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SECOND EDITION

Special Excerpt:
The Adult Learner - Agree/Disagree

From
STAFF ROOM to
CLASSROOM

A Guide for Planning and Coaching
Professional Development

Picturing the Adult Learner

I agree or disagree with these statements:

1. Adults seek learning experiences to cope with life-changing events.
2. For adults, learning is its own reward.
3. Adults prefer survey courses to single-concept classes.
4. Adults want to use new materials.
5. Adults are quick to reevaluate old materials.
6. Adults prefer to learn alone.
7. Adults prefer to “sit and git.”
8. Adults prefer “how-to” trainings.
9. An eclectic approach works best with the adult learner.
10. Nonhuman learning (books, TV, Internet) is popular in adult learning.
11. Adults don’t like problem-centered learning.
12. Adults carry reservoirs of personal experiences.
13. Real-world exercises are preferred.
14. Adults let their schoolwork take second place to jobs and family.
15. Adults transfer ideas and skills easily into their work settings.
16. Adults are self-directed learners.
17. Facilitation of groups works better than lecture formats with adult learners.
18. Adults expect their class time to be well spent.
19. Adult learners are voluntary, self-directed learners.
20. Adults are pragmatic learners.

Box 2.6

SOURCES: Knowles, 1973; Zemke & Zemke, 1995/2015

Discussion of Agree/Disagree Statements

Question 1: Adults seek learning experiences to cope with specific life-changing events. (True)

Discussion: Yes, this is true. Adult learners will seek learning opportunities in order to cope with job-related changes such as a promotion. They will seek new learning when stressed by changing family situations including divorce, a move, or an impending parent-care situation.

Case in Point: A professor once said, in a matter-of-fact way, "Ninety percent of female doctoral students are in a divorce or are newly divorced." That makes this point succinctly. Adults do seek learning to cope with major changes or disruptions in their lives.

Question 2: For adults, learning is its own reward. (True and False)

Discussion: True: Adults do learning for its own sake in areas of self-selected hobbies and interests. *False:* However, this may be a false statement in terms of learning for, or on, the job. Adults seek to learn because there is an impending need to proceed along their chosen career paths. In the sense of seeking job learning for its own sake, the answer is not true.

Case in point: Adults will pursue pleasurable learning to support their lifestyle and to become more skillful as a gardener, needle pointer, artist, gourmet cook, musician, or even day trader. Yet most learning for adults that is job related is not done for its own reward but rather because it is needed for advancement or maintaining the current job.

Question 3: Adults prefer survey courses to single-concept classes. (False)

Discussion: The statement is false. Adult learners prefer to learn something in depth rather than at a superficial, introductory, or awareness level.

They want to delve into the specifics of the learning with depth and understanding. They do not like to skim the surface generalities. They want specifics.

Case in point: Adults want to pursue particular software training such as Excel rather than take a general course on office software.

Question 4: Adults want to use new materials. (False)

Discussion: Not so! Adult learners prefer the tried and true. They are frequently reluctant to switch to new materials, whether new software, new hardware, or new ideas. Adult learners epitomize two sayings: "It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks," and "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

Case in point: Adults like the old comfortable shoes! They may come to the training to learn about the new information, but that doesn't mean they will actually embrace it or put it into practice.

Question 5: Adults are quick to reevaluate old materials. (False)

Discussion: Paralleling the previous statement, adults do not easily give up the old materials. They tend to hang on to them and continue to use them when they can. If they are forced to move into the new material, they may still retain much of the old, or they gradually and cautiously weave the new into their existing repertoire. It is usually a slow process in which adult learners eventually achieve a level of confidence that allows them to move forward.

Case in point: Textbook adoptions cause great concern for teachers. They do not want to give up their well-worn units or their favorite activities. Turning to the humorous for an example, the executive of a small publishing company, in an attempt to get everyone computer literate, banned the use of typewriters in the office. Although the office team followed orders *on the surface*, the entire staff conspired to keep a lone typewriter in the storeroom for “emergencies.” In their mind, emergencies occurred every time someone needed to type an address on an envelope, a skill they had not yet conquered on the computer.

Question 6: Adults prefer to learn alone. (False)

Discussion: Nope! Adults like working with others. They thrive in collaboration with a colleague and in the dialogue process that ensues. Adult learners become quite reflective as learning partners or learning teams.

Case in point: Most distance learning models are designed with a collaborative component so adult learners can dialogue with a buddy or partner and feel a sense of support.

Question 7: Adults prefer to “sit and git.” (False)

Discussion: Adult learners want a collaborative, interactive, hands-on learning experience. They want to try things in step-by-step procedural ways. Adults are eager to do whatever it is they are learning to do, and they want to try it out with an expert nearby.

Case in point: A friend attended a software training that was conducted in a hotel ballroom with 450 people in attendance. No one had a computer to use except the instructor, who projected the performance sequence on a 12 × 12 screen. My friend’s appraisal of the experience was, “It was the worst seminar I have ever attended.”

Question 8: Adults prefer “how-to” trainings. (True)

Discussion: Absolutely! Adult learners want the nuts and bolts! They want to know specifically *how to* manage the task or skill they are learning. Adult learners are eager to know all about the practical components so that they can practice them and take them back to their work setting with ease and grace.

Case in point: When learning to play golf, the novice does not really care that much about the history of the game itself, about the metaphors, the equipment, or the rules. They want to know how to grip the club, which club to use, and how.

Question 9: An eclectic approach works best with the adult learner. (True)

Discussion: Yes! Focus groups often reveal preferences of adult learners that include a combination of online and web-based and the more traditional face-to-face interactions.

Books, television, and the Internet are popular sources of information for adult learners.

Case in point: Many field-based or distance learning programs in education require intermittent on-site retreats, either over a weekend or during the summer holidays. In this way, they can meet the needs of those who want some face to face.

Question 10: Nonhuman learning (books, TV, Internet) is popular in adult learning. (True)

Discussion: Although adult learners relish collaboration and face-to-face dialogue, they also, at times, embrace nonhuman forms of learning. Books, television, and the Internet are popular sources of information for adult learners.

Case in point: Adult viewers cite *Band of Brothers*, an eight-part docudrama on HBO about WWII, as the greatest tool for clarifying the historical event.

Question 11: Adults don't like problem-centered learning. (False)

Discussion: No! Just the opposite is true. Adults are hooked into learning situations through the skill of appropriate and personally relevant real-world problems. By presenting scenarios of actual situations, adult learners are attracted to the problem and immediately get into problem-solving mode.

Case in point: The vignettes of schools in case studies provide fertile ground for leadership seminars during which practical problem solving becomes the rule, resulting in rich discussions.

Question 12: Adults carry reservoirs of personal experience. (True)

Discussion: So true! Adult learners are laden with myriad experiences that they bring to the learning setting. In fact, the expression "lesson learned" is critical to the learning process. As new information comes in, adult brains search for patterns that fit. By attaching the new to former or existing information, adult learners actually internalize the learning for storage in long-term memory. Adult learners tend to pursue learning along the lines of career interests that will eventually translate into job

advancement or life fulfillment. Thus, adult learners are often building on an existing knowledge base that can be both rich and diverse.

Case in point: An estate-planning attorney seeks accounting and tax seminars that can continue to build and update her knowledge base for her primary business in estate planning.

Question 13: Real-world exercises are preferred. (True)

Discussion: This is true. Adult learners want actual situations to ponder and problems to solve. They do not especially like the “fantasy” problems as evidenced by their reluctance to dig in with this kind of problem; instead, they turn off.

Case in point: Middle school teachers will complain, “But this is not realistic. This would never happen. It’s not useful to spend time on these hypothetical situations. No school schedule allows for this kind of time for ‘advisory programs.’”

Question 14: Adults let their schoolwork take second place to jobs and family. (True)

Discussion: The bad news is yes, they do. The good news is they do it because they are clear about their responsibilities. But because they see learning as part of those responsibilities, their schoolwork does get done, too.

Case in point: Many a mom spends quality time and energy with family affairs, including errands, soccer practice, dinner, and housework before they settle down, late in the evening, to the reading required for their graduate classes.

Question 15: Adults transfer ideas and skills easily into their work settings. (False)

Discussion: Adults do not always see the application to their work. When the learning is closely related to work in the case of a newly learned skill, only then is the transfer ready-made. More often than not, with complex processes, transfer requires explicit coaching and much “shepherding” to be skillfully applied.

Case in point: Adults usually can move between a PC and a Mac computer with little effort. Yet they may experience great difficulty in changing from one operating system to another. The operating systems are often conceptually quite different; therefore, the transfer must be more mindful.

Question 16: Adults are self-directed learners. (True)

Discussion: True! True! Adults are usually clear and focused about what they want to achieve. They select the right program for themselves to meet their specific goals in terms of time constraints, effort, and outcomes.

Case in point: Second-career teachers seek out an expedient university program that offers the course work needed, the necessary practicum, and the alternative certification required to actually be placed in a school for a teaching position.

Question 17: Facilitation of groups works better than lecture formats with adult learners. (True)

Discussion: Adults want to experience learning with real and authentic activities. They want to collaborate and discuss their work and form reasoned judgments about how they are doing. For adults, working in groups gives them a chance to dialogue with other learners to confirm understanding and to discuss process.

Case in point: A well-run training session at a local bank involves the participants in case study scenarios as it teaches customer-service skills.

Question 18: Adults expect their class time to be well spent. (True)

Discussion: An adamant yes! Time is precious! Adults do not want their valuable time wasted in inefficient or superfluous ways. They are committed to a certain amount of time for class, and they want it to be well spent.

Case in point: One graduate student habitually complained to a professor who regularly dismissed the class early, while the undergraduates were ecstatic! The adult learner wanted to get everything he could possibly get in his time with the teacher.

Question 19: Adult learners are voluntary, self-directed learners. (True)

Discussion: Yes, in many cases adults seek learning situations they want or need and voluntarily attend to their school responsibilities. Yet in some cases, they are volunteering only to fill a requirement for certification or advancement.

Case in point: A golf pro voluntarily attends the required hours of PGA classes needed annually to retain certain levels of certification.

Question 20: Adults are pragmatic learners. (True)

Discussion: Oh, yes! The picture by now, after 19 previously discussed traits, is becoming quite clear. Adult learners are learning for a reason. They are focused, tenacious, and goal oriented. Adult learners want to cross the finish line and go on with their lives!

Case in point: Many adult learners accelerate their doctoral programs and complete the course work in record time. They are eager to get on with the real work—the dissertation.

Adult learner is... Adult learner wants... Adult learner prefers... Adult learner brings...
