

Clinical Education: Teaching the “Adult Learner”

Part of being an effective clinical educator involves understanding how adult students learn best. Andragogy (adult learning) is a theory that holds a set of assumptions about how adults learn. Andragogy emphasizes the value of the process of learning. It uses approaches to learning that are **problem-based and collaborative** rather than didactic, and also emphasizes more **equality between the teacher and learner**.

What do you mean by 'adult learning principles'?

- Adults are internally motivated and self-directed
- Adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences
- Adults are goal oriented
- Adults are relevancy oriented
- Adults are practical
- Adult learners like to be respected

How can I use adult learning principles to facilitate student learning during clinical experiences?

1. Adults are internally motivated and self-directed

Your role is to *facilitate* a students' movement toward more self-directed and responsible learning as well as to foster the student's internal motivation to learn.

As clinical educator you can :

- Set up a *graded learning program* that moves from more to less structure, from less to more responsibility and from more to less direct supervision, at an appropriate pace that is challenging yet not overloading for the student.
- *Develop rapport* with the student to optimize your approachability and encourage asking of questions and exploration of concepts.
- *Show interest* in the student's thoughts and opinions. Actively and carefully listen to any questions asked.
- *Lead the student toward inquiry* before supplying them with too many facts.
- Provide *regular constructive and specific feedback* (both positive and negative)
- *Review goals* and *acknowledge goal completion*
- *Encourage use of resources* such as library, journals, internet and other department resources.
- *Set projects or tasks* for the student that *reflect their interests* and which they must complete and "tick off" over the course of the placement. For example: to provide an in-service on topic of choice; to present a case-study based on one of their patients or to design a patient educational handout.
- *Acknowledge the preferred learning style* of the student. Adult learners can give you feedback when prompted on how they learn best (by observing, by reading, by doing)

2. Adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences

A adult's experience is who he/she is. So if an adult's experience is not respected and valued, it cannot be used as a resource for learning. Adults experience this omission as a rejection of their experience and as a rejection of them as persons which negatively affects learning.

- *Find out about your student* - their interests and past experiences (personal, work and study related)

Child and Adult Learner Characteristics	
Child	Adult
Rely on others to decide what is important to be learned	Decide for themselves what is important to be learned
Accept the information being presented at face value	Need to validate the information based on their beliefs and values
Expect what they are learning to be useful in their long-term future	Expect what they are learning to be immediately useful.
Have little or no experience upon which to draw, are relatively "blank slates."	Have substantial experience upon which to draw. May have fixed viewpoints.
Little ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource to teacher or fellow classmates	Significant ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource to the trainer and fellow learners.

- *Assist them to draw on those experiences* when problem-solving, reflecting and applying clinical reasoning processes.

3. Adults are goal/relevancy oriented and practical

Your role is to help the student identify the need for the knowledge or skill presented. As educator, you can:

- *Provide meaningful learning experiences* that are *clearly linked* to patient and clinical rotation goals.

- *Use real patient examples* as a basis from which to learn about specific content or skill
- *Ask questions* that motivate reflection, inquiry and further research.
- *Clearly explain your clinical reasoning* when making choices about assessments, interventions and when prioritizing patient's clinical needs.

4. Adult learners like to be respected

Respect can be demonstrated to your student by:

- *Taking interest*
- *Acknowledging the wealth of experiences* that the student brings to the placement;
- *Regarding them as a colleague* who is equal in life experience
- *Encouraging expression* of ideas, reasoning and feedback at every opportunity.

It is important to keep in mind that the student is still developing clinical practice skills. However, with the theory and principles of adult learning in mind, you can facilitate the learning approach of the student to move from novice to more sophisticated learning methods. The ultimate educator knows that experience is a rich resource for adult learning and therefore actively involves adults in the learning process.

Article written by Kim Cox, based on excerpts from "The Ultimate Educator" by C. Edmunds, K. Lowe, M. Murray, and A. Seymour-