

# Designing for adult learners

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"Tell me, and I will forget.  
Show me, and I may remember.  
Involve me, and I will understand."

Confucius

Adult learners are very different from child learners. Whereas children are constantly building their understanding of the world and take direction and instruction from others regularly, adults take in new things relative to existing knowledge and when they are personally motivated to do so.

You can use this resource to help you....

- Assess whether the design of a training will meet the needs of adult learners
- Determine which responses to a ToR for training design attend to adult learning principles
- Begin to assess whether a curriculum is designed for adult learners, or how it might be adapted for a learning-centered approach.

## Characteristics of adult learners

Here is a list of key characteristics of adult learners and some ways you would expect to see them applied in training design<sup>1</sup>.

Characteristic of adult learner	Applied in training
Adults have rich life experience that shapes how they perceive and understand new knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Create opportunities for learners to use what they already know to make sense of new knowledge.</li> <li>● Encourage reflection to help learners recognize their current habits and practices, and their shifts in understanding over time.</li> <li>● Introduce new concepts in context and develop conceptual knowledge through conversations around related experiences.</li> </ul>
Adults are internally motivated and self-directed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pose questions that motivate reflection, inquiry, self- assessment and further research.</li> <li>● Frame opportunities to appeal to emotional hooks and motivators, provide meaningful reason to learn.</li> </ul>
Adults are goal-oriented.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Create ownership of learning by having learners set specific goals within the framework of what is being taught.</li> <li>● Review goals, provide regular constructive and specific feedback, and acknowledge progress.</li> </ul>
Adults learn what is immediately relevant to them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide meaningful learning experiences that are clearly linked to personal goals.</li> <li>● Provide real world scenarios and pertinent examples as a basis from which to explore new information.</li> </ul>
Adults are practical.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be explicit about how the learning is useful and applicable.</li> <li>● Provide choices and options for applying and practicing new concepts so that learning addresses the learner's interests and needs.</li> <li>● Provide time to engage in collaborative processes which immediate use and practice with new concepts..</li> </ul>
Adult learners expect to be respected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Model respectful communication and openness to diverse opinions.</li> <li>● Note different learning preferences and match methods to these.</li> <li>● Recognize that adult learners have many demands on their time.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Professional Learning Overview Appendix A, by Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. Based on Lyons & Pinnell. (2001). Systems for Change in Literacy Education: A Guide to Professional Development, Pearson Education Canada.

## Twelve principles for effective adult learning<sup>2</sup>

1. Needs assessment: participation of the learners in naming what is to be learned
2. Safety in the environment and the process
3. A sound relationship between teacher and learner for learning and development
4. Careful attention to sequence of content and reinforcement
5. Praxis: action with reflection or learning by doing
6. Respect for learners as subjects of their own learning
7. Cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects: ideas, feelings, actions
8. Immediacy of the learning
9. Clear roles and role development
10. Teamwork: using small groups
11. Engagement of the learners in what they are learning
12. Accountability: how do they know they know?

## Learning cycle

For purposes of training and instructional design there is a learning cycle which adults go through when acquiring new knowledge<sup>3</sup>. We regularly use this cycle when designing training and recommend it is easily identifiable by the activities and tempo of the session or curriculum.

### ADULT LEARNING CYCLE



<sup>2</sup> Vella, J. (2002). Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults. Germany: Wiley.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.calsac.org/becomeatrainer>