

# The Experiences and Expectations of Non- Traditional Adult Learners.

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# Adult Education and the Education of Adults

The distinction between adult education and the education of adults has been around for a long time.

The education of adults is accidental. Coombs (1973) defined *informal* as a “truly lifelong process” where adults inform themselves about life and its possibilities. *Non-formal* can be defined as organized adult education outside the established formal system.

In contrast, adult learning is in the “formal, instructional setting in which the element of chance is minimized”.



# Pedagogy? Andragogy??

Before exploring the topic of andragogy, it is essential to understand where Knowles (1980) felt pedagogy was unsuitable for adult learners - as “andragogy was developed as an extension of pedagogy” (p. 61).

- First, pedagogy assumes that “students only need to learn what the teacher teaches them” (McGrath, 2009).
- Second, pedagogy assumes no prior experience in each subject area.
- Finally, “the teacher’s concept of the learner is that of a dependent personality” (*ibid*).



# Pedagogy? Andragogy??

Andragogy seeks to remedy the shortcomings of pedagogy by proposing that “too much of learning consists of someone else’s experience and knowledge” (Lindeman, 1926, p.6).

Lindeman’s best-known statement in view of adult education and the adult learner is that “adult education is a lifelong activity, to be non-vocational, to concern itself with situations not subjects in teaching, and to place primary emphasis on the learner’s experiences” (*ibid*).



# Who is the Adult Learner?



# Characteristics of the Adult Learner

The population of students returning to higher education is changing. According to Steele ( 2010) ,“ undergraduates in Canada are studying less, working more, and taking longer to complete their degrees. Today, only one-quarter of post-secondary students follow the path of the traditional, full-time student.

Often called *self-directed, non-traditional students*, adult learners are older, more diverse, and have different responsibilities and expectations than younger, traditional students. In addition, they carry their past experiences into the classroom and their specific characteristics must be explored.



# Who is the self-directed adult learner?

## The key assumptions of Knowles' (1980) Andragogy:

1. *Self-concept and self-direction*: “Unlike children, adult learners are not defined by their roles as students but rather by the various identities they must use to live their lives” (*ibid*).
2. *The role of the learner's experiences*: Throughout their lifetime, adult learners develop different types of experiences, and the involvement in these experiences provides a stockpile of resources that initiates innovation, imagination, and enthusiasm.
3. By tapping into this experience, teachers (in their role of facilitators) can make the learning relevant and make the learning process more active (Knowles et al., 2015).



# Who is the self-directed adult learner?

3. *Readiness to learn*: Adult learners become ready to learn a specific topic when they understand the applicability of that topic to their own life or the relevance to one of the many social roles (Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Facilitators must be able to contextualize topics to make them relevant to the adult learner.

4. *Orientation to Learning*: Similar to the point on readiness to learn, “adults learn because they need to address issues in their lives” (Forest III & Peterson, 2006, p. 119). Adults approach learning from a problem-centered or performance-centered perspective where learning experiences must extend beyond obtaining basic knowledge into how this knowledge can be applied immediately (Knowles, 1980).





# Who is the self-directed adult learner?

5. *Need to know*: Adult learners need to understand the value of the topic at hand to invest time and energy into their learning.

6. *Motivation to learn*: Adult learners are motivated by internal (for instance, feelings of accomplishment) and external factors (like bonuses from a student's employer for obtaining a certain grade in a course).



# Activity #1

In groups of 3, select one of Knowles' assumptions.

Based on the assumption selected, describe how a teacher can provide instructional strategies to best accommodate adult learners expectations.

Activity time-limit : 15 minutes

**Let's discuss.**



# Let's discuss



# Adult Learners and Transformation

Why do you think certain adults return to school?

What do you think motivates them?

What type of challenges, barriers, or obstacles do they face when deciding to return to school?

**Let's discuss.**



# Adult Learners and Transformation

## Main challenges, barriers, and obstacles

1. Situational : Financial, childcare, multiple roles...
2. Dispositional: Attitudes and perceptions from others as being too old to learn , lack of confidence in their skills and abilities- “ Looking Glass Theory”.
3. Institutional: Policies, procedures ,or situations that adult learners do not have access to.
4. Academic : Past educational experiences, lack of prior pre-requisites...
5. Socio-cultural barriers: Language, social stigma, cultural taboo...



# What do Adult Learners Expect from their Teachers?

Adult learners have defined as specific teacher traits (Hill, 2014).

1. Teachers can structure classroom learning, implement various teaching techniques, and stimulate discussion.
2. Value teachers who are approachable and available and who are flexible with deadlines and class activities. Adult learners also find it essential for teachers to value and validate their experience, and be sympathetic to the demands placed on them by their jobs and families.
3. Regarding teacher attitudes, adult learners appreciate teachers who are “fun and enthusiastic” and who listen to students’ views.



# Best Practices – To Promote Adult Readiness to Learn

1. Create a safe, welcoming learning environment;
2. Create a culture of empathy, respect, approachability, authenticity ;
3. Collaborate on the diagnosis of learning needs;
4. Collaborate on developing learning objectives and in instructional planning;
5. Ensure the practicality of all learning activities (Keillor and Littlefield 2012).



# Teaching Methods to Support Adult Learning

1. *Teachers should facilitate learning.* They should create the environment in which learning occurs and guide the students through the learning process; however, they should not dictate the outcome of the experience.
2. *Teachers should provide autonomy and independence.* This can mean the freedom of pace, choice, method, content, or assessment.
3. *Teaching should empower learners.* As a corollary to providing autonomy and independence, teachers should share power and decision-making roles with their students.





## Activity # 2

Based on the teaching methods to support adult learning, select one and develop an activity to engage adult learners in your classroom and be transferable to **all** students in your class.

Activity time limit : 20 minutes

**Let's discuss.**



# Let's discuss



# Five Specific Categories

1. **Self-directed** learning provides students with the “opportunity and freedom to choose the means of acquiring knowledge that is best suited based on their self-knowledge” (Alex, Miller, Rachal, and Gammill, 2007).
2. **Active learning** provides students with opportunities to apply their background knowledge or prior experience and instructors' opportunity to assess existing student knowledge.
3. **Experiential learning** allows adult learners to make practical use of their knowledge and apply it in a context like how that knowledge would be used in real life (Goddu, 2012).



# Five Specific Categories

4. **Collaborative learning** is effective for adult learners because it allows them to use their “shared connections and experiences to explain and build upon concepts from class in ways instructors cannot” (Davis, 2013). In addition, adult learners have reported their appreciation for the “interactive learning environments” created through collaborative learning (Scherling, 2011).

5. In **narrative learning**, adults are allowed to form a link between “lived experience and curricular content. Because adult learning has to do with meaning-making, these autobiographical connections are integral to the process” (Clark & Rossiter, 2006). Autobiography encourages learners to identify where their value systems line up or diverge from the new concepts or ideas being presented in the course content (Clark & Rossiter, 2006). Learners are encouraged to see how they are situated within the narratives created by family, organizations, cultures, and societies. Personal stories “serve not only to link the concept to students’ life experiences but also to transcend those experiences and see the larger social and cultural structures that shape their lives and their meaning-making” (Clark & Rossiter, 2006).



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