

How Adults Learn

Some Principles of Adult Motivation, Learning, and Retention for Adult Faith Formation

(with some practices which for designing: learning opportunities/programs/processes; learning environments and teaching/ learning methods)

- **Adults are motivated to learn when they identify they have a need to learn.**
 - *Adults are selective in the learning process and areas of interest; they enter learning situations on a voluntary basis. They are selective/protective of their time. (Lack of time is one of the major barriers for participation in adult learning.) Therefore:*
 - *Pay attention to what is going on the lives of adults; listen carefully to what adults are talking about. Where is their energy? What puzzles them and leads them to ask ultimate questions of meaning?*
 - *Do needs assessment; know what their needs are, rather than what a few planners think they might be.*
 - *Discuss expectations.*
 - *Offer varied opportunities/ multiple modes.*
 - *Set agendas that match time schedules; be flexible in time schedules.*
 - *Adults appreciate choices of times for participation.*
 - *Begin/end on time.*
 - *Offer support services, if that is needed: light suppers preceding an event, child care, rides, etc.*

- **Learning is a process occurring within the participants and controlled primarily by them.**
 - *Therefore, the presenter/ leader's appropriate role is more of coach, supporter, challenger, and facilitator and less of a teller, imparter of knowledge, advisor, or expert. (Never do for adults what they can do -or think- for themselves.)*
 - *Sit with the learners, rather than always standing in front.*
 - *Design learning experiences and activities that openly promote the freedom of the learner.*
 - *Instead of presenting "all" the material, share some, raise questions, invite the learners to continue the search.*
 - *Choose approaches that will deliberately respect the person of the learner in ways that enhance self-esteem and self-confidence.*

- **Adults learn best when they feel the need to learn and have input into the what, why, and how they will learn.** They want to know the goals of the learning experience are their goals. They are motivated to participate when they have been part of the planning.
 - *Continually do needs assessment, using various methods. Let the needs of the people determine what is planned/ offered.*
 - *Involve adults in the planning and decision-making related to their learning.*
 - *A representative group of adults from the parish/ community needs to take lead responsibility in planning opportunities; this group must be in continual contact with the whole community in various ways (e.g. surveys, interest finders, focus groups, interviews, attentive listening, etc.)*

- *Provide means for adults to continually clarify their learning needs and provide input into the structure of the learning events, including the evaluation of their own learning outcomes.*

- **Adult learners have multiple motives for learning. Some adults are goal-oriented; some learning-oriented; and some are activity-oriented.**
 - *Many adults want to participate in settings their own goals.*
 - *Some adults learn because it is enjoyable; learning itself provides a high.*
 - *Activity-oriented learners are the “doers,” in the church, often the justice and peace learners.*
 - *Adult faith formation, speaking to the needs of all three groups, can help all to learn from each other, if none are categorized as a separate group.*

- **Adults come to any learning experience with a foundation of life experiences and knowledge. They have opinions, perceptions and knowledge to share.** Most adults do not come to have religion “pumped into them,” but to have faith drawn out of them, because of the rich experience they already have. Adults need to be treated with respect, acknowledging the wealth of experiences they bring. They, as learners, need to be treated as equals in experience and knowledge.
 - *Draw out participants’ knowledge and experience which is relevant to the topic.*
 - *Adults learn new information best when it is related to their past experiences. They are willing to change when they can better understand their past and then see where they are going.*
 - *At every meeting of the group, ask the participants to identify an experience from their lives that is related to the theme/topic.*
 - *Adults can learn well – and much – from dialogue with peers.*

- **Adults are autonomous and self-directed.** (Self-direction does not mean isolation. Studies indicate that self-directed projects involve an average of ten other people as resources, guides, encouragers, etc.)
 - *Actively involve the participants in the process.*
 - *Invite them to work on projects that interest them.*
 - *Adults learn best when they can set their own pace.*
 - *Encourage them to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership.*
 - *Guide participants to their own knowledge rather than just giving them facts.*

- **Adults are practical, relevancy-oriented; they want a reason for learning something. They learn best when there is a problem to be solved, a question to be resolved or a task to be completed. When/how is faith related to life?**
 - *They tend to be less interested in survey courses; they tend to prefer single concept, single-theory courses that focus heavily on the application of the concept to relevant problems. (This tendency increases with age.)*
 - *Facilitators must help identify objectives for learners at the outset.*
 - *Since most adults are problem-centered rather than subject-centered, survey your current offerings. If all are subject-centered, there is a direction for some new offerings.*

- **Adults are pragmatic; they learn best when they have an opportunity to apply theory/information to practical situations immediately in their own lives.**
 - *Help participants to explicitly see how the session/workshop will make a difference in their lives.*
 - *Provide time for critical reflection. Adults need to ask: So what? What difference does this make for the way I live my life? WIIFM: What's in it for me?*
 - *Use real language. Use language that helps people connect faith and the teachings of the church with the way they live their lives.*
 - *People retain knowledge/skills if they have immediate and repeated opportunities to practice what is learned.*

- **Adults are competency-based learners in that they wish to apply newly-acquired skills or knowledge to their immediate circumstances.**
 - *Recent research in best practices in adult education theory recommends layering information with the most basic information first. Then exercises and experiences are created where people can use and apply the information.*
 - *Adults need to be able to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep – and use – the new information.*

- **The most teachable moments in an adult's life have been found to be transitional times, when they are negotiating critical passages.**
 - *Adults seek learning experiences in order to cope with specific life-changing events – e.g. marriage, divorce, a new job, a promotion, being fired, retirement, losing a loved one, unanticipated illness, moving to a new city, etc.*
 - *The more life-changing events an adult encounter, the more likely he or she is to seek out learning opportunities. Just as stress increases as life-change events accumulate, the motivation to cope with change through engagement in a learning experience increases.*
 - *Adults are generally willing to engage in learning experiences before, after, or even during the actual life change event.*
 - *Research also indicates that motivation/attendance occurs most successfully when opportunities are offered for specific groups, rather than generic programs “for everyone,” e.g. the widowed, unemployed, newly marrieds, empty-nesters, newly-retired, etc.*
 - *Expand the understanding of what is included in adult faith formation, the inclusivity of it: counseling, spiritual direction, etc.*

- **Adults are motivated to learn when they have the opportunity to do something they could not do before.**

- **Adults learn best in an environment that encourages self-esteem and interdependence.**
 - *Adults expect and need to be respected.*
 - *Acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adults bring.*
 - *Treat learners as equals in knowledge and experience.*
 - *Adults hate to have their time wasted.*

- *Allow learners to voice their opinions freely.*
- **Adults learn best in a safe, relaxed and comfortable environment.**
 - *Research shows that learning increases in an atmosphere that is the least reminiscent of any formal schooling.*
 - *Adults appreciate physical settings that have been created for adults (rather than fourth grade classrooms or a 300-seat cafeteria for an intimate group of 20).*
 - *Long lectures, periods of interminable sitting and the absence of practice opportunities rate high on the irritation scale.*
 - *Adults need regular breaks.*
 - *Create an atmosphere of welcome and hospitality: serve good food.*
 - *An environment that reflects welcome (special touches like flowers or candles on the tables) is crucial for adults.*
 - *Provide water, candy, snacks on every table.*
 - *Weave humor and good fun into the sessions.*
- **Adults learn best when they are physically comfortable and can socialize with others as they learn.** Adult learning takes place within a sense of community.
 - *Use name tags; take time for people to introduce themselves.*
 - *Invite work in small groups; teamwork.*
- **Effective adult learning is discovery-centered. Adults learn best by discovering it for themselves rather than just being told.** They learn more effectively through experiential techniques such as discussion or problem-solving.
 - *Use questions; small group discussions.*
 - *Facilitators who have a tendency to “tell” rather than facilitate can hold that in check/compensate for it by concentrating on the use of open-ended questions to draw out relevant learner knowledge and experience.*
- **Adults learn by doing.** Adults learn more if they participate and if they invest something of themselves (ideas, time, money) in the learning experience.
- **Recent research in best practices in adult education theory proves that learning proceeds most quickly when information reaches the learner through more than one sensory channel.**
 - *Adults learn best when there are opportunities for a variety of learning activities.*
 - *Use visual, auditory and kinesthetic methods and techniques – as well as methods incorporating all the Multiple Intelligences.*
 - *Nonhuman media such as books, programmed instruction, television, multimedia, the internet have become popular with adults in recent years.*

- **The hallmark of any adult gathering is heterogeneity. Adults are more likely to be different than the same.** (A group of 60-year olds is different than a group of 40- year olds, and not all 60-year olds are the same.) At the same time, each person has his/her own learning style; adults have different preferred ways of taking in and processing information, and of responding to learning situations.
 - *Offer a number of options/present in different ways in order to reach people who learn/process in different ways.*
 - *When suggesting activities for learners to respond to the material presented, give options (discussions, poetry, writing a prayer, designing a program/response/social action, quiet reflection, etc.); don't expect that all will be comfortable with/will want to do the same thing.*

- **Learning is emotional and intuitive as well as intellectual and rational.**
 - *Take time to build community, a feeling of trust and acceptance.*
 - *Give time for expression of feelings around an idea or task at hand.*
 - *Encourage people to be active, not passive learners, to ask questions and do critical thinking without the facilitator (or other participants) giving judgment or negative criticism.*

- **Learning is communal and social as well as individual and personal.**
 - *Adults learn best when they have opportunities to engage in social learning, i.e., they learn from peers as well as from an "instructor."*
 - *Create an atmosphere in which the participants become comfortable with feedback from one another and the facilitator and in which each person sees his/her importance in the group.*
 - *Programs need to be designed to accept viewpoints from people in different life stages and with different value "sets."*

- **Adult learning happens not just through the intellect, rational capabilities but as the emotions, imaginations and creativity are engaged.**
 - *Utilize art, music, story-telling, prayer, drama, reflection, poetry, guided imagery, images, rituals, service, symbols, conversation, etc.*
 - *Provide an environment that encourages questions.*

- **Learning (change) is a consequence of experience. Adults need to experience what is being taught.** Change does not come about simply by being told about something (e.g. prayer is learned only by praying).
 - *Use problem-solving and discussion groups which create an environment that gives high value to an individual's discovery of the personal meaning of ideas.*
 - *Enable people to express their needs in the adult faith formation setting, rather than telling them what their needs are.*

- **This transformative learning happens when adults have time to attend to and reflect upon their experience. Reflecting on one's experience is usually done through extended conversation. There are some requirements for this type of conversation:**
 - *enough time to get beyond surface understandings/polite agreements*
 - *space conducive for adult gatherings*
 - *an atmosphere of openness and trust*
 - *a relationship of learners together (role of the leader is not that of a teacher handing over data for learners to receive)*

- **Adult faith formation aims to develop wisdom, not simply knowledge, motivation or a code of conduct.** Wisdom is defined by Scripture as insight and discernment gained as truth, applied to life.

- **Adult learning results in transformation: a change in one's self and thus making a difference in the world.**

- **Adults learn best when they evaluate themselves.**
 - *Adults need an opportunity when they have a sense of progress toward their goals, can see results and rewards for the time they invest in learning.*
 - *Feedback and recognition needs to be planned.*

Janet Schaeffler, OP
www.janetschaeffler.com