

# The Secret of Adult Learning Theory:

## It's Not About Age

By Sharon Bowman, M.A.



**4 Cs Accelerated Learning instructional design process.** To get the most from this article, you are encouraged to participate in the activities along the way. You will learn more, and be able to apply what you learn, because of your participation. For more information about the 4 Cs, log [www.Bowperson.com](http://www.Bowperson.com) and download the free article titled: “Bag It! A Quick and Remarkably Easy Instructional Design Process.”

### CONNECTIONS

#### One-Minute Fast Pass:

You already know a lot about how adults learn. As a teacher or trainer, you’ve observed adult learning in action; and, as an adult learner yourself, you’ve experienced adult learning “up close and personal.” So take a few moments to check off any of the following statements that you think apply to adult learning:

- \* They want to or need to learn.
- \* They learn in different ways.
- \* They learn best in an informal environment.
- \* They see themselves and self-directed and responsible.
- \* They learn best when they have hands-on practice.
- \* They bring their own past experiences to the learning.
- \* They learn best when they can relate new information to what they already know.
- \* They have their own ideas to contribute.

Now think about the children you know, the children you have raised, or the child you once were. Think about what you know about how children and how you learned as a child. (Continued on page two.)

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With those thoughts in mind, check off any of the following statements that you think apply to children's learning:

- \* They want to or need to learn.
- \* They learn in different ways.
- \* They learn best in an informal environment.
- \* They see themselves as self-directed and responsible.
- \* They learn best when they have hands-on practice.
- \* They bring their own past experiences to the learning.
- \* They learn best when they can relate new information to what they already know.
- \* They have their own ideas to contribute.

You're probably thinking by now, "What's going on? It's the same list." And you probably checked off all the statements in both the adult learning list as well as the children's learning list. So read on to discover the most profound secret about adult learning theory and one that will change your whole perception about teaching and training adults: *It's NOT about age!*

## CONCEPTS

Let me tell you a story: Once upon a time, in the early 1960s and 1970s to be exact, a college professor wrote a number of definitive books pointing out that the ways most adults were being taught—through lecture-based classes – didn't work very well. In fact, in terms of remembering and using the information they were being taught, adults were learning very little from lectures, assigned readings, drills, quizzes, rote memorization, and examinations.

The author's name was Malcolm Knowles, a Boston university associate professor of adult education. His writings spanned 4 decades, from the 1950s to the 1980s, and he was almost solely responsible for making two words household items in the worlds of teaching, training and adult learning theory: *pedagogy and andragogy*.

## Pedagogy Versus Andragogy

For better or worse, Malcolm Knowles changed the beliefs about adult learning in the United States. I use the phrase "for better or worse" because the effects of Knowles' lifelong work had both positive and negative consequences. First, he said that children learn best through what he termed "pedagogy," which he defined as "teacher-centered" instruction. Adults learn best through "andragogy," that is, "learner-centered" instruction, where the focus is on experiential-based learning. Thus, the word pedagogy became synonymous with learning environments in which children sit passively while information is poured into their heads via lectures, books, and tests. Knowles used this word to describe how children learn. The word andragogy became synonymous with hands-on, informal instruction that is based on the relevant learning needs of adults. Knowles used this word to describe how adults learn. In one of his most famous books, written in the early 1970's,

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titled “The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species,” Knowles emphasized the need for experiential learning in adult classes and training – a radical departure from traditional methods of adult instruction at the time.

## **Adults Versus Children**

Knowles did adults a huge favor in the United States: he significantly changed the perceptions of educators and trainers as to what adults need in order to learn effectively. To that end, he demonstrated and preached the need for more informal, experiential learning environments for adults. Unwittingly, Knowles did a drastic disservice to children. He permanently cemented the old paradigm of teacher-centered instruction for non-adult learners. He made the assumption that, because children had been taught with lecture-based methods since the early 1800s, it must be the way children learn best. Because that was the way it had been done for decades, it must be effective. Circular, “chicken and egg” thinking, to be sure. Knowles’ mistake regarding how children learn was understandable. At the time, there wasn’t much research about how the human brain learns, meaning how the brain is hardwired to take in information, store it, and retrieve it when the learner needs the information to perform some task. The brain research has been growing since the late 1970s, with the majority of the published research appearing from the late 1990s to the present. When Knowles realized that traditional methods of instruction weren’t working for adults, he assumed that it was a matter of age-difference, not a matter of ineffective instructional methods to begin with. He didn’t have the research indicating what we now know: *that most people, regardless of age, do NOT learn best when just sitting, passively listening to a lecture.*

## **From Adult Learning to Human Learning**

The brain research from the past two decades proves that human beings learn best when they are actively involved in the learning process – experiencing a variety of meaningful, motivating, self-directed learning methods in an informal, hands-on learning environment. This kind of “brain-based” learning describes *human learning*. It is NOT based on age, gender, culture, generation, or any other arbitrary assumptions. The truly ironic piece in the whole paradigm of adult learning theory is that, forty years after Knowles’ research, much of adult instruction is STILL pedagogical in nature – lecture-based, teacher-centered. Although a lot of lip service is given to Knowles’ adult learning theories, and most train-the-trainer programs cite Knowles’ work, lecture-based instruction is still the order of the day in the majority of adult learning environments—even in those classes that teach about adult learning! Old habits die hard.

## **CONCRETE PRACTICE**

First, let’s take a look at what you now know about HUMAN learning. Remember, HUMAN learning refers to how the brain remembers, stores, retrieves, and uses information. It is NOT age-related. Take a minute to do the Myth or Fact activity on the next page. Then continue reading.

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## CONCRETE PRACTICE

### One Minute Myth or Fact

Look at the statements below and divide them into columns labeling each statement with an M for Myth or F for Fact. (Careful this is not true or false!) Then check your Answers below.

1. Humans learn best by listening and taking tests.
2. Humans like to be self-directed and actively involved in learning.
3. Both children and adults have their own preferred ways of learning.
4. Humans learn best when they feel good about learning.
5. Humans learn differently depending on their ages and abilities.
6. Past experiences are important to the learning process.
7. Regardless of their ages, humans have their own ideas to contribute.
8. Informal learning environments enhance learning.

1: M, 2: F, 3: F, 4: F, 5: M 6:F, 7. F, 8: F, 9: M

### One-Minute to Choose and Circle.

Based on the characteristics of how humans learn, what will be your choices when designing and delivering your next training, class, or presentation? Read the following list and circle what you will do. I will:

- A. Include a variety of instructional strategies that involve learners so that they are talking, writing, moving, and doing topic-related activities, instead of just listening to me speak.
- B. Make sure learners are quiet and listening to me as I present the information to them.
- C. Give learners choices of discussion topics and review activities as they learn the material.
- D. Begin by explaining the agenda, syllabus, or overall plan for the learning experience.
- E. Begin by facilitating a discussion about what learners already know about the topic.
- F. Set up the room with desks, tables, or chairs in orderly rows in which learners face the front of the room.
- G. Arrange the room informally, with round tables scattered throughout, or chairs in small cluster groups so that learners can talk to each other.

Of course you chose A, C, E, and G, because you know how humans learn best.

Here is a bit more information to add to what you already know:

**Use a variety of active learning strategies to involve learners.** Examples are:

- paired and small group discussions,
- quick games (more collaborative than competitive),
- “teach backs” where learners teach each other what they’ve learned,
- quizzes that learners make and take,
- learner presentations, large group discussions, projects, simulations, skits (often called “role-play”), and the like.

**Give learners choices.** From a list of review tasks, let learners decide which they wish to do and let them work in pairs, triads, or small groups to accomplish the tasks.

**Take time to find out what learners know.**

At the beginning of the training, give them a few minutes do discuss what they know or have heard about the training topic. Throughout the training, encourage them to share comments, ideas, insights, and opinions with the whole group.

**Create an inviting, friendly, informal learning environment.**

Cluster learners into small groups using round tables or chairs arranged in small circles. On the tables, put plenty of colorful felt pens, colored paper, post-it notes, index cards, and the like. On the walls, hang colorful charts with topic-related information on them. If possible, provide snacks and beverages, or ask learners to bring their own.

## CONCLUSIONS

Your challenge is to take what you know about human learning and begin to design learning experiences that move from traditional, teacher-centered instruction towards more brain compatible, learner-centered instruction.

**One-Minute Think and Write.**

Think about the topics you teach, train, and present. Also think about how you traditionally instruct adults. On the lines below, list a few new instructional strategies you might experiment with, ones that are compatible with how adults *really* learn, that is, *strategies that work best for human learning*. Then include one or more of these strategies in your next training, and watch the learning grow!

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This article is part of Sharon’s newest book, *Training from the BACK of the Room*, published by Pfeiffer Co., a division of John Wiley & Sons. Log onto [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) for Sharon’s five popular training books already in print.



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*The Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) is a regional organization committed to promoting quality care and education for young children and their families. SECA is committed to providing leadership and support to individuals and groups by:*

- *Enhancing the quality of young children's lives through early childhood care and education.*
- *Supporting families in their roles of caring for their children.*

*Fostering the professional growth and status of individuals working with young children and their families.*

### **Resources for this article:**

***The Accelerated Learning Handbook***

David Meier

***How to Give It So They Get It***

Sharon Bowman

***Informal Learning***

Jay Cross

***Preventing Death by Lecture***

Sharon Bowman

***The Ten-Minute Trainer***

Sharon Bowman

***Training from the BACK of the Room.***

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Bowman helps educators and business people “teach it quick and make it stick,” - fine-tuning their information delivery skills and turning their passive listeners into active learners. Sharon is the president of Bowperson Publishing & Training, Inc., a professional member of The National Speakers Association (NSA), and the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD). Over 70,000 of her popular training books are already in print.

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