

Adult Learning Theory

There are many theories on adult learning. Adult Learning Basics by Bill Rothwell and The Adult Learner by Malcom Knowles, et al. are highly recommended reading to learn more about adult learning theory. Below are just some of the theories as noted by Rothwell from his book Adult Learning Basics.

Rothwell, W. (2008) Adult learning basics. ASTD Press, Alexandria, VA.

Theory of Learning	Key Idea of the Theory	Tips on Applying the Theory Trainers should...
<u>Functionalistic Theories of Learning</u> Edward Thorndike, BF Skinner	Learning is a way that biological organisms adapt to their environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work to give learners a reason to learn – that is show them why • Encourage people to practice what they learn • Find ways to reward learner for what they learn • Not punish learners who Fail
<u>Associationistic Theories of Learning</u> Pavlov, Edwin Guthrie, William Estes	The world is seen in the ways people associate stimuli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use practice to build skill • Use different cues to help people unlearn what they have previously learned • Take steps to increase transfer of learning by ensuring that the learning environment is as close to the actual conditions of the work setting in which the learning is applied
<u>Cognitive Theories of Learning</u> Edward Tolman, Albert Bandura, Donald Norman	The focus is on cognition, the process of knowing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage learner intuition • Organize instruction around pictures of the whole(whole to part learning) • Provide learners with cognitive maps by taking steps to try and understand how people understand the big picture • Guide learners to watch those who are successful at performing observable tasks to encourage social learning • Use behavioral modeling to encourage and shape social learning • Encourage learners to try out what they are learning by doing behavioral rehearsals
<u>Constructivist Theories of Learning</u> Piaget	The focus is how learners internalize what they have learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get to know learner and try to understand their backgrounds, since where they come from and where they sit on the organization chart will influence what they want to learn and how they will use what they learn • Familiarize themselves with the national culture in

		<p>which people learn, and what they expect of learning situations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage learners to reflect how new ideas can be incorporated into what they already know, thereby encouraging assimilation • Help learners make sense of mistakes or failures so as to learn from them • Help learners take more responsibility for the learning process instead of expecting trainers to guide learning events • Encourage learners by showing them they can lean and achieve success from the learning process • Play the role of facilitators who pose questions to stimulate learners' thinking rather than be subject matter experts who merely provide information through lecture
<p><u>Neurophysiological Theories of Learning</u> Daniel Hebb</p>	<p>The focus is on brain anatomy and chemistry and on such complex phenomena as intelligence, thinking and learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become familiar with differences between adult learners and children as learners • Emphasize sensory input, enriching training experiences by trying to appeal to as many senses as possible so as to increase learner retention and transfer of training.
<p><u>Anchored Instruction</u></p>	<p>The best learning occurs when learners are given the anchor(focus) for it. Instruction should be centered on a specific case, role play, activity, experiential exercise or other problems solving situation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Center learning experiences on a focal problem solving activity to make the learning event action oriented
<p><u>Cognitive Load Theory</u></p>	<p>Learning happens best when aligned with how people think (cognition).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study how people think and then align the design of learning events accordingly • Avoid memorization and rely instead on multiple examples, graphics and other aids
<p><u>Conversation Theory</u> Pask</p>	<p>People learn through conversation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage social interaction among learners, and give learners chances to teach back what they have learned
<p><u>Experiential Learning Theory</u> Carl Rogers, Malcom Knowles</p>	<p>The most important learning comes from experience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage action oriented learning • Create a psychologically supportive learning environment • Give learners compelling reasons to learn • Serve as resource agents to put learners in touch with helpful resources to use in their own learning projects • Give learners a

		major role to play in determining how instruction will be designed delivered and evaluated
<u>Functional Context Theory</u>	What is to be learned should relate to what work the learner does	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw instructional materials and activities from real-world situations and from real-world documents or problems •
<u>Minimalist Learning Theory</u> John Carroll	Learning Events should minimize how much time is devoted to starting a learning event. Instead, learners should immediately be confronted with a learning challenge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus as soon as possible at the outset of learning on action-oriented, problem solving challenges • Reduce reliance on lectures • Increase reliance having the learners undertake challenges • Provide tips on how to avoid common mistakes or missteps in applying what they have learned
<u>Subsumption Theory</u> David Ausubel	New ideas are subsumed under what learners already know. Learners should be given advanced organizers at the outset of instruction – a roadmap which to navigate through the material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give learners advance organizers so they will have a roadmap by which to navigate through the information they are to learn.

Additional theorists that would enhance ones understanding about adult learning theory are Robert Gagne, Benjamin Bloom and Howard Gardner.

Sensory Style Teaching Tips¹

Auditory Learners

Adults with this style will be able to recall what they hear and will prefer oral instructions. They learn by listening and speaking. These students enjoy talking and interviewing. These adults do well with lecture and can repeat auditory instructions. They may have difficulty with “reading’ body language and facial expressions. They may struggle with written instructions and writing in general. Some suggestions for the trainer would include some of the following activities:

- interviewing, debating
- participating on a panel
- giving oral reports

¹ Adapted from Teach to Student’s Learning Styles (1998 – 2009) everythingESL.net <http://www.everythingsl.net/in-services/learningstyle.php> retrieved 7/28/2010

- participating in oral discussions of written material
- Use auditory features in eLearning
- Use of music

Visual Learners

Visual learners will be able to recall what they see and will prefer written instructions. Visual learners may respond to color. They can read facial expressions and body language well. They may misinterpret auditory instructions and have difficulty with lectures. These students are sight readers who enjoy reading silently. Better yet, present information to them with a video. They will learn by observing and enjoy working with the following:

- computer graphics
- maps, graphs, charts
- cartoons
- posters
- diagrams
- graphic organizers
- text with a lot of pictures
- Video
- PowerPoint

Kinesthetic and Tactile Learners

These learners learn best by doing. They likely have good eye hand coordination. Kinesthetic learning may be done through experiencing and feelings. Tactile learners encode information through touch They understand directions that they write and will learn best through using hands and through activities. These learners may have difficulty sitting still.

They'll learn best by :

- drawing
- playing board games
- moving around
- making models
- following instructions to make something
- Taking notes
- Activities that have a component that addresses feelings

Global Learners

Global learners are spontaneous and intuitive. They do not like to be bored. Information needs to be presented in an interesting manner using attractive materials. Cooperative learning strategies and holistic reading methods work well with these learners.

Global learners learn best through:

- recorded books
- story writing
- computer programs
- games
- group activities

Analytic Learners

Analytic learners plan and organize their work. They focus on details and are logical. They are phonetic readers and prefer to work individually on activity sheets. They learn best when:

- information is presented in sequential steps
- lessons are structured and teacher-directed
- goals are clear
- requirements are spelled out

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