

## Notes for the Primary Care Teachers HOW DO ADULTS LEARN?

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### Introduction

It is the professional responsibility of Family Doctors to train the next generation of physicians. This can be daunting to novice mentors because until recently, learning how to teach has never been in the medical curriculum. The problem is made more challenging when the learners are adults. In order to be an effective mentor, you will have to thoroughly understand your learners. This paper aims to provide information on the special characteristics of adult learners and its implications on teaching-learning.<sup>1</sup> The term “andragogy” was first introduced by the educationist Malcolm Knowles who defined it as the “art and science of helping adults to learn”. Box 1 lists the special characteristics on which the principles of adult learning are based.<sup>2</sup>

### Box 1: Special characteristics of adult learners

- o Adults are independent and self-directed
- o Adults are self-motivated
- o Adults already possess vast experiential learning
- o Adults want learning that can be immediately applied to their daily job requirements
- o Adults prefer relevant problem-based specific topics to broad subject-based general topics
- o Adults prefer interactive learning
- o Adults want conducive learning environment

### CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS

#### Independent and self-directed

Adult learners are independent and self-directed and will decide on what they want to learn. Unfortunately, when placed in a learning environment some immediately revert back to their traditional pedagogical roots of passive dependency and expect ‘spoon feeding’ from the teacher. This paradox prevents them from acquiring lifelong learning<sup>3</sup>. The solution is to teach them how to “fish” by applying modern learner-centred approaches (problem based learning, outcome based learning, guided discovery learning) and teaching them how to source for learning materials.<sup>2,3</sup> Keeping a portfolio can identify

knowledge and skills gaps and assist in monitoring progress of their continuing professional development. Adult learners, with the guidance of the mentor, can prepare a curriculum based on their own learning needs.

#### Self-motivated

Motivation to learn comes from extrinsic and intrinsic factors for children but adults are usually self-motivated. They learn because they want to. Offering rewards may not work with adult learners but recognising their values, respecting their opinions and being concerned will increase learner’s self esteem and sense of belonging. Mentor’s clear directions, enthusiasm for the subject, role modeling and rapport with mentees all support learning.<sup>4</sup>

#### Possess vast experiential learning

Adult learners come with a wealth of experiential learning. The good mentor should recognise this and build on it to promote new learning. These vast experiences can be drawn upon to provide peer to peer learning which is as powerful as learning from the teacher alone. Teaching-learning with adults is rewarding and stimulating for the mentor as a two-way traffic for sharing exists. However, previous learning can pose an obstacle to adult learning. The adage, ‘it is difficult to teach old dogs new tricks’ still holds true for adults who have difficulty “unlearning” what have been superseded by current evidence-based data.

#### Learning that can be immediately applied to their daily work

Adult learners prefer learning that can be immediately applied to their daily work. Family doctors may not be interested in learning the evolution theory but will prefer to learn how to start insulin therapy.

#### Relevant problem-based specific topics

Time is a precious commodity due to the competing demands from family and work. Hence adult learners are not interested in mere information gathering but would prefer specific problem based topics that are relevant to their needs. The General Practitioner with a large paediatric patient base will not be interested in learning broad topics like the history of medicine but will be keen to learn how to recognize Kawasaki disease. Adult learners learn best by focusing on problem-solving. This

method of delivery is the basis for problem-based and task-based learning, now adopted by most medical schools to promote life-long learning.<sup>3</sup>

### Interactive Learning

Didactic teaching is useful for children but adults prefer and learn better when learning is interactive. They can ask questions, contribute answers and provide stimulating discussion using their previous knowledge and experiences. The effective mentors should keep in mind that adult learners have different learning styles and learn at different paces. Hence the use of handouts and materials can allow for learning to start before the session and to continue at learners' own time and pace.<sup>1</sup>

### Conducive learning environment

With adult learners, creating a conducive educational environment is as important as what is taught and shared.<sup>4</sup> The mentor's role in creating the correct learning climate can make or break a useful learning experience. Adult learners are more sensitive to their surrounding and discomforts. The adult learner has hearing, sight and bladder problems due to the physiological process of aging.

When planning a learning session, consider the acoustics of the room. An almost excellent course I attended recently was marred by periodic screeching interruptions from passing trains. Try to minimize sounds from inside or outside that will distract and detract from learning. The older presbyopic adults read better with large fonts in presentations and handouts. Artistic fonts are beautiful to look at but difficult to read. Colours should contrast and stand out.

Adult learners are more sensitive to extremes of temperature. Learners cannot concentrate if they are too hot or cold. Aging also affect attention span and bladder control. Provide adequate short breaks in between and ensure there are adequate toilet facilities nearby.

Adult learners can learn more if they can discuss among each other and learn from each other. For sitting arrangement, learners should not only face the teacher but should be able to interact easily with other learners. Chairs should be ergonomic and supportive of the aging spines.

Besides physical factors, the learning environment includes the "mental climate". Learning sessions where there is constant fear of being questioned and found wanting, can be intimidating to learners. Being sensitive to the effects of negative feedback and using buzz groups to answer questions can take away this learning anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion, to be an effective mentor of adults, you need to know their special characteristics which impact on how and what you teach. Adult learners are independent, self-directed and self-motivated with experiential knowledge. A good mentor should be learner centred and deliver interactive learning that is problem-based, relevant and immediately applicable to learners' daily practice. He should provide a learning environment that is physically and emotionally conducive for adults.

### REFERENCES

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### FURTHER READING

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