



# *The Adult Learner*

## **FCS New Field Faculty Orientation**

Dr. Sandy Wiggins  
FCS NFFO Coordinator

sandy\_wiggins@ncsu.edu

Dr. Malcolm Knowles research and publications have been used as key resources in developing an understanding of the adult learner and teaching strategies.

Dr. Knowles used Piaget's and Erikson's work to study the adult learner. Knowles believes that the adult learner brings life experiences to learning, incorporating and complementing the cognitive abilities of Piaget's adolescent. As the individual matures:

1. his/her self-concept moves from dependency to self-direction
2. he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experiences that becomes a resource for learning
3. his/her learning readiness becomes increasingly oriented to the tasks of various social roles
4. his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed knowledge application to immediate application
5. his/her orientation to learning shifts from subject-centered to problem-centered

If you examine personal and cognitive development and compare teaching approaches, you see that children tend to be dependent learners, whereas adults need to be independent and exercise control.”

Online at

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/knowles.htm>



## The Adult Learner

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Andragogy refers to the teaching of adults while pedagogy refers to the teaching of children.



Generally, adult learners have clear expectations and bring a variety of experiences to the learning experience. There are generalizations that address the adult learner along with some guidelines, but keep in mind that you will need to address each learning setting by using teaching strategies to fit the audience makeup.



It is very important for Extension professionals, especially FCS Extension field faculty, to understand the adult learner. The knowledge gained will assist with developing, planning and implementing educational outreach for adults.



## *Characteristics of the Adult Learner*



- ★ Tend to be pragmatic learners

- ★ Study to improve their performance in other social roles



- ★ Let their schoolwork take a back seat to other responsibilities such as jobs and family

- ★ Expect their class time to be well spent

- ★ Hope their courses will help them solve problems in their daily lives



- ★ Are usually voluntary learners

Pragmatic learner can be defined in context as being active, have opinions, practical and concerned with everyday affairs .



## *Characteristics of the Adult Learner*

*cont'd*



- ★ Believe that the decision to return to school is an important one

- ★ Believe that education is helpful



- ★ Vary widely among ages, abilities, job experiences, cultural backgrounds and personal goals

- ★ Range in educational background from no formal schooling to advanced degrees

- ★ Carry well developed personal identities



- ★ Carry reservoirs of personal experiences which are learning resources

Adult learners come from varied backgrounds, educational, economic and social status. Their personal experiences can be a valuable resource within the educational setting.

<http://ww2.nsc.edu/adjunct/m5adultlearner.htm>

Adult Learner Characteristics	Teaching Strategies
Adults have years of experience and a wealth of knowledge	Use your adult students as resources for yourself and for other students; use open-ended questions to draw out students' knowledge and experiences; provide many opportunities for dialogue among students
Adults have established values, beliefs, and opinions	Take time to clarify student expectations of the course; permit debate and the challenge of ideas; be careful to protect minority opinions within the class
Adults expect to be treated as adults	Treat questions and comments with respect; acknowledge contributions students make to the class; do not expect students to necessarily agree with your plan for the course
Adults need to be self-directed	Engage students in designing the learning process; expect students to want more than one medium for learning and to want control over the learning pace and start/stop times
Adults often have a problem centered approach to learning	Show immediately how new knowledge or skills can be applied to current problems or situations; use participatory techniques such as case studies and problem-solving groups
Adults tend to be less interested in survey type courses and more interested in straightforward how-to	Focus on theories and concepts within the context of their applications to relevant problems; orient the course content toward direct applications rather than toward theory
Adults have increased variation in learning styles (individual differences among people increase with age)	Use a variety of teaching materials and methods to take into account differences in style, time, types, and pace of learning

This chart is online: <http://ww2.nsc.edu/adjunct/m5adultlearner.htm>

The chart identifies adult learner characteristics and descriptions of recommended teaching strategies.



## *Four Critical Elements of Learning for Adults*

- ★ Motivation
- ★ Reinforcement
- ★ Retention
- ★ Transference



Each of us are adult learners. As you review these critical elements, think about the implications for yourself and the adult learners participating in your educational outreach efforts.



## *Motivation*



The learner must recognize the need for the information or the instructor's effort to assist the learner will be in vain.



Set a tone for the lesson

Set an appropriate level of concern



Set an appropriate level of difficulty

Stephen Lieb

It is important for the students to know that you, the instructor, care about them and want them to gain knowledge and to succeed. If the educational information is presented in a format or at a level that is above the audience's comprehension level, learning will not occur.



## *Reinforcement*



Necessary part of the teaching/learning process.



Positive reinforcement – teaching new skills



Negative reinforcement – teaching a new skill or new information; change modes of behavior

Stephen Lieb

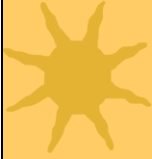
Positive reinforcement is very effective in teaching new skills. This is the same principle we use with children.

In some learning situations, negative reinforcement can actually bring about a change in behavior.

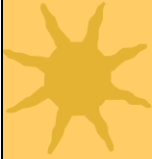


## *Retention*

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Participants must retain information from the learning experience in order to benefit from the learning.



Instructors emphasize retention and application.



Stephen Lieb

The adult learner will gain knowledge and learn new skills if the learning experience focuses on retention of information and how it will be applied outside the learning setting.



## *Transference*

The ability to use the information taught in the learning setting within a new setting.

**Positive transference:** participants use the behavior taught in the learning setting in another setting

**Negative transference:** participants do not do what they are told not to do, resulting in a positive (desired) outcome.

Stephen Lieb

Stephen Lieb's online publication, "Principles of Adult Learning" is brief and a very good resource. Available online at:  
<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-2.htm>



## *Adult Learners*

Best motivators are:

- \* interest
- \* selfish benefit.

If prove the learning experience benefits them:

- \* will perform better
- \* the benefits will be longer lasting

In summary, there are two significant motivators:

- 1) must have interest in the knowledge and or skills being taught
- 2) it beneficial to that person for various reasons, therefore considered to be a selfish benefit.

Outcomes for a well-planned learning experience are increase in performance and the longer lasting impact.

If you would like to learn more about the adult learner, please contact [sandy\\_wiggins@ncsu.edu](mailto:sandy_wiggins@ncsu.edu)