

Lecture 5 – Learning Theories

Guiding questions:

- What are the five basic principles of adult learning?
- What models may be applied to adult learning?
- What teaching strategies may be applied for adult learners?

Five basic principles of Adult Learning can be applied to guide instructors in teaching their students. People learn every day, but providing instruction along these five principles can help make learning more efficient.

Five Principles of Adult Learning

Instructors who work with both K-12 students and Adult Learners often comment that the adult learners are **more motivated** than their younger counterparts. One reason for this is that they have developed a **rich set of life experiences** and want their instructor to directly apply to their interests, especially when they can be incorporated to help them perform better with their careers.

In order to build an effective learning environment for adult learners, instructors are guided by five guidelines. They are:

1. Learning should be relevant and include practical applications.
2. Learning should be based upon the adult learner's experience and be problem-based.
3. Adult learners are self-directed and their learning experience should be active.
4. Learning should be presented in a supportive environment.
5. Feedback should drive course improvements and student learning.

Guideline 1: Adult learners want relevant applications

When adult learners can readily see that the **content is helpful** to their professional or person life they are more likely to be motivated to learn. Obviously, if adult learners do not see this connection, then they are likely to not engage with the course content.

For the instructor, the first thing to remember is that it cannot be assumed the students automatically will see the relevance of the course content. To address this, before the course begins, instructors should consider the most important concepts to be learned in the course. These should be introduced the first time the course engages students and reinforced throughout the semester. In addition, instructors should offer opportunities for the students to discuss what is

relevant to them in order to reinforce for the students what they want to learn as well as to help the instructor better comprehend how to direct the students. This will be useful to the instructor in planning discussions, exercises, projects and other classroom assessments.

Guideline 2: Adult learners respond to problem-based learning based upon experiences

A useful strategy for helping adult learners to see the relevance of a course's content is to present problems to be solved. These problems should be realistic and the instructors should ask for practical solutions. One approach that can be used is the **capstone project** that asks students to build upon concepts taught throughout the course. For example, in this online course the teaching project is considered a capstone project. Another strategy that is often employed is the case study that summarizes a scenario and asks student to resolve conflicts.

Keep in mind that adult learner will bring rich **a priori** knowledge into the course. A priori knowledge refers to experiences they have previous to the course. Many times this is very rich and helpful. Sometimes, though, the students draw incorrect conclusions. One way the instructor can be helpful to the student is to draw connections between what the student knows already and how to apply it for a positive outcome.

To help explain the application of this strategy, the instructor who posts a video to be viewed should also present questions and summaries to help the student reflect upon what is important. That is, the student should not be wondering why he or she is viewing the video. This same approach can be applied to the writing of discussion topics, project objectives, and even when students are taking tests and quizzes.

Another strategy that can be employed is to **start a lecture with a problem** that students will work through as the material is delivered.

Guideline 3: Adult learners are self-directed

Group activities offer students opportunities to discover solutions to problems the instructor provides. The instructor also moves away from being the lecturer into the role of a **coach or facilitator**. The instructor becomes a resource for the students while they work through the problems and teach concepts to each other.

As with any assignment, the instructor should provide the student a method for reporting findings to the larger group. In addition, the students should be directed to assess their own learning and to make recommendations to the instructor about the value of the assignment. This will help the student to build confidence and also give the instructor valuable feedback.

Guideline 4: Learning should be presented in a supporting environment.

People like it when others call them by their given name. Keeping this in mind, instructors will do well to practice the names of the students they teach before the semester starts. For online instructors, a personalized welcome to the class before it starts goes a long way toward making the students feel at home. For either the classroom or online approach, instructors should consider contacting the students with surveys that help the students to learn about each other and to explore data already held in school records for each student.

For teachers, the tone of emails to students can be a challenge. While adult learners often respond well to humor it should be used in emails with caution. That is because the “joke” intended can often be taken in the wrong way, creating problems for the instructor. At the same time the instructor should not be writing in such a formal manner that the student does not respond to the meaning of the message. The instructor, then, should write with an **objective point of view**, or third person (using he, she, it, them, their, they’re, etc.).

With that, it is suggested that the instructor craft messages that supports a student’s question or reason for the instructor to be writing. Suggestions to resolve problems should then be presented. Given the purpose of the communication, the instructor may also focus the student on the requirements of the assignment. A positive conclusion for the future success of the student should be offered as well. Finally, the communication should be timely. If the instructor says he or she will respond within 48 hours, then that should be the objective.

Instructors should offer students reasons for signing into their courses as often as possible. In an email message, the instructor may point out to students something within the course content they can refer to that helps them to improve. Creating new announcements and posting them can also encourage traffic into the course.

Guideline 5: Adult Learners need ample feedback.

Instructors should provide **feedback** that focuses upon the progress of the class as a group and each of the students. Individualizing feedback offers each student personalized information about what he or she has done well and what still needs to do for improvement. Having a way to collect data and evaluate the results of each student also offers the instructor feedback for how to plan the next session. That is, if several students have missed an important point, then the instructor can review this the next time the students meet. For the online learner, the instructor can guide the student to where the missed points are addressed in the course. When students are struggling with the same points from semester to semester, the instructor can build into future courses areas that address these concerns. This is another reason for the instructor to compile the biggest concerns of the students.

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