

Handout 2: Adult Learning Principles

Dr. Malcolm Knowles received national recognition for his work helping people apply the theory of adult learning, or “andragogy.” His theory teaches that strategies for program improvement that emphasize greater equality between the teacher and learner are likely to be most effective. His theory also suggests that strategies must connect with adult students’ work and lives.

Knowles and others point to six research-based adult learning principles. These principles can help you envision how you want consultants to approach their assignments so you get the results you need.

Principle #1: Adults are internally motivated and self-directed.

Adult learners will resist learning when they feel others are telling them what to do. Adults need to be free to direct themselves. The consultants you hire must be ready to actively involve participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators rather than didactic teachers. They must get participants’ perspectives and give them the flexibility to work on projects that reflect their interests.

Principle #2: Adults need to draw upon their own life experiences and knowledge.

Adults have accumulated vast experiences and knowledge—from school, work, and family life—that can be a resource for their own learning as well as the learning of others. Consultants must help adults connect their experiences to theories and concepts. Consultants also should encourage collaboration and idea-sharing among adult learners.

Principle #3: Adults are goal oriented.

Adults appreciate learning when it is tied to specific professional or personal goals. They desire well-organized consulting experiences that will help them attain the goals in their Quality Improvement Plan and Individual Professional Development Plan. Consultants should identify learning objectives, follow clear agendas, and show participants how the activities are helping them to achieve their goals.

Principle #4: Adults are relevancy oriented.

Adults must be able to see how learning connects to their work. Consultants should become familiar with the program they are working with and be able to facilitate appropriate connections. They should demonstrate how the theory and content of the learning relates to participants’ work.

Principle #5: Adults are practical.

Adults like to solve problems in their work. They like hands-on exercises that simulate real-world situations. Consultants must design concrete learning activities and assist participants in seeing explicitly how the information will be useful to them on the job.

Principle #6: Adults need to be shown respect.

Adults need to be given a strong voice during consulting experiences. Consultants should establish a learning atmosphere within the program where adults are treated as equals and encouraged to share their opinions, experiences, and knowledge.