

Understanding Adult Learning Styles



Adults attend training for many reasons: to improve job performance, expand their skills and knowledge, and for personal growth. The most effective trainings are those that incorporate an understanding of different learning styles into adult learning concepts.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNING

Adults tend to:

- > Need to know why they are learning something
- > Learn through doing
- > Be problem-solvers
- > Learn best when the subject is of immediate use

LEARNING STYLES

There are three main styles – seeing, hearing, and doing. Everyone has a preferred style and many people learn best when styles are combined.

1. **Visual:** Visual learners have a preference for seeing [use visual aids such as PowerPoint slides, videos, diagrams, handouts, etc.]. They understand information better if they can read it.
2. **Auditory:** Auditory learners learn best by hearing information [use lectures, discussions, tapes, etc.]. They can usually remember information more accurately when it has been explained to them verbally.
3. **Kinesthetic or Tactile:** Tactile/kinesthetic learners prefer to learn via experience—moving, touching, and doing [use role play, exercises, hands on activities, writing, etc.]. They can absorb information best if they are physically engaged in the learning process.

Audiences are made of individuals with all three learning styles. Therefore, presenters should consider incorporating activities that engage all three learning modes. Presenters increase participant thinking and interest when they employ multiple teaching methods.

UNDERSTANDING ADULT LEARNING STYLES

Practical Tips for Presenters

Create a Supportive Environment: The tone set by the presenters can significantly affect the quality of the training. Help participants to feel welcome and comfortable. Be respectful, warm and engaging. Allow time for participants to ask questions and discuss information.

Engage Participants by Connecting Content to Real World Impact: Use presentation methods that help participants recognize how the content can help them achieve professional goals. Adults will be more interested and invested in the presentation if they consider it realistic and relevant to them.

Use a Variety of Learning Methods: Consider using lecture, large group discussions, videos and case examples to work cases, interactive exercises and small-group activities throughout the presentation. In particular, adults benefit from small-group activities that allow them to move beyond understanding to application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Small-group activities provide an opportunity to share, reflect, and generalize their learning experiences.

Build on Participant Expertise: Adults bring a wealth of experience to presentations. Successful presentations stimulate participants to apply their knowledge in new ways and in new situations. This builds on the participant's competence.

Provide Feedback: Adults need to receive feedback on how they are doing and the results of their efforts. Having activities that allows participants to use what they have learned and receive structured, constructive feedback will make the presentation more meaningful.

Managing Controversy: Consider drawing on the experience and knowledge of participants when presented with a challenging question or comment. Responses by participants often deflect what otherwise could be a highly charged statement and gives the presenter a moment to think what else, if anything, may need to be added.

Trust the process! Experience has shown that these methods and approaches will enhance the quality of the learning experience. When adults feel their opinions and their ideas are welcome, they are more forthcoming with ideas; more willing to participate in small group tasks; and more engaged in interactive activities.