

Principles of Adult Learning

In this module, we will be talking about how to plan and deliver information to adult learners in ways that are consistent with how adults learn new material and apply it to their situation.

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Learning objectives

- Identify the principles of adult learning.
- Propose ways to incorporate adult learning principles into training for vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors.

The goals of this module are to identify the main principles that define adult learning and propose ways to make these principles part of planning training for VR counselors.

Principles of Adult Learning

What are the characteristics of adult learners?

- They are autonomous and self-directed.
- They bring life experiences and knowledge and should be treated with respect.
- They are goal oriented: They know what they want to do.
- They are relevancy oriented: They need to see the reason for learning something new and how it applies to their situation or interests.

- They are practical and want to learn things that directly help them in their jobs.

We know that adults learn differently from children. These are some key principles to keep in mind when planning training for adults. And because you are all adult learners yourselves, we can see how they apply to this module:

Adults are autonomous and self-directed: They need to be free to make choices and be involved in the learning process. Adults can take responsibility for leading groups, sharing their knowledge, and helping the instructor make sure the training is as relevant as possible to their interests. In today's training, we will ask you to apply these principles to your own situations.

Adults have their own life experiences and knowledge, which should be valued and respected as part of the training process. Good instruction will relate theories or skills back to the participants' own knowledge. All of you come in with existing knowledge about VR training. Based on your experience, what are some things that are unique about that environment that might make teaching easier or more difficult?

Adults are goal oriented. They come to the classroom knowing what they want to achieve. A well-designed instructional program will clearly lay out the objectives of the program and help learners see how it is relevant to their goals. This training is part of a larger curriculum to give you the skills to train VR counselors on [program]. If it does not meet those needs or is too general, you will walk away frustrated.

Adults are relevancy oriented. Adult learners have a lot of competition for their time and energy. To be successful, an instructional program must have a clear connection to their own settings. We could teach the same material about training nurses or lawyers, but you would be frustrated.

Finally, adults are practical. They want to know things that help them in their jobs. Each of you comes into this training with your own concerns

about how to do VR training, your own ideas about what will or will not work in your situation, and your own preferences for what works. You might be interested in theories in general, but you will get more out of the training if you come away with solutions that you can apply directly.

Underlying all these principles is respect: You bring knowledge as trainers, and the people you train bring knowledge of their roles as VR counselors and the needs and preferences of their own clients. Good training recognizes and respects what adults bring to the table and uses it to make the training as meaningful as possible.

Key Concepts in Adult Learning

- Knowledge: Show learners that a gap exists and fill it.
- Attitude: Show learners why they should care and want to make a change, incorporate new information, or take on a new practice.
- Skills: Point by point, show how it can be done.
- Practice: Give an opportunity for learners to try it out—a case study, a quiz, or a discussion.

Knowledge, attitude, skills, and practice are common concepts that are evaluated when looking at effective learning. Each plays an important role in addressing the needs of adult learners.

The first is knowledge: Help learners identify a gap in what they know or do. In some cases, attitude is an important piece of the puzzle. If adult learners feel that barriers exist to incorporating new knowledge or processes in their settings, all the knowledge and skills that training provides might not be enough to help put it into practice. These relate back to adult learners' autonomy and preexisting knowledge: Learners know their work environments and often have clear ideas about what could be better and what stands in the way. Successful training needs to incorporate the learners' knowledge and concerns.

After identifying a problem and solution and determining that it can be addressed, it is important to teach concrete skills, not abstract

concepts. Show how to complete an evaluation form or model a client interview.

The last component is practice: Give learners a chance to try out the new knowledge and skills for themselves. This builds ownership and confidence and, ideally, provides a chance for learners to apply the information in a way that is relatable to their own settings. This makes the new information more actionable and goal oriented.

Case Study: Determining Client Interests

- Knowledge: Show learners that a gap exists and fill it.
- Attitude: Show learners why they should care and want to make a change, incorporate new information, or take on a new practice.
- Skills: Point by point, show how it can be done.
- Practice: Give an opportunity for learners to try it out—a case study, a quiz, or a discussion.

One key success factor identified in many VR programs for people with autism spectrum disorder is identifying skills or types of work that the client finds interesting or motivating. VR programs may vary in how they include this process during client intake and assessment. Let's go through this together:

What are some ways that you would introduce best practices for determining client interests when training VR staff? Suppose you want to take a practice highlighted by another center, such as the Groden Network, which performs individual assessments of each client's vocational interests and skills. The first part of knowledge transfer is describing what this intervention is and how it is used in another setting. You might describe how it fits into a client's overall trajectory in that organization or share data that shows how this intervention helps make that site successful.

Adult learners will be thinking of how this new information does or does not fit in their environments. You might next solicit these ideas

from your team: What are some barriers to incorporating these best practices that might come up in your site? How would your team be able to adapt the practices to fit your work? What are some good things that might happen if your team did so? What might you be able to do for clients? This is a key element: building the attitude that the intervention is worthwhile and achievable.

Once you have buy-in, the next part is skill based. You might ask the Groden Network for a copy of its training on assessment or the forms the network uses to determine clients' strengths and interests. As a team, work through each step and how to apply it in your space.

Finally, practice is key. You might talk through the case of a new client or compose a hypothetical client to give staff an opportunity to try out the process and any documents and agree on what the results should look like. With this practice, they become more confident in their ability to take this new skill to the field.

Exercise: Plan a Training

- Choose a topic
- Prepare an outline of a training on that topic, using what you have learned
- Possible topics include employer relations, social skills training, job skills training, long-term support services, and alliances with community partners.

For this portion of the course, we will practice applying the principles of adult learning to your own work setting and teams of vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors. We will walk through a series of steps to help you plan how to teach your VR counselors about something. Feel free to pause the presentation as we walk through each step so you can use the worksheet. Ideally, you will be teaching them about working with clients with autism spectrum disorder or students with disabilities. The process begins by thinking about how what you want to teach

relates to what your VR counselors know already and what they need to know or know how to do. You will apply adult learning principles to plan how to introduce knowledge or skills to them in a way that respects what they already know and applies to the work they do now.

The goal of this exercise is not to complete a plan; rather, it is to get accustomed to using steps that can help make the teaching of your VR counselors as successful and relevant as possible in your environment.