ideas in dialogue and through interaction with other people, we educate them. Very little learning takes place without personal involvement and meaning on the part of the learner.

Unless what is being taught has personal meaning for the individuals, they will shut it out from their field of perception. People forget most of the content “taught” to them and retain only the content which they use in their work or content which is relevant to them personally.

**Principle 2: Learning is the discovery of the personal meaning and relevance of ideas.**

People more readily internalize and implement concepts and ideas which are relevant to their needs and problems. Learning is a process which requires the exploration of ideas in relation to self and community so that people can determine what their needs are, what goals they would like to formulate, what issues they would like to discuss, and what content they would like to learn. Within broad programmatic boundaries what is relevant and meaningful is decided by the learner(s), and must be discovered by the learner.

**Principle 3: Learning (behavioral change) is a consequence of experience.**

People become responsible when they have really assumed responsibility. They become independent when they have experienced independent behavior, they become able when they have experienced success, they begin to feel important when they are important to somebody, they feel liked when someone likes them. People do not change their behavior merely because someone tells them to do so or tells them how to change. For effective learning giving information is not enough; e.g., people become responsible and independent not from having other people tell them that they should be responsible and independent but from having experienced authentic responsibility and independence.

**Principle 4: Learning is a cooperative and collaborative process.**

Cooperation fosters learning—“Two heads are better than one.” People enjoy functioning independently but they also enjoy functioning interdependently. The interactive process appears to “scratch and nickel” people’s curiosity, potential and creativity. Cooperative approaches are enabling. Through such approaches, people learn to define goals, to plan, to interact and to try group arrangements in problem solving. Paradoxically, as people invest themselves in collaborative
group approaches, they develop a firmer sense of their own identification. They begin to realize that they count, that they have something to give and to learn. Problems which are identified and delineated through cooperative interaction appear to challenge and to stretch people to produce creative solutions and to become more creative individuals.

**Principle 5: Learning is an evolutionary process.**

Behavioral change requires time and patience. Learning is not a revolutionary process. When quick changes in behavior are demanded, we often resort to highly structured procedures through which we attempt to impose learning. Whether such learning is lasting and meaningful to the learner is doubtful. Implicit in all the principles and conditions for learning is an evolutionary model of learning. Learning situations characterized by free and open communications, confrontation, acceptance, respect, the right to make mistakes, self-revelation, cooperation and collaboration, ambiguity, shared evaluation, active and personal involvement, freedom from threat, and trust in the self are evolutionary in nature.

**Principle 6: Learning is sometimes a painful process.**

Behavioral change often calls for giving up the old and comfortable ways of believing, thinking, and valuing. It is not easy to discard familiar ways of doing things and incorporate new behavior. It is often “downright” uncomfortable to share one’s ideas under the microscope of a group, and to genuinely confront other people. If growth is to occur, pain is often necessary. However, the pain of breaking away from the old and the comfortable is usually followed by appreciation and pleasure in the discovery of an evolving idea or a changing self.

**Principle 7: One of the richest resources for learning is the learner.**

In a day and age when so much emphasis is being placed upon instructional media, books and speakers as resources for learning, we tend to overlook perhaps the richest resource of all—the learner. Each individual has an accumulation of experiences, ideas, feelings, and attitudes which comprise a rich vein of material for problem-solving and learning. All too often this vein is barely tapped. Situations which enable people to become open to themselves, to draw upon their personal collection of data, and to share their data in cooperative interaction with others maximize learning.

**Principle 8: The process of learning is emotional as well as intellectual.**

Learning is affected by the total state of the individual. People are feeling beings as well as thinking beings and when their feelings and thoughts are in harmony, learning is maximized. To create the
optimal conditions in a group for learning to occur, **people must come before purpose.** Regardless of the purpose of a group, it cannot be effectively accomplished when other things get in the way. If the purpose of the group is to design and carry out some task, it will not be optimally achieved if people in the group are fighting and working against each other. If the purpose of the group is to discuss current issues and problems in a given field with reason and honesty, then it will not be achieved if people are afraid to communicate openly. Barriers to communication exist in people and before we can conduct "official business" we need to work with the people problems that exist within a group. It might be said that in any group, regardless of the people problems which exist, enough group intellectual capacity remains intact for members of the group to acquire information and skills. However, to maximize the acquisition and internalization of ideas, it seems reasonable that the people problems would have to be dealt with first.

**Principle 9: The processes of problem solving and learning are highly unique and individual.**
Each person has their own unique style of learning and solving problems. Some personal styles of learning and problem solving are highly effective, other styles are not as effective, and still others may be ineffective. We need to assist people to define and to make explicit to themselves the approaches they ordinarily use so that they can become more effective in problem solving and learning. As people become more aware of how they learn and solve problems, and become exposed to alternative models used by other people, they can refine and modify their personal styles so that these can be employed more effectively.
CONDITIONS WHICH FACILITATE LEARNING

Condition 1: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere which encourages people to be active.
The learning process thrives when there is less teacher (group leader) domination and talk and more faith that people can find alternatives and solutions satisfying to themselves. Listening to people and allowing them to use the teacher (group leader) and the group as a resource and a sounding board, facilitates the active exploration of ideas and possible solutions to problems. People are not passive and reactive receptacles into which we can pour the “right” values, the “right” answers, and the “right” ways of thinking. People are active and creative beings who need the opportunity to determine goals, issues being discussed, and the means of evaluating themselves. They learn when they feel they are a part of what is going on—when they are personally involved. Learning is not poured into people, learning emerges from people.

Condition 2: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere which promotes and facilitates the individual’s discovery of the personal meaning of ideas.
This means that the teacher (group leader), rather than directing or manipulating people, helps them to discover the personal meaning of ideas and events for them. The leader creates a situation in which people are freely able to express their needs to them. Learning becomes an activity in which the needs of the individual and the group are considered in deciding what issues will be explored and what the subject matter will be.

No matter how permissive or unstructured a learning activity may be, there exist implicit goals in the activity itself—a group leader (teacher) is never goal-less. Learning occurs when the goals of the leader accommodate, facilitate, and encourage the individual’s discovery of personal goals and personal meaning in events. The art of helping people to change their behavior requires the development of goals which provide sufficient room for people to explore and internalize behavior satisfying and growth-producing to themselves.

Condition 3: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere which emphasizes the uniquely personal and subjective nature of learning.
In such a situation, each individual has the feeling that ideas, feelings and perspectives have value and significance. People need to develop an awareness that all that is to be learned is not outside or external to themselves. They develop such an awareness when they feel their own contributions and their value as people are genuinely appreciated.
Condition 4: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere in which difference is good and desirable.
Situations which emphasize the “one right answer,” the “magical solution,” or the “one good way” to act or think, or to behave, narrow and limit exploration and inhibit discovery. If people are to look at themselves, at others, and at ideas openly and reasonably, then they must have the opportunity to express their opinions no matter how different they may be. This calls for an atmosphere in which different ideas can be (but not necessarily) agreed with. Difference in ideas must be accepted if differences in people are to be, too.

Condition 5: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere which consistently recognizes people’s right to make mistakes.
Where mistakes are not permitted then the freedom and the willingness of people to make choices are severely limited. Growth and change are facilitated when error is accepted as a natural part of the learning process. The learning process requires the challenge of new and different experiences, and trying of the unknown, and therefore, necessarily must involve the making of mistakes. In order for people to learn, they need the opportunity to explore new situations and ideas without being penalized, or punished for mistakes which are integral to the activity of learning. The teacher (group leader) who feels and acts on the need to be always right creates a limiting and threatening condition to learning.

Condition 6: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere which tolerates ambiguity.
In a rigid and defensive atmosphere, people feel they cannot take the time to look at many solutions, they feel highly uncomfortable without answers, and they feel there is more concern for “right” answers rather than good answers. The open and fearless exploration of solutions calls for time to explore many alternatives and time to proceed without feeling any pressures for immediate and forthcoming answers.

Condition 7: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere in which evaluation is a cooperative process with emphasis on self-evaluation.
If learning is a personal process, then people need the opportunity to formulate the criteria to measure their progress. Criteria established by the teacher (group leader) are mostly artificial and irrelevant to persons in the group. Usually behavioral change and growth are measured by the degree to which people can regurgitate what others have tried to spoon-feed to them. It is obvious that anyone can play the game of “giving the teacher what the teacher wants.” A more viable and meaningful evaluation occurs when people are free to examine themselves and the roles they
play with other people. Self evaluation and peer evaluation enable people to really judge how much they have learned and grown. Through audio and/or videotaped recordings of their behavior, people can see themselves in the process of learning. Such recordings provide tangible and concrete evidence of progress and provide a rich source of material to the group for learning. New insights evolve as people see themselves as they really are. For learning to occur, the individuals in the group need to see themselves accurately and realistically. This can be best accomplished through self and group evaluation.

**Condition 8: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere which encourages openness of self rather than concealment of self.**

Problem solving and learning require that personal feelings, attitudes, ideas, questions, and concerns be openly brought to light and examined. To the degree that an idea, a thought, a feeling, or an attitude related to the topic at hand is held back and only covertly expressed—to that degree are the processes of learning and discovery inhibited. People need to feel that they can try something, and fail if necessary without being humiliated, embarrassed, or diminished as persons. Openness of self occurs in an atmosphere free from psychological threat. People can invest themselves fully and openly in the collaborative and interactive process of learning when they know that no matter what they say or express, it will not result in psychological punishment or penalties.

**Condition 9: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere in which people are encouraged to trust in themselves as well as in external sources.**

They become less dependent upon authority when they can open up the self, and when they feel that who they are is a valuable resource for learning. It is important that people feel that they have something to bring to the learning situation rather than feeling that all learning means the acquisition of facts and knowledge from some external agent for use sometime in the future. People learn when they begin to see themselves as the wellspring of ideas and alternatives to problems. Learning is facilitated when people begin to draw ideas from themselves and others rather than relying on the teacher (group leader).

**Condition 10: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere in which people feel they are respected.**

In a group in which high value is placed upon the individuality of the members and upon the relationships that exist within the group, people learn that someone cares for them. A genuine expression of care on the part of the teacher (leader) and a warm emotional climate generate an atmosphere of safety
in which people can explore ideas and genuinely encounter other people without any threat. Confrontations and differences of opinion become constructive forces in a group in which people experience that they are respected as persons. A safe atmosphere need not exclude personal confrontations which often are effective catalysts for learning.

**Condition 11: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere in which people feel they are accepted.**
People are free to change when they feel that change isn’t being imposed upon them. It’s paradoxical, but the more we try to change people, the more resistant they become to change. People must be before they can become. Accepting people means that we allow people to hold their values and to be themselves. When they do not have to defend themselves or their values, then they are free to take a look at themselves, and their values, and to change. An insistence on change contains an implicit note of rejection. In effect, we say to people—I can’t accept you as you are; you must change. People need to feel they have an option—to change or not to change. They develop this feeling when they experience that they are accepted for who they are. When people or their values are attacked, it is natural that they will defend themselves. People who are busy defending themselves are not free to learn.

**Condition 12: Learning is facilitated in an atmosphere which permits confrontation.**
With free and open communication, with a non-threatening psychological climate, the unique self of each person is expressed. It is inevitable that in such a situation, persons will confront persons, ideas will challenge ideas. Confrontations facilitate learning. They provide opportunities for people to have their ideas and themselves viewed and tested from the framework of other people or the group. No person learns in isolation from other people. Behavior changes and ideas are refined and modified on the basis of the feedback one gets from other people. Confrontation is a proving ground which enables ideas to emerge, and people to change.

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UNIT 7 - Instructional Methods

OBJECTIVES:

Upon the completion of this unit the student will:

1. Identify and discuss six effective instructional methods for adult learners and explain one advantage and one limitation of each.

2. Identify four behavior problems associated with adult learners, and describe two ways of mitigating problems.