To be considered a distinct profession with a unique knowledge base (Merriam 2001), the field of adult education advances the idea that teaching adults is different than teaching children. The subject of much debate, this issue has generated assumptions, opinions, and research. This publication takes a look at all three in discerning myths and realities associated with the teaching of adults.

**Adults and Children as Learners**

Teaching adults should be different if adults learn differently than children do. Theories or perspectives on adult learning, such as andragogy, make a number of assertions about the characteristics of adults as learners: adults need learning to be meaningful; they are autonomous, independent, and self-directed; prior experiences are a rich learning resource; their readiness to learn is associated with a transition point or a need to perform a task; their orientation is centered on problems, not content; they are intrinsically motivated; their participation in learning is voluntary (Draper 1998; Sipe 2001; Tice 1997; Titmus 1999). For some, “the major difference between adults and younger learners is the wealth of their experience” (Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler 2000, p. 7). For others, the capacity for critical thinking or transformative learning is what distinguishes adults (Vaske 2001). Some argue that the child learner is a dependent personality, has limited experience, is ready to learn based on age level, is oriented to learning a particular subject matter, and is motivated by external rewards and punishment (Guffey and Rampp 1997; Sipe 2001). If there are indeed “distinctive characteristics of adults, on which claims for the uniqueness and coherence of adult education are based, then one might expect them to be taken into account in all organized education for adults” (Titmus 1999, p. 347). However, each of these characteristics is contested. Courtney et al. (1999) assert that “characteristics of adult learners” refers to a small number of identified factors with little empirical evidence to support them. Andragogy has been criticized for characterizing adults as we expect them to be rather than as they really are (Sipe 2001). Both andragogical and pedagogical models assume a “generic” adult and child learner (Tice 1997).

Some question the extent to which these assumptions are characteristic of adults only, pointing out that some adults are highly dependent, some children independent; some adults are externally motivated, some children intrinsically; adults’ life experience can be barriers to learning; some children’s experiences can be qualitatively rich (Merriam 2001; Vaske 2001). The emphasis on autonomy and self-direction is criticized for ignoring context. Adults in higher education can be participative learning resource; their readiness to learn is associated with a transition point or a need to perform a task; their orientation is centered on problems, not content; they are intrinsically motivated; their participation in learning is voluntary (Draper 1998; Sipe 2001; Tice 1997; Titmus 1999). For some, “the major difference between adults and younger learners is the wealth of their experience” (Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler 2000, p. 7). For others, the capacity for critical thinking or transformative learning is what distinguishes adults (Vaske 2001). Some argue that the child learner is a dependent personality, has limited experience, is ready to learn based on age level, is oriented to learning a particular subject matter, and is motivated by external rewards and punishment (Guffey and Rampp 1997; Sipe 2001).

**Learner Centered or Teacher Directed**

Learner centeredness is promoted in the literature as another distinguishing characteristic of adult education. Cervero and Wilson (1999) identify a strong thread in the field: “At the heart of practice is the adult learner... The highest professional and moral principle for adult educators is to involve learners in identifying their needs” (p. 29). In traditional teacher-directed education as practiced in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary settings, passive learners receive knowledge transmitted by teachers (Tice 1997). Formal curricula reflect what powerful groups think students should learn and what kinds of knowledge are considered important (Sheared and Sissel 2001; Titmus 1999). In contrast, learners are at the center of policy and practice in adult learner-centered institutions, which are characterized by flexibility and individuation for self-directed, empowered adults (Mancuso 2000).

Such a philosophy implies that traditional teaching practices, not considered appropriate for adults, are suited to the needs of children and adolescents. Some agree with this assumption: “In teaching kindergarten through middle school, pedagogy has a secure place. Children must first be taught to read, compute, communicate, and socialize before they can become involved in deciding their future learning activities” (Guffey and Rampp 1997, p. 31). Others argue that the traditional model does not meet the needs of either children or adults. The learning enterprise as a whole is shifting from transmission of a fixed body of knowledge to a focus on lifelong learning, the essential habits of mind with which adults will be ill prepared if initial schooling continues to use traditional teacher-directed methods (Titmus 1999). Andragogical methods, which purport to provide “a relaxed, trusting, mutually respectful, informal, warm, collaborative and supportive learning environment” (Sipe 2001, p. 89), are more conducive to learning at all ages (Guffey and Rampp 1997; Sipe 2001).

To what extent are learner-centered practices actually used by adult educators? In Kempber, Kwan, and Lesdemus’s (2001) study, instructors viewed adult students as being at the andragogical end of the continuum, but teaching methods stemmed from their conception of good teaching: as transmission of knowledge or facilitating learning. They also varied the use of teacher-directed and learner-centered approaches depending on which better served learner needs (e.g., designing teaching to be congruent with the relative strengths and weaknesses of students).

In Beder’s (2001) research, adult literacy teachers expressed learner-centered intentions and orientations. Yet “observations portrayed a type of instruction that was the near antithesis of learner-centered” (p.
Finally, the question posed in the title may best be answered by restating it as a source of guidance. Instead of conceiving of adult learners as objects of instruction, teacher-learner relationships, and the social context of learning differences as an expression of values, not a teaching method.

Do adult learners prefer learner-centered approaches? Beiter (1997) found midcareer adult students more concerned with teacher characteristics, teacher beliefs and values (Ross-Gordon 1999). Moving beyond the debates, choices about teaching methods—variations that should be reflected in teaching practices (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). The answer is likely all of the above for learners of all ages, at different times and in different contexts. It may be that adults and children do not learn differently, but the configuration of learner, context, and process has qualitative and quantitative benefits and who should benefit from adult education.

**Conclusion**

The ongoing debates—andragogy vs. pedagogy, teacher directed vs. learner centered—may mean that no single theory explains how adult learning differs from children’s learning (Vaske 2001). As more is discovered about the ways in which we learn, the principles, practices, and philosophies of teaching and learning will continue to evolve.

Appropriate ways of teaching begin with conceptions of learning: Is learning the acquisition of knowledge and skills? Social participation in knowledge construction? A natural process of making sense of the world? Reflection on and adaptation to experience? (Courtney et al. 1999; Taylor et al. 2000). The answer is likely all of the above for learners of all ages, at different times and in different contexts. It may be that adults and children do not learn differently, but the configuration of learner, context, and process has qualitative and quantitative variations that should be reflected in teaching practices (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Moving beyond the debates, choices about teaching practices should be based on numerous considerations: context, learner knowledge and characteristics, teacher beliefs and values (Ross-Gordon 2002). Ross-Gordon advocates reflection on learners, learning processes, teacher-learner relationships, and the social context of learning as a source of guidance. Instead of conceiving of adult learners as generic, educators should address the power issues identified earlier. Finally, the question posed in the title may best be answered by restating it: teaching different adults (or children) is (or should be) different.

**References**


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