

Learning Theory

In higher education, students are **adult learners**. Adults and children fundamentally need the same conditions for learning, and in fact it is often said that the skills of a really good primary school teacher can be extrapolated very effectively to working with adults. With adults, however, there are a few extra things that we can do which may be helpful. Malcolm Knowles' theory of **adult learning**, which he termed 'andragogy', (Knowles, M. 1984), suggests that adults are more likely to engage in, and retain, learning when they can see the relevance for it in their own circumstances and when they can put new learning into practice with almost immediate effect. For this reason, we would encourage teachers to clearly communicate the "utility" of a teaching session, that is, why this teaching is relevant to these learners at this stage in their development. Making reference to how learners can put your teaching into practice is also likely to have an effect on their engagement. **Adult learners** are also more likely to be receptive to learning when they find the topic interesting. Not everybody will find the same things interesting so, as an educator, you need to display enthusiasm for teaching as well as for your subject. Other principles of andragogy are that adults generally learn better when they feel **self-directed**, so in practice it can help if your learners can somehow be involved with the planning and evaluating of their instruction.

The concept of **active learning** is one which is likely to resonate with us all. In the simplest of terms, active learning involves engaging your learners with an appropriate degree of challenge to encourage them to formulate their own reasoning. Feedback and repetition (with increasing challenge) also have a role to play in active learning. An example of this might be rehearsing and practising a particular clinical examination or procedure.

Similarly, **experiential learning**, can be a helpful concept when thinking about how we learn. David Kolb's 'Experiential Learning Cycle', (Kolb, D. 1984), below, represents this idea pictorially: we have an experience, think about it, pull together general 'rules' and then use this to plan for the next time we encounter a similar situation. Simulation-based learning is perhaps the clearest example of this in practice. Care needs to be taken to set a tone which feels "safe", without fear of judgement, for this to be a positive learning experience.



Kolb (1984)

As educators, our role is not simply to help others remember a large quantity of information but to encourage them to develop their understanding through building on their own prior knowledge, as well as helping them to explore and challenge their existing perceptions, opinions and beliefs. Small group teaching can be an ideal opportunity to provide opportunities for active learning, which may promote critical thinking. This is nicely summed up by the following Chinese proverb, which you may already be familiar with:

*"Tell me and I forget,
teach me and I may remember,
involve me and I learn."*

Over to you...

Reflect upon your own experiences of learning and try to bring to mind a moment where the “penny dropped” for you. What was it about that moment that made it a memorable learning experience? Imagine a continuum with a traditional, didactic, teacher-focussed approach at one end and a learner-centred, active approach at the other. Where are you on this continuum now, and where would you like to be?



Now, discuss in your group what strategies you might use that could make you more learner-centred teacher or facilitator.

References:

Knowles, M. (1984). **Andragogy in Action**. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kolb, D. (1984). **Experiential Learning as the Science of Learning and Development**. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.