1.2 HOW ADULTS LEARN

1.2.1 INTRODUCTION

Our knowledge of how adults learn is incomplete. It is not even clear whether all adults learn in the same way. At present, the best we can do is to set out what seem to be the most widely accepted characteristics of adult learners and then deduce from those some guiding principles for the design of post-school learning materials. Whatever the weaknesses of this approach, it at least ensures that at the pragmatic level, designers who follow these guidelines consistently produce ODL courses that lead to high quality courses.

> **Issues for instructional designers**
>
> 1. How are adult learners different from school-age learners?
>
> 2. What implications do these differences have for instructional design?

1.2.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS

Various writers have maintained that adults possess certain characteristics that affect how they approach learning and how they learn. Perhaps the most commonly quoted characteristics of adult learners are those six identified by Knowles (1990).

1. Adults need to know why they are learning

School children may accept the school curriculum without question, treating it as part of the 'natural' world of being a child. Adults are less accepting and, when faced with a new course or curriculum, are more likely to ask questions such as 'How will this help me in my job?' or 'How will this help me bring up my children?'

This leads to an important observation about adult learning: adults are likely to put more effort into a task if they think they will benefit from it. This implies that ODL curricular should concentrate on what is beneficial to adult learners – that is, what can be practicably applied at home and at work.

2. Adults see themselves as responsible, self-directed persons

Adults tend to see themselves as being responsible for directing their own lives: deciding what job they want; deciding how to bring up their children; deciding what leisure pursuits they wish to follow. In education, this manifests itself as a desire by adult learners to make their own choice of courses and to exercise some autonomy within a course. In educational terms, we can say that adults like to set their own goals and choose their own learning tasks. This criterion is hard to

meet when designing ODL courses: materials-based courses are necessarily more pre-prepared and more rigid than courses delivered in a classroom.

3. Adults come to post-school education with a wealth of experience

Adults will have (to varying degrees) experience of attending school, working, handling money, bringing up children, following politics and so on. They are therefore likely to view post-school education as building on those experiences.

Such experience is usually spoken of in positive terms, and often that is the way it is. However, some prior experience can also be a block to new learning. For example, where someone has developed a prejudice towards certain people, he or she may be reluctant to have that attitude and associated ideas challenged.

4. Adults are likely to choose to learn when they are ready to learn

In school, children are often taught things for which they are not always ready. For example, teaching business studies to students younger than 16 is a questionable activity. Adults, on the other hand, are unlikely to enrol in courses before they feel ready to follow them. For example, adults are not likely to take a business course unless they have decided to start a career in business. This means that adult ODL learners tend to be highly motivated: they study what they want to study and have clear personal goals that they wish to achieve through study. (However, it is also the case that some adult students will enrol in courses that do not match their needs. For this reason, it is important for adults to have access to educational guidance when choosing their courses.)

5. Adults, in their learning, are problem-centred

Adults tend to enter post-school education to solve a problem. For example, if a woman wants to get a job in a local office that uses computers and she knows nothing about computers, she might decide to take a course in basic ITC (information technology and communication) skills. In other words, adult learners tend to be goal-oriented. This means that we need to design ODL courses in a way that assists adult learners to achieve their goals – that is, courses need to have a strong, practical aspect.

6. Adults tend to be motivated by personal factors

According to Knowles (1990), adults engage in post-school education primarily to meet personal needs such as greater job satisfaction or a better quality of life. It seems doubtful whether this is true of developing countries, where getting a job, gaining a better job or a promotion, and earning a higher income are likely to be important motivators.

1.2.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN IN ODL

What are the implications of these characteristics for instructional design? We can probably conclude that instructional designers need to emphasise the following approaches when designing post-school courses:

*   Include opportunities for learners to recall their prior knowledge and experience, and encourage them to reflect on this and compare it with what they are learning.

*   Design adult curricular around the needs of learners. 'Needs' refers here to why they are learning (e.g., to qualify for some other course, to start their own business or to gain a particular type of job). It helps to look at every item in a proposed curricular and ask 'How will this item be useful to our learners?'

*   Look for ways of allowing learners to make choices and direct their own learning (e.g., by setting some of their own goals or by giving them a choice of tasks). (In practice, this can be quite difficult to do since building choice into learning materials can be both costly and complex.)

*   Encourage learners to set their own personal goals and to check their progress against them.

*   Look for ways in which learners can choose how they complete tasks. For example, in designing a marketing programme, learners might have the choice of preparing a brochure, a poster or radio advertisement.

*   Try to give learners the maximum opportunity to put new knowledge and skills into practice.

1.2.4 LIMITATIONS OF ADULT LEARNING THEORY

Whilst the above principles are widely quoted and followed in designing post-school courses, it has to be admitted that our knowledge of how people learn is very patchy. Much of the research on adult learning has been conducted on very small groups, often of middle-class learners in the developed world. The limitations of our knowledge are discussed further by Brookfield (1995).

1.2.5 OTHER PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING

In looking at what makes post-school learning distinctive, there is a danger of forgetting some other crucial points about how people learn.

*   Learning is an active process, so good learning materials focus on learner activities rather than on exposition and explanation.

*   Learning tasks should always be meaningful to the learner.

- Learning tasks should always match the assumed prior knowledge of the learners.

- Learning requires feedback: learners need to know whether they have learnt something correctly and therefore need regular feedback on their progress.

- Learning is enhanced by examples: learners can better understand and remember important points by being presented with good examples.

You will find that these ideas run through the whole of this handbook.