eLearning Design and Development

9 Tips To Apply Adult Learning Theory to eLearning

See also: adult learners, adult learning, adult learning theories, andragogy, corporate elearning best practices, Corporate Learners

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In this article I'll discuss how Knowles' 5 adult learning theory assumptions can be translated to modern day eLearning experiences, so that you can integrate the 4 principles of Andragogy into your eLearning course for maximum learner engagement and motivation.

How To Apply Adult Learning Theory to eLearning

According to the renowned American educator, Malcolm Knowles there are 5 assumptions concerning the characteristics of adult learners, and 4 principles concerning adult learning

(andragogy). Despite the fact that Knowles' adult learning theory assumptions and principles were introduced in the 1980's, each can be utilized today to help eLearning professionals create more meaningful learning experiences for adult learners.

Applying Knowles' 5 Adult Learning Theory Assumptions to eLearning

1. **Assumption #1 (Self-Concept)**
   Create learning experiences that offer minimum instruction and maximum autonomy.
   A major aspect of designing adult eLearning courses is having an eLearning support system to offer guidance and help, while still giving the eLearning tools and resources they need to learn on their own terms. Adult learners acquire new information and build upon existing knowledge much more effectively if they are encouraged to explore a topic on their own. While younger learners might need to be guided through the learning process, mature learners will typically get more out of the experience if they are able to work autonomously. This might come in the form of self-study or group collaboration projects that involve minimal instructor intervention. eLearning professionals can also offer simulations, scenarios, or games without prefacing them with any information. As such, the adult learners will have to explore the activity on their own, and decide which benefits and information they can take away from the eLearning experience. With that being said, you'll also want to have an eLearning support system in place if they need to ask questions or to overcome any obstacles that may be hindering the eLearning process.

2. **Assumption #2 (Adult Learner Experience)**
   Include a wide range of instructional design models and theories to appeal to varied experience levels and backgrounds.
   Adult learners are more mature. Therefore, they have had more time to cultivate life experience and typically have a wider knowledge base. That means that you'll have to take into account that your adult learning audience is going to be more diverse, especially in terms of backgrounds, experience levels, and skill sets. While one adult learner may be well versed on how to search for resources online, another may have very little experience using the Internet. All of this must be considered when designing and developing your eLearning courses and eLearning activities. To appeal to different adult learners, it's often best to include a variety of different instructional design models and theories into your eLearning course or module. Survey your audience beforehand to determine any technical knowledge limitations they may have, as well as to assess their education levels. By doing this, you will also be able to create eLearning experiences that are informative and engaging, rather than too challenging or boring. For instance, if your target audience includes a number of adult learners who may already know how to use multimedia, then including them in your eLearning course will boost its effectiveness and make it more immersive.

3. **Assumption #3 (Readiness to Learn)**
   Utilize social media and online collaboration tools to tie learning to social development.
   As we get older, we tend to gravitate more toward learning experiences that offer some sort of social development benefit. For example, we are often more ready to challenge ourselves with new learning opportunities if we know it will help us to fine tune skills that pertain to our social roles. From an eLearning professional point of view, social media and online collaboration tools can help you to incorporate this assumption into

your deliverables. Create activities that encourage adult learners to use sites like LinkedIn and Google Plus as invaluable tools. This can help them to not only build their social network, but collaborate with those who share the same interests.

4. **Assumption #4 (Orientation to Learning)**
Emphasize how the subject matter is going to solve problems that an adult learner regularly encounters.
Adult learners, essentially, need to know the why and when before they actively engage in the eLearning process. For example, they will not only want to know why they need to acquire specific information, but whether or not that information can be applied in the immediate future. Younger learners accept the fact that the knowledge they're acquiring today may not be used for quite some time. However, mature learners prefer to engage in eLearning experiences that help them to solve problems they encounter on a regular basis (in the here-and-now, rather than the future). So, you'll want to emphasize how the subject matter is going to help them solve problems immediately by offering real world examples and scenarios.

5. **Assumption #5 (Motivation to Learn)**
There must be a valid reason behind every eLearning course, module or educational activity.
Motivation is key with adult learners. As such, you will need to motivate them to learn by offering them a reason for every eLearning activity, assessment, or eLearning module they'll need to complete. eLearning professionals must explain why a particular eLearning course is being taught and why an adult learner must participate in an eLearning activity, in order for the overall eLearning experience to be meaningful and engaging. For example, if you are asking adult learners to complete a group collaboration task, you should also clearly define that this exercise will help them to build their team working and communication skills, even after the eLearning course is over. While younger learners won't need to necessarily know the reason why they are required to participate in an activity, adult learners need to feel as though they are more involved in the process of learning. Otherwise, they will question the validity of the eLearning course, given that they don't see any real need for acquiring the new knowledge or skills.

Applying Knowles' 4 Adult Learning Theory Principles to eLearning

1. **Principle of Andragogy#1**
Adults must have a hand in the design and development of their learning experience.
While, both adult and younger online learners must feel as though they are playing an active role in their own eLearning experience, for adult learners this is particularly important. They must truly be an integral part of the development and implementation of the curriculum, as well as of the evaluation process. Getting feedback from adult learners allows you to achieve this, as it offers you the opportunity to design learning materials, exams, and activities based upon the needs and wants of the adult learners.

2. **Principle of Andragogy#2**
Experience should be at the root of all eLearning tasks and activities.
What matters most in regards to adult education isn't the end result, but the eLearning experience that is gathered through instruction and activities. Rather than offering memorization tasks, create projects and exercises that encourage adult learners to go out

and explore the subject matter, thereby gaining experience. By doing this, adult learners can learn from their errors and master their skills sets through first-hand experience. Adult learners can take on their own approach when solving problems, which will give them the chance to use their knowledge in a practical way. There will be trial-and-error involved, which is what makes the overall eLearning experience more meaningful and effective.

3. **Principle of Andragogy #3**
   Real life applications and benefits must be tied to the eLearning course.
   Adult learners need to be able to tie the subject matter to real world benefits and applications. If they cannot see how a module or activity will give them an advantage in real life, or how a particular eLearning course is going to apply to real world situations, then they won't be excited about the eLearning process. eLearning professionals can increase engagement by integrating scenarios into adult eLearning courses. This way, adult learners have the opportunity to directly see how what they are learning can be used in the real world.

4. **Principle of Andragogy #4**
   Give adult learners the opportunity to absorb information, rather than memorizing it.
   The content being offered in adult eLearning courses should be problem-centered, as adult learners' will want to immediately see how the instructions will help them to solve an issue they might encounter outside of the eLearning environment. This often means that the subject matter should offer them the chance to fine tune skill sets and acquire (and retain) practical knowledge by doing, rather than just memorizing. Create activities that allow adult learners to delve into specific tasks, such as simulations, that enable them to store the information in their long term memory through repetition and experience.

These adult learning principles and assumptions can be applied to any eLearning deliverable in order to offer your adult learners a wide range of benefits, including improved comprehension of key concepts and a boost in knowledge retention.

If you'd like to learn more about the Knowles' Adult Learning Theory, **The Adult Learning Theory - Andragogy - of Malcolm Knowles** article features a detailed explanation of the adult learning theory, as well as a list of recommended resources that you may find useful.

In addition, the **17 Tips To Motivate Adult Learners** article offers a number of valuable tips on how to motivate adult learners, so that you can create engaging and exciting learning experience.

Last but not least, you may want to review the **The Adult Learning Theory – Andragogy – Infographic**.

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