

Adult Learning Theory

Adult Learning Theory is a set of ideas about how adults learn new skills or information.

Adult Learning Theory, as developed by Malcolm Knowles and Jane Vella, focuses on the idea that **adults learn best when they talk to others about their life experiences and relate these experiences to the learning process.**

When we were children most of us had teachers who knew much more than we. These teachers usually told us what to learn. As adults, we may not know as much as the teacher, but we have a lot of experiences and we often want to talk about what we know and decide what we would like to learn. The ways we teach children thus may not work well for adults.

The following five principles are key to effective adult learning. Adult learners need:

1. To be **respected**
2. To see the **immediate** usefulness of the learning
3. To be in a **safe** learning environment
4. To be **engaged** in their learning
5. To have the learning be **relevant** to their lives

Adult Learning Factors

Factor	Description
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needs to be the subject of their own learning<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Needs to be free to decide what to learn○ Likes to be part of planning what will happen during the learning
Immediacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needs to see how the learning can be used right away• Does NOT like to waste time
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needs to feel welcome and comfortable during the learning experience• Needs to have trust in the learning design• Does NOT want to be judged• Wants to be recognized or affirmed
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needs to be actively involved in the learning
Relevancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needs learning to apply to their family or work lives• Needs to be able to relate learning to their life experiences

Adult Learning Key Points

Let's explore several key points about how adults prefer to learn. Fill in the blanks with the terms in the Adult Learning Word Bank.

1. Adults learn because they _____ or _____ learn. Adults learn because they want to apply learning to problems and needs they face. Adults also learn because they want to improve their lives or their professional or personal situations.
2. Adults have _____ learning styles. This means that they learn most readily when their preferred methods are used.
3. Adults learn best in an _____ atmosphere. Some adults continue to have bad memories about their formal school experiences and have developed negative opinions about authority.
4. Adults learn best when _____ application is encouraged. Adults learn through hands-on practice. Lectures are the least favorite method of knowledge exchange.
5. Adults see themselves as _____ and _____. They expect to be treated with respect and to have some control over the learning experience.
6. Adults bring a wealth of _____ to the learning setting. They play many roles in life, lead busy lives, and expect to contribute to their learning experience.
7. Adults learn best when they can _____ learning to what they already know. Adults reflect on their learning experience and are able to relate them to current knowledge. What they have already internalized may act as a barrier or a catalyst to learning something new.
8. Adults have ideas to _____. Effective trainers leave room for participants' contributions. Therefore, what else would you suggest is important to consider about adult learning?

Adult Learning Word Bank

contribute
different
experience
have to
informal
practical
relate
responsible
self-directed
want to

Adult learning: Assumptions and Applications

Assumption	What would you do in your training to address this assumption?
1. Adults learn because they want to or have to learn	Trainers must clearly state the answer to: "What's in it for me?"
2. Adults have different learning styles.	
3. Adults learn best in an informal atmosphere.	
4. Adults learn best when practical application is encouraged.	
5. Adults see themselves as self-directed and responsible.	
6. Adults bring a wealth of experience to the learning setting.	
7. Adults learn best when they can relate learning to what they already know.	
8. Adults have ideas to contribute	

MALCOLM KNOWLES' FIVE ASSUMPTIONS OF ADULT LEARNERS¹

To understand the needs of adult learners, Malcolm Knowles, a prolific American educator, identified five defining characteristics that set them apart from their younger counterparts. These assumptions form the backbone of Knowles' Adult Learning Theory and offer insight into how best to engage and develop mature learners.

#1: SELF-CONCEPT (SELF-DIRECTED)

Adults become more self-directed as they mature.

As adults move through life, they become more independent and self-directed. Adult learners want to have ownership over their learning journey. Adult learners are actively involved in the learning process such that they make choices relevant to their learning objectives. For example, we will seek out information, rather than waiting for it to come to us. As a result, adults carry the skills and knowledge needed to learn and understand independently.

#2: LEARNER EXPERIENCE

Adults bring a wealth of experience to the learning process.

The second assumption Knowles made is about the learner experience. Adult learners bring the richness of past education, jobs, and life events to the learning experiences. Even if the concepts and skills you're introducing are new, remember that adult learners may have skills and lived experiences that they can reference to enrich their own process of discovery and growth.

#3: READINESS TO LEARN

Adults want to learn things that help them accomplish relevant tasks.

The third assumption, *Readiness to Learn*, suggests that adults want to learn and are prepared to do so when there is a good reason. In other words, as we mature, we become more eager to learn things that help us achieve our goals or accomplish relevant tasks. Unlike younger learners, adult learners are typically more selective with what information they take in. As such, they care about the "why" or WIIFM (what's in it for me) behind learning.

#4: ORIENTATION TO LEARNING

Adult learners want to solve problems.

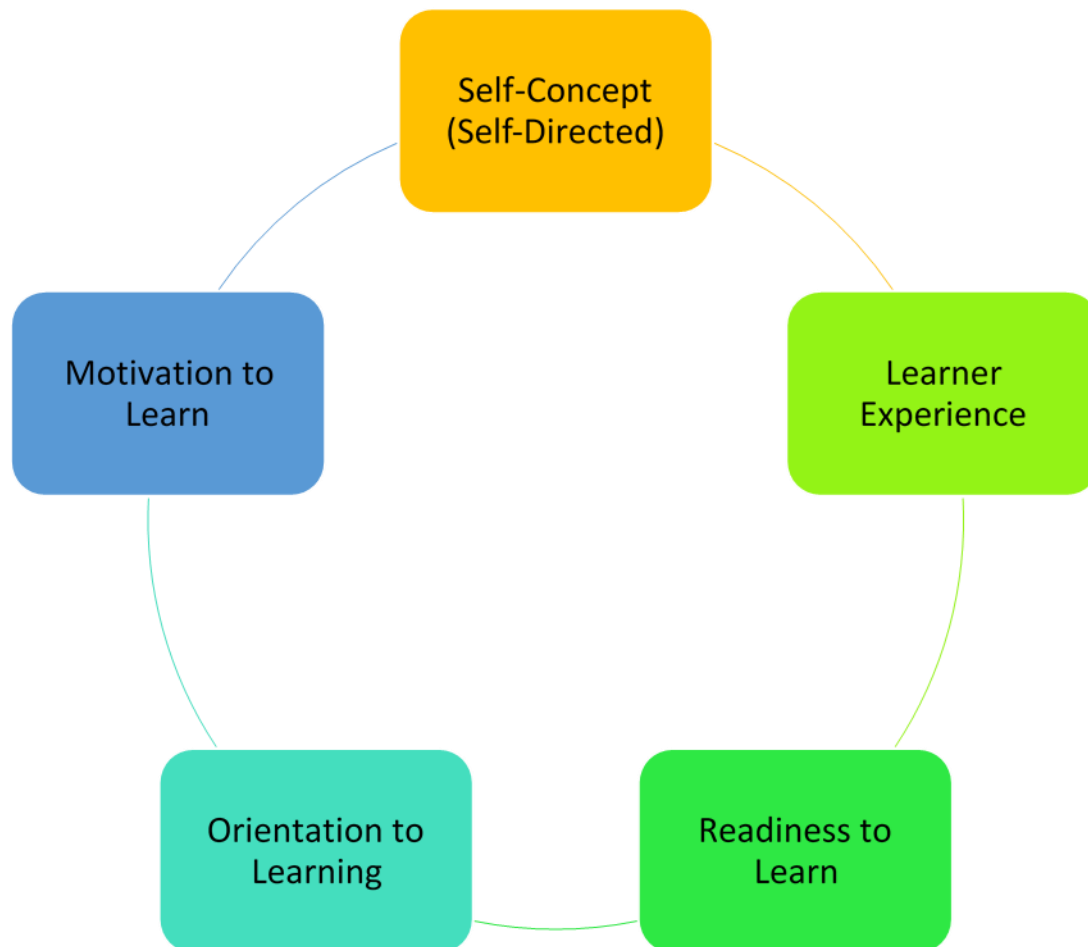
The fourth assumption, *Orientation to Learning*, suggests that adult learners want their learning to be applicable to their everyday life. Knowles explains that as a person matures, their perspective changes. They move away from subject-based learning, which centers around simply knowing about a concept, towards problem-based learning. Ultimately, adults want to learn practical skills that help them solve problems they are encountering in their lives.

#5: MOTIVATION TO LEARN

Adults rely on internal rather than external motivation.

¹Excerpt from <https://maestrolearning.com/blogs/malcolm-knowles-five-assumptions-of-learners-and-why-they-matter>

The last assumption, *Motivation to Learn*, suggests that as humans grow older, their motivation to learn becomes internal. Adults want to learn for their own reasons and these internal motivators are individual to each learner.



NOTES FOR ADULT LEARNING MODULE: