



Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Adult Learners

Resources / Publications / Young Children / September 2018 / Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Adult Learners

MARTHA MUÑOZ, LINDA ANDERSON WELSH, TINA L. CHASELEY

Ten minutes after class begins, Alicia enters her community college classroom juggling an overflowing backpack, a purse, a drink, and a bag of fast food for dinner. The instructor welcomes Alicia and briefly explains what the class is doing. Alicia apologizes for being late; she had to wait for a parent at the child care center, and traffic was heavy during her drive across town to campus. She gets situated and turns her attention to the class.

Adults come to classes, workshops, and staff trainings in the midst of their busy, complex lives. Denying that reality reduces the odds that adult educators will be able to attain their educational goals. Understanding adult learning and development—and accounting for the demands of adults' lives—provides a starting point for creating rich, enlivening experiences for adult learners. While developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is familiar to most early childhood teachers, it is typically considered only in the context of working with young children (Copple & Bredekamp 2009).

By examining the core considerations of DAP through the lens of adult learning theory, we (the article authors) created a framework for supporting early childhood professionals who are continuing their educations, whether

in staff development, a certificate program, or higher education. We call this framework developmentally appropriate practice for adult learners (DAPAL).

At the heart of DAPAL is applying the three core considerations of DAP (NAEYC 2009) to adult learners:



1. Based on the DAP question “What is known about child development and learning?” we ask: What is known about adult development and how adults learn? Studying adult learning theory prepares the instructor or facilitator to be most effective in fostering learning.
2. Based on the DAP question “What is known about each child as an individual?” we ask: What is known about each adult learner as an individual? Knowing what unique preferences, interests, strengths, and approaches an adult learner brings to a class, workshop, or meeting is useful information on which the facilitator can build. Facilitators can create LGBTQ-inclusive spaces so all students feel comfortable and safe sharing their identities.
3. Based on the DAP question “What is known about the social and cultural contexts in which children live?” we ask: What is known about the social and cultural contexts in which the adult learners live? Learning about birthplace, family size, racial and ethnic identity, language, age or generation, and cultural norms provides a foundation for the facilitator to use in scaffolding the learning experience and building connections across diverse learners.

These considerations for adult learners can be used in college classrooms (including online environments), staff or team meetings, workshops, and other professional development settings. By understanding the unique characteristics of adult learners, adult educators can design effective and meaningful educational experiences.

What is known about adult development and how adults learn?

In distinguishing between child and adult learners, we find it useful to focus on four key ideas. While all four apply somewhat to children, they apply very strongly to adults (Ott 2011):

First, . . . the learner [is] self-directed and independent in the pursuit of information. Second, the real-life experience of the learner must be acknowledged and built upon. Third, the readiness to learn is driven from the learners' occupational and social roles. Finally, the learner is driven by the possibility for immediate application of the knowledge or skill. (32)

Adults are independent and responsible for their own decisions; they are self-directed in their lives and want to manage their learning. Taking ownership of learning includes deciding *what* and *how*. When adult learners are given options for what they will learn and how, they are intrinsically motivated and tend to view learning experiences as relevant (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson 2012). This desire for control and choice is evidenced by students choosing how they want to learn. Options include regular face-to-face classrooms, online courses, blended formats (combining face-to-face and online interaction), and informal tools, such as webinars or conferences. Students seek options in how they share their learning, choosing an oral or written report or video, for example. Students expect technology to support their learning. Giving choices within the curriculum allows adult learners to select the learning experiences most relevant to their needs. (See "Implications for Adult Educators.")

Adults bring a lifetime of diverse experiences to the learning environment. It is important to recognize and tap into these experiences, not only because of the wealth of knowledge and resources that deepen group learning, but also because experiences are tied to identity. Recognition of life experiences makes adults feel valued and competent—and can reassure less-confident learners that they have unique perspectives to share (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson 2012). Of course, as experiences are shared, some set views, biases, or deeply held beliefs may also be revealed. Collectively creating ground rules for openly discussing individuals' established views can create space for all voices to be heard.

Listen carefully for what issues are important to adult learners. You may need to adjust your plans to address their pressing issues.

Information needs to be relevant and useful in adults' professional lives. A preschool teacher may want to know how she can foster kindergarten readiness skills, while a center director may seek a better understanding of budgeting and payroll functions. In planning educational experiences for adults, it is helpful to ask, "What are the benefits of learning this new information?" "What do adults risk by not knowing the information?" When adults understand how their learning benefits them in real-life situations, they are more interested in learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson 2012). Listen carefully for what issues are important to adult learners. You may need to adjust your plans to address their pressing issues.

Rosanne, a child care center director, has prepared an agenda for the regular staff meeting, which takes place the second Tuesday of every month after the center closes for the day. While she has some standing topics, Rosanne makes sure every staff member has an opportunity to add items to the agenda. Recently, there has been an increase in biting in the toddler classroom, creating tension between parents and

teachers who are concerned about children's safety. Understanding that the teachers are looking for solutions to the biting, Rosanne moves this topic to the top of the agenda. The educators feel validated and hopeful that the rest of the team can help them formulate a plan to resolve the challenges.

What is known about each adult learner as an individual?

Adult learners bring their individual experiences, preferences, dispositions, interests, and histories to learning scenarios. Places individuals have lived, for example, influence their worldviews and experiences. Some have lived in the same town for their entire lives; others have traveled around the world with their military families. Living in a tropical or desert climate conjures up a different perception of winter than living in an area that receives several feet of snow does. From seemingly trivial differences to core beliefs, it is worthwhile for adult educators to get to know as much as possible about their students.

In an online environment, such as a web-based certificate or degree program, instructors should make extra efforts to get to know their students—including interests, strengths, family and work obligations, and career goals. Instructors can personalize the online environment by having students complete a survey before the start of instruction, indicating where learners live and work, their previous course work, certificates or degrees they hold, and their instructional goals.

Just as instructors benefit from getting to know students, adult learners benefit from getting to know each other. This can be especially challenging

with online courses—but web-based tools, such as a class blog, help students connect whether the class is in person or online. In an early assignment, ask students to introduce themselves with a short blog post and a photograph. Encourage students to add comments to each other's introductions as a way to connect through common interests. Online learners often reside in different states or countries; this can add richness to discussions when adult educators facilitate in-depth comparisons of topics relevant to the course. Learners may discuss how curriculum and standards vary where they reside or the differences in licensing regulations from state to state. Familial and cultural norms internationally can be a source of information to expand world view. In addition, instructors can use this information to customize assignments or responses to discussion thread posts.

In a class project for Creative Activities for Early Childhood, a blended course that combines online work with some class meetings, students work online in assigned groups to redesign an infant and toddler playground to foster better connections to nature. This project has multiple aspects: background research on the value of natural outdoor learning environments for young children; a review of the current state of the playground, including direct observations of how children use the play space; development of proposals for changes; and a presentation of final recommendations online. Students post their ideas for new playground features to a class Pinterest site; everyone is excited to share their ideas using this visual medium. They benefit from seeing each person's unique perspective, especially since some students live in the surrounding rural areas and others live in the urban core. As they work on this project, the adult learners begin to look at their own outdoor play environments in new ways.

What is known about the social and cultural contexts in which adult learners live?

It is important for the facilitator, trainer, or instructor to learn about the social and cultural contexts of their students. Languages, traditions, and cultural practices shape personal views of social norms (including which behaviors are desirable among learners).

One often-overlooked factor that can lead to misunderstandings is generational differences. Looking beyond stereotypes and getting to know individuals reduces misunderstandings in one-on-one and group interactions. Similarly, rapid developments in technology and terminology, and a growing global community, may lead to confusion. Even the term *family* carries different meanings for individuals. Sharing stories and histories provides a framework for connecting with others. For example, capitalizing on generational diversity offers rich opportunities for adult learners to share personal narratives and create connections.

Approximately 100 people in a rural farming community have turned out for a professional development day beginning at 8:00 a.m. sharp on a Saturday morning. Participants include a grade school principal, a school bus driver, a family child care provider, child care center directors and staff, Migrant Head Start personnel, trainers, community college faculty, and an inclusion specialist. The facilitator, Maria, is pleased with the group's enthusiasm and works to create shared meaning among the diverse group of participants. After a brief overview of the age ranges that define generations, Maria asks

participants to organize themselves by the generation they identify with.

In their small groups, participants reflect on the historical events, education, music, clothing, and trends of their youth. Each group then reports on their collective remembrances, including outside-of-home care arrangements, while Maria captures themes. As one member from each generational group shares, there is an overall sense of acknowledgment and respect, and sometimes laughter. This powerful experience increases understanding and participants' interest in learning from each other. Throughout the day, Maria and the participants explore how childrearing and education have changed—or not—over the past several decades.

Once adult learners' social and cultural contexts are known—to the instructor and to each other—it may be helpful to form small groups based on shared interests and learning goals, at least for some projects. This may be most difficult to do in online courses, but many online learning platforms have ways to create smaller groups. For example, instead of having a discussion board with 24 students, set up three discussion boards with eight students each. If it is not feasible to organize these smaller groups by interest areas, then consider something practical, such as the ages of children the adult learners teach. This results in a more manageable size group that allows students to discuss a topic and connect with others in the class. “The opportunity to collaborate is an important design element, particularly for students who may be learning from a distance” (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver 2010, 27). At designated times, each small group reports their findings to the larger group.

Adults bring experience, wisdom, and insight to the learning community; the discerning facilitator fosters an exchange of knowledge.

Key strategies for adult education

In our work educating adults and supporting adult educators, we focus on creating a respectful community of learners in which the facilitator develops reciprocal relationships and teaches to enhance learning. Together, these strategies help us apply what we know about how adults learn, about each learner as an individual, and about each learner's social and cultural contexts.



By incorporating the idea of a community of practice into the planning process and the intention for the learning experience, the adult educator can consider, “How can I create a welcoming environment, a sense of shared culture, and a space where each learner supports the others?”

Everything from the way the learning space is organized to shared agreements about discussions to learning activities reinforces the idea of a community of practice. Ask yourself the following: “Does my workshop overview or course syllabus emphasize a learning community?” “Do my staff trainings or team meetings foster the idea of learning together?” Just like children, adults thrive in caring communities. Adult educators can create such communities by starting with learners’ basic needs for safety, security, and belonging.

It is 2:45 on a Wednesday afternoon and the teachers are back from taking children to their buses; Wednesdays are early dismissal days the district has designated for professional learning communities. The third-grade team is just arriving in Ms. Dugan’s classroom as she logs on to her computer and displays the third-grade students’ scores on the most recent district math benchmark assessment. A large bowl of foil-wrapped chocolates sits in the center of the table. Chocolate seems to brighten her team’s mood as they spend the afternoon looking at the students’ scores, comparing them with the district medians, analyzing which questions were especially difficult for the students, and brainstorming strategies to address problem areas. Everyone feels safe as they openly discuss the math topics that they find hardest to teach. The team collaborates and bounces ideas off of each other as they design a plan that promotes their students’ math growth; each member of the team has specific ideas and talents that contribute to the overall effort.

In a community of practice, it is especially important for the director or team leader to serve as a learning facilitator, rather than the fount of all knowledge. Rearranging the space into a seminar style when possible, in which learners face one another, projects the message that everyone contributes to the learning process. Adults bring a great deal of personal

experience, wisdom, and insight to the learning community; the discerning facilitator fosters an exchange of knowledge and uses it as a springboard to greater understanding. Having agreed from the start about how the community of learners will interact, maintain confidentiality, and respect one another, the participants settle into a comfortable learning environment.

Effective instructors use a variety of active and collaborative learning strategies and formats to engage adult learners. Adults benefit from thinking about and practicing real-life applications of what they are learning. Some of the most powerful tools include project-based learning, case studies, and reflective journaling. Case studies, for example, are a teaching tool that fosters critical, higher-level thinking. Instructors can create case studies that go to the heart of key issues. In a workshop on ethical decision making, for instance, participants can be given a variety of case studies in which there are competing interests and no clear answers. Case studies should involve realistic scenarios. For example, site-based staff could address recent challenges so the group can reflect on how they could have handled a situation better. In higher education settings, it may be better to discuss a variety of common scenarios so the group can prepare for challenges they are likely to face in the future.

Reflective journaling helps adult learners “gather influential incidents from [their] teaching and learning biographies and then hunt for patterns, assertions, and assumptions in order to grasp their influence on [their] current teaching practices, both confirmatory and contradictory” (Shadiow 2013, 127). Instructors can use prompts to help learners thoughtfully consider a given topic. Having students jot down their thoughts on a topic before discussing it engages everyone and may encourage the less vocal learners to speak up. Continuing to write down a mix of notes and reflections during a discussion is also beneficial. Often, it is not until we write out our thoughts that we know what we really think about a topic. A similar approach is to engage students in blogging, which can be done through a traditional online blog accessible to all, or through a website that

is only accessible to students. Blogging for academic purposes encourages dialogue, feedback, and reflection. In addition, “blogs pull together several of the most recommended pedagogies from learning theory: scaffolding, student-centered learning, the incorporation of multiple perspectives, and the use of learning communities” (Yang 2009, 14).

Conclusion



Effectively facilitating learning for adults encompasses much of DAP for children, with respect to being learner-centered, planning intentionally, creating community, assessing authentically, and using different learning formats purposefully (Copple & Bredekamp 2009). The instructor who has worked with young children and is grounded in development can easily make adaptations to support adult learners in settings ranging from staff

meetings to virtual college classrooms. Keeping DAPAL in mind enables adult educators to model exemplary practices in pedagogy and intentionality for early childhood teachers.

Implications for Adult Educators

- **Involve adults in planning their learning.** Collaboratively develop goals and objectives. Offer choices regarding how to learn new information. Explain the relevance of assignments.
 - **Draw on adults' rich experiences.** Provide scenarios that involve cooperative problem solving so that individuals' talents and strengths are shared and students can learn from each other.
 - **Ensure topics are relevant to the roles of the specific adults in your classroom, training, or workshop.** Share reasons why this new knowledge is important and how it can be applied to their lives. Ask adults to reflect on what they want to learn and improve upon in their practice.
 - **Include activities in your instructional plan to help you get to know each learner as an individual;** this can be as simple as an icebreaker activity or as involved as a detailed questionnaire. Celebrate and respect the individual gifts and experiences each learner brings to the learning setting.
 - **Be aware of your biases and the assumptions that you bring to teaching.** Learn about other social and cultural contexts, including generational preferences, and build on the rich diversity of each learning community.
-

References

Copple, C., & S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: National Association for the

Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Herrington, J., T.C. Reeves, & R. Oliver. 2010. *A Guide to Authentic e-Learning*. Connecting with e-Learning series. New York: Routledge.

Knowles, M.S., E.F. Holton, & R.A. Swanson. 2012. *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*. 7th ed. New York: Routledge.

NAEYC. 2009. "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8." Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC. [www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resource....](http://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resource...)

Ott, K.D. 2011. "Technology and Adult Learning: Understanding E-Learning and the Lifelong Learner." *International Journal of Technology, Knowledge & Society* 7 (3): 31–36.

Shadiow, L.K. 2013. *What Our Stories Teach Us: A Guide to Critical Reflection for College Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Yang, S.-H. 2009. "Using Blogs to Enhance Critical Reflection and Community of Practice." *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 12 (2): 11–21.

Photographs: © Getty Images

Audience: *Faculty*

Topics: *Other Topics, Developmentally Appropriate Practice, Professional Development, Professional Development, Coaching, Technical Assistance, Training, YC*

MARTHA MUÑOZ

Martha Muñoz, PhD, is an early childhood specialist and higher education consultant residing in Apache Junction, Arizona. She is an author and presenter, and a former university early childhood faculty member. mmunoz@mdzpg.com

LINDA ANDERSON WELSH

Linda Anderson Welsh, PhD, is an early childhood and higher education consultant and community volunteer. Previously, she was a faculty member and department chair at Austin Community College. Her current passion is helping to create magical natural outdoor learning environments. lawelsh@gmail.com

TINA L. CHASELEY

Tina L. Chaseley, MEd, NBCT, is currently a doctoral student and part-time faculty member at Northern Arizona University, teaching preservice teachers. She worked as an elementary educator for 10 years and a K–6 reading specialist for three years. tlc43@nau.edu

© National Association for the Education of Young Children
1313 L St. NW, Suite 500, Washington, D.C. 20005 | (202)232-8777 | (800)424-2460 | help@naeyc.org