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Characteristics of Adult Learners

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OVERVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative research was to compile and compare comments about adult learners from actual adult learners to research on characteristics of adult learners to validate self-perceptions. Participants were selected using a readily accessible population from the course. References were actually provided by the participants.

While compiling and reviewing the statements, it was interesting to learn that in many instances the adult learner and the traditional student have similar characteristics. There are circumstances such as family responsibilities, financial circumstances, career obligations and limited time frames that lend a slightly different tone to the adult learning situation. With these added responsibilities the adult learner expects to acquire relevant knowledge in a timely manner.

The perceptions and Creed included below, define some of the adult learner's characteristics; namely, serious, applied, persevering, experienced, self-directed, impatient, anxious, willing, excited, focused, concerned with excellence and quality work, responsible, goal oriented, wanting to be appreciated and respected.

Importance of knowing characteristics about the adult learner as early as possible during a course or workshop-

“When we think of those individuals we consider ‘great communicators,’ what is it that makes them so great? The answer is that they know and understood their audience. There is no different in the classroom setting. As ‘great Teachers’ (communicators) we also need to know and understand our audience (students). These are just some of the questions that we should be asking our audience:

- * Why are they in our classroom?
- * What are their expectations?
- * How do they learn (learning styles)?
- * What is their background?
- * What are their dreams?

How can a teacher begin to connect with their students without knowing the answers to at least those basic questions? I don't think they can. We're in the ‘people business,’ whether we want to think of it that way or not. In the business world, to know and understand your customers is the quickest way to success.” J.Z.

“I feel that with any learner, any age if there is a personal connection, they are prone to accept the information you are trying to convey.” T.B.

“It seems to reason that as a teacher, if you don't know the characteristics of your learners (whatever age they may be), you can't do the most effective job of instructing. For planning a workshop, lesson, or seminar, knowing your audience is step one.” M.E.

“It is important to make sure the instructor understands the learner characteristics as soon as possible to make sure the goals and objectives are appropriate and being completed at a rate that ensures successful learning. Repeating things already known, teaching far above the basic understanding or going too fast will only discourage the learners. The instructor needs to know what experiences and skills the learners already have and what directions they hope take. If the learners have a great deal of experience the instructor can move along more quickly. If there are learners in need of more support, the instructor can arrange more assistance. The instructor also needs to know what methods to use when instructing and know if alternative methods, materials or resources are needed.” S.P.

“A student will have a more effective and productive experience in an environment that makes them comfortable. It is up to the instructor to find that comfort zone. The earlier that the instructor finds that zone, the more the student will absorb.” A.V.

Characteristics of adult learners in general-

“In all the articles that I found, every one of them mentions that most adult learners have external factors that they must deal with such as jobs, families and financial responsibilities. Many adult learners also go back to school after many years. They may have dropped out of school due to numerous reasons and have come back to school to further their education, because of the changing economy, job changes or advancements.” C.S.

“I believe adult students need to be recognized for their unique backgrounds, educations and experiences and this uniqueness needs to be included in the class. To provide an environment that allows for these differences to be expressed without ridicule or distain is of the utmost priority.” B.R.

“Since adults are self-directed, instruction should allow learners to discover things for themselves, providing guidance and help when mistakes are made. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life.” T.P.

Characteristics

“Serious student - Usually in a hurry - Time is limited - Wanting to understand why - Must see a use for what they are learning - Applied learner - Must see logic in the material being learned – Practical.” JW

“I am a highly motivated and very organized person. I like to get things done ahead of time and not wait till the last minute. Taking web courses has expanded my horizon and I realize it is not so bad coming out of my comfort zone.” PK

“I am detailed and organized when doing a task. When it comes to learning, I am a visual and hands on learner. If you tell me that something is good, I want to know why, what it is, where to go to get it, how can it help me or others and show me how to. Don't beat around the bush; tell me what I want to hear.” CS

“A perfect example of making sure you nail down every detail. I found myself liking to get the information and tossing it around in my brain for a while instead of receiving all the information at once.” DB

“I am a young adult learner, but being out of undergraduate school for 6 years, entering the workforce, and realizing you can't get ahead without an advanced degree, make most people contemplate returning for more education. I am more interested in learning what I need to know for my particular job. If it applies to my life, great! If it doesn't I am impatient and want to move on to something that I feel does apply to me. I am more time conscious now, I know how to work ahead of deadlines, and get things in on time without asking for an extension. I am afraid of jumping in to new things cold. I want to stand or fall on my own. I hate tests that expect you to memorize and regurgitate information. I think I am a good example of an adult learner because I am self-reliant, and dedicated to enhancing my life.” AWE

“I can only compare myself to the younger version. The younger version of myself had none of the following characteristics:

* persistence.

* organizational skills.

* highly motivated.

* impatient...wanting it all NOW.

This is why web courses are the best form of learning for an individual such as myself. Driving 45 min., each way, to sit in a classroom, is in my assessment a total waste of time.” JZ

“As an adult, I have a DESIRE to learn. I take pride in my work and put forth my best effort. I am doing this for myself, whereas most other things in my life I do for others. My schedule is very hectic and although my heart is in it, there are times that my mind is on overload and can not except another thought. My time constraints are my greatest challenge. There are days that there is no time or energy left and it is then that the desire to learn and do my best motivates me to accomplish the goals set before me.” TG

“I am a visual learner for the most part, auditory secondly. I am a serious student and I need to find significance in what I am learning. I want to apply what I learn to my life in some way.

I am very organized, self-motivated and I tend to look for a unique way to express or use what I learn. I think I am a life long learner since I am always yearning to learn more in the areas that interest me personally.

My characteristics as a learner are to feel successful and yet I want to be challenged. I prefer to use a logical and practical approach to learning and I enjoy sharing my knowledge with others (teaching). I have a great desire to learn and I want to stay ahead of schedule.

I don't intend to come across as a 'know it all' person, although I may appear to act that way at times. I humbly apologize! I am but a mere grain of sand in the realm of knowledge! I get so excited about what I have learned and in that excitement I want to share my knowledge with others. I thoroughly enjoy sharing, expressing or teaching what I have learned to others around me.” EY

“The North American Plains brothers have this conception of time that when the spirit moves them then the job will be done. I've seen this perception of time put to work up close and personal. I think that when it comes to long term planning I can empathize with these gentlemen. My point is that I really have to work hard at long term planning, but when the fertilizer hits the propeller, I am there with a solution. This probably comes from years in the military and being an outdoors type. A wise man once said, 'First come the test than the lessons'. When you are on nature's terms, you have senses you wouldn't have in a more gentile situation. In the military many times the same thing applies. Again my point is that my characteristics for learning sometimes can get more instinctive than let's say 'literature enhanced'. But this is what makes life and education interesting: the chance to improve a life characteristic. Even to acquire one. Being a teacher has greatly helped me toward my goal of long range planning proficiency. Why, because I must.” PR

“The characteristic that most makes me an adult learner is that I do NOT want to be treated like a child. It wastes my time to have everything repeated a million times. If I didn't understand, I'll

ask - otherwise, just go on to the next topic. If certain things are of major importance, just tell me so and I'll write it down. I am a responsible person - if something needs to get done, it'll get done. I don't need to be prodded." JE

“Not just comparing me to other students, but also comparing me to myself just ten years ago, wow, I am a lot different. I guess I could say I am more serious about my education and direction. I am not here because I've just graduated high school and what else is there to do anyway! Over the years, I have "learned the ropes" and can get a lot more accomplished in less time. Unlike many first time or non-traditional students, I've been attending school pretty regularly for the past ten years, so I don't feel too "on guard" or frightful of surprises. I feel pretty comfortable knowing what may or may not happen and what to expect.

I'm required this semester to take a course that is a prerequisite to my program. After attending the first night I feel like it is really irrelevant to where I am going and what I want to be learning. I found myself very uncomfortable and very impatient sitting there. I think adult learners either chose to learn something maybe new or fun because they're curious about it, or, they're on a mission to get something or get somewhere. Well, right now I feel like I'm on a mission, kind of antsy, tell me what I have to do...I'm ready to do it!" JH

“Structured – I'm not sure if I was born with this trait or if I learned it as a product of my environment. I do well in a structured environment. School has always been a very structured place, and that is fine with me. The military was very structured and probably had a large influence on my need for order and structure. Prior Experiences – It's hard to believe, but I am middle-aged. I have many experiences to share – many of which would probably be relevant in just about any learning

situation. That is the positive or helpful side of prior experiences. Prior experiences can be a barrier to preconceived notions – open-mindedness also. I have to admit that sometimes it takes much convincing to change my mind about certain things. The wiser I become, the more open-minded I become. Although I still have preconceived notions about things, I am learning to gather

Success and facts first and then develop notions. Feedback – I like experiencing success; I also know that more often than not, hard work goes along with success. Feedback from mentors and teachers is welcome – probably time constraints – I have a full-time essential job. I have a family. I have recreational needs. I go to school. Relevancy – If I am I need to sleep. Shown that something is relevant to my goal(s), and then learning becomes much easier and enjoyable. Responsible – Being responsible came with adulthood for me. Being responsible means that you can count on me to do the right thing – as distasteful as it may be at times.” DW

“I am aware of the value of the knowledge I am seeking and recognize the work necessary to obtain it. I am looking to travel the most direct route to my goals and am angered by what I consider to be useless detours. I also take responsibility for mapping my own roads and appreciate those who work hard supplying needed course corrections to keep the traffic flowing for all of us. And at the same time I treasure the beautiful scenery and restful diversions along life's highways and byways. Happiness and balance are as dear as the achievements. As an adult learner, I have many experiences to flavor the present input and require evidence, references and tools with the drama. The more I learn, the more I become conscious of, and wish to know and be a part of.” MH

“To be honest it seems kind of strange to be called an adult learner. I am sure I am, I'm 25 that seems like enough years to me to make me an adult. I certainly gained the responsibility of an

adult, gained with a couple of years of teaching. Third, I have lost my patience for wasted time. Of all the resources that are available to any adult learner I believe that time is the most limited. I do not have time to waste, if five minutes can be saved, I'll save it, don't waste time, and I am always looking for a faster way to get the work done." JP

“Constraints: My most significant characteristic change from undergraduate work is the number of constraints that I have in my life. From a time perspective, my career consumes my time; one of the lessons that I have learned so far, however, is the necessity of balance in your life. I will not allow myself to place a greater emphasis on my "work" than I will on my "life." (Can you tell this is a sore spot?) The flexibility that web courses offer feels ideal to remove any worry about conflicting commitments. I feel a strong sense of guilt as an adult learner of letting others, and myself, down.

Lust for Learning: I have always enjoyed learning more depth on topics and about new topics. I'm starting to call that a lust because it seems that I may leave learning and education for a short period of time, but I keep coming back to it!

Motivation/Dedication: As so many others have mentioned, I am definitely more selective, or maybe discriminating, about my motivation as an adult learner. While I may be more motivated overall, if I sense a "waste of time" then the motivation drops off quickly and I focus on the critical task of learning the material and moving on to something else.

Confidence: As an Adult Learner I understand my own goals and myself much better. I also feel very comfortable working with others in a group situation. These both contribute to a sense of comfort in learning and interacting, even if the material is unfamiliar.

Learner: I think that the key for me is self-direction. Unlike a child I am in charge of what I will learn. I take responsibility for what I need to learn and how to go about obtaining that education.” MR

“A characteristic that makes me an adult learner is that I am making my own decisions. It was my choice to enroll in this course, which makes me much more motivated to learn the content and do well. It is interesting for me to look back now and compare myself as a "child learner" and now as an "adult learner". As a child, I was learning because I had to and I performed well for everyone else (my parents, my teachers). Now as an adult, I am doing this for myself because I enjoy and want to learn.” AV

“As an adult learner, I want to get things done and get them done correctly. I don't want to be treated like a child and I don't want to waste time. Learning and education is very important to me and I want to get the most out of it that I can, both for my learning and myself and for my students and their learning. I am a busy woman. I work full time, am a wife and mother, and go to graduate classes part-time. I am a professional and wish to make that impression in both work and as a student. I am a perfectionist and try to give everything my all, especially as a learner. I want people to expect great things from me and to be able to count on me to get the job done. I think adult learners differ greatly from younger learners because their expectations and personal goals are much more serious. I know for me, I've been a much better student as an adult learner because I value the time, commitment, and desire to learn more than I did at a younger age.” LM

Characteristics which make ME an adult learner.

“Some of the Characteristics that make ME an adult learner are; I am an adult, having reached legal age. I am continuing to mature, an ongoing process. I am a student. I am skeptical, particularly of absolutes. I can be cynical. I am tolerant of ambiguity and intolerant of intolerance, prejudice and stereotyping. I like to challenge pedantry and orthodoxy. Details are important to me. I am equally a visual and auditory learner. I am analytical and intuitive. I acknowledge a difference between knowledge and wisdom. I do not require a practical reason for learning something. I am not impulsive nor am I a procrastinator. I realize that the more I learn the less I know, even about myself. I am logical although not always practical. I find reality more fascinating than fiction. I am comfortable with the theory of an expanding universe. I do not like to categorize others or myself unnecessarily. I see contradictions as commonplace and natural. I feel that I as well as you am unique. I believe that learning how to learn is the most important thing that one can learn and if I can teach this I am successful. I rarely say “I” as many times as I have in this paragraph. But since it is about me it couldn’t be avoided without being more awkward than it is.” RC

“My characteristics as an adult learner are probably quite typical in being derived from experience, physiology, personality, need, circumstance, and objective. Experience developed from years of being a student under a vast variety of teachers having different methods gives me a certain level of impatience with the less effective instructional methods. I have always enjoyed the process of discovery. After experiencing quality instruction, it is too easy to be critical of different techniques. My solution is to focus on the content.

Compared to the resiliency of youth, my physiology is differently vulnerable to the health consequences of the mouse on carpal tunnel, the sedentary time on vascular function, the monitor on

vision degradation and disruption of the brains electrical activity. As these and new health factors become better understood, I feel the need to put higher priority on health protection.

The need for knowledge in my field, automotive technology, is critical as in other technical pursuits in this era of escalating rate of change and unprecedented access to information. I need not only to keep up to date, but also to do so ever more efficiently. Need drives my motive to learn. A need to satisfy curiosity leads to learning about whatever is new. A need more effectively to convey it leads to investigating the characteristics of adult learners.

The circumstance of an adult learner creates priorities directly affecting the learning process. Priorities of family, job, commitments, responsibilities, dependents, health, life involvement all may change the adult learners priority available to a class compared to secondary education when school is, ideally, the most important job. My circumstance characteristic places class on the list about seventh.

Objective is more important to me as an adult learner because of the limits of circumstance. My objectives for learning are goal achievement, entertainment, or satisfaction of curiosity.” GM

“Being twenty-two years of age, single, with no dependents I still consider myself an adult learner. Adult learners like myself are responsible for their own actions. I set realistic goals for myself but am understanding if life requires for the goals to be modified. I realize that issues that hold importance in my life might not hold true for the next person and to be sympathetic to all walks of life. Most importantly, my life has numerous components that daily change and I must have the ability to change with them.” HP

“I am a serious, motivated student. As an adult learner I have found that returning back to school as a thirty something has been the single most difficult thing I have ever done next to raising my two sons. I am a kinesthetic learner and learn best by doing the task at hand. I have to work at my visual and audio learning.” JD

“Although I am only 20, there are clearly things about me that make me different from my peers. Without getting too personal, my life has taken so many changes in the past two years, that I feel like I've been given a second chance to buckle down and do it right. And isn't that what being an adult learner is about? Getting another chance (or finally taking one)? After changing my major two times and finally learning how to focus, I have clear goals and a plan. You won't find me at parties or complaining about the mountains of work before me, because it is all my choice. I am different because I go to class to learn, come away with something, and accomplish my dreams. I realize that school is for me!” JB

“I have grown up under the military way of education. They teach at different levels for different purposes. They teach everyone an introductory course through boot camp, officer candidate school, direct commission orientation and the academy. This is a condensed, no non-sense, teach exactly what the person needs to know to be able to learn their job in the Coast Guard and survive the dangerous life we end up living.

Then everyone goes through on the job training that teaches the new person what they need to know to function at their new unit and to become a part of the functioning team.

This training is also very specific. It only teaches what the person needs to know to do the job.

Now we get into technical training. There are three levels training. First, there is the basic level of training that teaches exactly what the student needs in background studies like physics, chemistry, biology and other scientific fields, and then teach the basic skills the student needs to return to their unit. This only prepares the student for on the job training that makes the person ready to become a technician. This is called "A" school.

Second, there is advanced training that prepare the technician to assume higher responsibilities. Here the student goes deeper into the background and core subjects.

This helps the student with his job experiences to help solve problems in their field of expertise and take on projects that improve the Coast Guard and their service to this country. This training is very similar to engineering technician training at colleges throughout this country. It is broad in foundation, research oriented and project based. This is called a "B" school.

Third, there is specific training that teaches everything a technician needs to know to maintain, repair and overhaul a whole system that is not able to be taught on the job. It is very task orientated, very specific and very narrow in scope. This is called "C" school.

After this, a technician would actually go to college for further training and this would be at the level of engineer. If the individual continues in his field, we now get graduate training in the managerial, administrative and educational fields. Very few enlisted personnel get this level of training outside of the military system. This training is given to officers in the Coast Guard.

I have gone through most of these levels of training. I need to get exactly what I need to know as a technician in my field of expertise when I am learning a new, specific skill related to my field of expertise. I need to know background subjects that relate directly to my specialty when I move into a higher level of responsibility, such as lead technician. I need to know what is expected of me and how to accomplish my collateral duties such as administration, leadership, management

and education that go with promotions into positions of leadership. This is usually a very broad field of study.

I am a husband, a father, a licensed technician, supervisor, community volunteer office holder, student and educator. I know that I have limited time to do each of these duties. I have to plan very carefully how I spend my time, and know what to give up (with out guilt) when there is a conflict.

I have to be very mature about my studies, be the kind of student I expect my student to be and work at the level my courses are taught at. That means I have to take each course individually. I should not work a college course like I would work a vocational course or a workshop. Each is different and requires their own special level of work and attention, because each has their own special purpose and focus.

I am an adult. I expect to be taught like an adult. On a course that teaches a specific skill, only teach what I need to know to do that job. On a course that teaches a broader or new field, limit it to the subjects and fields I need to know. On college courses, lead me to the resources I need to research the subject and help direct my self-study.

I am a complicated individual, able to accomplish many things under difficult conditions. I do not need self-esteem training, career training, employment training or self-improvement training to be included in my courses. These subjects might be needed for adult learners who have not finished school, been to school in a long time, been continually on assistance, unemployable or unemployed for a long time, or incarcerated. These students learn life skills and career skills better when they are included with courses that teach them a trade and can directly associate the skills to their jobs and future, but that is not me.” BR

“I think overall, I am more determined, have more pride, and have much less time to do all the things I desire. I am very eager to learn things that I can use. I pay more attention to detail and I am focused. I do become irritated by courses I don't find useful or when they are taught in an uninteresting or inapplicable (is this a word?) manner.

I learn best by doing. I like to learn by interacting with others and by sharing information. I think being an adult; I understand that it is not possible to "know it all" if you want to know anything. It is also important to value the strengths others have and "use" their skills in a collaborative way. This way everyone benefits and the project benefits.

Also, as an adult learner, I have an extremely hectic schedule and am saddened when my personal life (now that I have one) suffers. It's exciting to be learning and doing new things and I am motivated to keep learning and growing.” SR

“The characteristics that make me an adult learner are that I am going to back to school after being away for a significant period of time, I work and attend school, I have been in the workforce for a number of years; and on a personal note; I feel what makes me an adult learner is that I chose to go back to school to make a change in my career and to better myself. I feel that I am more focused and motivated this time around because I am here for myself and not my parents, as was the case the first time.” TP

“Characteristics, which make me an adult learner, are numerous. The most obvious characteristic is that I am an adult. I have long ago left my childhood. I am not sure the exact date I became an adult? When I was age 18 the law said I was an adult. I was given the right to vote and other adult responsibilities. The law defined me as an adult and I became responsible for my own

actions. But I am not sure each one of us becomes an adult at the magical age of 18. I don't think I felt like an adult at that age?

With getting older and gaining more and more responsibilities I begin to realize I was truly an adult. Now I identify myself as an adult and I have chosen to return to college and get a degree makes me a degree learner. I believe that all people learn thru out their lives. Because I have chosen to go back to college as an adult, learning is an important part of my adult life at this time.

When you've got a career or for some other reason time is precious, you don't want to be bogged down by infantile processes. You are there to learn and burn. How can you get anymore direct than that? This is what most adult learners demand and since most of the time they are paying for it, they should get what they pay for.” DS

Creed of the adult learner

- I am a highly motivated and very organized person.
- I like to get things done ahead of time and not wait till the last minute. P.K.
- I am afraid of jumping in to new things cold.
- I want to stand or fall on my own.
- I hate tests that expect you to memorize and regurgitate information.
- I think I am a good example of an adult learner because I am self-reliant, and dedicated to enhancing my life. A.W.E.
- I have a DESIRE to learn.
- I take pride in my work and put forth my best effort.
- I am doing this for myself, whereas most other things in my life I do for others. T.G.
- I am a visual learner for the most part, auditory secondly.
- I am a serious student.
- I need to find significance in what I am learning.
- I want to apply what I learn to my life in some way.” E.Y.
- I am not here because I've just graduated high school and what else is there to do anyway!? J.H.
- I am aware of the value of the knowledge I am seeking and recognize the work necessary to obtain it.
- I am looking to travel the most direct route to my goals and am angered by what I consider to be useless detours.
- I take responsibility for mapping my own roads and appreciate those who work hard supplying needed course corrections to keep the traffic flowing for all of us. M.H.
- I understand myself and my own goals much better as an adult learner.
- I also feel very comfortable working with others in-group situations. M.R.
- I set realistic goals for myself but, am understanding if life requires for the goals to be modified.
- I realize that issues that hold importance in my life might not hold true for the next person and to be sympathetic to all walks of life. H.P.
- I want to get things done and get them done correctly.
- I don't want to be treated like a child and I don't want to waste time.” L.M.

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