Adult Learners: Characteristics, Qualities, and Needs

Andragogy is the study of how adults learn and is a theory developed by Malcolm Knowles based on a variety of research centered on adult development, needs, and learning styles. Below is a description of Knowles’ five underlying assumptions, along with specific applications of these five components expanded upon by other researchers and theorists. More recent theories of adult learning have called these assumptions into question, proposing that there may be degrees or certain conditions under which they apply or that self-direction, for instance, may be desirable but not always the reality of adult learners. Nevertheless, these assumptions continue to serve widely as a general guide for thinking about adult learners.

1. Adult learners are generally self-directed
   - They often have a psychological need for self-direction
   - They need empowerment and opportunities for nurturing self-direction
   - Adults want to be treated as capable of self-direction, with time to work on their own or collaboratively
   - Adults accept responsibility for their learning if it is perceived as timely and relevant
   - Adults often expect to be held accountable, which supports effective self-directed learning

2. Adult learners need to know the importance and relevance of what they’re learning
   - The purpose of the learning should be established before engaging in the process
   - Adults’ readiness to learn is strongly impacted by the relevance of the task to their lives and work
   - Adults need to engage in real-world problem solving; they seek solutions in education to bridge where they are to where they want to be
   - Adults have competing interests; clearly establishing the importance of a given study makes it more valuable and meaningful

3. Adults bring a variety of experiences that should be utilized in their learning
   - Their experiences are the foundation of their learning are part of their continual growth
   - These experiences can and should be tapped into for the benefit of all learners
   - They come to learning with expectations about the process and established patterns of learning

4. Adults are results-oriented and want to shift quickly from theory to application
   - Adults are performance-centered and want to immediately apply new knowledge
   - Adults may be skeptical about new learning and want to test ideas before accepting them
   - They often have specific outcomes in mind and may disengage in learning if it doesn’t move towards those outcomes

5. Adult learners are intrinsically motivated and work best when learning has clear, relevant goals
   - Adults work best when they are involved in setting relevant and achievable goals
   - The path to those goals should be related to and applicable to their learning
   - Intrinsic motivation is strongest when the tasks are timely and appropriate

Reference