Characteristics of Adult Learners

As an instructional coach you will be more successful if you keep in mind that teachers approach learning differently than the typical students who inhabit our classrooms. The differences between adult learning and student learning affect the coaching process. The most frequently cited expert in adult learning is Malcolm Knowles, whose basic assumptions about the adult learner, as compared with the child learner, are the following (Smith, 2002):

- **Self-concept.** The adult learner’s self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.

- **Experience.** The adult learner accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.

- **Readiness to learn.** The adult learner’s readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles.

- **Orientation to learning.** The adult learner’s time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and, accordingly, his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness.

- **Motivation to learn.** The motivation to learn becomes internal.

As you plan your coaching activities, notice how the differences between adult and student learners translate into the following general characteristics. Adult learners:

- are largely self-directed
- have a broad, rich experience base to which to relate new learning
- perceive time itself differently than children do and are more concerned about the effective use of time
- learn best when they perceive the outcomes of the learning process as valuable and as immediately applicable
- are more often internally motivated (by the potential for such feelings as worth, self-esteem, and achievement)

These assumptions regarding adult learning styles undergird the elements of effective professional development presented in this course. Designing your coaching plans with these assumptions in mind can contribute much to your coaching success. Here are some specific examples of designing your coaching to meet their needs of adult learners:

- Encouraging teachers to set their own goals for professional development can improve their personal engagement in and commitment to the coaching process and make the process more valuable for them.
• In order to see the applicability of the new learning, teachers should be provided with many opportunities to practice new skills and with feedback until they feel comfortable and competent in using those new skills.

• Using an online tool grants teacher greater flexibility to fit their learning sessions into their busy schedules and provides easier access to more resources.

• Using an online tool will offer them a greater opportunity to personalize their learning through communication with you as the coach. As a result, you should be able to meet their needs more effectively.

• Their understanding will be deepened if they are able to use a community tool such as Peer Connection to reflect on their new methods through discussion and dialogue with other adult learners and interact with other teachers who also are incorporating new methods in their teaching.

• In honoring teachers’ different learning styles, it is important for the coach to offer them the opportunities to select their own most effective methods of learning when possible. If they can choose when to work alone, when to work with others, and have choices among learning activities, then they are likely to be more engaged and reap more benefits from the experience.

Understanding that teachers, as adult learners, approach learning differently than your typical students do will help you become a better coach. Recognize, too, that teachers might feel some stress and anxiety as adult learners. Careful listening may help alleviate some of that stress and anxiety, and will help you better address the needs of your adult learners.

Additional Reading

If you wish to read more about adult learning theories and the ways in which they may affect your coaching plans, we recommend the following articles:


This article provides an explanation of Knowles’s theories (andragogy refers to teaching adults, as opposed to pedagogy, which refers to teaching children) and their implications for teaching adults, as well as a discussion of the controversy surrounding his ideas.


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Kuhne explains 10 characteristics of adult learners, along with suggestions for teaching with an understanding of those characteristics.


Lieb has expanded upon Knowles’s assumptions by showing how the teacher of adults (the coach in this context) can construct effective learning experiences with these assumptions in mind.


Imel summarizes research on the characteristics of adult learners, creating a climate for adult learning, and evaluating adult learning, and provides a collection of resources on the topic.

**References**
