

Handout # 3: Adult Learners' Traits and How to Encourage Adult Learners¹

A. Adult Learners' Traits

1. **Self-direction. Adults** feel the need to take responsibility for their lives and decisions and this is why it's important for them to have control over their **learning**. Therefore, self-assessment, a peer relationship with the instructor, multiple options and initial, yet subtle support are all imperative.
2. **Practical and results-oriented. Adult learners** are usually practical, resent theory, need information that can be immediately applicable to their professional needs, and generally prefer practical knowledge that will improve their skills, facilitate their work and boost their confidence. This is why it's important to create a course that will cover their individual needs and have a more utilitarian content.
3. **Less open-minded** and therefore more resistant to change. Maturity and profound life experiences usually lead to rigidity, which is the enemy of learning. Thus, **instructional designers** need to provide the "why" behind the change, new concepts that can be linked to already established ones, and promote the need to explore.
4. **Slower learning, yet more integrative knowledge.** Aging does affect learning. **Adults** tend to **learn** less rapidly with age. However, the depth of **learning tends** to increase over time, navigating knowledge and skills to unprecedented personal levels.
5. **Use personal experience as a resource. Adults** have lived longer, seen and done more, have the tendency to link their past experiences to anything new and validate new concepts based on prior learning. This is why it's crucial to form a class with **adults** that have similar life experience levels, encourage discussion and sharing, and generally create a learning community consisting of people who can profoundly interact.
6. **Motivation. Learning in adulthood** is usually voluntary. Thus, it's a personal choice to attend school, in order to improve job skills and achieve professional growth. This motivation is the driving force behind learning and this is why it's crucial to tap into a learner's intrinsic impetus with the right thought-provoking material that will question conventional wisdom and stimulate his mind.

¹ Source: GFA Consulting Group, C³ Training Unit, http://www.c3-training.de/C3_Content_3508944.html

7. **Multi-level responsibilities. Adult learners** have a lot to juggle; family, friends, work, and the need for personal quality time. This is why it's more difficult for an adult to make room for learning, while it's absolutely crucial to prioritize. If his life is already demanding, then the learning outcome will be compromised. Taking that under consideration, an instructional designer needs to create a flexible program, accommodate busy schedules, and accept the fact that personal obligations might obstruct the learning process.
8. **High expectations. Adult learners** have high expectations. They want to be taught about things that will be useful to their work, expect to have immediate results, seek for a course that will worth their while and not be a waste of their time or money. This is why it's important to create a course that will maximize their advantages, meet their individual needs and address all the learning challenges.

B. How to Motivate Adult Learners

Here are **17 Tips to Motivate Adult Learners** that you might try.

1. **Create useful and relevant learning experiences based on the age group and interests of your learners.** Emphasize on the practical knowledge. It is important to design a course that provides immediate relevancy. Learning materials that can be put into practice. Adult learners appreciate more practical knowledge, rather than extraneous facts and theories.
2. **Facilitate exploration.** Even though children are famous for their exploratory nature and curiosity, adult learners, too, sometimes like to take the opportunity to construct knowledge in a way that is meaningful to them. For this reason, you should have all sorts of materials, references, infographics, short videos, lectures, podcasts and free resources available. In such a perfect learning environment, learners are more likely to get inspired or find something that makes them want to learn more.
3. **Build community and integrate social media.** Keep in mind that social media websites are a powerful tool for collaboration, commenting and sharing. You can facilitate group discussions and communities. People will quickly start exchanging knowledge, and will also have fun, social media is fun!
4. **A voice behind the video is not enough.** Add a personal touch. Your course needs to have a face. Make yourself available to people, invite subject-matter experts, authors, professors and other specialists in live online discussions and question and answer sessions.
5. **Challenge through games.** Come up with different problem-solving exercises and case studies. Make your learners look for and find solutions.

6. **Use humor.** Humor would work great even with the most demotivated learners on your course. When your students know you are funny, they will listen to your material carefully, because they wouldn't want to miss on your witty sense of humor. You can never lose with that.
7. **Chunk information.** Chunking is essential, as it helps people remember and assimilate information. Small bits are easier to process.
8. **Add suspense.** Don't give out everything your course is about in the beginning. Yes, you need an overview, but keep some interesting points until the time is right. No one likes to read a book if they know what's about to happen.
9. **Accommodate individual interests and career goals.** Empower learners to work on these goals and individualize the training to suit their needs.
10. **Stimulate your learners.** Encourage them to think by either providing them with brain teasers, or by asking thought-provoking questions.
11. **Let learning occur through mistakes.** According to a German proverb "*you will become clever through your mistakes*". Have you heard the famous expression: "*Practice makes perfect*"? Of course, you have! Henry Roediger who started a learning experiment divided his students in two groups. Group A studied natural sciences paper for 4 sessions, while group B studied the same paper for one session and was tested on it three times. According to the experimenter, one week later, students from group B performed **50%** better than Group A, even though they studied the paper less. The results clearly support the argument that "*practice makes perfect*".
12. **Make it visually-compelling.** Did you know that 83% of learning occurs visually?
13. **Get Emotional.** If you do not sound inspiring, if your materials are not exciting, how will you motivate your learners? Get them emotionally involved too – come up with controversial statements, tap on memories, add real-life stories.
14. **Get examples of their workplace.** Your learners may not always remember to associate what is learned with its application at the workplace. Sometimes they might need reminders and a clue to help them make that connection.
15. **Be respectful to them.**
16. **Ask for feedback.** It is motivating to know that your opinion contributes to the course.
17. **Present the benefits of undertaking the course.** Always present the benefits derived from the course; what improvements in knowledge, skills and attitude the participants can gain.