

SIX PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE¹

	Theory	Practice	Examples <i>An example of when I experienced or applied this theory was...</i>
1	Emotions: Adults' emotional states are inextricably tied to their abilities to learn. To learn, an adult must be emotionally comfortable with the learning situation. When we feel afraid, our brains shut down to learning and new information can't be absorbed.	<i>In a training, professional development session or coaching session, incorporate opportunities for learners to recognize and share their emotional experience. Use a facilitation style that communicates acceptance for learners wherever they're at in their learning, that invites feedback, that acknowledges the emotional risks inherent in learning. Normalize emotional discomfort in learning.</i>	
2	History: Adults come to the learning process with a wide range of previous experiences, knowledge, interests, and competencies. The more explicit these relationships (between the new and the old) are made through discussion and reflection, the deeper and more permanent the learning will be.	<i>Provide activities that permit learners to compare the theoretical aspects of the training with their experiences.</i>	
3	Self-direction: Adults want to be the origin of their own learning and should therefore have some control over the what, who, how, why, when and where of their learning. Adults must see a need for the learning they're engaging in before the learning can take place.	<i>Present trainings and professional development sessions with as many options for learning as possible. Provide PD that can be used in the near future.</i>	

¹ Adapted from: Knowles, M. (1996). Adult Learning.

4	<p>Problem-centered learning: Because of our life and work experience, adults have a task-centered or problem-centered orientation to learning. When trainings are developed around problem solving, then adults will learn the content with the intention of using it.</p>	<p><i>Design PD so that learners are solving problems or performing tasks as close as possible to those encountered in their work. Offer input and information as a way to solve the problems. Focus on doing something with new information, not just knowing the information.</i></p>	
5	<p>Knowing why: Adults need to know why they need to learn something. Adults spend a lot of time and energy exploring the benefits of learning something and the costs of not learning them before they are willing to invest time in learning it. Adults will commit to learning when they believe that the objectives are realistic and important for their personal and professional needs. They need to see that what they learn through professional development is applicable to their day-to-day activities and problems.</p>	<p><i>Design trainings based on the actual needs of the audience. Include the reasons for learning in information about the training and agendas. Clearly show the benefits of learning. Base activities on real work experiences.</i></p>	
6	<p>Internalizing learning: Adult learners do not automatically transfer learning into daily practice. Adults need direct, concrete experiences for applying what they have learned to their work. Adult learners need a lot of practice including guided practice that incorporates receiving feedback.</p>	<p><i>Offer coaching and other kinds of follow-up support. Incorporate practice opportunities into training sessions. Create structures for giving and receiving feedback.</i></p>	