

Thoms, K. (2002). They're not just big kids: Motivating adult learners.

- d) *Need to know* – Since adults seek learning as a means to solve problems, they need to know why they study something. Children, dependent personalities, will do what they are told, but adults, non-dependent personalities, resent situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills upon them.

- e) *Self-directed learning* – Their need to maintain control over their learning brings us to the central concept of adult education: Basically, adults, who are self-directed in life, also prefer to be self-directed in their studies. They hate to be treated like children, and they learn better when assignments are flexibly organized around basic criteria that allow personalization. Generally, instructors should manage the processes, not the content. However, adults are not always aware of their need to be self-directing, and often expect to be treated like children. An adult instructor, then, must be ready facilitate their transition to self-directedness.

- f) *Role of experience* – Finally, in their need to be self-directing and in their orientation towards solving life's problems, adults need to connect learning to their lifetime of experience and be acknowledged for it. Adults like discussions in which they can share experiences (conference presenters take note). This need to share experience is related to schema theory, and belies a major difference from the way children learn. Learning in children centers on accretion (making new schema), while learning in adults centers on tuning and restructuring (revising and replacing schema). Talking about one's experiences, then, is more than an ego massage; it is part of the neurological processes that result in evaluating and replacing existing schema. Replacing old schema is also why adults are mistakenly characterized as being slower at learning, or even unable to learn (in both cases, the research says otherwise).

In conclusion, if you, like I once did, teach adults the same way you teach high school students, it is time to look into the fascinating array of adult education methods and techniques. This is not an option. Adults are more likely than our younger peers to make us accountable, and if there is one thing adult education abroad has taught us, it is that great teachers are no longer construed as those who possess the right information, but rather, as those who possess the right procedures.

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Kerr, C. (1979). Key issues for higher education in the 1980's. In *New Directions for Higher Education: Preparing for the New Decade* (Vol. 28, pp. 1-11). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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The eighties held a surprise, though, and a very big one. Rather than decrease, the number of college applicants over the decade increased dramatically. Four-year college enrollments went up 36% and amazingly, two-year college enrollments virtually doubled (Jones, 1997). There were indeed fewer eighteen year olds, but for the same reason – the shape of the demographic curve – an adult education boom took place. As the population peak moved into the workplace, its constituent adults experienced stiffer competition for a relatively set number of jobs and promotions, and as a result, many of them came back to school to increase their odds (Cross, 1981). By the turn of the century, the average age US college student became 29.

We can see the same trend here. Whereas ten years ago, there were fewer than 5000 adults enrolled in Japanese colleges, the adult education boom Japan has entered has increased that number tenfold or more. Also like colleges in the US and UK, most Japanese colleges do not really know how to handle these adults. Adults tend to be mixed in with the eighteen-year olds, and treated the same way. Not good. Similar policies in US and UK colleges twenty years ago led to dropout rates that ranged from 50% to 100%. As a result of these failures, extensive research was done on how adults learn and a new academic field was established: adult education. Adult education, relatively unknown here is so well established in the US, UK, Canada, Australia, South America and New Zealand that I recently counted 42 doctoral programs in the US alone.

So what is this pedagogy for adults the research has spawned? It is called “Andragogy, and it is usually accredited to Malcolm Knowles (Thoms, 2002). Here are some basic characteristics Knowles provided in his classic work, *The Adult Learner* (1998), although I have revised them a bit:

- a) *Readiness to learn* – Lifespan theory holds that we pass through different stages in life with different sets of challenges in each. Adults become ready to learn when their life situation makes the related learning necessary. Newlyweds want to learn about interpersonal communication and gender issues; retirees want to learn about healthcare. Educators who integrate their learners’ life situations into their lessons are more effective.
- b) *Orientation to Learning* – Since adults seek learning to solve the problems thrown at them by life, they are task-centered in their orientation towards learning. They want to see how their studies will apply to their lives: tasks they need to perform, problems they need to solve. Whenever possible, learning should be oriented towards solving real problems in real life situations. For example, adults are much more likely to sign up for a course called “Writing Better Business Letters” than “Composition 1.” In addition, since they study for specific goals, they prefer practical, hands-on training to study of theory.
- c) *Motivation to learn* – It follows then, that adults are motivated by personal payoff and intrinsic value. While they still seek and respond to external motivators, such as test scores, internal priorities are far more important, Self-esteem, a desire to get a better job, or the quality of life, are common reasons adults study.

Acting Adult in the English Classroom – Curtis Kelly

“Okay, class, open your books to page 67. There will be a test on Friday, so let’s master these verbs today. Okay, ready? Repeat.”

It’s a typical English class. It could be in a junior high school, a college, or a company. It is what we do, and while maybe not reflecting the latest methodologies or grammars, this kind of approach is still the bread and butter of the EFL classroom. In fact, this is exactly the kind of class I taught at Matsushita Electric during my first five years in Japan. The students were men, and since we taught them in the evening after a long workday, the classes were drab. Monotone repetition, molasses drills, motivation to move the hands forward on the clock. Those poor tired businessmen, what an effort they made.

Since the classes were long, we took fifteen-minute breaks, during which they had to speak English. As soon as the break started, it was like we had just fed them pure oxygen. Everyone perked up and the drones started talking. It wasn’t unusual for a break to go on 30 minutes or even an hour, but being young, we felt guilty when they did, since we were “not doing our jobs.” We even felt a little indignant when our peers spent too much time around the coffee machine. After all, real leaning meant drilling in our carefully worked out syllabus, not “chatting.”

How I laugh at the way I was in those days. How little I knew that it was probably during the breaks that real language learning was occurring. At least, that is what a massive body of research on adults tells us: adults learn best when the learning is connected to their lives, their problems, and left in their control. In fact, a whole separate pedagogy exists for adults, and if it were used, the teacher talk might sound like this instead:

“Okay, hopefully, you have examples of English from your jobs to discuss, but before we break up into groups, I would like each of you to make a progress report on the project you set up. Some of you wrote Friday as a deadline in your learning contracts.”

So what do we know about adults? Why do we need a separate pedagogy for them? And why haven’t we heard about this before?

To answer these questions, let’s go back to 1980. Educational conditions in the US and the UK that year were surprisingly similar to conditions in Japan in 2000. This is a result of our demographic curves being twenty years out of sync (a fact marketing experts make good use of). The US/UK population peaks coincide with Japan’s troughs, and vice versa. America in particular was facing a shortage of college students in 1980, due to a trough in the population curve, and pundits predicted there would be 25-40% decrease in college applicants over the decade (Kerr, p.2). Not unlike Japan today, college administrators were worried.