

Adult Development Matters in Adult Education

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All too often in adult education settings, the learning strategies and methods that we use are tailored as one size fits all. A key component of effective adult learning that can be easily overlooked is the role of adult development with adult learning. This oversight is possible among adult educators because our knowledge base is grounded in education as compared to human development or developmental psychology. The point being made that the developmental characteristics of the adult learners should influence the teaching-learning strategies that are implemented. In other words, developmental differences between a 22 and 77 year-old should be accounted for in a community-learning setting.

The best way to address this practitioner issue is to have an understanding of adult development characteristics as categorized by their life stage. These human development characteristics are best viewed according to social, cognitive, emotional, and physical domains which are present throughout the life span. Adulthood can be classified into three life stages (young adulthood, middle adulthood, older adulthood) with unique characteristics evident in each stage according to the four domains of human development.

For example, in older adulthood (65 and greater) developmental characteristics include – Social: social activities and engagements are important, loss of family and significant others, transition to retirement begins. Physical: more chronic disease and sensory decline, reaction time slows along with physical abilities. Emotional: maintains personality traits with reflection increasing, resolve conflict of integrity vs. despair. Cognitive: slower learning, memory lapses, mental abilities capable enough for daily routines (Sigelman & Shaffer, 1995).

In utilizing the above developmental characteristics concerning older adulthood for research-to-practice, the instructor would not want the learning activities to be timed, unfamiliar, or require unexercised skills. It is preferable to avoid learning activities that require recall rather than recognition of information. Although, it is important to note that there is immense diversity of capabilities among all adult learners since developmental characteristics provide only generalities.

Human development theory provides the basis for putting characteristics of adult development to practice in adult-learning settings. Adult learning, motivation, and readiness to learn will vary according to where adults are developmentally. By anticipating learning needs that arise at various life points and understanding how life events facilitate or inhibit learning in particular situations, a “goodness of fit” environment (Learner, Nitz, Talwar, & Lerner, 1989) can be established to create a productive, positive, experience for both the learner and instructor.

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