

## CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS – MALCOLM KNOWLES

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"[Knowles'] work was a significant factor in reorienting adult educators from 'educating people' to 'helping them learn'." ~ M.K. Smith

### INTRODUCTION

Many early childhood trainers have roots in teaching young children in child care settings. It is exciting to acknowledge the effective teaching practices common to both children and adults—such as the value of hands-on learning. However, in spite of the similarities that exist between these two sets of learners, it is important to stop from time to time to look at the knowledge base related specifically to adult learning theory. Review of this knowledge base ensures trainers understand and embrace accurate perceptions of adults and the ways they learn best.

In a thoughtful article on adult learning principles by Stephen Lieb, a community college instructor, he explains, "Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding how adults learn best. Compared to children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. Despite the apparent truth, adult learning is a relatively [recent] area of study."

One of the pioneers in the field of adult learning was Malcolm Knowles (1913 - 1997), born in Livingston, Montana. In an article written by M.K. Smith in 2002, Knowles' conclusions about adult learners are described. Smith starts by pointing out that "As a result of extensive exploration, Knowles concluded that adult learners demonstrate four unique characteristics and later added a fifth." The five charac-

teristics Knowles identified can help trainers as they plan and prepare workshops and classes. The list of characteristics below includes Knowles' descriptions:

- **Self-direction:** "As a person matures, his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being."
- **Experience:** "As a person matures, he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning."
- **Readiness to learn:** "As a person matures, his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles."
- **Orientation to learning:** "As a person matures, his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness."
- **Motivation to learn:** "As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal."

While Malcolm Knowles' assumptions remain the subject of considerable debate, experts acknowledge that much adult learning theory reflects his thinking.

Early childhood trainers can take advantage of Knowles' work by considering these characteristics as they plan and prepare training events. Why? Because the simple goal of all early childhood professional development is to create opportunities for teachers and caregivers to become in Knowles own words "more proficient practitioners."

## SELF-DIRECTION

Self-direction is a component of maturity that cannot be ignored in training sessions. Adult learners thrive best when the learning experience allows some self-direction. In addition, adults blossom during educational opportunities that respond to them as individuals with unique needs and interests. Adults need to be free to manage themselves and their learning. A trainer who understands the importance of autonomy and self-direction might:

~ Actively involve adult participants in the learning process. Specifically, the trainer would get participants' perspectives about what topics--or aspects of a given topic--to cover and let them work on projects and activities that reflect their interests.

~ Allow participants to assume responsibility for mini-presentations, peer teaching, and group leadership. Trainers should act primarily as facilitators, guiding participants to discover their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts and information.

~ Create multiple learning stations for participants to select from. Effective learning stations represent a range of complexity and topics, and appeal to different learning styles. Learning stations might include a batch of short articles to enhance knowledge, a related case study to consider, a hands-on experiment (such as washing hands after rubbing with oil and cinnamon), writing a poem or developing a tip sheet or newsletter on the topic, self-assessment, etc.

~ Help participants set personal goals and develop action plans. Participants want to see how the training can help them reach their goals. Goals can be short or long-term, or both; they might be easy or hard, simple or complex. Research suggests that

goals that are articulated are more likely to be accomplished. This type of activity might be written, expressed verbally in a large or small group, or posted on a flip chart, etc. Life-long learners tend to set goals with little prompting or guidance.

~ Offer a variety of resources for participants to choose during or after a session. Together the resources would represent a range of complexity from entry level to advanced, cover a range of related topics to allow for individual interests, and/or be designed to appeal to different learning styles. Handouts might include articles, tip sheets, reading lists, web sites, activities to try, names of individuals to contact for further information, etc.

"As do all learners, adults need to be shown respect. Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class." ~ Stephen Lieb

## EXPERIENCE

The "on the job" experiences of the adult learner are important learning tools. Adult learners need opportunities to reflect upon their current practice, relate new ideas to past experiences, tell colleagues about their experiences, and listen to the stories of others. This principle can be applied in many ways.

~ Plan a 30-minute pre or post-training "conversation time" with beverages and light snacks. Doing this encourages interaction and information exchange among participants on an informal level.

~ Provide index cards at the beginning of the session for participants to record "strengths I have in this area" on one side and "opportunities I have for growth" on the other. Build pauses into the session for participant reflection and recording on the cards.

~ Schedule a "think/pair/share" opportunity and encourage partners to discuss what they are doing in

their programs and how to apply the new information from the session to their every-day practices.

~ Following a brief presentation, ask participants to a) take a few minutes to reflect upon a new idea they heard (or thought of) as it relates to their program, and b) turn to their neighbors to discuss their insights. Before your presentation, inform participants that you are going to allow time for this type of activity, and it will give them an immediate purpose for listening to you!

"Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, [trainers] should draw out participants' experience and knowledge which is relevant to the topic. They must relate theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of experience in learning." ~ Stephen Lieb

## READINESS TO LEARN

Since readiness is so integral to learning, trainers are obligated to pay attention to participants' current level of knowledge, skills, and ability. In addition, trainers must be conscious of the logical next step in developing participants' abilities.

Dictionary.com defines "readiness" as "willingness, inclination, or cheerful consent." These are the aspects of readiness trainers understand best. Dictionary.com further explains readiness as "a developmental stage at which a child [or adult] has the capacity to receive instruction at a given level of difficulty or to engage in a particular activity." These aspects of readiness require trainers to understand themselves as well as the participants. After her conference session titled "A Cross-disciplinary Study of Preferred Strategies in In-service Training," Jennifer Kilgo concluded that "You should know your stuff . . . and also who you are stuffing!"

Few trainers would expect preschool children to understand and apply a college physics lesson. Why?

Because young children are neither conceptually, experientially, or even have the vocabulary to be ready for the concepts. Trainers need to watch themselves that they don't ignore the critical aspect of participant readiness as they provide professional development for early childhood teachers.

"Adults are relevancy-oriented. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Therefore, instructors must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins. This means, also, that theories and concepts must be related to a setting familiar to participants. This need can be fulfilled by letting participants choose projects that reflect their own interests." ~ Stephen Lieb

## ORIENTATION TO LEARNING

Adult learners have specific goals in mind when they pursue training opportunities. Based on previous experiences, self-perceptions of strengths and needs, and perhaps evaluation feedback from supervisors, early childhood professionals come to training sessions with expectations for learning in mind. Considering the fact that adult learners want to learn for their own specific purposes, trainers will want to:

~ Place a clear description of the training session in the local training calendar. Learners need to have this type of information to inform choices and pursue sessions that match their goals.

~ Continuously gather information about participant interests and needs both in between training events and during any one session. Take what you learn into consideration when adjusting training activities during a session and planning future training. It is advisable to ask the individuals who are expected to actually participate in the training what their needs are; experience shows that administrators may see needs differently. Do not risk an ill-fated attempt at getting teachers to change their behavior guidance policies if what they really want/need is how to arrange toys and play materials effectively. When there is a

mismatch between session objectives and the needs of participants, training is likely to prove ineffective and unproductive.

~ Include a participant goal statement and action plan in handouts to help participants reflect upon and clarify personal and professional goals.

Adults are goal-oriented. Upon enrolling in a course, they usually know what goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Instructors must show participants how this class will help them attain their goals. This classification of goals and course objectives must be done early in the course. ~ Stephen Lieb

~ Provide a series of workshops on the same topic to allow learners time to try new ideas between sessions and return for more learning and guidance.

~ Build ongoing technical assistance and on-site coaching into your agency or training approach to support implementation in participants' programs.

~ Develop learner networks so participants can contact each other for support.

"Adults are practical, focusing on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Instructors must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them on the job."  
~ Stephen Lieb

## MOTIVATION TO LEARN

Adult learners want information they can immediately apply in their home or center-based work setting. In fact, researchers suggest that training most often fails to create change or improvement in the care and education of young children because it fails to produce this crucial impact. Training sessions must move beyond the one-time transmission of knowledge and facts to a point of application and continued support for the learner's growth.

There are many ways to motivate early childhood professionals to make the connection between theory and practice. These include:

~ Examine session content carefully to ensure the focus is on the most important and key points rather than overloading the learner with new information.

~ Show a video clip that demonstrates the new skill being used successfully.

~ Plan workshop time to give participants the opportunity to "try on" new practices through guided role play, case studies, or

~ Provide a learning aid for each participant to take home and post as a reminder to use new ideas.

## CONCLUSION

Trainers who address the characteristics of adult learners are more likely to facilitate learning and stimulate improved practices in day-to-day interactions with children. Stephen Lieb concludes his article on principles of adult learning by pointing out that

"Although adult learning is relatively [recent] as a field of study, it is just as substantial as traditional education and carries potential for greater success. Of course, the heightened success requires a greater responsibility on the part of the teacher. Additionally, the learners come to the course with precisely defined expectations. Unfortunately, there are barriers to their learning. The best motivators for adult learners are interest and selfish benefit. If they can be shown that the course benefits them pragmatically, they will perform better, and the benefits will be longer lasting."

## RESOURCES\*

\* *Principles of Adult Learning* by Stephen Lieb, Senior Technical Writer and Planner, Arizona Department of Health Services and part-time Instructor,

South Mountain Community College from VISION, Fall 1991. This article may be found at:

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-2.htm>

\* *Malcolm Knowles, informal adult education, self-direction and andragogy* (2002) by M.K. Smith for the encyclopedia of informal education, found at:

[www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm)

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