

# **Tutorial letter 501/3/2015**

## **EXPLORING ADULT EDUCATION LEARNING**


### **ABT1513**

**Department of Adult Basic Education and  
Youth Development**

**IMPORTANT INFORMATION:**

This tutorial letter contains important information  
about your module.

BAR CODE



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**Module: Exploring Adult Education Learning**  
**Higher Certificate in Adult Basic Education and Training**  
**Module Code: ABT1513**  
**Study guide**

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First published 2009

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ISBN

Published by:  
Institute for Adult Basic Education and Training  
University of South Africa  
UNISA  
000X

*Production team*

Module production coordinator: John Aitchison  
Graphic design and layout: John Aitchison and

## Introduction

Welcome to this course on **Exploring adult learning**, one of the modules in both the Higher Certificate and the Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training. This module aims to familiarise you with the key concepts and knowledge relating to adult learning. We hope that you will enjoy each of the six units in this module and that you will be learning things that you want to know about why and how adults learn. We hope also that you will gain knowledge and experience which will help you in your work as educator, trainer and developer.

The module is an introductory one at level 5 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and is meant to outline adult learning information that is of practical application to an entry level adult basic education and training practitioner.

In this Introduction we introduce you to the contents of the module on **Exploring adult learning**. In it you will find basic information about:

- the aims of the module
- the learning outcomes of the module
- the units in the module
- the study guide material and readings
- sources of additional information
- tutorial support
- assignments and assessment
- study expectations.

## Aims of the module

This module aims to help you to develop the basic knowledge of adult learning you will need to be able to run effective adult education and training events in the workplace or in your community. It will help you in identifying the characteristics of adult learning relevant to the context in which you are working. You will gain a basic understanding of what helps adults learn best and of how this information may be applied in the various forms of adult education and particularly in literacy and adult basic education classrooms and groups.

We will study various issues about adult learning that are important to you as an adult educator, regardless of whether you are teaching adults how to read and write in a classroom situation, repair a car in a workshop, or how to grow vegetables in a garden. Whatever kind of adult education you are involved in, you are likely to start asking questions such as: 'Do adults learn in a different way from children?' 'Can older adults continue to learn?' 'Why do adults want to learn?' 'How do adults actually learn?' 'What prevents adults from learning?' 'Why do adults stop learning?'

## Learning outcomes

The statements of learning outcomes provided below tell you what **results** are expected from your study of this module. It tells you what content you are expected to know as well as what you should be able to do or demonstrate. Of course these learning outcomes rest on the assumption that you will read and study this study guide, engage in the recommended study activities, and complete all the assignments.

By the end of the module you should be able to do the following (both in spoken and appropriate written form):

1. Demonstrate an understanding of some of the more common characteristics of adult learners
2. Relate principles of effective adult education to what is known about how adults learn best
3. Demonstrate a basic understanding of common theories of the what motivates adult learners to participate and learn in adult education
4. Describe typical barriers to participation and learning in adult education
5. Outline basic theories and types of learning
6. Identify the value of a learner-centred and experiential learning approach in helping adults to learn.

## The module units

The ***Exploring adult learning*** module consists of the following topic areas that are covered in six study Units of printed material:

Unit	Title	Topics covered
1	What are the characteristics of adult learners?	The more common characteristics of adult learners  The implications of these characteristics for adult basic education and training practice
2	How do adults learn best?	Some principles of effective adult education  The relationship of these principles to what is known about the characteristics of adult learners  Differences between how children and adults learn

3	Why do adults participate in adult education?	Common theories of what motivates adult learners to participate and learn in adult education
4	What are the barriers to adult learning?	The typical barriers to participation and learning in adult education How barriers to learning can be removed
5	Theories and types of learning	The distinction between learning and teaching/ instructing The main theories of learning Rote and meaningful learning Types of learning in practice
6	Learner centred and experiential approaches to helping adults learn	Teacher centred and learner centred instruction The value of a learner-centred and experiential learning approaches in helping adults to learn.

Knowing something about these matters is important if we are going to be effective adult educators, trainers or development workers. Therefore, we will explore some of the things that you should know about how adults learn. If you are guided by these ideas when you design and deliver adult education activities you will become a successful educator and facilitator.

So, during this unit we will begin by looking at some of the most important **characteristics** of adult learners. Then we will look at **six principles** of adult education and see how they fit with these characteristics of adult learners. We will look at what **motivates** adults to learn and discover what **barriers to learning** discourage them. Then we learn something about **theories** of how learning takes place and go on to explore two approaches to learning that are particularly suited to adult learners. These two key ideas are a **learner-centred approach** and an **experiential learning approach**.

## The study guide material and readings

The instruction given in this module is done in two ways:

7. through this study guide with its units of printed course materials and readings which you are expected to read and study, and
8. through interactions with a tutorial group (if you can attend one).



## Units

The printed course material for the *Exploring adult learning* module is divided up into six **units**. Each unit covers topics related to one of the learning outcomes.

### *What is in each unit?*

Each unit has:

9. Aims
10. Learning outcomes
11. Content material
12. Activities
13. Readings
14. Further reading
15. References
16. Glossary

### Aims

These provide a **general** statement on what you will learn in the unit and on what material has been provided to help you to do this.

### Learning outcomes

These are **specific** statements about what you will be able to do when you have worked through the unit and engaged in other course activities related to the unit.

### Content material

This is the material you will read and think about. Other supporting materials, mainly readings, may also be used.

### Activities

Included in the study material will be a number of activities. These tasks should help you check your own understanding of the material. The activities will include questions, exercises, self-tests and ideas to think and write about.

### Readings

At the end of some of the units you may find a readings or readings.

### Further reading

A list of further readings will be provided near the end of each unit. These readings can be found in textbooks, books, journal articles and other publications as well as on the Internet. You will have to find these readings yourself. In nearly all cases the books and journals are available in the University of South Africa Library and some are available at regional centres of the University.

### References

The list of references lists all the books, journal articles or other sources that are mentioned or quoted in the unit.

## Glossary

A list of words together with a definition or explanation of their meaning. There are two types of words in this list. Firstly, technical words that are used in the academic study of the subject of the unit, and, secondly, some words that may be new or unfamiliar to people for whom English is not their first language.

## *How much time must I spend on each unit?*

How long do I need to study this module and each unit of this module? This module is rated at 12 credits. This means that it is assumed that you will spend about 120 hours of study on this module. Usually this means that you must plan to spend time

17. reading the materials,
18. engaging in activities as you read, and attending tutorials
19. writing assignments, and preparing for and writing the examination.

We recommend that you study for the following number of hours:

20. Reading through this introduction and the six units (40 hours) (about 6 hours per module)
21. Doing activities and attending tutorials (40 hours)
22. Writing assignments (this includes preparation, reading, writing and careful editing): (20 hours)
23. Preparing for and writing the examination (20 hours).

## Sources of additional information

Most of the basic information you need for the **Exploring adult learning** course is either presented in this study guide or in the class sessions or available in the tutorial letter you received with it.

But what about information you need that is not found in the above? What other information do you need? Maybe there are things you are just curious about.

Here are some ways you can find further information:

### Further reading

Some information can be got from recommended books or journal articles listed in the Further reading section near the end of each unit. These you can borrow from the University library.

### The Internet

Another primary source of information is the Internet or World Wide Web. Computer facilities are available at the University for you to use this computer based resource.

### The other students studying this module

Studying by yourself can be a lonely task. A rich resource of support, information and experience is your fellow students (whether given informally, by your setting up a study group, or by joining a UNISA tutorial group).

Support from the module coordinator:

You can make use of the support given by the module co-ordinator. You are welcome to make appointments to see the co-ordinator and you can also communicate with him or her by letter, telephone, fax or e-mail (details are given in the Tutorial letter).

## Assignments and assessment

What is going to be assessed?

The assessment in this module will be based on **assignments** and **examination**.

### *Assignments*

You will be asked to complete **two assignments** during the course. Each written assignment has a due date and must be sent in by that date.

Completion of the **first assignment** is a requirement for entry in to the final examination. Note well that if this assignment has not been submitted you will not be allowed to write the examination.

### *Examination*

This will be written at one of the recognised UNISA examination centres. The examination will last two hours.

### *Things to remember about assessment*

In thinking about assessment, remember that what should be assessed is **your demonstration** that you have achieved the **learning outcomes** of this course. To do this you need to:

24. show that you have **knowledge** about adult learning (which you demonstrate by writing in appropriate ways in assignments and examination answers).
25. demonstrate that you have the **skills** to think and plan how you would use your knowledge of adult learning in practical ways in your education and training activities.
26. display **attitudes** that indicate that the knowledge you have of how adults learn is meaningful to you personally (both as an adult learner yourself and as an educator of adults) and that the way you use your skills will be effective when working with adults (which is displayed in the way you demonstrate your knowledge and skills).

Some things that will **not** help you demonstrate your achievement of the learning outcomes are the following:

27. Writing what you have learned by **rote** (this means learning words, texts or facts off by heart without really understanding their meaning). You will not do very well in your assessments if you simply write what is in the study material.

28. Not making use of your own experience. We are very interested in your experiences, ideas, feelings and activities as an adult learner yourself. You will do well in your assessments if you combine what you have learned from the study material with your own well thought out ideas. You will do well if can show us that you can use what you have learned in your work and activities.

## Study expectations

To be truly successful in this module will require that you spend a considerable number of study hours reading and writing. The module was written assuming that you have a School grade 12 level competence in the language of instruction and in reading and writing skills. It is further assumed that you can learn from predominantly written material and that you can find, analyse and evaluate information relevant to the learning programme' Lastly it is expected that you will spend time in the careful reading and study of the course material and readings provided and that you will do the assignments and prepare for the examinations.

## Unit 1: What are the characteristics of adult learners?

### Introduction

Adult learners. How shall we know them? This is a key question for any educator. Who are the learners I will be working with? What are they like? How will they learn? For adult educators these questions are even more important than for school teachers. In a school class all the children will be of more or less the same age. Their background will be the same. With adult education there is great variability in who will be in your literacy, ABET or other kind of class. How will you know them so that you can teach them?

### Aims of the unit

This unit aims to outline some of the common characteristics of adult learners and draw attention to the practical implications for teaching of these characteristics.

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

#### **Demonstrate an understanding of some of the more common characteristics of adult learners**

You will demonstrate this by being able to:

- \$ List some of the more common characteristics of adult learners, and
- \$ Describe some of the implications of these characteristics for adult basic education and training practice.

## The more common characteristics of adult learners

Who are the learners in adult education?

One of the most important steps in preparing to teach any group of people is to find out about who they are. If you do not know who your learners are and what they are like, you will not be able to design your teaching approach and methods to suit them best. This means that they may struggle to learn. And you will feel frustrated.

So, who are we talking about when we say *adults* in the term 'adult education'?  
What are the characteristics of adults?

Before I give you a list of some of the ideas that various adult education practitioners have come up with, I would like you to think about who 'adults' are and come up with your own ideas.

### Activity 1

What does being an adult mean to you?

The aim of this activity is to get you to think about some of the characteristics of adults.

Try and answer these questions for yourself.

- \$ What does being an adult mean to you?
- \$ What are the characteristics and qualities of adults?

You will notice that the questions are very similar. This is because I want you to think about the same thing in two different ways.

Over the page I have placed a picture of a two adults. Write all the ideas that you come up with as you think about these two questions onto the blank space around the picture

PICTURE

REPLACE WITH EQUIVALENT  
PHOTOGRAPH WITH  
ONE SOMEWHAT OLDER

Write down the ideas around your picture.

## Activity 2

### Your experience as a learner

Try and answer the questions below. Each questions has been rephrased in a number of ways to make the task easier.

#### School

- 1(a) What was your most significant learning experience at school?  
(What experience(s) do you value most from school?  
What do you remember most vividly from school?)
- 1(b) How did you learn during this experience?
- 1(c) What was important or different about the situation within which you learned during this experience?

#### After school

- 2(a) What was your most significant learning experience after you left school?  
(What experience(s) do you value most after you left school?  
What do you remember most vividly about this experience?)
- 2(b) How did you learn during this experience?
- 2(c) What was important or different about the situation within which you learned during this experience?

#### This year so far

- 3a) What was your most significant learning experience in the past year?  
(What experience(s) have you valued most in the past year?  
What do you remember most vividly about this experience?)
- 3(b) How did you learn during this experience?
- 3(c) What was important or different about the situation within which you learned during this experience?

## Getting started at the Masisisane Learning Centre

In order to help us understand some of the characteristics of adult learners, we start with a case study about an imaginary learning centre which we have called the Masisisane Learning Centre. We shall 'visit' the Masisisane Learning Centre, observe what is happening, and speak to a few learners about what is it like to be an adult learner. We shall also meet up with the educators at the Masisisane Learning Centre and speak with them about their experiences in arranging and teaching the classes for these learners. If you are already a practising ABET educator, you will have experiences that will be very similar to these. And so we use

the case study to look at some of the characteristics of adult learners and the possibilities and problems these characteristics create when teaching adults.

### Case study: A new class at the Masisisane Learning Centre

The Masisisane Learning Centre is located in the Mzimela High School in Kwa Mashu. This venue was chosen for the centre's ABET classes by the community itself, because the school buildings are not often used after 2 pm each day. The idea for the centre originally came from a small group of local people who wanted to attend classes themselves, and thought that the community needed ABET classes that were formally structured and organised. This group made all the necessary initial arrangements. They also offered the help with the management of the centre.

Today, Masisisane Learning Centre is enrolling its very first students. As the learners enter the school grounds, their excitement is apparent. They greet each other happily, and there is a lot of noise and laughter as people who have not seen one another for a while meet in the crowd. The new learners arrive in little groups of twos and threes. Many of them have heard about the classes from other learners, or from the group of people who initiated the classes. Some have been told about the classes by friends who read an article in the local newspaper which aimed to inform people when the classes would be starting..

Mrs Nomsa Nzimande is one of the new learners. She tells us that she heard about the opening of the new learning centre last Sunday, at her church. Other learners say they heard about it through various other community organisations, like the women's groups, the local pre-school, the civic association and even the football club. Mandla Makhanya, John Mabunda en Peter Masuku heard about the classes from other workers at their workplace: the organisers had placed a notice in the workers' newsletter. A few learners say they heard about the classes from Mrs Vilakazi and Mrs Hlophe, the two co-ordinators of the centre.

Mrs Vilakazi and Mrs Hlophe tried to find out as much as they could about the learning needs of the Kwa Mashu community before they began arranging the classes. They discovered that the learners would probably range from those who could not write their own names, to those who could read the newspapers but wanted to join an ABET class in the hope of improving their reading and their general knowledge. They knew that placing the learners would be a difficult task and so they requested assistance from a few practitioners from a nearby adult learning centre with whom they now have a kind of partnership. Between them they decided that they would arrange one class for learners who could not read and write at all (absolute beginners) or who had only a very limited ability in reading and writing. The learner who could already read and write would be placed into a second group.

As the learners arrive, Mrs Vilakazi and Mrs Hlophe chat to them. They ask a lot of questions, and they record some of the answers on enrolment cards. Their most important task for the evening is to divide the learners into one of the two groups, depending on their levels of proficiency. There are doing this now, as the learners arrive, Mzimkhulu Ndlovu and Florence Shongwe, two of the learners who helped start the classes, are assisting them. Some of the learners have been asked to do a



pre-test, and some teachers from the other centre have the job of explaining the test to these learners. Mrs Vilakazi and Mrs Hlophe allocate each learner to a particular class once he or she has been screened.

While Mrs Vilakazi and Mrs Hlophe make their lists of who should go into which group, the new learners chat to each other and introduce themselves.

Nomsa Nzimande is very active in her church but she is nearly illiterate. She wants to read well so that she can read the Bible and the prayer book. She feels embarrassed not being able to read the Bible.

Mandla Makhanya and John Mabunda both feel that they have not advanced at work because they have no education. Though they are both skilled workers they never get promoted because they cannot read or write. They want promotion and they think that ABET classes will help them get an education and a certificate to prove it.

Peter Masuku can read and write but not very well. He would like to become union organiser and he thinks that he will then need to read newspapers and union documents, write reports and fill in all sorts of forms. He wants to learn these skills quickly.

One of the learners is Petrus Khota. He is nervous because he dropped out of school when he was young because he was abused by a violent teacher. He feels that he has missed out on knowledge. He wants to know more and have a second chance at getting an education, though he fears that he may have left it too late.

Another learner, Nomonde Sibiyi, is talking about her hopes. 'Do you think they can teach us quickly? I hope I can learn to read soon. You know, sometimes a train is standing in front of you but you do not know where it is going because you cannot read the number. You have to ask people and they say to you, look, read there. It is written up there! Then you feel so ashamed, because you cannot read.'

Mrs Vilakazi and Mrs Hlophe try to reassure the learners who seem apprehensive. They know from past experience that one of their challenges will be to keep the learners motivated, so that they attend classes regularly and do not drop out.

### Learning from a case study

A case study is an example taken from real life that can be studied to learn about something. We use the case study to 'teach' you.

So, for example, when we ask you to read the case studies, we would like you to look at them both as something that sets the scene for our 'lesson', and also as a teaching technique, perhaps as a technique that you could use in your own classes.

This means that you will have to read through the case study very carefully and think about the characters, the various situations and what is happening.

In this case we have the Masisisane Learning Centre. The purpose of the case study is to set up an experience so that all our students on this course are able to join in the same experience.

Why do we do this? Does it make the course more interesting? If we speak of Mrs Vilakazi and Mrs Hlophe, of Nomsa Nzimande, of Mandla Makhanya, John Mabunda and Peter Masuku and so on, do those characters remind you of situations you know or are planning to work in?

What do you think of our use of case studies? Do they help you to understand things better? Do they help you to think more easily about the issues we discuss? Are you able to use the 'stories' and the characters as the basis of your discussions with your fellow students?

### Some important characteristics of adult learners

This list is a summary of what adult learners are like. It comes from the writings of many experienced adult education practitioners. Compare this list with the ideas you had when you did Activity 1.

This list is important for two reasons:

- § As an *adult educator*, it is very important for you to know who your learners are so that you can design your teaching to suit them. This list will help you to do this.
- § You are an *adult learner* in this course. It might also be interesting for you to think about yourself as an adult learner while you read through this list. How many of these characteristics apply to you?
- § Adult learners want to be **treated as adults**. They will not put up with the criticism or humiliation that schoolchildren often get.
- § Often, even within the workplace, they are **volunteers** and they recognise the need to learn and are willing to learn. Motivation is generally high too, but can be easily lost if their needs and expectations are not met.
- § Adults come to education with **intentions and needs**. Some of these are specific, some more general, sometimes related to the subject matter of the course, sometimes not, and sometimes unknown even to themselves. Their motivations may be very varied. (This suggests that adult learners should be encouraged to state their learning needs.)
- § Adults generally want their learning to have **immediate results**. They want what they learn to help meet some of their immediate needs and solve their problems. They want courses to be **relevant** to their daily lives. (This suggests that the aims and outcomes of any course should be clearly stated at the beginning.)

- \$ They also have **other responsibilities and pressures** outside the learning situation.
- \$ Adults already have their **own learning styles** or **set patterns of learning** (which may be difficult to change).
- \$ Adults bring with them a rich store of **experience and values**. They have knowledge of the world and their place in it. They can use their experience and existing knowledge in the learning process but the willingness of individuals to do this may differ. Adults tend to view and interpret ideas, skills and knowledge by comparing them with what they have experienced in their own lives. Adults like to test new ideas in real life settings.
- \$ Adults will also have **entrenched beliefs, opinions, prejudices and positions**. New ideas and material may question their existing knowledge, beliefs and world view. This means that they may well experience learning as painful and risky. (This suggests that adult education programmes should always take feelings into account and ensure that the relevance of what is being learned is clear – one may be willing to bear learning pain if the end result is worth it in one's own life.)
- \$ They come to a course with **different expectations about the learning process**. Some may expect to be taught everything (as in a formal school) and some may wish to find out everything by themselves. They will have different assessments of what they can and cannot do as learners.
- \$ They **often lack confidence** in their ability to learn.
- \$ Adults often like to be given **some control over the course plan**.
- \$ They often like to be **active** and do things with a clear purpose. People learn best when they are actively involved.
- \$ Adults usually prefer **non-competitive** educational situations.
- \$ Adult learners like **examples, samples** and **resources**.
- \$ They may **learn at different speeds**.
- \$ They often need to **ask questions** and **discuss freely**.
- \$ They need to **see that they are making progress and achieving something**. They appreciate reassurance, positive reinforcement, and helpful feedback. (This suggests that courses, and in particular assessment, should be designed to give regular, helpful feedback to learners).
- \$ Adults may be of **different ages** and older adults may suffer from a number of **physical disabilities**, particularly in relation to hearing and sight.
- \$ Adult may be **tired** from their ordinary work.

Yes! That was a long list. But I do hope that it was easy to read and that it made sense to you because you could relate to many of the statements made by learners.

### Can older adults still learn?

We all know that as people get older their bodies do not function as well as when they were young. Does this mean that as we get older we cannot learn as well as we used to? The evidence collected by scientists is that in fact adults can continue to learn perfectly well until they are very old.

The physical decline in older people can be handled though glasses, hearing aids (and less noise in the classroom) and better lighting. Adult education students, especially illiterate or poorly educated ones, may need to have the eyesight tested as many have problems with their vision.

Older people may process information at a slower pace because they are filtering it through many more years of experience than a young person. They may need an increased time for learning (and also slower presentation of new ideas).

Studies have shown that older adults can learn and that intelligence does not drop significantly with age, though young people perform best on tasks requiring quick insight, short-term memorization, and complex interactions. As people get older, they accumulate knowledge and develop perspective and experience in applying it.

Memory is an important part of learning and memory is also relatively stable as long as material is learned well and new information is related to previously learned material. Older people have problems with meaningless learning (they have no motivation to do it) and with complex learning (it takes longer to sort out especially if new information is inadequately associated with what they already know).

There is often a need to reassure older adults that they are still capable of learning. Lighting in adult learning centres should be bright and venues should be suitable for the hard of hearing.

### Activity 3

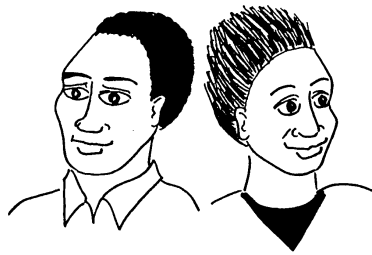
This activity is aimed at helping you to remember some of the important characteristics of adult learners. Understanding these characteristics will help you to understand how adults learn.

On the next page I have repeated the picture of the two adults.

Think about the characteristics of adult learners and write your ideas into the space around the pictures.

Once you have written down all of your ideas, you can turn back to pages listing all those characteristics of adult learner.

- \$ Read through the characteristics listed there.
- \$ Tick the ones that you have remembered.
- \$ Write any additional characteristics into the space around the drawing.



REPLACE WITH EQUIVALENT  
PHOTOGRAPH WITH  
ONE SOMEWHAT OLDER

## Our response

Although you will find that long list of characteristics of adult learners, here are what we think are the very important characteristics for you to keep in mind when we are thinking about how adults learn.

- \$ Adults come to the learning situation with a **wide frame of reference**. This means that adults have lots of already existing knowledge, values and skills to compare new knowledge with. This is different to children who have a less developed framework. So adults may take longer to absorb new information as they will be comparing it with what they already know. And they may question the new things they are learning.
- \$ Older people have problems with meaningless learning that has no motivation to it. Adults learn what they consider **important and relevant**. But, what is important will vary among adults according to their life experiences and their needs.
- \$ Adults are often very conscious of **time**. They have many roles to play. They cannot indulge in learning that seems irrelevant or that is taking too long to acquire.
- \$ Adults wish to be **treated as adults** – sometimes. Most adults have an independent view of themselves and they want to be treated as if they were responsible individuals. But because some adults have only had negative experiences of a very structured and teacher-centred learning environments, they may need assistance in accepting responsibility for their own learning.
- \$ **Physiological changes** may affect learning. Adults can learn throughout their lives but certain physical changes may affect how they learn. Physical characteristics will include speed and reaction time, sight and hearing, and intellectual functioning.

So these characteristics suggest that adults will learn best when:

- \$ There is good adult to adult rapport (good relationships).
- \$ Participation is encouraged and a participatory environment is created.
- \$ They are encouraged and assisted to be independent learners.
- \$ Their individual differences are recognised and provided for.
- \$ The learning is relevant and meets their needs.
- \$ They are encouraged to compare the new learning with their own experiences and ideas.
- \$ The environment, materials and teaching methods are chosen to suit older people.

## The implications of these characteristics for adult basic education and training practice

I am sure you will agree that, if these are the typical characteristics of adults who want to learn (and particularly, those who want to learn basic literacy and then gain an adult basic education), and then how you teach and run adult education classes will need to respond to these characteristics.

Adults are not schoolchildren; they are mature people with lives full of varied experiences and living with heavy pressures of working for a living and being parents and caregivers.

We recommend that you look again through the long list of characteristics and think of how your teaching would adjust or change to be responsive to the characteristics and needs of such adults.

### Unit summary

This Unit has started looking at adult learning by first looking at the common characteristics of adult learners. Adults tend to be goal focussed, wanting immediate, quick and relevant outcomes from their engagement in learning. However, adults are also often insecure, worried whether they can still learn, damaged by previously unpleasant educational experiences, and not sure that their life experience will be taken into account and their humanity respected.

### Further reading

Conner, M. L. *How Adults Learn. Ageless Learner, 1997-2007.*

<http://agelesslearner.com/intros/adultlearning.html> <Accessed 4 February 2009>

An example of the many articles on adult learning on the Internet.

## Unit 2: How do adults learn best?

### Introduction

In the previous unit we looked at some of the more common characteristics of adult learners and noted that the presence of these characteristics has obvious implications for how adults learn and how, therefore, teaching is done most effectively. Educators have to work with these characteristics rather than against them if they are to provide effective educational service.

### Aims of the unit

The unit aims to present some general principles about how adults learn best in educational situations.

## Learning outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

### Relate principles of effective adult education to what is known about how adults learn best

You will demonstrate this by being able to:

List some applications of what is known about common characteristics of adult learners to typical participation and instructional aspects of adult basic education. Describe the main similarities and differences between how adults learn and how children learn, and implications of this for your own practice (e.g. differences in life experiences, purpose for learning, time available for learning, relevant physical differences. Similar needs for relevance, respect, affirmation, stimulation).

## Six principles for effective adult learning

Now that we have explored some of the characteristics of adult learners let us have a look at some ideas about what type of education approach will suit them best.

As *adult learners* we ourselves learn best by following these principles. As *adult educators* we can use these principles to help our students to learn best.

For each principle there is a corresponding practice. These practices are guidelines for designing activities. The activities then help us to follow these principles as we teach and learn.

## Six key principles and practices for effective adult learning

<b>Principle</b> The important idea	What does this mean?	<b>Practice</b> How to act upon this idea
1. A <b>rich body of experience</b> is essential for learning to occur best.	The more practical experience you have, the better you will know your subject.	<b>Build a growing body of experience.</b>
2. You only know what you learn from experience when you <b>reflect on that experience</b> .	Having an experience alone is not enough for learning to happen. You have to think deeply about the experience in order to learn from it.	<b>Reflect actively and regularly</b> on experience and learning.
3. People learn best when focussing on their <b>learning goals and how to achieve them</b> .	If you have no real idea why you are learning and what you want to achieve, you will not be motivated to work hard.	Design <b>learning materials and activities</b> which <b>focus on learning goals</b> . Focus on ways to <b>help learners achieve their learning goals</b> .



4. <b>Solving real problems</b> as a means of learning improves people's learning abilities.	You will learn more easily if you can see how what you are learning is relevant to real life and real life problems.	Activities focus on <b>solving real problems</b> .
5. Learning occurs best if <b>learners understand early what is to be learned and how it is to be learned</b> .	You will learn better if you know from the beginning what you will be learning about and how you will be learning it.	From the start <b>give clear statements and examples of learning goals</b> and describe the <b>path to reaching them</b> .
6. <b>Deliberate practice</b> is the most effective means of learning.	You will learn more easily if you do real life practical things with what you are learning.	<b>Use deliberate practice in real situations</b> to achieve the most effective learning.

adapted from: Sheckley and Keeton (1997):  
*Improving employee development: perspectives from research and practice*

## What do these principles mean?

### Principle 1: You need a rich body of experience

When you have had a lot of experience in adult education or community development we can say that you have a 'rich body of experience' in this field. Right now some of you have more experience in community work than others. By the end of your studies you should all have a richer body of experience in adult education and community development.

### Principle 2: You need to reflect on your experience

Reflecting on learning experiences helps us to identify what we had learnt at that time. You will see how reflecting on these experiences helps you to identify your skills and knowledge.

### Principle 3: You need to focus on your goals and how to achieve them

We know from experience how hard it is to learn something that we are not interested in or which bores us.

Each one of you must be interested in adult education. That is why you are here. (If you are not interested in adult education you better ask yourself: 'What am I doing in this programme?') In this unit we ask you to think carefully about what it is that you need to learn. What do you want to know? What do you want to be able to do once you have finished the **Exploring adult learning** course?

It is important that you know what you want to learn. In this way we can decide on your learning goals for the course.

#### **Principle 4: You need to practice solving real problems**

Once you know what you want to learn, you can look at the situations in the communities in which you work. In this way you can look at ways of finding solutions to problems you may identify. Then you will be able to use what you learn during the course in your real life work and volunteer situations.

#### **Principle 5: You need to understand what you will be learning and how you will be learning it**

One of the reasons why outcomes-based education has been adopted in South Africa is that it focuses on clearly specifying what people are going to learn. It is important to be clear on what are your own learning goals.

#### **Principle 6: You need to deliberately practice what you are learning**

You need to start the process of real practice to try out what you are learning. If you are already involved in adult education activities in your community then this practice has already begun. For those of you who are not currently involved in adult education in your community, we encourage you to start.

These principles of adult education practice take seriously the characteristics of adult learners that we looked at in Unit 1. Indeed, what these principles do is apply, in a general way, how these characteristics affect learning and participation in adult education.

Take as an example the characteristics that:

29. Adults come to education with **intentions and needs**. Some of these are specific, some more general, sometimes related to the subject matter of the course, sometimes not, and sometimes unknown even to themselves. Their motivations may be very varied. (This suggests that adult learners should be encouraged to state their learning needs.)
30. Adults generally want their learning to have **immediate results**. They want what they learn to help meet some of their immediate needs and solve their problems. They want courses to be **relevant** to their daily lives. (This suggests that the aims and outcomes of any course should be clearly stated at the beginning.)

If you look at Principle 3: “**You need to focus on your goals and how to achieve them.**” You will see that it links to the characteristic that adults tend to have clear goals. Principle 5 “**You need to understand what you will be learning and how you will be learning it.**” has a similar focus.

Then Principle 4: “**You need to practice solving real problems.**” relates to the characteristic of wanting to learn things that are relevant and will immediately help them solve real life problems.

So we seriously commend these six principles to you as general guides to your own adult education practice.

## Comparing adult and child learning

### Age as a factor

Children are young; adults are older and sometimes very much older. Children seldom worry that they can learn – particularly as they are told all the time that their main “job” is to be in school – learning! Many older adults believe that they are no longer capable of learning. What is the truth about this?

Modern evidence suggests that people can learn right up to the age of 75 or more, though older adults may have some physical problem before that age (especially after they turn 60). Older adults may have problems with poorer eyesight and hearing, but these can be handled by glasses, and hearing aids (and less noise in the classroom), better lighting, and increased time for learning (and also slower presentation of new ideas).

Adult education students may need to have their eyesight tested – can they see close up (to read a page in a book) or far enough (to read what is printed on the chalk board). You may well find that as many as two-thirds of older adult learners have vision problems.

Adult educators involved in literacy and adult basic education programmes need to take special care that poor vision does not become yet another barrier to learning to read and write.

Hearing also declines after the age of 65 to 70 and rapid speech is less intelligible. Women cannot hear lower pitch and men cannot hear higher pitch. Deafness is a serious disability because of its isolating effect and consequent loss of self-confidence.

### Learning speed as a factor

Learning at school and university is typically tested under time limits. But speed is less important to adult learning and though older people tend to be slower in perception, thinking and acting, given enough time they can learn just as well as the young. Older people may process information at a slower pace because they are filtering it through many more years of experience than a young person.

### Activity 1

Consider how you would ensure that the following take place in any adult education activities you were engaged in:

- Assurance is given to older adults that they are still capable of learning.
- Learners have their vision checked.
- Lighting in venues is bright enough.
- Verbal instruction is audible to all.
- Venues are suitable for the hard of hearing.
- Adult learners are given adequate time to do tasks at their own pace.

## **The factor of intelligence**

We often think of young people as being more intelligent than the old. But is this true?

One problem is that it is very hard to define what intelligence is (what it is, how it functions, how it can be tested). Though we may think of it's as a general mental ability there is now an increasing tendency amongst scientists to think of "intelligences" (for example, there may be one kind of "intelligence" that masters numbers and mathematical concepts, another, "emotional intelligence" that helps us be skilled in managing our relationships with other people).

What is clear is that young people do better when tested under strict time limits. So we may need to go more slowly with older adults. However, this does not mean that adults are less intelligent than youngsters – what they loose in speed they gain in experience, accumulated knowledge and understanding of the social environment.

Cross (1981, p. 162) remarks:

Part of the appeal of the findings on fluid and crystallized intelligence lies in their common sense credibility. Throughout history, societies have revered the wisdom and judgement of the aged and called on younger people for quickness in learning new skills. Today's research confirms the ancient wisdom. On the average, people seem to perform best in their youth on tasks requiring quick insight, short-term memorization, and complex interactions. As people get older, they accumulate knowledge and develop perspective and experience in the use and application of it.

Patricia Cross suggests that the different phases of life call for different kinds of learning equivalent to these two types of intelligence, namely, in youth the acquisition of knowledge and in the older person its integration and application.

## **The factor of memory**

Research seems to show that memory is relatively stable "when material is learned well and new information is related to previously learned material" (Cross, 1981, p. 163), though older people have problems with:

- meaningless learning (no motivation to do it)
- complex learning (it takes longer to sort out especially if new information is inadequately associated with stored information).

## **The factors of maturity and experience**

The very obvious difference between adults and children is that adults are considered to be mature. They have adult responsibilities and obligations and expect to be treated with respect. Thus means that much of the behaviour considered appropriate with schoolchildren (though they too should be treated with respect) is inappropriate with adults. As many adult learners in literacy and ABET

are illiterate or poorly educated because they dropped out of dysfunctional schools when they were young, the issue of respectful treatment is an important one. In the same way, adults have a wealth of experience that school children do not have. This is their one great asset and one in which there is a great rough equality between all adult learners and their educators.

### **The factor of relevance**

Both young and old are one in needing education to be relevant if learning is to take place in an effective and stimulating way. Both young and old want learning to make sense in their lives, to offer to offer to make a difference. One of the tragedies of much schooling is that young people do not expect education to be relevant or meaningful. Adult education not merely should but has to be relevant. Adult learners are volunteers and will leave if it is not.

### **The factors of respect and affirmation**

Both young and old want to be respected and affirmed. Adult education should never be a place where learners are criticised in a negative and destructive way.

### **The factor of stimulation**

Both young and old respond better as learners if they are stimulated and there is an appropriate variety in the ways they are taught.

## **Comparing male and female learning**

Recent research has indicated that there may be real differences in the way that men and women think and use their brains). Some of these findings come from research into the different functions that seem to be handled by the left and right hand sides of the brain. Differences have been found in the way such things as verbal skills, map reading, or physical control. The implications of these findings for adult learning are still unclear as other evidence has shown that on average both men and women are equally intelligent.

In the past (and still in the present) women have often been discriminated against educationally. Sometimes this discrimination was rationalised by claims that women were not capable of the particular education that they were denied access to. Contemporary findings have soundly refuted these prejudices and when women are not discriminated against they perform as well as, if not better, in school and higher education.

In many countries it has been found that women are more and more the main participants in adult education. Changes in society with women increasingly part of the workforce have strengthened this trend.

Women however have two major barriers to surmount:

- a generally lower educational level than men
- more concern over cost (they are more likely to have to pay for themselves and receive less funding from employers)

The cultural and social reasons why men often do not participate well in literacy and ABET provision is something that will have to be addressed in the future.

## References

Cross, K. P. 1981. *Adults as learners: increasing participation and facilitating learning*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass

Sheckley, B.G. and Keeton, M.T. 2001. *Improving employee development: perspectives from research and practice*. Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse.

## Unit 3: Why do adults participate in adult education?

### Introduction

In this unit we are going to explore the question of why people participate in adult education. We will investigate what learner participation in adult education means and why it is important. We will explore factors that affect participation and we will discover how you can encourage participation.

There are a variety of factors that affect an adult's participation in education events or programmes. Some people are confident that they can learn and are highly motivated. They enjoy studying and find it easy. Others lack confidence and struggle to overcome many barriers to learning.

Part of our work as adult educators is to be aware of the factors which affect adults' full participation in education events and programmes. It is our job to encourage learners and help them to overcome the barriers which they experience while learning. In understanding factors which affect participation it often helps to examine ourselves as learners. It helps to think of those factors which help us to learn and those factors which hinder our learning.

### Aims of the unit

To describe some of the common explanations of why adults are moved to participate in educational activities and to see how knowledge of these motivational factors to assist us to improve our educational delivery to these learners.

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

**Demonstrate a basic understanding of common theories of the what motivates adult learners to participate and learn in adult education**

You will demonstrate this by being able to:

Describe some common theories of what motivates adult learners.

## Why do adults want to learn to read and write?

Let's start with the question: "why are there so many adults needing to learn reading and writing?"

There are millions of adults in this country who never had the chance to learn to read and write at all when they were children. We will visit a class of mother-tongue adult learners and try to find out some of the reasons why they wanted to learn to read and write.

### Case study: Mrs Vilakazi's basic literacy class

We visit Mrs Vilakazi's beginner class. We see groups of adults working busily around the table. While Mrs Vilakazi is busy reading with one group, the other groups are doing writing exercises, or drawing pictures to illustrate what they have just read. A fourth group is playing a game of dominoes. We chat to the learners to try to find out why they did not learn to read in their youth.

Some of the learners are embarrassed, but eventually they begin to talk about some of their reasons:

"I had to herd cattle," says Simon, one of the older men.

Maria says that she had to look after the children at her home. "My mother worked in town and so had to cook and wash and look after the small children. So, I lost my schooling,"

Petrus, who recently retired from a mine in Randfontein, tells us "I lost my schooling because, at the age of fourteen, I had to go to work to help support the other members of the family. I did go to school when I was about ten years old and I could read a little then," he says, "but that was so long ago, I just forgot."

Jabu says that her daughter died and she is looking after her three grandchildren. "I can do everything else but I cannot help them with their homework or read the notices that they bring back from school. I never went to school. There was no school where I lived as a young girl. I worked in the fields. When I married my husband did all the reading that was needed."

### Activity 1

Read through the case study again and underline the reasons why many people are only able to learn reading and writing skills when they are already adults.

The case study refers to reasons like the following:

31. Some people were unable to attend school as children because they had to do domestic duties like looking after children or herding cattle.
32. Others had to leave school very early in order to get work and help earn a living for the family.

We also see in the case study that Petrus, like many adults, attended school for only one or two years a long time ago. Although he had learned to read and write, he did not have the opportunity to practice reading and writing because there were no books in his home. Because he could not use the skills he had learnt at school, he lost them.

If you look back at case study, you will see that the grandmother could do a lot of things like caring for her grandchildren and no doubt making ends meet on a limited income. Even though she could not read and write, she was a person who knew a great deal about the important things in life. But this does not mean that your learners will not have lots of reasons for wanting to learn to read and write, as the grandmother did. Try to think of some reasons for wanting to become literate.

## **Activity 2**

Think about a person you know who cannot read and write – perhaps a member of your family, someone in your community or even one of your own learners. Jot down some short answers to the following questions:

33. What do you think he or she needs literacy for?

34. What do you think she or he would like to learn in an ABET class?

Have you made your list of reasons?

We asked Nancy Murray to give us her answer. She said that if you really wanted to find out about how illiteracy affects adults, and why adults want to learn, you should ask illiterate people themselves.

Nancy actually interviewed learners in Old Crossroads, and she said that the following were some of the reasons the learners gave for wanting to learn to read and write.

### **Case study: Learners' motives for joining literacy classes**

"If you can't write, you can't write a list in a book if you sell things, like chickens or oranges, and you can't write down the names of people who owe you money. I would like to be able to write people's names in a book so I don't forget who owes me money."

"I want to write letters."

"I went to sewing school. They taught me very well. I can make aprons and dresses. They knew I could not read. They would just tell me and show me and I would keep it all in my head. You remember things because you know you can't find it in a book like people who can read. That is the one reason I want to read. They tell you different sizes to sew and that is difficult to remember."



"I bought **Imvo** newspaper. I used to buy it, but others used to read it to me. This time I read some of it myself. People couldn't believe I could read it myself. I was so proud."

"I used to receive letters from my husband, and I had to ask someone to read them to me. I want to learn to read and write so that I can laugh or cry on my own."

"You don't want another person to know all your business, but if you can't write, you must ask someone else to write your letters. You don't always feel free to say what you really want to say."

"I want to be able to read because I want to learn out of a book what food I should grow to feed my children in a healthy way. I also want to learn the best way to grow that food."

A practitioner for a rural programme in the Eastern Cape, told Nancy the following:

"People did not always know exactly what they wanted to learn because they coped fairly well with their lives. But they came to classes because they wanted to improve themselves. People already felt different when they started coming to classes because they had made a big and courageous decision to change their lives. They already felt better about themselves because they had taken the first big step towards becoming educated."

You should by now have a much clearer picture of adults who wish to start the learning process for the first time, or wish to return to learning after a long time. We are sure that you will meet learners who have similar needs to those interviewed by Nancy Murray. It is important for you to really understand the everyday problems that illiterate people have so that you can shape what you teach them to assist them in meeting their specific learning needs.

If you look carefully at the reasons given by the learners, you will see that though they have immediate, practical reasons for wanting to read and write, they also want to develop themselves further. They want to be able to build on their new skills; they want to be confident enough of their reading ability to be able to form their own opinions about what they read. They want to be able to *learn from what they read*, they also want to learn *skills* and acquire *knowledge*, that will help them to *improve the quality of their lives* and which will help them to *carry on with their education*.

### Activity 3

You have already read through material which gives some reasons that have been given for literacy and ABET students wanting to learn. Go back to the answers you wrote for Activities 1 and 2 and look at what you have written. After having read what the learners told us about why they wanted to learn, can you think of any other reasons that you can add to the list you made? What reasons and motives have learners for participating in adult education classes?

Make a list of all the ones that you can think of.

## Our response

We have compiled a list of possible motives for adult learners to attend classes:

To learn job skills

To have a second chance to learn

To improve themselves

To get a certificate

To help their children with their homework

To gain general knowledge

To progress at work

To read and write their own letters

To read the Bible

To fill in forms

To meet with other people

We are sure you had additional ones.

### Activity 4

You probably know some learners or potential learners. Why not ask them what motivates them to learn. Interview them and ask them whether any of the following was important in motivating them to join literacy or ABET class. Add any other reasons you thought of.

Motive	Learner					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
To learn job skills						
To have a second chance to learn						
To improve themselves						
To get a certificate						
To help their children with their homework						
To gain general knowledge						
To progress at work						
To read and write their own letters						
To read the Bible						
To fill in forms						
To meet with other people						


Count across the rows and see how many learners regard each aspect as important.

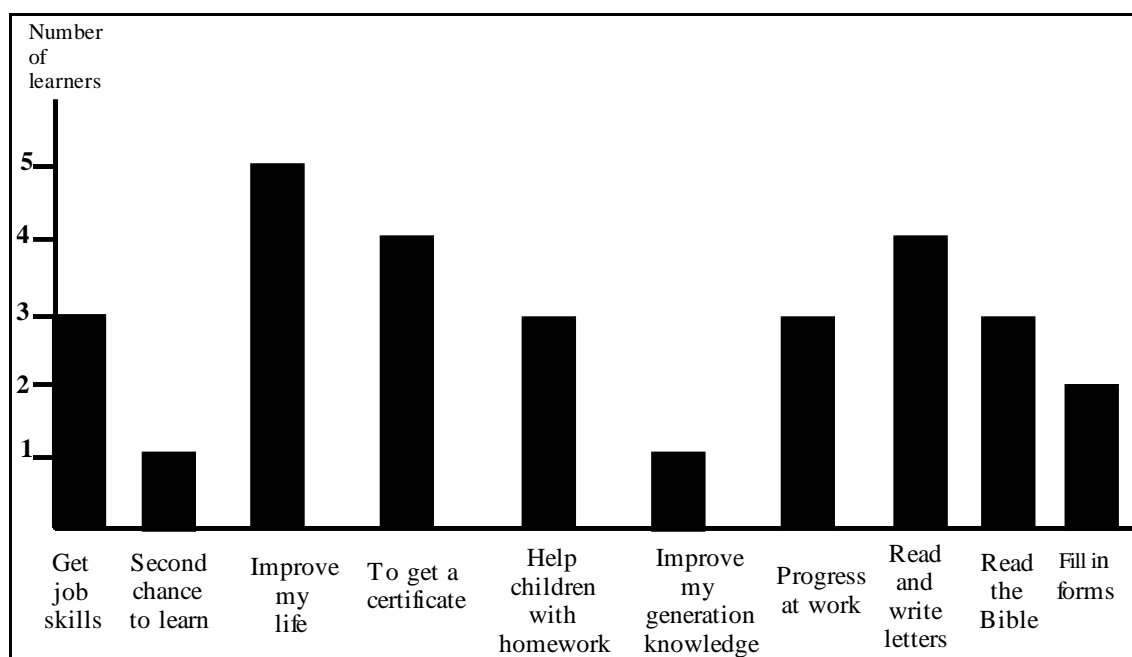
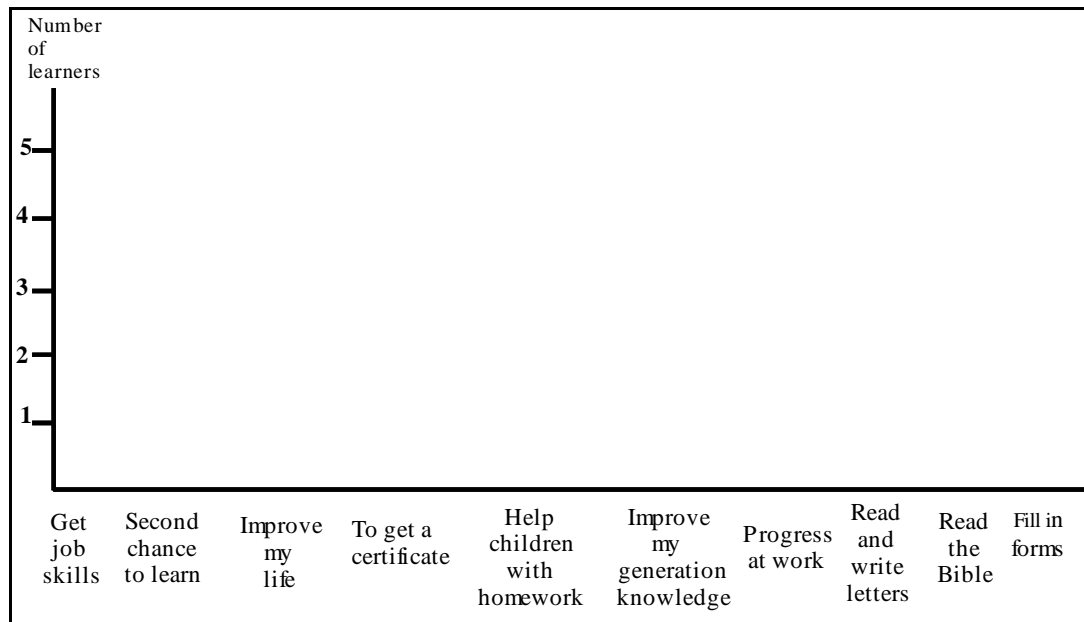
Put you total at the end of each row.

For example, how many ticks do you have for 'filling in forms'? Count them up and fill in the total at the end of that row.

The following is an example of a completed list.

Motive	Learner					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
To learn job skills		✓				1
To have a second chance to learn	✓					1
To improve themselves	✓	✓		✓	✓	4
To get a certificate	✓			✓		2
To help their children with their homework			✓		✓	2
To gain general knowledge					✓	1
To progress at work		✓				1
To read and write their own letters			✓	✓	✓	3
To read the Bible				✓	✓	2
To fill in forms	✓	✓			✓	3
To meet with other people			✓			1
To get a promotion at work				✓		1
To be respected by my relatives				✓		1
To read instruction manuals		✓				1

From a little survey like this you could make a graph showing which were the more common motivations in the small group that you interviewed.



**REDO this graph to fit data**

Why do people participate in adult education?

In looking at participation in adult education, we will explore three key questions:

35. What does 'participation' mean?
36. What factors affect participation?
37. How can we encourage participation?

What does 'participation' in adult education mean?

You have probably heard the word 'participation' many, many times. This is because the idea of the participation of people in making decisions about their own

lives is very important for democracy. It is built into our new Constitution. Participation is also very important in most modern forms of education and development.

But the word 'participation' is ambiguous. This means that it has many different meanings to different people. This is because the meaning of participation has developed over a long period, it is affected by current theories and ideas, and it is affected by practical constraints.

In adult education and training we can think of participation in two ways: firstly, participation in the sense of enrolling or registering or joining in an educational class or event, and secondly, in the sense of participating as an active learner in the actual learning activities.

In school education children are not volunteers. The children are sent to school by their parents and it is the law that children have to be educated up to a certain age. Most adults do not have to attend education and training (except for those who have to attend certain workplace training as part of their jobs). Adults are mainly volunteers. Hence their motivation (the reasons or desire that they have to learn something) is of great importance if they are to participate.

How they actually participate during the learning activities once they are in a class is also important. Indeed how they participate will also be influenced by the reasons they have for attending.

### What factors affect participation?

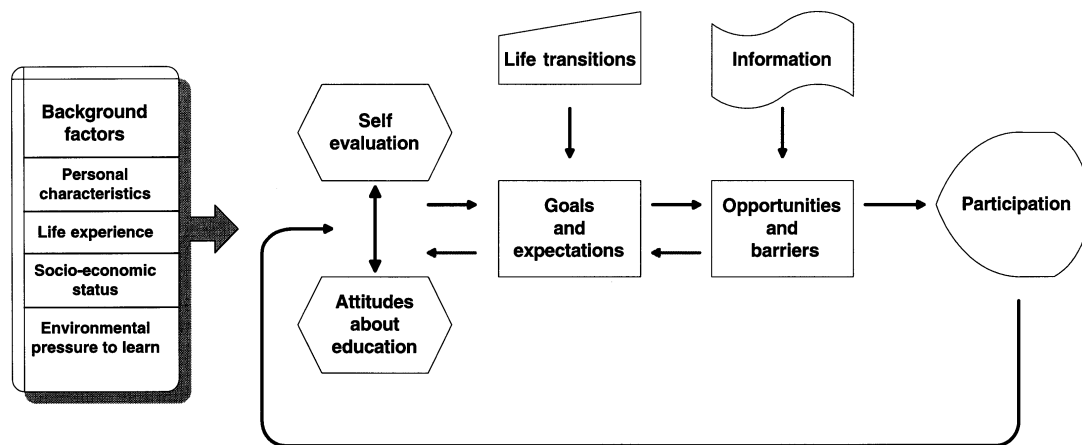
In this section we are going to read and think about six factors that affect participation in education. These six factors have an impact on the ability and willingness of adults to participate **in** and **during** education events and programmes.

The factors you will be reading about are:

- 38. Background factors
- 39. Self-evaluation and self esteem
- 40. Attitudes about education
- 41. Goals and expectations
- 42. Life transitions
- 43. Opportunities

Below is a model which tries to show how they factors affect adult learning and the order in which these factors do so.

## A model for understanding participation in adult education



Based on the Chain-Of-Response (COR) model in Cross, K.P. 1981. *Adults as learners: increasing participation and facilitating learning*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, and on the Psychological Interaction model in Darkenwald, G.C. and Merriam, S.B. 1982. *Adult education: foundations of practice*. New York: Harper and Row

### Background factors

These are key factors that also influence adult behaviour in general. Many of them have affected individuals since their childhood days (and therefore there may be little that adult educators can do to influence many of them).

The main background factors are:

44. Personal characteristics
45. Life experiences
46. Social and economic status
47. Environmental pressure to learn

### Personal characteristics

These include the personal characteristics and family characteristics of individuals. Many of these are determined already during childhood years. These are factors such as age, sex, intelligence, and one's socio-economic background (whether one came from a wealthy or poor family).

### Activity 5

To look at the educational impact of some of your own personal characteristics, briefly answer the following questions, in relation to one of them, your biological sex:

Are you male or female? \_\_\_\_\_

Were you encouraged by your parents to get a good education?

Did this have anything to do with your being male or female?

Does this have anything to do with your reasons for furthering your education as an adult?  
How?

Do you think things would have been different for you if you had been of the other sex?

How would they have been different?

These factors strongly influence educational experiences later in life. They also influence people's values and attitudes towards education and life in general.

### **Life experience**

What kind of schooling has a person had? What values and attitudes has he or she learnt? Has he suffered from the effects of violence? Has she been healthy or sick? All the experiences you have in your life influence the way you feel about furthering your education. Some of you may have had your schooling interrupted by political violence. How did that affect your schooling? How do you feel now?

### **Social and economic status**

The key factors here are: The adult's educational achievements, his or her work status, and how much money she or he earns. Usually, if a person has high status, this means that person is more likely to want to and to be able to further his or her education as an adult. Why do you think this is so?

### **Environmental pressure to learn**

By environmental pressure to learn we mean the social environment, the family environment, the work environment, and so on. This pressure can come from the family, peers or the broader work and social environment. *For example:* If your

father was a teacher he might have wanted you to become a teacher as well. Therefore he tries to persuade you to train as a teacher.

Another example might be that many of your friends have university qualifications. They encourage you to get one too. They say you will get a good job and gain everyone's respect. You feel pressured to go to enrol in a university.

If unemployment is very high it may be very important to have a good educational qualification to get a job.

Usually, the higher your social and economic status, the more pressure you will feel to study further and the more opportunities you will have.

### **Self-evaluation and self esteem**

This is your evaluation of yourself as a learner and your general attitude to yourself. It will have been moulded by your background and life experiences. *For example:* Confident people will be drawn to further their education. They tend to stick in a programme until they have finished it. People with little confidence in their ability to learn and do well do not expect to succeed. They fear the pain of failure and humiliation. These people tend to resist further education. If they do register for a course these people often drop out.

Often people's negative attitudes to education and negative attitudes to their own ability to learn are caused by low achievement at school. The school system tends to be competitive. Losers or people who don't do so well are often humiliated. Obviously, as adults, we want to avoid repeating negative experiences we had at school. For this reason we may fear any kind of further education, and choose not to study further. However, we may be happy to participate in learning activities which do not threaten us.

### **Attitudes about education**

Attitudes about education are influenced by one's own experiences and the attitudes and opinions of others.

Peer pressure is the effect on you of the attitudes and opinions of your friends and colleagues. *For example:* It is difficult for a worker to commit to adult education classes if his friends and colleagues tease him and his wife thinks he is wasting his time.

Wealthy people tend to see learning as an enjoyable experience. Often they have had the privilege of a good education. They feel good to be exercising their minds and to be learning new things. They gain personal satisfaction from learning itself.

Poorer people tend to not think of learning as a personally rewarding experience in this way. They tend to regard further education only as a means of ensuring job security. Or they feel further education is only useful if they will be paid more. The act of learning is seldom seen by these people as 'pleasurable'.



## Goals and expectations

In most societies education is geared toward achievement. Therefore the goals of participation in any learning are extremely important. Some researchers believe that the **conscious** expectation of reward through reaching a desirable goal may be more important than most other factors.

People's goals and expectations differ widely, as do their needs.

Adults will not participate if the goals are not important to them. They must place a high value on the goals. The emotional value of these goals (how achieving these goals will make them feel) will be influenced by a person's:

- 48. social and economic status.
- 49. own attitudes to education.
- 50. the attitudes of peers.

Adults will also not participate if they have low expectations of success or reward. Expectations are heavily influenced by self-evaluation of one's learning ability and by one's attitudes about education.

## Life transitions

Goals and expectations are heavily influenced by life transitions. 'Transition' means change from one thing to another. These life transitions include ageing, changing job, moving house, marriage, divorce, death of a marriage partner, birth of children, retirement, etc

Some of these transitions are common to most people all over the world: puberty, having to start work, marriage, having children, widowhood, etc. Others differ from society to society and within societies. To take a new transition custom amongst rich young people in rich Western societies – the so-called gap year in which they take a year off after they have finished school or university and before they get a real job. They travel to foreign countries and learn something about other parts of the world as well live apart from their parents though their parents still fund them.

Life transitions are often very important for participation in adult education because the transition to something new may demand new knowledge and skills. An obvious example is that a young mother now needs to know quite a lot about childcare.

## Opportunities

Most adult educators try to attract adult learners by providing opportunities.

Worldwide the trend is a growth in adult education opportunities and this is also so in South Africa though there has been disappointment that the Department of Education has failed to deliver on promises of greater provision of adult education opportunities (though new opportunities have started through the Department of Labour's SETAs funded through the skills levy and through the *Kha ri gude* literacy campaign). Employment opportunities for women are increasing and there are more opportunities for them to study.

Unfortunately, though just providing opportunities works for highly motivated people, it does not work for those who have had bad educational experiences in the past and are not attracted to further education.

### **Activity 6**

Reflect on the key factors affecting participation in adult education. This activity will help you to remember the key factors affected participation in adult education (and during adult education).

Think of the learners/students/participants you work with in your adult education type activities. (If you are not engaged in adult education think of those you have worked with in the past or would be likely to work with in the future).

Answer the questions below about how these key factors would influence their participation.

### **Background factors**

Personal characteristics

Life experiences

Social and economic status

Environmental pressure to learn

Self-evaluation and self esteem

Attitudes about education

Goals and expectations

Life transitions

Opportunities

How can we encourage participation?

I said at the beginning of the section on *What factors affect participation?* that adult educators can often have very little influence over many of these factors. Although we cannot change the personal history of our adult learners, there are many ways in which we can encourage them to participate in and during education events and programmes.

## Activity 7

### Encouraging participation

This activity is aimed at getting you to explore ways in which you can encourage learners you teach (or hope to teach) to participate in and during education events and programmes.

**Step one: Examine the factors that affect participation:** Background factors, Self-evaluation and self-esteem, Attitudes about education, Goals and expectations, Life transitions, Opportunities

**Step two: Come up with ways that you can help learners to deal with these factors**

Encourage your learners to participate in *and* during the education events you are facilitating by helping them to deal with the way that the factors affect them.

**Step three: Plan for how you will teach the rest of the class**

What would you recommend adult educators to do to help learners to deal with each factor?

### Unit summary

This unit has looked at the reasons and motivations learners have for wanting to learn and participate in adult education activities. Understanding these motivations is an important part of the work of the adult educator in getting to know the learner.

The unit describes some of the more common reasons given for participation and presents a model for understanding the factors that lead to adults participating or not participating in adult learning activities.

### Further reading

Cross, K.P. 1981. ***Adults as learners: increasing participation and facilitating learning***. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Courtney, S. 1992. ***Why adults learn : towards a theory of participation in adult education***. London: Routledge

Darkenwald, G.C. and Merriam, S.B. 1982. ***Adult education: foundations of practice***. New York: Harper and Row

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## Unit 4: What are the barriers to adult learning?

### Introduction

What could 'block' or prevent adults from learning? In this Unit on What are the barriers to adult learning we will explore four key questions:

51. What is a 'barrier'?
52. Why is it important to know about barriers?
53. What barriers, problems and fears prevent participation and learning?
54. How can we help learners overcome barriers?

Literacy and ABET practitioners can assist learners effectively if they are aware of the possible blocks to learning and can assist in removing them.

### Aims of the unit

To describe typical barriers to learning (social, economic, physiological and psychological) and the ways of overcoming them.

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

#### **Describe typical barriers to participation and learning in adult education**

You will demonstrate this by being able to:

Describe barriers that should include physical, social, economic, institutional and attitudinal ones.

Describe barriers that in particular prevent South African adults from participating in education.

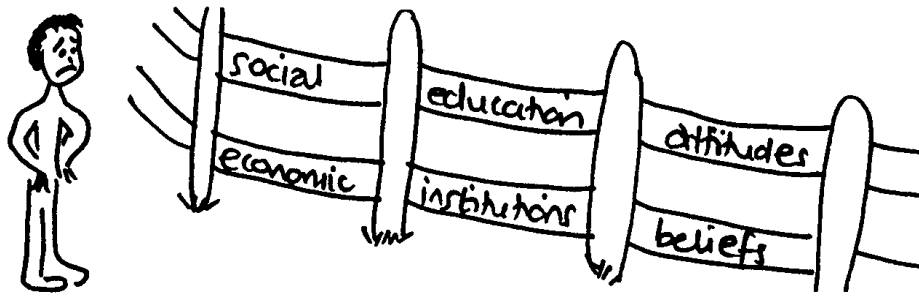
Describe ways in which adult learners may be encouraged to participate and learn.

Describe ways in which typical barriers can be removed.

## Barriers to participation and learning

What is a 'barrier'?

Barriers to learning are things that make learning difficult. You can think of a barrier as something like a wall or fence that stands between a learner and his or her success. Can the learner climb over the barrier or find an unlocked gate to get through it? If learners can get past the barrier then their learning is much easier. If they can't, they often drop out.



### REPLACE WITH BETTER ILLUSTRATION

There are different kinds of barriers: they can be inside the learner's mind as attitudes or ideas, or they can be outside in the environment. So we can call them internal barriers (inside the learner) or external (outside the learner).

### Activity 1

Read through the case study below.

Underline each of the difficulties that Mrs Vilakazi and Mrs Hlophe had in their first three weeks of teaching an ABET class.

Underline also the problems they thought might arise in the future.

Make a summary list of these problems or barriers.

### Case study: three weeks after the start of the course at the Masisisane Adult Learning Centre

Three weeks after the start of the ABET course we visited the Masisisane Learning Centre again. Several of the learners have a lot to tell us about their experiences. Many of them are pleased that they now have an opportunity to learn reading, writing and number skills. But some of them tell us that they are disappointed that they are taking so long to learn to read and write. They did not realise that it would take such a long time to learn.

A small group of learners say they would prefer to learn skills that will immediately enable them to earn a living. As one of them says, "I know it is important to read and write, but first I need to learn something that can earn me some money for food for my children."

Mrs Vilakazi and Mrs Hlophe, the two educators, also talk to us, and they tell us about some of their problems.

"We had to move some of the learners from the groups we first put them into," says Mrs Vilakazi. Even though we try to assess the learners when they come here, it is not an easy task to decide on the right level, and we misplaced a few people. You remember Petrus Ndlovu? He started in the beginners' class, and we had to move him to the second level class after two lessons. And Nomonde Bhengu, she sat so

quietly that we did not realise that she was in the wrong class until tonight. She was too nervous to speak because she was afraid the others would notice that she is not at the same level as they are.

Another problem is absenteeism. "Attendance is a bit better this year," says Mrs Vilakazi, "but it is still a big problem for us, because we always have somebody who has to catch up with the work. And then there are the people who come to class late. It is really disturbing when people are not on time, and you have to start all over two or three times."

"My problem," says Mrs Hlophe "is that I have already had a few learners drop out and then in addition to that I had new learners joining the classes at almost every lesson for the first two weeks. Here is Sipho Twala. He only joined the class tonight."

We ask Sipho why he only joined the class in the second week. "For three evenings," he says, "I stood outside and waited to hear from the other learners when they were leaving whether the teachers hit the learners like the teachers do with our children at school. When I was sure that they do not hit or ridicule the learners, and I could see that the learners are happy, I had the courage to join the class, before that, I was too scared."

Mrs Hlophe says she also has some learners in her classes who have physiological problems. "Joseph Zulu, for example, works in a steel factory and I think the noise at his workplace is affecting his hearing. So he often has to ask me to repeat what I have said, and sometimes he misunderstands me. Another one is Mary Nzimande. She has difficulty reading what I write on the board because she cannot see so well. I am sure that she needs glasses. I make sure she sits at the front of the class and that helps her a little."

## Our response

Compare your list with the one we give below.

Our list is as follows:

55. high level of absenteeism
56. learners coming to class late
57. new learners arriving each week
58. learners being disappointed that they were not learning as quickly as they thought they would
59. learners dropping out of the classes
60. fearful learners.

What can adult educators do in such situations?

## Why is it important to know about barriers?

It is usually those who 'need' education the most – the poorly educated – who fail to participate in adult education. Even if they are highly motivated they often feel that learning will be difficult. They may experience all kinds of problems such as: how to pay for courses, how to find transport to get to classes, how to earn enough money to feed their families while they study, and so on. Obviously, this will affect their participation in the learning, even if they are very motivated.

If you want to be a successful adult educator, if you want your events and classes to be well attended, if you want people to participate actively, if you want your education to make a real difference in the lives of your learners, then you must understand the barriers they face. And you must help them to overcome these barriers wherever possible.

## What barriers prevent participation and learning?

In this section I am going to introduce you to three main barriers to adults participating in and learning from adult education.

These barriers are:

61. Social and economic barriers.
62. Barriers caused by education institutions.
63. Physiological barriers
64. Barriers caused by attitudes, beliefs and perceptions.

The first two categories are external barriers. The last two internal ones, inside the learner's body and mind.

### Social and economic barriers

In all countries of the world adult learners report barriers caused by their social situation or their economic situation. Time and money are the main barriers here. Those who have time often have no money, and those who have money often have no time.

Some other interesting points about social and economic barriers:

65. People often have incorrect information about costs. Sometimes people are not sure where to find information about costs.
66. When a man spends money on education this may be seen as an investment in a career. This is often not so with women. Women often feel guilty about spending family money on education. Do you think this is right?
67. Young people have usually had a (more or less) free education (paid for by the government and their parents). They are unwilling to now pay for education which they see as their 'right'. Older people are often more willing to pay.



68. Workers have less money and larger families to support. At the same time their employers are less likely to pay for them or give them leave to study.

## Barriers caused by education institutions

### **Timetabling**

Workshops which last all day or all week are difficult for people with jobs. Mothers with small children also have problems with classes organised like this. There are often no child care facilities. Choosing a suitable time in consultation with the learners can often improve attendance and reduce dropout.

### **Location and transport**

Lack of transport and lack of suitable locations (especially at night) are a problem for many adult learners in South Africa. The dangers from criminals at night are serious barriers to participation, especially for women.

### **The learning environment**

Uncomfortable, overcrowded, noisy, or too hot or too cold class venues can block learning. It is not always possible to do very much about finding suitable venues for your learners. Try to find the most suitable venue for your classes. A good understanding of the community and its resources will help you here. If your venue is not satisfactory, ask your learners about other venues. They may be able to suggest other arrangements. Someone in your class may, for example, know of a more appropriate venue at a clinic, a church, a section of a factory or even a shed. While many factors may be beyond your control, you can try to make whatever practical arrangements are possible. For example, if your venue is too hot, you could divide your class into two smaller classes, make sure the windows are open, find out whether there is a fan you could use in the classroom, or even try to arrange for the classes to be held at a cooler time of the day.

### **Lack of interesting, relevant and practical courses**

Many courses, especially correspondence or distance education courses demand a high level of literacy (and the energy to keep up with the pace).

### **Procedures**

Many courses are not easy to register for – there are many forms to fill in and they may require certain qualifications. It is also difficult for workers and experienced people to get credit for prior learning (RPL). Fees are sometimes very high for part-time courses. This is not fair on the poor.

### **Time**

Some courses are just too long for some people.

### **Lack of information**

Most adults with a poor education background do not know where to go or who to ask about adult learning opportunities. Again, most well educated adults are aware of at least one place that offers adult education. Simply providing information is not good enough.

## Physiological barriers

Other internal blocks to learning are caused by poor hearing or by poor vision. These kinds of problems are common among older adults, and adult educators are often the first people to identify such problems. When you do identify this kind of problem, you should recommend medical attention to the learners concerned. You may need to do simple sight and hearing tests in your class.



Adult learner holding his hand behind his ear to be able to hear – he cannot hear properly.

You should also try to take such problems into account in the way you present your lessons. In the classroom, hearing and visual problems have implications for where people sit in class, encourage them to move so that they can see and hear better. Other physiological blocks to learning are tiredness or illness. If a learner feels tired or ill, he or she may be unable to pay attention or participate in a lesson.

## Barriers caused by attitudes, beliefs and perceptions

Often learners do not talk about these personal barriers. Generally, society places high value on education so students do not wish to appear stupid or uninterested in learning.

These psychological blocks include the following:

### Fear of humiliation and failure

It is quite common for adults to fear that people in the community might laugh at them for attending a literacy or ABET class. Older men who often feel ashamed to be seen 'returning to school'. They felt ashamed because they could not read and write. This is quite common, and many adults try to hide their illiteracy because they feel ashamed. They are afraid that, if other people find out that they do not know

how to read and write, they will think that they are stupid. Some are afraid that they may lose their jobs, or that they will not be considered for responsible positions in the clubs or committees to which they belong. When they do attend classes, they may not want to participate in class because they are afraid that their classmates – or even the teacher – will laugh at them.

Look at these this case study:

### Case study: Sonwabo Mbulawa, an ABET teacher, tells this story

One of my learners was a lay preacher. Although he was illiterate, he managed to hide this so that no one ever knew about it. He memorises all the prayers and hymns and Bible verses for church services. One day someone asked him to come up and read a new piece from the Bible. It was a piece he did not know. He went up to the pulpit, looked down at the Bible and said, "I have left my glasses at home, and so will do another reading." And he turned the page and began to "read" one of the verses that he knew off by heart.

Negative school experiences or negative cultural attitudes towards women being well educated contribute to these barriers.

A general lack of confidence and dislike of competition all contribute to these barriers.

It is important that you should never humiliate a learner and also that you should not allow learners to humiliate one another. Be careful not to make learners feel embarrassed or to give learners the impression that you think they are stupid.

If you are aware that some of your learners are afraid of humiliation or abusive treatment, it is essential to create a learning environment which does not make learners feel anxious. Some ways of doing this are:

69. Talk to learners as mature adults.
70. Reassure your learners.
71. Make learners aware of their progress.
72. Help learners to see mistakes as part of the learning process.
73. Show interest in their lives and opinions.
74. If they are afraid to speak in large groups, divide the class into smaller groups. Speaking in a small group is less stressful than speaking in a big group.
75. A friendly atmosphere, where the practitioner is supportive of the learners and encourages learners to support one another, will give anxious learners a sense of security.
76. Try to create a spirit of *ubuntu* (i.e. of caring for and supporting one another) in your classes. This will do much to ensure that your learners are happy.

### Fear of being too old to learn

Many older people do not believe that they are still able to learn. Many adult learners secretly fear this even if they do not say so. They may also fear that they are too stupid to learn and that others will see them fail.

Look at this case study:

### Case study: Noluthando Nxu, another ABET teacher, remembers this story

A learner in my group told me she spent a long time trying to make up her mind about joining a literacy class. She explained that she was afraid of holding the other learners back. She thought that she would be the only one struggling. She was afraid that the teacher would be impatient because she was an old grandmother, and that the teacher would be fed up with a "person who knows nothing".

### Activity 2

Why do you think someone who is afraid of being too old or too stupid might not learn very well? In other words, why is fear of failure a block to learning?

The above case studies highlight the way that many illiterate people see themselves. Because they do not have formal education, they see themselves as people who "know nothing". One of the responsibilities of an ABET practitioner is to show learners that they (like this grandmother), actually know and understand many things.

You have to feel fairly confident in order to learn well. If you are tense or nervous, it is difficult to make sense of what the teacher or the other learners say. You think about your worries and fears instead of paying attention. And you do not have the courage to ask for explanations if you do not understand. Everybody has difficult understanding at times. But while confident learners just ask for an explanation, nervous learners stay quiet and pretend they are listening. This is the main reason why fear is a psychological block. It gets in the way of joining in mentally with what the rest of the class is talking about.

This may prevent a learner from asking for help if he or she does not understand. It may also explain why some learners do not participate in discussions.

With learners who are nervous, you will need to try and build up their confidence. One way of doing this is by building on what they already know and by linking your discussion to their everyday experiences.

Another way is to ensure that you respect all learners. Treat the adults in your class with the same kind of respect that you would show them in everyday life. Avoid being sarcastic and do not allow learners to humiliate other learners. Make all the learners feel special.

The fear of being too old may be more pronounced if an older learner is in a class with many younger learners, or if there is only one man among many women, or if one particular learner is very much poorer than the others, and so on. Make *all* the learners feel important and respected.

Some practitioners say that it is useful to try to group learners so that people in similar age ranges work together. They say that the elderly do not feel comfortable with, for example, teenage learners, and vice versa. Whatever you decide about such arrangements, your learners must be made aware of the importance of respecting the other learners in the class.

### Blocks caused by adult learners' many duties

Some psychological blocks that arises because adult learners may be thinking about the chores that they have to do. Problems like these can inhibit their concentration. You may be able to alleviate the problem by talking about it with the class or by consulting with them and trying to arrange your classes at a less busy and more suitable time. This may not always be possible with adult learners who have many chores.

### The thoughts of three women learners

#### **Activity 3:**

This activity is aimed at helping you to explore the difference between external barriers and internal barriers to learning.

Remember: Barriers to learning are things that make learning difficult. You can think of a barrier as something like a fence that stands between a learner and her success. If learners can get past the barrier, like someone finding a way through the fence, then their learning is much easier. If they can't, they often drop out.

Barriers can be in learners' minds, as attitudes or ideas, or they can be in the world that the learner faces. So we can call them internal barriers (inside the learner) or external (outside the learner).

In this exercise, look at the statements in this table below. It has some descriptions of barriers to learning in it.

You must decide if each one is in the learner's mind or in the world outside the learner. If it is in the learner's mind, tick in the column headed 'Internal'. If it is in the world outside the learner, tick in the box headed 'External'.

	Internal	External
The learner is afraid of failing.	✓	
The teacher does not come to class.		✓
Teacher uses inappropriate teaching methods.		
The learner has no confidence.		
The learner has learnt the wrong ways of doing things.		
The learner has no real desire to change.		
Women are afraid to go out because of criminals.		
The learning centre is far from the learner's home.		
The content of the course is boring.		
The books look like children's books.		
The course is too quick for the learner.		
The learner needs reading glasses.		
The learner has no hope.		
The learner has no money.		
The learner fears change.		
The course is not relevant to the learner's situation (learner cannot use anything from the course in her life).		
The learner feels afraid that people will mock him (laugh at him) because he is not educated.		
The learner's husband will not let her attend class.		
The person who handles registration is rude to adult students.		
The textbook the student has to use cannot be found in local bookshops or the local libraries.		
<i>Fill in more barriers that you can think of</i>		

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## How can we help learners overcome barriers?

It is sometimes not possible to do very much about these problems. In such cases, the teacher and the learners often carry on as though the problems do not exist. But this is not very helpful. It is better to be aware of the problems and at the very least, to talk to your learners about them. It is also useful to talk about them to other teachers, who may be able to suggest solutions that you did not think of.

### Activity 4

Think of your own experience as a learner at school and after.

How did the Social and economic barriers, Educational institution barriers, and your own internal barriers caused by physiological and psychological problems (illness or disability, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions), affect your learning?

Then list the way in which you were able to overcome some of these barriers

How would you teach adult learners in a class to overcome some of these barriers that are blocking their way?

### Our response

Here are some ideas that we had about how we can help learners to overcome barriers.

### Overcoming barriers with information

Effective information can help learners to overcome barriers to participation and learning by:

77. Linking learners to learning opportunities that suit them. So advertising courses and offering counselling and interviews will help learners to find out about courses on offer and what courses are relevant to their needs and interests.
78. Preparing learners for the type of learning and how it will be structured. Learners who understand the educational approach being used, who know how the course is structured and what is expected of them feel more confident.

### Overcoming barriers by creating a positive learning environment

A positive learning environment for adult learners is a non-threatening environment in which they feel safe to try out new ideas and make mistakes.

Adult learners often feel threatened if they think they may be punished or humiliated if they get answers wrong. Adult learners may feel threatened if they think they will be made to feel stupid. Adult learners may also feel threatened if they think they may be treated like children.

What can you do to help learners to overcome their barriers to participating during literacy and ABET programmes?

- § **Create low-threat, non-competitive educational opportunities.** Learners feel comfortable in situations where they may work as a group and where they can set their own expectations and pace of learning.
- § **Create low-threat tests of interests, competencies and aptitudes.** Learners should be able to do the tests in their own time and assess themselves. Instead of setting a test which may remind students that there is still a lot that they don't know, you could design an activity which would allow the learner to focus on what she or he already knows and can do. This can be an empowering experience for the learner and helps the educator to get to know the learner. It also helps the educator to see what knowledge and skills the learner already has.
- § **Provide positive, enjoyable learning experiences. Give useful feedback.**
- § **Boost learners self-confidence wherever you can.**

Get to know your learners. Learn what they enjoy doing. Learn what it is they want to learn. Help them to feel free to discuss their learning needs and goals with you. Be sensitive to their feelings. Show them that you take them seriously and that you respect their thoughts and ideas. Congratulate them when they have done well.

On the last point – it is important to challenge them as well. You will not help learners by telling them they are brilliant all the time. Help them to think critically, encourage them to ask questions. When you feel they do not understand something clearly, take the time to help them to understand. When they get something wrong, point out to them where they have gone wrong and what they need to do in order to get it right.

These are just a few ideas of how you can help learners overcome barriers. You will discover many more ideas in the rest of the course.

## Unit summary

We have looked at some of the barriers that stop and delay adults from learning. Some of these barriers are caused by things out of our individual control – like poverty or unemployment or the fact that a learner has eyesight problems. Some, however, we can do something to lessen (so for instance we could arrange for a learner to get reading glasses) and sometimes we can influence our educational organisations to arrange things to make it easier for adult learners to attend the right kind of courses presented at suitable times in a learning helpful environment.



## Unit 5: Theories and types of learning

### Introduction

Given that learning is so important to our lives, it is not surprising that we want to know how it works. How do we learn? What is the best way to learn? Can we learn better? Are there different types of learning?

Unfortunately, knowing how learning takes place is not a simple matter. The human brain and mind are incredibly complex. The brain is not like some machine we can take to bits and see how the parts work. So it is also not surprising that philosophers and psychologists have come up with different ideas and theories about how learning takes place.

### Aims of the unit

This unit aims to introduce some theories about learning and show how these theories can influence the practice of teachers. The concepts of rote learning and meaningful learning are also explained.

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

#### Outline basic theories and types of learning

You will demonstrate this by being able to:

- Distinguish between learning theories and instructional theories
- Outline a description of the main learning theories
- Distinguish between rote and meaningful learning
- Identify types of learning being applied in observed learning interactions.

### What is a theory?

A **theory** is a set or system of ideas that tries to explain something. Theories are usually general, that is, they provide some general principles that will explain how all the specific instances of a thing should work. Thus a theory of learning tries to explain in general terms how all individual instances of human learning happen.

Theories are suppositions, that is, they are assumptions or hypotheses. Theories have to be tested and checked to see that they really do explain things. In the sciences, if theories are found to be convincingly correct they are no longer called theories but principles or laws. In psychology and other human sciences it is much more difficult to be certain. For this reason current theories on learning remain just that – only theories. Scientists and educational researchers are still arguing about which theory of learning explains learning best.

## What is the difference between a learning theory and an instructional theory?

A theory of learning is about how human beings learn under all circumstances. An instructional theory is not the same as a learning theory. An instructional theory is about what is the best way for teaching or instruction to take place more effectively and efficiently in particular contexts and practical circumstances.

Now, naturally, learning theories and instructional theories may well be in harmony with each other. You would think it odd if a teacher who claimed to believe one theory of how adults learn then went and taught in a way that totally contradicted that theory. But there is also much debate amongst researchers on what instructional theories are best or most practical. Often instructional practices based on a particular learning theory do not seem to work very well – does this point to the learning theory not being correct or to the difficult circumstances under which learning often happens?

## What are the main theories about learning?

There are a variety of theories about how people learn. These theories can be found described in most introductory textbooks on psychology or educational psychology.

There are five main types of learning theories: behaviourist, cognitive, social, humanist, and information processing.

Each of these theories will be described together with some examples of what kinds of educational practice they support.

### **Behaviourism**

Behaviourism is one of the oldest theories of learning and is commonly associated with the theories of a number of famous psychologists: Pavlov, Thorndike, Watson and Skinner.

Behaviourist theories generally think of learning as the way that we respond to stimuli in the environment. Stimuli (that is, anything which affects our human senses) which we find pleasurable or interesting we try to gain more of, stimuli which are unpleasant or cause us pain we avoid. The repetition of stimuli reinforces the way we habitually respond to them. Learning is thus a case of stimulus-response.

The practical application of these theories tends to support a lot of practice to reinforce learning, supported by rewards for learning (or punishments for not learning). Behaviourism supports the belief of educators that feedback is critical to learning.

The stimulus-response method is used frequently in adult learning situations in which the students must quickly learn an appropriate response to some stimulus (for example what to do when a warning is sounded in some emergency situation).

Behaviourism has influenced outcomes based education in its insistence that learning can only be identified if there is an observable outward change in the behaviour of the learner. The change must be made visible in observable behaviour.

Behaviourism also argues that learning is best presented in short manageable blocks that build on previously learned behaviours. This leads to training courses and materials being designed in short repeatable training steps each with one or very few manageable tasks.

In organisations much training and performance management is based on behaviourist principles.

Many critics of behaviourism see it as too limited a theory and that it does not take into account the complexity of human learning. Most modern learning theorists have come to believe that learning is not solely determined by external stimuli but that it also includes an internal component as well.

### **Cognitive theories**

Cognitive theories focus on the inner mental activities. Although learning may result in changes in observable behaviour, that behaviour is a sign or product of the processes that are happening invisibly in the person's head. Though, obviously, external stimuli are important influences on learning, learning is the result of complex inner mental events, through interactive processes of memory, thinking, knowing and problem-solving

Since the 1960s a variety of cognitive theories have replaced behaviourism as the most dominant way of understanding how learning happens.

One of the best known of cognitive theories is constructivism (which itself has a variety of forms of theory). Constructivism became popular in the 1980s.

### **Constructivism**

Constructivism is a learning theory that attempts to explain how learners learn by constructing understanding for themselves.

Constructivist theories argue that learning is an active, building process. The learner actively engages in constructing his or her own mental representations of reality. New stimuli and information are linked to the prior mental representations and knowledge that they already have. Learning is not just acquiring or absorbing new information – rather the learner dynamically constructs new knowledge.

Constructivism assumes that all knowledge is constructed making use of previous knowledge (sometimes seen as being like a template or **schema** of knowledge into which the new information is fitted, thereby making sense of it, or the schema is adapted to fit the new knowledge).

Some theorists, such as Piaget, concentrated on the way our developing psychology enables us to construct knowledge. Others, such as Dewey and

Vygotsky stressed how we build knowledge through our interactions with other people.

Constructivism is also an instructional theory and constructivist teaching practice advocates real genuine activities in appropriate environments, use of prior knowledge and experience, lots of learner collaboration and co-learning, thoughtful reflection on experience and problem-based education. It is assumed that the role of the teacher is to help the learner construct his or her own knowledge, rather than to give it to the learner. It is also assumed that human beings naturally want to learn and discover new knowledge.

### Jean Piaget

One of the most influential sources of constructivism was the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980).

Through careful observation of young children he came to the conclusion that children do not have inborn mechanisms or mental structures that enable them to think logically but rather **construct** such logical mechanisms through their experiences with the physical world of objects and people around them. These **organised** cognitive structures are the result of **adaptation** to the world around them.

The adaptation process (driven by a need to attain a state of dynamic **equilibrium**) is characterised by two processes, **assimilation** (in which new information is incorporated into the existing cognitive structure) and **accommodation** (in which the existing cognitive structure has to be changed and reconstructed to enable new information to fit).

Although Piaget insists that the development of thinking is a continuous process, he describes cognitive growth as occurring in a series of **stages**, the **sensory-motor**, **concrete operational**, and **formal operational**. The stages follow upon and build upon each other in an invariable order. This progress is partly the result of maturation but, more importantly, it is **constructed** by mental **action** and the influence of the **social and cultural environment**.

The three main stages, which have certain subdivisions, are the:

- **sensory-motor period** (from birth to approximately 18 months) in which the child operates through senses and motor abilities and gradually **constructs** a picture of a stable world of objects in time and space.
- **concrete operational period** (approximately 18 months to 11 years) in which language develops and the child begins to **think**, to make acts of thought rather than acts of the body - but still about **concrete** objects and images. Classificatory principles of number, class and quantity are acquired for organising objects.
- **formal operational period** (approximately 11 years plus) which leads to the thinking of the intelligent educated adult and is characterised by logical reasoning. The formal thinker can manipulate not merely 'things' in the mind but

also propositions. He or she can form hypotheses, distinguish between what is real and what is possible, consider multiple possibilities, and formulate theories which interrelate many factors.

Although this stage of formal operations is usually attained during adolescence, a number of studies suggest that many adults (perhaps a majority) are not really able to use them.

The correspondence between Piaget's formal operations and the 'academic thinking' that is rewarded in high schools and universities is obvious. Universities require their students to conceptualize, to think abstractly. There is also a common sense view that sees the development of formal operations as requiring the environmental stimulus of formal schooling.

## **Social theories**

Most social theories are related to constructivism. What they stress is that learning is not done by the individual alone, simply absorbing new ideas and skills. Rather, the active construction of knowledge happens through social interaction with other people. Learning is therefore the end product of social behaviour.

The best known social theory of learning was that of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). His social theory is also a theory of instruction.

Vygotsky argued that social relations in society are internalised in the psychology of the individual. Vygotsky agrees with Piaget that certain patterns of activity that are performed in the external social world come to be internalised and done within the mind as mental functions. Language plays a key role in this internalisation process (for language is a key to participation in the social processes of the external world). Speech serves to organise and integrate many aspects of a person's behaviour including perception, memory and problem solving (learning).

How this internalisation happens is dependent on the fact that cognition is essentially the mental establishment of connections between things. These connections are acquired through language and signs that reflect the relationships between things in the social world.

Vygotsky argued, on this basis of this understanding of the development of cognition, that abstract cognitive operations (Piaget's "formal operations") tend not to emerge in social contexts characterised by concrete and functional relationships (as in a rural peasant society) whereas they do in modern urban technological ones where formal abstract relationships are frequent.

Another important Vygotskian idea is that of there being an appropriate growth step in learning that is both challenging but not too difficult. He called this the **Zone of Proximal Development** (ZPD). The idea suggests both the concept of development taking place in steps and the need of a challenge to growth. The actual ZPD is the gap or distance between the learner's "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" and the higher level of "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in

collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The concept of the ZPD reflects his interest in assessing not only existing levels of intellectual attainment but also the **potential** for development, as well as an interest in improving instructional methods.

For Vygotsky one of the purposes of instruction was to create this zone of proximal development within which the learner may be cued and prompted to develop by the instructor. Generally, Vygotsky’s approach to instruction encourages dialogue between learner and teacher and attention to the specific historical and cultural settings in which the learners live.

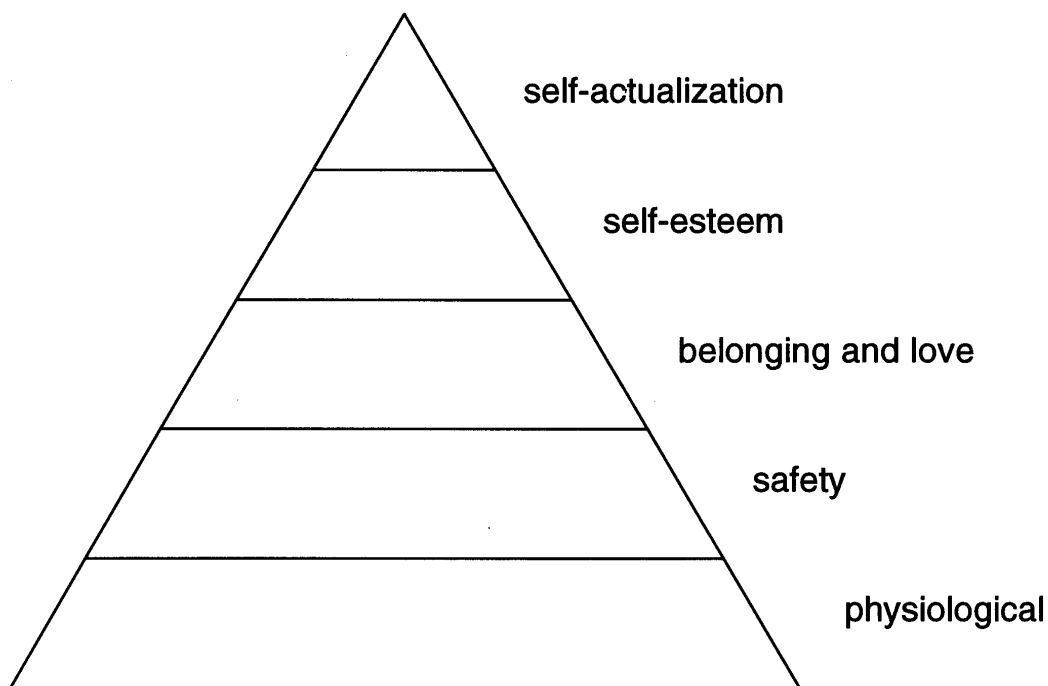
Many of Vygotsky’s ideas on the possibility of assessing potential and developing it (rather than simply assessing current ability) have influenced contemporary educational psychology and educational instruction.

### **Humanist learning theories**

Humanist learning theories are partly learning theory, partly philosophy of education, and partly a teaching approach. The basically argue that learning is a personal act in which a person tries to fulfil his or her full potential.

Well know theorists are the psychologist Abraham Maslow and the adult educator Malcolm Knowles.

Maslow was particularly interested in why people are motivated to learn on the basis of their particular needs. He visualised these needs as a pyramid like ‘hierarchy of needs’ rising from basic physical needs to safety needs to affection needs to esteem needs and finally to complex self-actualisation needs.



**Maslow's 'hierarchy' of needs**

In practice humanist learning theory leads to a very facilitative type of teaching with a high degree of equality and respect between learner and teacher.

### **Information processing**

The most recent of learning theories sees the human mind as a complex system and subsystems of more or less innate but flexible processes that enables human beings to learn and make meaning of the world. Intelligent behaviour is learned successfully because the human mind has innate systems that do the learning. The mind naturally seeks to find patterns and meaning in the world and environment. Some of these information processing theories try to explain how the mind works and learns by using analogies from computers and their software.

Information processing theories are becoming increasingly dominant, particularly as they are backed up by growing scientific evidence (much of it suggesting that there are serious weaknesses in constructivist learning theory).

These theories will have growing influence on how teaching and instruction are done and may well support a return to more structured and designed approaches to instruction.

### **Activity 1**

Ask yourself what learning theory you know or believe in.

How would this learning theory influence how **you** would interact with adult learners?

### **Two kinds of learning**

Having looked at some of the main learning theories you will have noticed that some, like behaviourism, put a strong emphasis on repetitive practice. Others, such as constructivism and information processing emphasise meaning.

This naturally leads on to asking what common kinds of learning we see in teaching and learning situations. There are many different kinds of learning, which we use in different situations. However, there are two main kinds of learning that we have all experienced in our schooling and other education. The first kind is rote learning. The other kind is meaningful learning.

### **What is rote learning?**

Rote learning is learning in a mechanical fashion through repetition. The focus is on the memorization without any understanding of what is being memorised. A good example of rote memorization is when we have to learn a new telephone number. The number in itself is arbitrary; it is not meaningful in itself in any way. The only way to remember it is by repeated rote memorization and use.

Rote learning is an essential skill that all learners require. Learning the alphabet, number bonds, multiplication tables, basic formulas in the sciences, etc. all require rote learning. Often this means repeating things over and over until they become connected together and seem to come to you naturally. You do not have to think much to achieve this kind of learning. You just do the practising and the learning happens. Learning physical skills also happens in this repetitive way.

Rote learning is actually difficult – it is precisely because what is being learned has **no** meaning to us that it requires a lot of repetition to be memorized.

However, rote learning becomes a disastrously bad and ineffective technique when it is used to memorise complex material that does require understanding and meaningfulness. Such material, because it remains meaningless when memorised by rote, cannot be genuinely incorporated into our real store of knowledge. At best it remains at a most basic level of learning with no possibility of it being applied in any way. People who rely on rote learning for this kind of material are locked into a bad study habit because meaningless memorization is not learning.

Unfortunately, rote learning is still often used for passing exams. If exam papers are not well designed, it is possible for someone with good memorization techniques to pass the test without any meaningful comprehension of the subject.

## Meaningful learning

The second kind of learning is meaningful learning, which is based on making sense of what you are learning. A lot of the learning we do as adults is to do with making sense. We want to make sense of our experiences and our world.

### Activity 2

Think about what it is like when you visit a town for the first time. The streets all look the same to you. You have no idea of how to find your way from one place to another. But if you spend a few weeks in the town. You begin to get to know it. You find you can plan a trip in which you go from one place to another, and on the another and another before you return back home. In other words you have learnt something about the town. How does this kind of learning happen?

79. Do you set out to 'rote-learn' the street names?
80. Do you have to practise each of the right turns and left turns many times until the connection between them have been memorized?
81. Or do you find that you focus on certain buildings and landmarks and on certain streets, which then become important to you in your efforts to find your way around the town? (In other words these particular places and landmarks become meaningful to you. You give them your own special meaning, such as 'The place where I bought the bag', or "The place where I met my friend".)
82. Do you then construct your own personal 'picture', or 'map' of the town in your head (or at least those parts of the town where you can find your way around)?



## Response to Activity 2

Your answers must surely have been 3 and 4, rather than 1 and 2. It would take a lot of time, and it would be very boring, to get knowledge of a town the first way. Instead you take advantage of your ability to use meanings. You already have concepts in your mind about what kinds of places there are in the town (the market area, the park, the bus station, the supermarket). When you see examples of these in the new town you link these to each other into some kind of map, so that you have an understanding of the layout of the town.

When you first arrive in a town, the streets are just jumble to you. You have no 'map' in your head which you can use to help you find your way from one place to another. But as places become meaningful to you, you soon develop a simple mental map which links these places together. When you set out to make trips within the town, you have to plan your routes. This planning makes you think. As a result of this thinking you build a picture in your mind of how the streets you know fit together.

Your personal mental map may not be very much like the printed map you can buy, nor like anyone else's map. But that does not matter. It works for *you* because it is the *sense you have made for yourself* of the town's streets. (You may have had some help, of course, from a map you bought, or from directions your friends have given you.) Once you have made the town meaningful to you in this way, by developing a map in your head, you have empowered yourself to find your way to places you want to go to. You are no longer the helpless stranger you were. You have developed the capability for independent action. You can even sit at home and just imagine trips around the town and, perhaps, work out shorter ways of getting to places, without actually being there. In other words, you can build *new* meanings in your head, out of the meanings you have already constructed.

This is a very different kind of learning from the rote learning we talked about first. Rote learning does not focus on meaning. It works by repeating things so many times that they get connected together, without your having to think about it. This second kind of learning is based on *meaning* and is done by *thinking*.

Meaningful learning is to do with taking in new ideas, changing and reorganising your existing ideas. These new and changed ideas involve concepts, mental models and ways of thinking.

## Activity 3

Here is another example to think about.

If you start a new job, or you go to college for the first time, everything is very confusing. But a few weeks later you feel a lot less uncomfortable and nervous, because you know a lot more about what goes on.

How do you acquire this new knowledge?

What things will you learn and how will you learn them?

What will you learn by rote?

What will you learn by developing concepts and mental maps?

In a new job everything is confusing at first, because you have no mental maps to enable you to make sense of what you have to do. You might need to do some rote learning, such as remembering your staff or student number, important telephone numbers, or the prices of goods for sale. But you will also need to develop concepts which help you to make some sense of what you have to do – concepts about who is important, what happens at different times of the day, and in what kinds of places you can find people and things. Once you have these concepts in your head and you have linked them together into maps, timetables, lines of responsibility and other such mental models, then your work days become much more meaningful to you. You also become much more effective in doing the job. And you carry on getting better in the job, because you keep improving your concepts and mental models of what is going on. The concepts and models become more complicated and refined, so that they match more closely the events, places, people and processes they represent.

We can put concepts, mental maps and mental models together and call them all **ideas**. The way we deal with the world around us is to develop **ideas** about it and ways of thinking about it. These ideas and ways of thinking enable us to make sense of the world we live in, and to work out what to do. A lot of the learning we do as adults is linked with getting hold of new ideas, or ways of thinking, or with changing, or reorganising, our existing ideas, so that they make better sense of the world for us. Another way to put this is to say that a lot of the learning we do is about constructing new meanings, which give us a better grip on the world around us than the old meanings we have been using.

New ideas that we have learned are structured and categorised and linked to our existing knowledge store, which itself is organised and categorised. These categories or mental structures or templates can be thought of as **frames**, schemes (**schemata**), **scripts**, and **stereotypes**, names often used to describe the integrated ways in which our existing knowledge is structured and which help us to interpret new information quickly and efficiently.

#### Activity 4

Read the following passage (adapted from Baddeley (1994, p. 144)) and try and make sense of it:

The procedure is quite simple. First you arrange items into different groups. In some cases you need more than one pile of some kinds of item. You are now ready. However, many people wait till a more convenient time. When you start it is important not to overdo things. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In you do too many at once there are often complications. A mistake can be expensive as well. At first the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another part of daily life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future. After the procedure is completed one arranges the items into different groups again. They then can be put into their appropriate places. Eventually they will be used once more and the whole cycle will then have to be repeated. However, that is part of life.

Well, what did you think of that?

Any idea what is being talked about?

Try and recall what was said in this passage.

Can you easily recall all the details?

Was the passage easy or difficult to comprehend? How would you rate it on a scale of 1 to 5 for difficulty?

## Response to Activity 4

Would it have helped you to know that the title of the passage was “Doing the washing”?

Now reread the passage again.

Do you see what a difference there is once the passage has meaning? You already have a mental picture or schema in your mind of ‘Doing the washing’. It makes it easy to understand what the passage is about. The pattern of activities is clear – in other words it has meaning.

When people are learning to read or write, there tends to be a lot of this repetitive kind of learning. They have to learn to recognise the letters, to connect them to sounds, and how to form the shapes of the letters when they write. They have to learn to recognise the general appearance of common words. Similarly, if you are learning a new language you have to take time to memorise quite a lot of vocabulary. Yet learning to read is much more than just a matter of mindless repetition. We can see this in a story told by Nancy Murray in a book called *Thandeka's story*, (This is an easy but excellent book for anyone who wants to understand about teaching basic literacy.)

The story is about Solomon Madublea, a factory worker who had been attending a literacy class for quite a time. He had worked hard at learning the sounds of letters and knew how to build them into words. But he was frustrated to find that he still could not *read*. Then one day, as Nancy Murray worked with him, he made a breakthrough.

Solomon put his finger under the first word. He sounded the letters *m...n...a*. Then he looked at me and said *mna*. He started to sound the long word *andizange*, but I could see he was confused and nervous...

I asked Solomon if his parents had sent him to school. He told me that he did not have the chance to go to school and that although he was not educated he was paying for his children to be educated.

I said “Solomon, the words that are written here are telling us the same story. Look ...” I read the first words to him while I moved my finger along, “*Mna*

*adizange ndifundiswe...*” Then I kept quiet and moved my finger under *ngumanma* and *ekhaya*.

Solomon read these words to himself. Then he read the whole sentence slowly by himself and he read it again. I read the next sentence with him... but I could see he wanted to try the words on his own. I helped him when he was not sure.

He looked at me and said “*Tyhini, ndim!*” (“My goodness, it is me!”)... He was so excited he wanted to go on and read the whole story... I could see that he suddenly discovered that reading and understanding go together. He now realised that all the letters on the page make up words, the words have meaning and together they tell a story.

(Murray 1991: 9-10).

## Activity 5

Think carefully about this story

What exactly did Solomon Madubela learn on this occasion that made him so excited?

How was this learning different from the many hours of learning he had done before?

What was the most important help that Nancy Murray gave him?

Write down your ideas.

Solomon Madubela was excited because at last he could make sense of the words he was reading. He could understand them instead of just saying them. And the reason he could understand the individual words now was that he understood that they were telling a story (and it was the kind of story he was familiar with). Once he knew roughly what sense all the words taken together were meant to make, he was able to make sense of each word as part of the overall message. This was the important help that Nancy Murray gave. She helped Solomon Madubela grasp that the story was about something he understood very well. The story was saying something that he himself might have said, so it became meaningful to him.

Until then, Solomon had been learning only by rote. And he had not been able connect this learning with *thinking* and *making* sense. When Solomon Madubela found that he could identify with the story he was reading, he wanted to know what it said. He had *purpose* and he immediately became very *actively* engaged in making sense. Suddenly he saw how to make meaning out of words on the page. As Nancy Murray explains:

At first Solomon was not reading because he was going too slowly to get any meaning. He was going slowly because he did not know what the writing was about and he did not know what words to expect (Murray 1991: 13).

...people who cannot read can only see [the] words. But they do not hear them. So they cannot turn the words into the sense that words must make. ...People ... can read when they see a written sentence as a whole message ... [when] they hear what the written words or sentences are telling them (Murray 1991: 11,12).

This story shows how there is a kind of learning, which is not to do with memorising but to do with meaning and making sense. And this meaningful kind of learning does not necessarily go together with the rote learning kind, as Solomon Madubela found.

### Note:

Although we have emphasized the importance of meaningful learning and shown some of the problems when people have only had experience of rote memorization, do remember that for some things you do have to memorise them by rote.

You should allow enough time for both kinds of learning in your classes.

A lot of the learning adult students do is not rote learning. It is learning ideas. Certainly, the emphasis is this ABET course is on learning ideas. You are meant to be developing ideas which you can use for understanding teaching and learning, and ideas which you can use for organising courses, planning lessons and so on.

This kind of learning requires you to listen, read, think, write and speak. It does not require you to memorise information by repeating it over and over.

We have said that some of the learning we do as adults is not 'sense-making' (learning telephone numbers, prices, vocabulary for a new language, or even learning the words of songs if you are singing in a choir.) However, a lot of what we learn is 'sense-making'. And whereas children often enjoy learning meaningless things (such as the nonsense rhymes they like to chant), adults find it difficult to concentrate on meaningless things for long. We quickly lose interest in situations where we cannot make sense of things. As far as attending classes is concerned, our main motive for learning is to grasp new meanings. If we have to do meaningless things for long, we lose sight of the overall purpose of joining the class, and begin to think of dropping out.

### Reflecting on learning

When you read about learning you will often meet the concept of reflection. Now what is meant by reflection? Reflection mean looking back to consider something in more detail. It is looking back at a learning experience (hence the appropriateness of the idea of reflection – in the same way that we carefully look at our reflected image in a mirror, we careful look back at something we have learned and think carefully about). This very act of reflection helps learning and remembering. This is because it is a form of practice or reinforcement.

A reflective educational practitioner is therefore one who thinks carefully and deeply on his or her practice as an educator.

Without reflection, complex meaningful learning, does not happen because there is not enough thinking and reorganisation of old and new ideas,

As adults we are learning all the time. Think about the learning you have done in the last two or three weeks, both in your everyday life and as a student of this ABET course. Write down some examples of what you have learnt.

83. Did you do some rote learning?
84. Did you learn some new ideas?
85. Did you change some of the ideas you already had?
86. How did you achieve this learning?
87. What did you have to make yourself do?

Reflecting on your own learning is an important part of becoming a successful student. It is also an important part of becoming a successful teacher, as it helps you to develop your 'theory of teaching and learning'.

## The making of sense

We have seen that a lot of learning involves the making of sense. Now we need to think some more about *how* we make sense.

To enable learners to make sense of something, teachers must find ways to build meaning up from ideas which are already in the learners' heads. It is a matter of building meaning on what you already know.

Why do you think it helped Solomon Madubela when he found that the story he was trying to read was about not having the chance to go to school, and wanting education for your own children?

It helped because it applied to him. The subject was very interesting to him and also he knew a lot about it. It was much easier for him to make sense of it because he already had a lot of knowledge in his head on this subject. Understanding is built on understanding. New meanings are built onto existing meanings. Your mind is not properly functioning except when it is busy making sense. It cannot set to work on making new meanings unless it is already working with meanings.

You need to bring some of what you already know to the front of your mind before you can build new knowledge. What this means is that a teacher needs to build on what the learners already know by bringing that knowledge into what is happening in the classroom. One of the best ways of doing this is to start from the learners' everyday-life knowledge. That is why, when we were introducing the idea of meaningful learning just now, we talked about learning your way around a new town. Teachers often forget that the meaning in their heads is based on a whole lot of other ideas which are not available in their learners' heads.

Another point is that making new sense is something that *you* have to *do*. It cannot be done to you by someone else, while you sit passively waiting. It is a constructive process. Your mind has to be actively engaged. Sense-making: an active and purposeful process

When learners' minds are actively and purposefully engaged in making sense of something, they can learn a lot quickly.

One problem with many basic education classes is that learners are asked to spend much of their time copying down notes from the blackboard. This does not engage the mind very actively. It does not force learners to make sense of what they are copying. In fact it interferes with sense making if the learner just concentrates on getting down an accurate copy and leaves the 'sense-making' till later.

If, as a teacher, you spend a lot of time writing notes up for learners to copy, very little learning is actually going on in the classroom. This is very demotivating for learners, when learning is what they have come for.

### Why do some learners avoid 'sense-making' activities?

Some learners seem to like rote learning activities, such as chanting and memorising sounds, words and lists, more than they like meaning-based activities such as reading, discussing and writing. If we are right when we say that making sense of something is more interesting and motivating, why do you think this happens?

Because of their past experience of being in a school class, many learners have become used to doing a lot of routine, repetitive learning. This was the way they were first taught. It is what they think learning is. And they do not expect education to make sense. They think that activities such as discussing just waste time, because they are not busy memorising anything. They are accustomed to working on meaningless exercises while their minds are half-asleep. They may not even be aware that they can connect the many ideas in their heads with what they are doing in class. They may simply not associate what they see as *learning* with *thinking*. But there is another reason too.

### Activity 6

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Nancy Murray tells us that Solomon Madubela was 'confused and nervous'.

Why should a grown man be confused and nervous in the presence of a friendly teacher?

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Not only does making sense of something require positive *engagement*, it also requires *courage*. You have to be prepared to take *risks*. As a beginner, you may not make very good sense of something the first time you try, so you may worry about making yourself seem foolish. Mindless routine tasks feel safer. Some learners are too nervous to *make the leap* to 'sense-making', even when it is essential for further progress (for example, with reading).

There has been a strong tradition of chanting and rote learning in South African schools and adult classes. This kind of learning has its place. But, if it is allowed to dominate, then it tends to drive out meaningful learning. It is particularly important that adult classes do not offer learners the security of *perpetual* meaningless learning.

## The impact of meaninglessness

When we cannot make sense of what is going on we feel inadequate, nervous and dependent on others.

### Activity 7

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We have said that learners can be nervous about taking risks in class.

But why should they be so anxious in the first place?

People take risks when they start a conversation with a stranger. And they take much bigger risks when they drive on the roads.

Why should a classroom be such a threatening place?

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We rely on the sense we make of the world in order to act as independent adults. Whenever we cannot make sense of what is happening to us, we are confused and helpless. This makes us nervous. We do not know what to expect. We do not know how to act. When we cannot make sense of something we feel dependent on other people to make sense of it for us, like we did when we were little children.

Spending too much time on meaningless activities creates a vicious circle for learners.

If learners spend most of their time in the classroom doing things which are meaningless, they have no sense of control. They then become dependent on the teacher, and although it may make teachers feel important to have learners who are very dependent on them, it makes the learners feel stupid and *inadequate*. Then they feel much too nervous about taking the risk of trying to make sense of something in front of other members of the class. This creates a *vicious circle*. The learners are made weak and child-like because they are in a situation where they do not have the means to make sense of what is happening. And this then makes them lack the confidence to try to make sense of it.

For this reason it is very important to make learning meaningful from the beginning. Rote learning exercises can be used where appropriate. But a lesson should not consist mainly of meaningless learning, even in the early weeks. Otherwise learners may get into a frame of mind which makes it very difficult for the teacher to encourage them to advance to higher levels of learning, where making sense for themselves is essential.

## Making sense with others



## Activity 8

If you find a book too difficult to read on your own, the subject often seems easier after you have talked to friends or other learners about it.

Why do you think talking to people helps us understand?

A lot of the sense we make in our lives, we make together with other people. Through listening to what they say and by saying things ourselves, we often find that our ideas become clearer. By putting our minds together, we can often make sense of things with other people at a level beyond what we could reach just thinking by ourselves.

Group work and other ways of sharing learning can play a very valuable part in meaningful learning.

So we see that, while we must be capable of making sense of something by ourselves, we can often get help in forming new ideas by talking with others. By sharing meaning together and understanding together, we can learn collectively.

## Unit summary

This unit has outlined some of the major theories about how learning happens in human beings. It has been explained that the answer is not yet clear as to which learning theory is closest to the full truth but that all of them have influenced various forms of teaching practice.

The unit has also emphasised the importance of meaningful in learning and has described in some detail the differences between rote and meaningful learning (without discarding the usefulness of rote learning for certain types of memorisation).

## Further reading

Abadzi, H. 2006. ***Efficient learning for the poor: insights from the frontier of cognitive neuroscience***. Washington, DC: The World Bank

An excellent book on the practical application of modern (mainly information processing) learning theory to teaching and learning in poor countries.

## References

Baddeley, A. 1994. ***Your memory - a user's guide***. Second edition. London: Penguin.

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## Unit 6: Learner centred and experiential approaches to helping adults learn

### Introduction

In the previous units we have seen how important it is to understand how and why adults learn. In this unit we look at how a learner-centred education approach helps adults learn better than a teacher-centred approach.

### Aims of the unit

This unit aims to help you to discover what learner-centred education is and what teacher-centred education is. It will present evidence as to why a learner-centred approach to education often helps adults to learn better than a teacher-centred approach. It will also look at a special kind of learner-centred education called experiential learning.

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

**Identify the value of a learner-centred and experiential learning approach in helping adults to learn.**

You will demonstrate this by being able to:

- 88. distinguish between teacher centred and learner centred interactions
- 89. define experiential learning
- 90. describe the characteristics and value of experiential learning.

### Teacher-centred versus learner- centred education

Let's begin our exploration by reminding ourselves of our own experiences of being students in a classroom. Then think of other ways in which you have learned things after school. How do your experiences compare? What are the similarities? What are the differences?

Now read these two descriptions on this and the next page:

#### **But first a word of caution**

Before reading the descriptions below it is important to remember two things:

- 91. Firstly, sometimes a teacher-centred approach is appropriate and sometimes a learner-centred one is not appropriate.
- 92. Secondly, some teacher-centred teachers are brilliant and inspiring teachers and some learner-centred teachers are very bad ones.

### **A teacher-centred approach to teaching**

Teachers with a very teacher-centred approach to teaching spend most of the time talking, explaining and communicating knowledge. Learners are expected to listen attentively but without doing much more than make notes. Students are seldom

given a chance to respond or to ask questions. The teachers do not welcome interruptions. They expect learners to hold their questions until the presentation is over or when the teacher decides it is time for questions. And, then, it is often the teacher asking the questions rather than the students. The students are not given much chance to learn things for themselves. They are not given the chance to apply or practise what they are learning. Learners are seldom asked for their input or their own ideas or opinions. Such teachers often see themselves as the experts (sometimes of course they really are experts). They often see the knowledge they are teaching as the truth which should not be questioned. Their lessons are usually well-structured. They control all the teaching materials used for explanations. Teachers with this approach to learning make all the decisions about the lesson: What is to be presented, how it will be presented, when it will be presented, and when the lesson will end. Teaching done in this way is often referred to as 'chalk and talk'.

Now, often teacher-centred approaches may be better than what is described above. Students may be expected to be more active – writing notes and asking questions frequently. The teacher-centred approach is at its best when there is a genuine presentation of expert knowledge to students who are well trained in listening and learning from traditional lectures.

### **A learner-centred approach to teaching**

In a class where the teacher has a learner-centred approach, learners are more in control of their own learning. Although the teacher may still see him or herself as an expert, learners have more of a say in the class: They may be allowed to decide on the content of the lesson, how the lesson may be approached, when they have gained enough knowledge to move on to another topic, etc. The teacher encourages active learning. Instead of having learners sit in rows listening to the teacher nearly all the time, lessons are designed to give them a variety of things to do. Instead of thinking simply 'What *topic* shall I talk about tonight?', the teacher thinks 'What shall I get the learners to *do*? what would be interesting and also help them build on the last lesson?' The learners' minds are actively engaged in making sense of the work through the process of working on activities and discussions, and by reflecting back on what they have done. The learners' views, input and involvement are highly valued. Educators provide students with opportunities to discover facts for themselves. Students are given opportunities to apply and practise their new knowledge. Teaching materials are used to involve students in the lesson. Students are regularly asked for their input. Dialogue between educator and student is encouraged. The educator emphasises the idea that learners should not just absorb what they are told. They should think about it and decide whether they agree. This is part of becoming a self-directing adult within society.

Classroom activities are often characterised by group work in which students are expected to solve problems. In a learner-centred approach to teaching the role of the educator is that of facilitator, guide, coach and co-learner. The learner-centred approach is particularly useful when it is not just a matter of transferring knowledge but of learning new skills and changing attitudes and behaviour. Now, sometimes learner-centred approaches do not challenge learners but simply allow for the recycling of ignorance amongst the group of learners.

We repeat the word of caution. The most appropriate approach to education depends very much on the particular context. Though generally a learner-centred

approach is the best for active learning there are many situations where a more teacher-centred approach is more appropriate or practical.

For an example of the difference between a learner-centred lesson and a teacher-centred lesson consider the following two ways of teaching learners how to set out a business letter:

### **Teaching learners how to write a business letter**

#### **Teacher-centred**

Teacher writes a model business letter on the board.

She points out features to the learners as she writes. She says: 'Your address goes on the right like this. The address of the organisation you are writing to goes on the left like this. The date goes here. Leave a line here' and so on.

The learners listen to her. Once she has finished they can ask questions.

Then they copy her model into their notebooks.

#### **Learner-centred**

The teacher divides learners into groups and gives each group samples of business letters that she has collected and photocopied beforehand.

She tells them to look at how the letters are set out, and to find ways in which the letters are similar. After they have compared the letters they must discuss how they are set out.

The teacher listens to the groups and interrupts group conversations only if they are stuck, or talking about irrelevant features, such as colour, etc. If they do this she does not say "No - you are supposed to notice that the address should be here", but something like, "See what addresses you can see on the letter."

When the groups have discussed the letters, they say what they have noticed.

One learner writes on the board what the others say. He or she draws a model of a business letter. The teacher monitors the process, helping where she needs to, and asking questions that draw attention to particular features.

The teacher then tells them to write a letter (modelled on her model) applying for a job.

Once everyone understands the plan of the business letter on the board, learners write their own business letters. Most choose to write a letter that they really need to write, like a job application, or a request for information. Those who do not want to practice a particular letter choose advertised jobs in the newspaper, imagine that they have the necessary qualifications, and write a letter of application for these jobs.



Notice how active the teacher is in this lesson. Until the learners start to write, everyone is watching her and listening to her as she talks and demonstrates.

Notice how passive the learners are. They listen and observe, and then copy a model.

The letter-writing task is very much one of copying the model with just some minor changes.

Notice how the teacher's work in this lesson includes preparation (collecting and photocopying real business letters) and how in the class the learners' attention is not on her but on what they are doing.

Notice how active the learners are. They examine real business letters, note and extract common features, describe their observations, manage their own discussion, construct a model and create their own letters. They use their teacher to check that what they do is correct, but apart from that their learning is independent of her.



**Picture:** Five learners in an ABET class, doing active learning and sharing their thoughts with each other.

### Activity 1: Identifying the two approaches

This activity is aimed giving you a mental picture of some teacher-centred and some learner-centred activities.

### Instructions

Tick the box below to show whether you think the teaching activity is learner-centred or teacher-centred.

The teacher...	This method is....	
<i>Example:</i> Hands out information without allowing any discussion.	teacher centred T	learner centred
Tells learners everything they need to know.	teacher centred	learner centred
Gets learners to reflect on their experiences and knowledge.	teacher centred	learner centred
Does not allow learners to question what is being taught.	teacher centred	learner centred
Explores learners' mistakes without showing anger.	teacher centred	learner centred
Gets learners to practise the skills they are being taught.	teacher centred	learner centred
Gets people to become actively involved in the lessons.	teacher centred	learner centred

Encourages learners to discover facts for themselves.	teacher centred	learner centred
Encourages people to think, talk, discuss, relate and tell.	teacher centred	learner centred
Punishes learners when they get an answer wrong.	teacher centred	learner centred
Asks learners what they think about what they are being taught.	teacher centred	learner centred

### Taking learner needs seriously

Learner-centred teaching also means that instead of planning the whole course in full details before it starts, you allow for the course to take into account the needs of the students who come to it. This involves spending quite a lot of time (i.e. investing some of your resources) talking to students at the time they enrol, and during the first meetings, to find out what their needs are. It also means continuing to talk to your learners the course goes on, to find out whether their needs have changed and to check that you are actually meeting the needs. What we mean by a needs-based approach is a continuing awareness that the main purpose of the class is to meet the learners' needs.

### Taking learner empowerment seriously

A learner centred approach is particularly appropriate for adult education because it recognises that the learners are whole people, with whole lives and whole plans. The learner who arrives in your classroom is not just a '**skill deficit**'. He or she is a person who wants that skill for reasons that are to do with his or her life as a whole. One effect of seeing teaching as only fixing that bit of the learner that is 'a problem' is that it does not empower the whole person. The learner knows that he or she is weak at writing or at number work. That is why he or she is shy in the class. But to focus all the class time on just that deficient area makes the learner feel helpless and dependent.

A learner-centred approach seeks to empower students by *making lessons meaningful*, so that the students can understand what is happening and why it is happening. This then enables learners to be purposeful in approaching the task they have to do (like Solomon, who started to read because he *wanted* to know what was in the story, instead of just sounding out the words as he had been told to do), which in turn helps them to learn better. The approach also encourages learners to *share* in some of the *decision-making* about how the class will be run. This helps to make sure that the class really meets their needs. But it also signals the kind of relationships which the teacher is building within the class. There is also an emphasis on *teaching* learners *learning skills*. When learners have been encouraged to learn how to manage their own learning, they can carry on learning for themselves. This enables them to learn more independently and more effectively during the course. It also enables them to carry on learning for themselves after the course is over. This is called the life-long learning approach.

An empowerment approach means designing courses so that the learners become confident, competent adults who can take control of their own lives. They learn more than just the specific skills they came for. The experience of learning helps them to discover some truths about themselves and their place in the world.

## Activity 2

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Have you found learning an empowering experience?

Have you found some courses more empowering than others?

In what ways do you feel you have become more capable and self-directing?

Is this course having an empowering effect?

If so, in what ways do you feel it has empowered you?

If not, are you studying it the right way?

Should you do something about it?

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## What is experiential learning?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *experience* is defined as “actual observation of or practical acquaintance with facts or events” or an “event that affects one”.

So an experience is:

- \$ an event or a happening
- \$ that you either see or participate in, and
- \$ that has an impact on you.

So, the most basic idea behind experiential learning is it is learning that you gain from watching or participating in some event or happening that has an impact on you. It is learning you gain from an experience or experiences.

Here is definition of experiential learning produced by Titmus *et al* (1979, p. 45):

- Learning which derives either from the general life-experience or from specific activities of the learner.
- Learning derived from the feelings and thoughts aroused in the learner while or after undergoing such experiences.

Thus experiential learning rests firmly on the experience of the learners (any education and training relying on it has to be relevant to the learners' everyday lives and genuinely make **use** of that life experience).



Experiential learning also engages the learner in specific activities and much of the learning would be derived from the feelings and thoughts aroused by experiencing these activities.

## How do we learn from experience?

Sometimes we learn something very quickly and never forget it. For example, as children we may have been told by our parents not to play with a fire or boiling water. If we then painfully burn ourselves we never forget that strong learning experience.

However, we don't learn things all things that quickly and we often soon forget what we learnt, unless we **practice it** or **reflect** on what was learnt. In other words, in order to learn something from an experience and to remember it, we need to **return** to the experience and **revise** or **practice** what we learnt.

Think back to the six principles of effective adult education that we looked at in Unit 2. Principle number 2 stated that: *You can only know what you learn from experience when you reflect on that experience.*

Learning is something that happens to us all the time, yet we are seldom aware of it. If you are aware that you are learning or preparing to learn, you will learn better.

**Learning is more effective when you are aware that you are learning something.**

Take time to be aware when you are learning something. Take time to reflect on what you are learning. Adults learn best when they remember their learning experiences and remember what it is that they learnt. This is what you do when you revise for tests or exams. You go over the work you learnt during the semester or year.

## What is the difference between experiential learning and learning in a formal classroom?

Experiential learning is much broader than classroom learning. This is because it includes learning that you gain from a much wider range of sources. In a classroom you are most often limited to learning from what the teacher says and writes on the board, from the books you may read and from discussions you may have with your fellow learners. But experiential learning can include any learning you may do both inside and outside of the classroom.

## Why does experiential learning help adults learn?

Adult learners come with their heads, hearts and hands already full. They come to any learning situation with ideas and knowledge, attitudes and values and beliefs, and skills and abilities that they have gained throughout their lives. They are not blank slates waiting to be written on for the first time, they are not empty vessels waiting to be filled up with new knowledge, values and skills.

We also know that adults want the new things that they learn to be relevant. This means that any new learning must equip the learners with real knowledge, skills and values that are useful in their real work and community lives.

In addition, we know that we should begin where the learners are and move forward from there.

So, experiential learning is often suited to adult learners because:

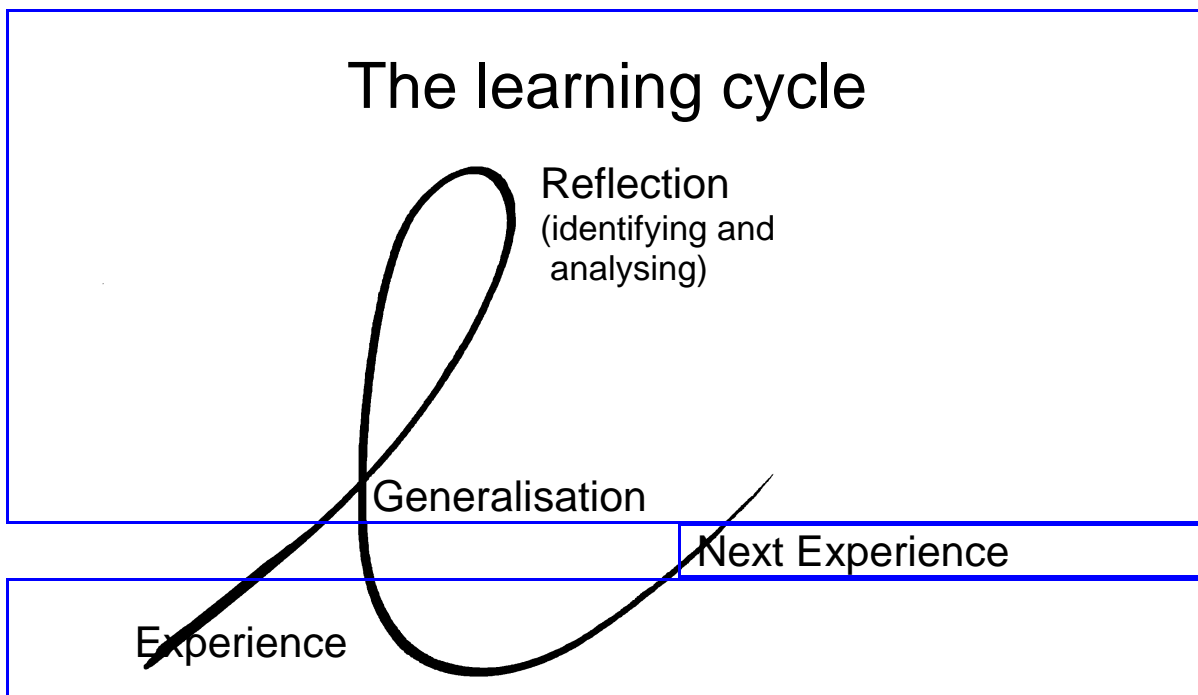
- § It helps learners to reflect upon and learn from the wide range of real life experiences that have already had and will continue to have.
- § It makes sure that what the learners are learning is relevant because it is rooted in real experiences.
- § It helps the educator to find out about what the learners already know, believe and can do so that learning can build on this.

### What is the experiential learning cycle?

The experiential learning cycle is a diagrammatic way of describing what happens in experiential learning.

Experiential learning is all about thinking deeply and in detail about your experiences. By reflecting on your experiences, you learn. This knowledge that you have learned helps you to perform better at related tasks. When you perform better at related tasks you can go on to learn more and more things. The more you learn, the more you improve. The more you improve the more you learn. This is why we call it a learning **cycle**. You keep on going through a set or sequence of actions and by doing so become better or stronger at what you are doing.

Here is a diagram of a very simple version of an experiential learning cycle:



Actually, it would be more correct to call this model a learning spiral. A spiral is a cycle which has direction. In other words, it does not go round and round in the same place. Every time it goes round, it moves forward or upward. That is why learning is more like a spiral – every time you complete a cycle, you learn more and so you move forward.

Here is a more complex model which presents the main steps in the experiential learning cycle/spiral.

**1**

### ***Experience / action***

This is the **event or happening** that you observe or participate in that has an impact on you. It is the experience or activity that sets off the learning.

In addition, whenever you come to learn something you always **bring with you all your learning experiences from the past**.

**2**

### ***Reflection***

You will **revisit** (remember) the experience and think deeply about it.

You will **remember** *how* you felt and *what* you did, *how* you did it and *why* you did it and felt that way.

**3**

### ***Learning / generalising/ theorising***

You may look at **new information** on that subject. You will try to **find the links** between what you already know from the past, what you have learned from the new experience and the new information on that subject. Finding the links means seeing if what you read reminds you of things you already know.

You may also **discuss what you are learning with others**. This will help you to understand *what* you are learning, *why* you are learning and *how* you are learning.

Eventually you will come up with **general ideas** and **principles** or **theories** about the subject. Principles and theories are ideas that are generally true. They are not only true for just one situation. They hold true for many similar situations.

**4**

### ***Planning***

You will **plan how to use this new knowledge** in your work or in your private life.

And this is where the cycle begins again.

**5**

## Experience/ action

You will go to work to **put your plans into action**. You will test out your new principles and theories by trying them out in practice.



## Reflection evaluation

Then you will reflect upon and evaluate the new experience of trying out what you learned.

## Unit summary

This unit aim has again emphasized a major theme in this whole course – learning has to be meaningful – and argued that a more learner-centred approach to teaching and learning (used intelligently and appropriately) will assist literacy and ABET learners.

We learned that learner-centred approach to educating adults encourages the learners to participate in decision making and in class activities. A learner-centred approach focusses on what the learners need and want to learn about.

After this we explored **experiential learning** in some detail. We learned about the experiential learning cycle. This is a cycle or spiral that includes four major steps:

- \$ Experience/action
- \$ Reflection
- \$ Learning/theorising
- \$ Planning

Experiential learning approaches stress that good adult education as far as possible works constructively with the learner's own prior experience and knowledge.

## Further reading

Aitchison, J.J.W. and Graham, P. 1989. *Potato crisp pedagogy*. In: Criticos, C. (Ed.). 1989. ***Experiential Learning in Formal and Non-Formal Education***. Durban: Media Resources centre, University of Natal, pp. 15-21

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