# How-to Guide

## Designing learning for adults

Purpose of this document.
This document outlines the theories around adult learning, and provide practical approaches to design training content for adult learners.

Adults learn differently from children. As a learning professional, you will have to take into account how adults learn in order to design training sessions that are impactful and effective.

## 1. Adult learning principles

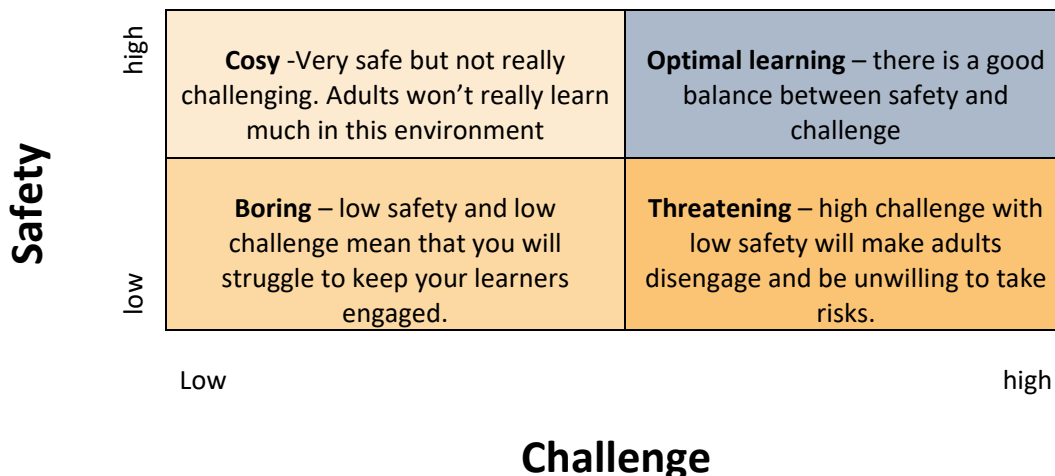Here is a list of the main adult learning principles that you will have to take into account when designing learning.

| Learning principle | | What it means |
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| Experience | : | When teaching children, they rarely have the experience necessary to provide context and meaning to what they learn. This is very different in adults – they enter the training space with lots of experience that they apply during the session. As a trainer you can rely on this experience to help them make connections from the new experience to their previous experiences. |
| Self-direction | : | Adults want to be in charge of their own learning experience. They need to be empowered to take decisions on what they learn, the sequence that they learn it in, how much they choose to participate and how fast/slow the pace is. |
| Social nature | : | Most adults learn in groups – there is a social nature to their learning. They learn from others' experiences and share ideas and insights within groups. |
| Motivated | : | Adults need to see how the learning will benefit them in order to be motivated to learn. Some people like to learn for the sake of it, but most people need to see the reason why behind the content. |
| Realism | : | Adults learn best when they are solving realistic problems. It also makes it easier for them to see how they can apply it back in the workplace. |

| Feedback on progress | : | Adults want to see that they are making progress and need to compare themselves to other learners, and to the standard that needs to be achieved. |
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| Dignity | : | Adults need to feel respected and do not like to be made to look foolish in front of their peers. The learning environment needs to be a safe space in which they can make mistakes without losing face. |

# 2. The learning environment

Adults learn best when the environment is BOTH safe and challenging.

The model below illustrates the most effective learning environment – where there is a good balance between safety and challenge.

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| | **Cosy** -Very safe but not really challenging. Adults won't really learn much in this environment | **Optimal learning** – there is a good balance between safety and challenge |
| | **Boring** – low safety and low challenge mean that you will struggle to keep your learners engaged. | **Threatening** – high challenge with low safety will make adults disengage and be unwilling to take risks. |

*Safety* axis (high to low). *Challenge* axis (Low to high).

**Challenge**

# 3. Applying adult learning principles when designing training

Here are some examples of how to apply the various adult learning principles.

| At the start of a training course you have to cover a lot of content containing various demographical and economical statistics that is important for the context of a training course. However, it's quite | Put the learners in groups (*social nature*) and give them a task of writing down what they think the indicators are and how they are calculated (*previous experience*). Ask them to choose their top 5 issues present to the class (*feedback on progress).* Link it them with the theory you have to cover. Put a list of key indicators with descriptors on the screen but without the indicators. Ask the learners in groups to guess what the |
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| boring and none of it is truly "new" information. | number is (e.g. Literacy at 85%) (*previous experience*). Reveal the true number so that they can test their score (*feedback on progress*) but be careful of not making fun of groups/learners whose guesses were way out (*dignity*). |
| You are presenting a course on how to conduct a development discussion with an employee. You also need the learners to be able to tell a good Individual Development Plan from a bad one. | Ask the learners foremost what their learning outcomes would be – what would they like to get out of the training (*self-direction and motivation*). Cover the formal learning outcomes.

Give a presentation on the principles of a good IDP and have more information in the file explaining it in more detail (*self-direction*). Ask the learners to share examples of where they had a good or a bad discussion (*previous experience*). Let them share in small groups (*social nature*) and then share with the bigger class.

Compile a role play of where a manager is having a development discussion with an employee and invite learners to pair up in groups (*social nature*). Debrief the role play focusing on what was done well first (*feedback on progress and dignity*) and then on what could be improved. Have the groups analyse 2 separate Development Plan feeding back on what was realistic and what they would change (*realism*). |
| You are designing an online learning solution to train ethics. There are 5 principles that you must cover in this training. | Design the learning in such a way that the learner can choose the sequence of modules rather than having a fixed learning path (*self-direction*). Start the module with a real-life example (*realism*) of an employee in an ethical dilemma and ask the learner to choose a response (*feedback on progress*). Debrief the choice by giving feedback why it was correct or incorrect. Use examples throughout the training and ensure that the learner knows his/her answers are not yet monitored (*dignity*).

Design a final assessment where the learner must answer scenario-based questions (*realism and feedback on progress*).

At the end of the learning, include the name or contact details of a person that they can contact if they need more information or have questions unanswered (*social nature*). |