

12 Principles of Effective Adult Learning

1. **Needs Assessment:** “Doing an adequate needs assessment is both standard practice and a basic principle of adult learning, which honors the fact that while people may register for the same program they all come with different experience and expectations. How can we discover what the group really needs to learn, what they already know, what aspects of the course we have designed really fit their situations? Listening to learners’ wants and needs help shape a program that has immediate usefulness to adults.” *Jane Vella, Learning to Listen Learning to Teach.*
2. **Safety:** “People need both challenge and safety. When the learning environment does not appear safe to adult learners, they will disappear or resist the program dramatically to protect themselves.” *Jane Vella, Training Through Dialogue.*
3. **Sound Relationships:** “...Relationship between the instructor and the learner is clearly an important factor in the learning process. I call this principle sound relationship-which implies there is friendship but no dependency, fun without trivializing learning, dialogue between [adults] who feel themselves peers.” *Jane Vella, Learning to Listen Learning to Teach.*
4. **Sequence/Reinforcement:** “Sequence is a vital principle in designing educational events....Nothing is more confusing to the adult learner than a design that is out of sequence! We suggest working from: simple to more complex, easy to more difficult, slowly to more quickly, A to B!”, “Reinforcement is another basic and vital principle for adult learning. The learner needs not only time for mastering new knowledge, skills and attitudes, but she or he also needs to have the mastery reinforced at every possible opportunity.” *Jane Vella, Training Through Dialogue.*
5. **Praxis:** “Praxis means action with reflection. It combines inductive and deductive approaches to learning...When every learning task is a praxis, you will have immediacy and relevance and highly motivated learning.” *Jane Vella, Training Through Dialogue.*
6. **Respect for Learners:** “Malcolm Knowles research shows that respect is the prime factor in adult learning. If learners do not feel respected by the teacher, they will not learn what they might learn.” *Jane Vella, Training Through Dialogue.*
7. **Ideas/Feeling/Action:** “When learning, human beings can use three faculties: the mind, to consider ideas or cognitive material; the heart, the affective faculty, or feelings; and the muscle, in psychomotor activities (actions). [The learning-centered approach] stresses that the most effective learning uses all three aspects of learning as much as possible.” *Jane Vella Training Through Dialogue*
8. **Immediacy:** “Without immediacy there is a dullness in the learning situation. The participants are there, but not there...All the decisions about content, methods, learning tasks, and materials are directed by this principle of immediacy. If a skill or attitude is not immediately useful to an adult, it is probably not being learned as effectively as possible.” *Jane Vella, Training Through Dialogue*
9. **Clear Roles & Role Development:** A teacher can be intent upon a dialogue with an adult learner, but if the learner sees the teacher as “the professor” with whom there is no possibility of disagreement, no questioning, no challenge, the dialogue is dead in the water. Adult learners

need reinforcement of the human equality between teacher and student and among students. It takes time for adults to see themselves and the teacher in a new role.” *Jane Vella, Learning to Listen Learning to Teach.*

10. **Teamwork:** “Teams provide, in the adult learning experience, a quality of safety that is effective and helpful. The assurance of safety and shared responsibility available in terms has always proved welcome, no matter what the cultural setting. Teamwork cannot be taken for granted.” *Jane Vella, Learning to Listen Learning to Teach.*
11. **Engagement:** “Without engagement, there is no learning! The engagement of learners is not only an indication that they are learning, it is how they learn.” *Jane Vella, Training Through Dialogue.*
12. **Accountability:** “Who is accountable to whom? First, adult learners are clearly accountable to themselves. No teacher can learn for a learner. Educators of adults must do all they can to be accountable to learners by carefully selecting people for courses, conducting LNRAs (Learning Needs & Resources Assessment), preparing achievement-based objectives, and designing feasible learning programs.” *Jane Vella, Training Through Dialogue.*

Source: Vella, J. (2002). *Learning to listen, learning to teach: The power of dialogue in educating adults.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.