Principles of Adult Education

Who is an adult? Malcolm Knowles (1984) defined an adult in four ways. The first definition is the biological definition: when they have reached the age at which they can reproduce. The legal definition of an adult is when the law allows a person to vote, get married without consent from parents, or obtain a driver’s license. The social definition of an adult defines a person as an adult when he/she begins performing adult roles such as spouse, parent, and/or full-time worker. The fourth and final definition is the psychological definition of an adult which states that “we become an adult psychologically when we arrive at a self-concept of being responsible for our own lives, of being self-directing” (p. 55). It is this fourth definition that is deemed the most important in terms of learning. Knowles’ andragogical model is based on six assumptions. These assumptions helped to define the characteristics of adult learners and their reasons for learning.

1) The need to know. Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it. Adults should be made aware of how a learning situation can be applied toward real world experiences which in turn makes learning more meaningful.

2) The learner’s self-concept. Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept they develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. They resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them.

3) The role of the learner’s experience. Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youths. These experiences lead to a diverse audience in any adult group setting. Background, learning styles, motivation, needs, interests, and goals vary to a large degree, and while the same is true of a group of youths, the big difference here is the emphasis on the individualization of teaching and learning techniques in adult education. Greater experience can also have some negative effects as well. Throughout a lifetime a person tends to develop mental habits, biases, and presumptions that tend to inhibit that individual from alternative ways of thinking and developing new ideas and different perceptions.

4) Readiness to learn. Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations.

5) Orientation to learning. Adult learners are life-centered in their orientation to learning. Adults are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations. Furthermore, they learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations.

6) Motivation. While adults are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries), the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of
life). Motivation may be blocked by an adult’s negative self-concept as a student, time constraints, and programs that violate principles of adult learning (pp. 55-61).

Many researchers have been involved in the study of adult learners. From these studies, a list has emerged.

Brookfield (1985) defines adult education as an “activity concerned to assist adults in their quest for a sense of control in their own lives, within their interpersonal relationships, and with regard to the social forms and structures within which they live” (p. 46). Brookfield also identifies six principles of critical practice in adult education:

1) Participation is voluntary; adults are engaged in learning as a result of their own volition. It may be the circumstances prompting this learning are external to the learner (job loss, divorce, bereavement), but the decision to learn is that of the learner’s. Hence, excluded are settings where adults are coerced, threatened, bullied or intimidated into learning.

2) Respect for self-worth; an attention to increasing adults’ sense of self-worth underlies all educational efforts. This does not mean that criticism is absent from educational encounters. Foreign to adult education, however, are practices or statements which belittle others or which involve physical or emotional abuse.

3) Adult education is collaborative; teachers and learners are engaged in a cooperative enterprise in which, at different times and for different purposes, leadership and facilitation roles will be assumed by different group members. This collaboration is seen in needs diagnosis, objectives setting, curriculum development, in methodological aspects, and in generating evaluative criteria and indices. This collaboration is continuous, so that adult education involves a continual renegotiation of activities and priorities in which competing claims are explored, discussed and negotiated.

4) Praxis is at the heart of adult education; participants are involved in a constant process of activity, reflection on activity, collaborative analysis of activity, new activity, further reflection and collaborative analysis and so on. “Activity” can, of course, include cognitive activity so that adult education does not always require participants to do something in the sense of performing clearly observable acts. Exploring a wholly new way of interpreting one’s work, personal relationships or political allegiances would be example of activities in this sense.

5) Adult education fosters a spirit of critical reflection; through education, learners come to appreciate that values, beliefs and behaviors are culturally constructed and transmitted, and that they are provisional and relative. Adult educators are concerned, therefore, to prompt adults to consider ways of thinking and living alternative to those they already inhabit.

6) The aim of adult education is the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults; such adults will see themselves as proactive, initiating individuals engaged in a continuous re-creation of their personal relationships, work worlds, and social circumstances, and not as reactive individuals, buffeted by the uncontrollable forces of circumstance (Brookfield, 1985, p. 48).

Gibb (1960) synthesized six principles of adult learning which formed a basis for a “functional” theory to aid in the practice of adult education. He believed that learning must be problem and experience centered, and that the experience must be meaningful to
the learner. The learner must also be free to look at his/her experience, and goals must be set and pursued by the individual. And finally, the learner must receive feedback concerning progress toward goals.

Miller (1964) identified six conditions for learning and believed that students need to be adequately motivated to change their behavior, they must need to be made aware of the inadequacy of present behaviors, and they should have a clear picture of the behavior required of them. They must be given the opportunity to practice those required behaviors, they should receive reinforcement of correct behavior, and they must have appropriate materials.

Kidd (1973) identified concepts that were derived from the changing conditions adults encounter throughout their life-span, role changes that are required by ever changing societal necessities, the nature of adult student-teacher relationships, the differences of the organs and functions of adult and, adults’ self-directing nature, the physical, cultural, and emotional meaning of time to an adult, and the attitudes of adults surrounding aging and the prospect of death.

Knox (1977) thought that adults can and do learn continually and informally throughout their lifetime as they adjust to role changes and other adaptations. However, individual characteristics can modify an adult’s learning achievement. Physical, social, and personal characteristics surrounding the learning act, including the content and pace of learning, can also affect the learning achievement. Knox also thought that adult learners tend to underestimate their abilities and often perform below their capacity.

Smith (1982) identified six observations about the nature of learning. He said that learning is lifelong, it is personal, and it involves change. Learning in part is a function of human development, it pertains to experience, and it is partially intuitive. Smith also recognized four essential characteristics that adults exhibit. He identified adults as having multiple roles and responsibilities that result in a different orientation to learning. Adults have many life experiences that result in preferences for modes of learning and learning environments. Adults encounter a number of developmental phases throughout their lifetime in the physical, psychological, and social realms. Adults experience anxiety and ambivalence in their orientation to learning. These four characteristics create conditions for learning for the adult learner. Adults learn best when they feel the need to learn and when they have a sense of responsibility for what, why, and how to learn. They use experience as a resource in learning, therefore they must perceive a meaningful relationship to past experience. What is to be learned should be related to the individual’s developmental changes and life tasks, and adults should not perceive learning as a threatening experience (Brookfield, 1986, pp. 30-31).

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) proposed a list of eight principles of learning that can serve as a guideline for effective facilitation. They believe that an adult’s readiness to learn is dependent upon the amount of previous learning, that more pervasive and permanent learning stems from intrinsic motivation, that positive reinforcement is effective, that the material should be presented in an organized fashion, that learning is enhanced by repetition, that meaningful tasks and material can be more fully and easily learned, that active participation improves retention, and that environmental factors have an effect on learning.
Brookfield (1985) summarized the principles of adult learning developed by Gibb, Miller, Kidd, Knox, Brundage and Mackeracher, Smith, and Darekenwald and Merriam concisely. He stated that:

adults learn throughout their lives, with the negotiations of the transitional stages in the life-span being the immediate causes and motive for much of this learning. They exhibit diverse learning styles - strategies for coding information, cognitive procedures, mental sets - and learn in different ways, at different times, for different purposes. As a rule, however, they like their learning activities to be problem centered and to be meaningful to their life situation, and they want the learning outcomes to have some immediacy of application. The past experiences of adults affect their current learning, sometimes serving as an enhancement, sometimes as a hindrance. Effective learning is also linked to the adult’s subscription to a self-concept of himself or herself as a learner. Finally, adults exhibit a tendency toward self-directedness in their learning (p. 31).