Principles of Adult Learning (How adults learn)

Immediacy
Immediacy makes for high motivation. When learners use new content immediately, within the training session, they know that they understand it because they have used it. Clearly connecting the training activities with the work that they will be doing in the near future reinforces the immediacy.

Respect
According to Malcolm Knowles’s research, respect is the prime factor in adult education. Another word for respect is courtesy. Although it may be shown differently in different cultures, respect transcends culture. The task for the training facilitator is to discover how to show respect. Since you want staff and volunteers to show respect for those with whom they work, ask yourself, “How can I model showing respect in the training course?”

Respect is conveyed in small and large ways. For example, creating a welcoming atmosphere by having nametags, greeting participants individually, and providing breaks and refreshments all demonstrate respect. Prescreening to determine whether the program is a match for the person’s needs, acknowledging and utilizing participants’ knowledge and strengths in the training, and genuinely inviting participation also embody this principle.

How will you know if you have successfully conveyed respect? When adults feel respected, they are more likely to engage with the material, to speak up, to ask questions and even challenge the content and the facilitator, to apply the content in unexpected ways, and to suggest changes or alternatives to what is planned. Respecting learners creates an energizing experience for everyone involved—facilitators and participants alike.

Engagement (Learning by Doing)
People learn more when they are actively involved in the learning process. Learning by doing engages people more than merely listening to someone talk about a subject. This engagement of learners is not only an indication that they are learning, it is how they learn! Without it, little or no learning takes place. Malcolm Knowles’s (1980) research showed that adults learn twenty percent of what they hear, forty percent of what they both hear and see, and eighty percent of what they do or discover for themselves.

Inclusion
The question here is, “Is everyone on board?” The alternative to inclusion is exclusion. When an adult learner feels excluded, little or no learning takes place. This principle is clearly related to respect, immediacy, relevance, and accountability.

The design of the training and the behavior of the facilitator assure inclusion. Each gesture of respect and courtesy is an expression of this principle. Learning people’s names and using them, affirming each person’s contributions, and using small groups help create inclusion. Establishing norms for language and participation (e.g., having the group create their own guidelines for communication) also encourages inclusion.
Relevance
Adults learn faster and more permanently when the material is significant to them and to their current lives. The facilitator can emphasize relevance by connecting the content and activities to what the learners already know, to what is important to them, and to what they will be doing in the future.

Relevance is also closely related to immediacy. If adults do not see the immediate relevance of the content, they quickly figure out that they don’t need to know it.

Safety
Learning involves taking risks. Adult learners typically worry about making a mistake or appearing foolish. As a facilitator, you need to provide a learning environment that balances the challenges of learning new skills with a sense of safety that allows your participants to risk exploring or doing something new. Treating people with respect, addressing them by name, being supportive, affirming their contributions, and asking for feedback about the process all help establish safety.