

The Adult Learner

in Higher Education and the Workplace

Seven Characteristics of Highly Effective Adult Learning Programs

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With our ever-accelerating speed of change in both knowledge and technology, it is clear that we adults have a choice: We either continue to learn throughout our lives, or we allow our skills and knowledge to quickly slide into obsolescence. The same principle applies to companies: Those who fail to continually teach and train employees quickly slide into obsolescence.

Private employers spend \$210 billion a year for training, while the government spends an additional \$5 billion. Are these training programs doing the job? Some are; some are not. Highly effective adult learning requires certain conditions. The question is, what are those conditions?

Because few studies have examined what type of learning environment best helps adults to grow and develop, I conducted a four-year study of this question. Why connect growth with learning? Because significant learning and personal growth are inseparable; growth is learning. The term growth here refers to the maturity of our thought processes. Just as children develop from simple to complex thinking, we adults can continue to mature in the way we think. And the way we think affects our character development, moral judgment, interpersonal relationships, impulse control, self-concept, and how well we function in our environment. Yet we have all noticed that not all adults continue to grow; some cease to learn; thus they cease to grow.

The study investigated which factors in adult learning environments best facilitate adult growth and development. Sixty men and women who began doctoral programs when between ages 37 and 48 participated. They completed two tests measuring adult development, a questionnaire, and 17 were interviewed. All measures revealed the same results. It was as though this research snapped multiple pictures of a barely visible phenomenon from various angles, and when developed, all pictures revealed the same clear image.

Results revealed that adults can and do experience significant personal growth at midlife. However, adult students grew significantly only in one type of learning environment; they tended not to grow or to regress in another type. What was the difference? The seven key factors found in learning programs that stimulated adult development are:

1. An environment where students feel safe and supported, where individual needs and uniqueness are honored, where abilities and life achievements are acknowledged and respected.

2. An environment that fosters intellectual freedom and encourages experimentation and creativity.
3. An environment where faculty treats adult students as peers--accepted and respected as intelligent experienced adults whose opinions are listened to, honored, appreciated. Such faculty members often comment that they learn as much from their students as the students learn from them.
4. Self-directed learning, where students take responsibility for their own learning. They work with faculty to design individual learning programs which address what each person needs and wants to learn in order to function optimally in their profession.
5. Pacing, or intellectual challenge. Optimal pacing is challenging people just beyond their present level of ability. If challenged too far beyond, people give up. If challenged too little, they become bored and learn little. Pacing can be compared to playing tennis with a slightly better player; your game tends to improve. But if the other player is far better and it's impossible to return a ball, you give up, overwhelmed. If the other player is less experienced and can return none of your balls, you learn little. Those adults who reported experiencing high levels of intellectual stimulation--to the point of feeling discomfort--grew more.
6. Active involvement in learning, as opposed to passively listening to lectures. Where students and instructors interact and dialogue, where students try out new ideas in the workplace, where exercises and experiences are used to bolster facts and theory, adults grow more.
7. Regular feedback mechanisms for students to tell faculty what works best for them and what they want and need to learn--and faculty who hear and make changes based on student input.

In contrast, in learning programs where students feel unsafe and threatened, where they are viewed as underlings, life achievements not honored, those students tend to regress developmentally, especially in self-esteem and self-confidence. In programs where students are required to take identical lockstep courses, whether relevant to professional goals or not, and where they are often expected to spend several years working on a dissertation that is part of a professor's research project instead of on a topic of their choice, they grow less. In other words, students grow more in student-centered as opposed to faculty-centered programs.

A clear and simple mini-lab on effective and ineffective adult learning environments can be observed in English-as-Second-Language classes for new immigrants. In classes where students feel safe, where lessons are focused on current language needs, where students are asked for input on what helps them most to learn, where students are actively involved in interesting and fun exercises, where there's lots of laughter and congeniality, students of all ages and backgrounds learn English fast and well. In classes where students are made to feel inadequate and threatened, little is learned.

These findings support the thinking of Malcolm Knowles, recognized as the father of adult learning; his trailblazing work underlies many of our most effective adult education programs. He reminded us that in optimal adult learning programs, where adults learn best, both students and faculty also have fun, for it is exhilarating to REALLY learn.

References:

Billington, Dorothy D. (1988) Ego Development and Adult Education. Doctoral Dissertation, The Fielding Institute. Dissertation Abstracts International, 49 (7). (University Microfilms No. 88-16, 275).

Knowles, Malcolm. (1986) The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species. Houston: Gulf Publishing.

Dorothy has a new book out, "*Life is an Attitude: How to Grow Forever Better*". It is targeted toward the millions of Americans who are terrified of getting older--and becoming lesser. It shows how we can become more interested and interesting, more wise, vital, happy and juicy every day of our lives. The surprise is that people in their 20s to their eighties are loving it.

If you would like to order a copy, you can either call 1-800-852-4890 or order through Amazon.com or by ordering through your local bookstore.

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ADULT LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS

Please answer the following questions, as you may become part of a process that will enhance Adult Learner programs. (Check the appropriate response as you believe it applies to you in this course.)

Please do not put your name on this paper!

1. This class has had an environment where I felt individual needs and uniqueness are respected.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree Strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree Strongly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided | |

2. I believe that my abilities and life achievements have been acknowledged and respected in this class.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree Strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree Strongly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided | |

3. This class has encouraged intellectual freedom, experimentation and creativity.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree Strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree Strongly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided | |

4. In this class I have been treated as an intelligent adult where my opinions are listened to, honored and appreciated.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree Strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree Strongly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided | |

5. Self-directed learning has been encouraged in this class.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree Strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree Strongly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided | |

6. This class has been an Intellectual challenge.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree Strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree Strongly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided | |

7. This class has promoted interaction with the instructor and between students.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree Strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree Strongly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided | |

8. Academic feedback has been regular and timely from the instructor.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree Strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree Strongly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided | |

9. I have been treated fairly in this class and the instructor has listened, responded and made adequate changes.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree Strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree Strongly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undecided | |

Highly Effective Adult Learning Programs

– Key Characteristics –

If these key characteristics are present, adults learn and grow.

If these key characteristics are absent, adults regress and don't grow.

1. **Class Environment of Respect**
2. **Abilities and Life Achievements Acknowledged**
3. **Intellectual Freedom, with Experimentation and Creativity Encouraged**
4. **Treated As Intelligent Adult Whose Opinions Are Valued**
5. **Self-Directed Learning**
6. **Class Is An Intellectual Challenge**
7. **Interaction Promoted with Instructor and Between Participants, with Them Trying New Ideas in the Workplace**
8. **Regular and Timely Feedback from Instructor**
9. **Learner Treated Fairly by Instructor, Who Listened, Responded and Made Adequate Changes**