

## HOW ADULTS LEARN BEST - Applied to a Parish Setting

Part of being an effective adult learning facilitator or instructor involves understanding how adults learn best. Compared to children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. Adult learning is a relatively new area of study pioneered by Malcolm Knowles. He identified the following characteristics of adult learners:

- Adults are *autonomous* and *self-directed*. They need to be free to direct themselves. Learning leaders/facilitators must actively involve adult participants in the learning process. Specifically, they must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and let them work on projects that reflect their interests. They should allow the participants to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. They have to be sure to act as facilitators, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts. Finally, they must show participants how the learning will help them reach some sort of goal/objective.
- Adults have accumulated a foundation of *life experiences* and *knowledge* that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, learning leaders/facilitators draw out participants' experience and knowledge which is relevant to the topic. They must relate theories and concepts to the participants' experience and build from that base.
- Adults are *goal-oriented*. They usually know what goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational opportunity that is organized and has clearly defined objectives and elements. Learning leaders/facilitators must show participants how this event/series of events will help them attain a goal or goals. This classification of goals and content objectives must be done early in the gathering. For those who attend adult faith formation, their goals may be less precise than those attending professional or workplace development. Nevertheless, the adult learning facilitators should keep in mind clear objectives for a gathered event and then assess the accomplishment of those objectives at the end. This helps adults see that a goal was reached, even if it was not *their* goal.
- Adults are *relevancy-oriented*. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their lives and/or ministries to be of value to them. Therefore, learning leaders/facilitators must tie objectives to the response to the question, "So what?" This means, also, that theories and concepts must be related to a setting/situation or concept familiar to participants. It is most helpful to assist adults to see the implications of some aspect of faith formation for their lives, their ministries and/or their growth in faith. Adults have not forgotten the burning question of their adolescent learning: Why do I need to know this? Learning facilitators must see that this is answered.
- Adults are *practical*, focusing on the aspects of a presentation most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Learning leaders/facilitators must tell participants explicitly how the content will be useful to them as people of faith, as ministers, or as employees of the Church.
- As do all learners, adults need to be shown *respect*. Learning leaders/facilitators must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the gathering.

Adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their perspectives. However, it is also true that adult learning leaders in faith formation climates need to know how to show respect for all participants. This will include mastering the skills of re-direction, closure, and correction so that an adult who is freely expressing a perspective that is lengthy, off-topic, incorrect or shows lack of respect can be managed.

Reference:

For a quick primer on adult learning, go to

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-2.htm>.

Available as of 4/1/2010

