

Characteristics of Adult Learners

by Connie Malamed

When it comes to learning, adults are not over-sized children. Maturity brings unique characteristics that affect how adults are motivated to learn. By appealing to the unique qualities of adult learners, we can design more effective and motivating online courses. Here's a list of generalized characteristics common to many but not all adult learners.

- **Autonomy.** Adults typically prefer a sense of control and self-direction. They like options and choice in their learning environment. Even adults who feel anxiety from self-direction may learn to appreciate this approach if given proper initial support.
- **Goal-oriented.** Many adults have specific goals they are trying to achieve. They prefer to partake in learning activities that help them reach their goals.
- **Practical.** Adults in the workplace prefer practical knowledge and experiences that will make work easier or provide important skills. In other words, adults need personal relevance in learning activities.
- **Competence and mastery.** Adults like to gain competence in workplace skills as it boosts confidence and improves self-esteem.
- **Learning by experience.** Many adults prefer to learn by doing rather than listening to lectures.
- **Wealth of Knowledge.** In the journey from childhood to adulthood, people accumulate a unique store of knowledge and experiences. They bring this depth and breadth of knowledge to the learning situation.
- **Purposeful.** Workplace training is often part of an initiative that involves change. Adults want to know the purpose of training and the motivation underlying an organization's training initiative.
- **Emotional Barriers.** Through experience, adults may fear a subject, have anxiety about a subject or feel anger about forced changes in job responsibilities or policies. These emotions can interfere with the learning process.
- **Results-oriented.** Adults are results-oriented. They have specific expectations for what they will get out of learning activities and will often drop out of voluntary learning if their expectations aren't met.
- **Outside responsibilities.** Most adult learners have numerous responsibilities and commitments to family, friends, community and work. Carving out time for learning affects adult learners.
- **Potential physical limitations.** Depending on their age and physical condition, adult learners may acquire psychomotor skills more slowly than younger students and have more difficulties reading small fonts and seeing small images on the computer screen.
- **Big Picture.** Adults require the big picture view of what they're learning. They need to know how the small parts fit into the larger landscape.
- **Responsible for Self.** Adult learners often take responsibility for their own success or failure at learning.
- **Need for Community.** Many self-directed adult learners prefer a learning community with whom they can interact and discuss questions and issues.