

# PD for PD Providers

## Knowing Adult Learning Characteristics Helps Successful Training

By Harvey Lee

Has this happened to you? While attending a professional development (PD) session, you are working in a small group and attempting to complete the assignment. The trainer tries to get everyone's attention, but the noise in the room is too loud. So the trainer flicks the fluorescent lights on and off to get participants' attention. This is one of the biggest mistakes a new trainer can make – treating adult participants like children. To provide effective PD, trainers must begin by considering adult learners' needs in three areas: context, process, and content.

### Context

According to Malcolm Knowles, author of *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (1970), understanding adult learning characteristics is critical to successful training. In her "Guidelines for Working With Adult Learners" ([ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed305495.html](http://ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed305495.html)), Susan Imel restates the assumptions that underlie Knowles's andragogical model:

- adults are self-directed;
- instructors should recognize and draw on adult learners' life experiences;
- adults' learning orientation is more likely to be centered on a specific task or problem than on a content area; and
- adults are more likely to be driven by intrinsic than extrinsic rewards.

While Knowles's ideas have been re-evaluated in the 30-plus years since publication of this influential work, the consequence has not been to abandon his approach, but rather to apply his ideas to pre-adult learning.

### Process

To increase the potential for successful long-term outcomes, facilitators must take adult learning characteristics into account when designing PD delivery. By taking a collaborative approach and inviting active participation, PD providers can affirm the adult/adult relationship between trainers and students and assign value to the knowledge that participants bring with them.

Inclusiveness is equally important. Many adult learners are uncomfortable with formal education because of previous experiences in inequitable learning environments. This is especially true of members of minority groups, the disadvantaged, women, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Care must be taken to ensure that PD content and delivery honor participants' diversity. An environment that supports all participants is crucial to successful training.

### Content

Content is the most visible component in a PD session. The content provides the building blocks participants will use to formulate new ideas. Adult learners thrive on new ideas and concepts. Through interactive learning activities, the facilitator can provide opportunities for participants to analyze and synthesize knowledge by assimilating it within their own conceptual frameworks or adapting those frameworks to accommodate new ideas and information.

Learners are more likely to retain new skills and information where there is a perceived need and an expectation that they will soon be put to use. Whenever possible, trainers should conduct a needs assessment prior to training to assure a close fit with participants' priorities.

Adult learning can be a joyful experience. Like all successful educational endeavors, it can change lives. Trainers who understand adult learning characteristics and ensure that PD is designed to work with and not against them can create that magic teaching moment when engaged learners cross the line from "I wish I could" to "I know I can."

For more information on PD context, process, and content, contact Harvey Lee, Program Specialist for the Pacific Comprehensive Regional Assistance Center, at [leeh@prel.org](mailto:leeh@prel.org)



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