What is the adult learning theory?

Adult learning theories are based on the premise that adults learn differently than children. Whereas child-oriented learning is in the realm of pedagogy, learning in adulthood is under the purview of andragogy in a broad sense. Here are some basic differences between the ways children and adults learn.

Children	Adults
Child-oriented learning provides a basic foundation of knowledge and helps develop critical thinking skills.	Adults have an existing base of knowledge and life experience. They seek out continuous learning based on personal interests, wants, and needs.
Children typically have no choice but to study and may lose enthusiasm if they are not engaged in what is happening around them.	Adults understand why they're learning, so their motivation levels are naturally high.
It's necessary to be in charge of the classroom.	It's beneficial to let adults work things out for themselves and organize themselves.
Teachers play a central role in delivering knowledge and guiding learning activities.	The role of "teacher" may be effectively filled by a mentor, coach, training facilitator, peer, or subject matter expert.

Given that adults differ from children and have certain emotional baggage, life experience, internal motives, and cognitive characteristics, this imposes specific challenges that most adults tend to face when it comes to learning and training. Let's cover them briefly.

Difficulties in adult learning

These are the most common difficulties, or learning barriers, typically encountered by adult learners that can prevent adults from trying new things, growing their skills, and obtaining new knowledge. Since workplace training takes the largest share in adult learning, we'll cover adult learning barriers in that context.

Focusing

With only 5% of the workweek that employees are ready to spend on training (according to the most optimistic estimates), it's evident that adults generally tend to have other priorities. They have too much on their plate, not only at work but in their personal life, taking care of their families. That presents the challenge to stay focused on training and reduce distractions (e.g., noisy office environment, children and pets demanding attention at home, or smartphone addiction).

Seeing the big picture

If adults don't see where they stand in the company, don't feel valued, or know what depends on them, training may seem unnecessary. Employees may simply not understand why their employer tries to involve them in the training process, what results are expected of them, and why. It's necessary to show that training and development are important for their growth in the company and to make a real impact on overall business performance.

Having a purpose

That's the same old 'what's in it for me' situation. Adult learners want to know exactly how the new knowledge will help them in life or work. If the purpose of training isn't concrete enough and doesn't target the learning needs of the audience, it may become an unbreakable barrier, and no training will make sense.

Imposter syndrome

Adults tend to fear not knowing something they perceive to be essential for their new role, another career path, or a different profession. Fear of criticism adds to this. Whereas any knowledge can be gained, toxic self-doubt and feeling unsatisfactory are harder to resolve. So, if the training topic is something new for the adult, they may suffer from imposter syndrome, and that hinders their growth and development greatly.

To distinguish the critical aspects of adult learning, education theorists and psychologists had to elaborate theoretical frameworks that would reinvent learning practices beyond the school and college gates and move them to workplaces. Over the last century, a number of different theories have gained prominence. There's no single

theory that explains how and why adults learn best; however, each one sheds light on a particular aspect of adult learning.

We've made a review of six of the most popular adult learning theories to see how each can be used to support overall learning needs.

Learning theory comparison chart

Here's a comparison chart of all the learning theories we will examine in the article. We hope it'll help you select the best strategy your learning design needs.

THEORY	SUMMARY	BEST SUITED FOR
Andragogy	Adult learners are autonomous and self-directed, and seek out learning based on personal needs. Adult learners must be able to apply what they learn in a practical way.	Problem solving Structured formal learning Learners with a defined need to know
Transformational Learning	A person's beliefs and expectations shape their view of the world. Through a rational analytical process, a person can consciously change their old beliefs and implement new ones.	Complex analytical processes Evaluation and analysis Long-term personal growth

Experiential Learning	A hands-on approach where individuals learn by doing. Puts the learner at the center of the learning process. Learning happens through an active process of doing and reflection.	Mechanical skills Leadership skills Process improvement Systematic thinking
Self-Directed Learning	Process where individuals take complete ownership of the learning process to diagnose learning needs, identify resources, implement learning, and assess their results.	Process updates Self-motivated learners Technology and software skills
Project Based Learning	Learners engage in active investigation of a real-world problem. Gives learners a voice in the overall process through a process of inquiry, critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and communication.	Project management Process improvement Manufacturing

Action Learning	Learning is the result of programming and questioning. Learners take action on a problem and reflect upon the results.	Team building Fill in knowledge gaps Uncover areas of learning need

Below is the detailed overview of these most popular adult learning theories.

Major adult learning theories

Take an overall look at these theories to gain insight into what motivates adults to learn, and use this knowledge as a building block for your instructional design efforts.

Andragogy

Developed by Malcolm Knowles, the concept of andragogy is described by its creator as the art and science of helping adults learn. We've already covered the main assumptions of this adult learning model when comparing adult and child learners. Malcolm Knowles elaborated the four main principles of adult learning that andragogy is famous for.

Principle	Practical example
Adults learn better from their experiences and their past knowledge should be taken into account.	When planning a course for adults, try to appeal to their professional background, whatever it is, and provide related examples. Adults will learn new knowledge better if they link it to their life experiences.

Adults favor a pragmatic approach and must be able to apply learning to solve a specific problem.	Clearly articulate the 'why' behind training and make it speak for itself. Anticipate the question "What's in it for me?" and make the very title of your training material answer this question.
Adults are most interested in learning things that have immediate relevance.	Blend theory with practice and create exercises and role-plays to apply new knowledge immediately.
Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.	Involve your learners in the planning, execution, and assessment of the new training program. Collect their feedback and update the training material accordingly.

Source: 2023

ispring