

The Great Books Foundation's Professional Development, Part 2 – Knowles's Knowledge

In part 1 of this series, we explored how the professional development designed by the Great Books Foundation incorporates adult learning principles and practices with a focus on Jean Piaget. Specifically, we looked at Schema Theory, assimilation and accommodation, and equilibrium and disequilibrium. In this installment, we will look at the work of Malcolm Knowles and the impact his work has had on how we teach adults.

Knowles initially identified four traits of adult learners, but this has since been expanded and, depending on the model used, now includes up to six or seven traits. These traits or needs of adult learners form the basis for andragogy. In contrast with pedagogy, which applies to the principles and techniques of teaching children, andragogy focuses on adults. It is vital to understand that adults learn differently and have strong preferences for learning that are extremely different from how children best learn.

Knowles's initial list:

1. Adults want to be involved and active in the planning of their learning.
2. Learning needs to be based on experiences. Successes and failures are essential.
3. Relevance to professional or personal life needs to be explicit to adults.
4. Adults like to solve problems in order to learn, rather than didactic teaching.

In 1984 Knowles clarified the list and added the fifth assumption of adult learners:¹

1. Self-concept
2. Experience
3. Readiness to learn
4. Orientation to learning
5. Motivation to learn

Later, the sixth assumption was added to include the need for adults to understand why they need to learn what is being taught. In her book, Elena Aguilar adds the seventh need of adults to feel safe in the learning environment.²

Professional development must incorporate these principles and needs in order to have the impact districts and schools want; otherwise, teachers will not be able to include the new knowledge into their classroom habits and teaching. The Great Books Foundation has always incorporated these principles in their professional development, and the chart below will explain how.

1 "The Adult Learning Theory—Andragogy—of Malcolm Knowles." <https://elearningindustry.com/the-adult-learning-theory-andragogy-of-malcolm-knowles>

2 Elena Aguilar and Lori Cohen. *The PD Book* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2022).

How the Great Books Foundation’s Professional Development Employs Knowledge Gained from Knowles’s Research and Writings

Great Books Professional Development	Needs of Adult Learners	Standards (not an exclusive list)
<p>Our Shared Inquiry™ Essentials course explains how to employ Shared Inquiry and why and how to make it your own. In every class, we encourage teachers to explore how the materials and methodology can be modified to fit the needs of the children they teach.</p>	<p>1. Self-concept Adults have a highly developed sense of who they are compared to children. Andragogy must recognize and provide opportunities for adults to direct their own learning.</p>	<p>Learning Forward</p>
<p>Teachers are the experts regarding their students’ needs. All training provided has this concept at its heart. In courses, when teachers ask questions about the methodology or materials, trainers will always defer to the teacher, as they know the realities of their students and the parameters of their teaching environment. Teachers often come to professional-development workshops with years of experience, and Shared Inquiry can seamlessly integrate into what teachers already do in their classrooms.</p>	<p>2. Experience Adults come to any training or professional development with their life experience and want recognition.</p>	<p>Texas Administrative Code Ch. 149 Standard 6</p> <p>Illinois DOE Professional Development Standards</p>
<p>Many strategies are demonstrated and explained throughout the training that teachers can take directly from the training and employ in their classrooms right away:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using a seating chart or other note-taking tools in discussion • Increasing the amount of wait time given to students • Techniques to help students get the most from rereading texts and annotating them 	<p>3. Readiness to learn In Knowles’s own words, “Adults become ready to learn things they need to know and do in order to cope effectively with real-life situations. Adults want to learn what they can apply in the present, making training focused on the future or that does not relate to their current situations, less effective.”³</p>	<p>Learning Forward</p> <p>International Accreditors for Continuing Education and Training</p> <p>Montana DOE Standards for Professional Development</p>

3 Knowles M., et al. *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005).

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Great Books Professional Development	Needs of Adult Learners	Standards (not an exclusive list)
<p>During the professional development workshops, teachers are provided with opportunities to practice the skills demonstrated and explained.</p> <p>Teachers work together in pairs and small groups to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write interpretive questions • Discover follow-up questions that work with their teaching style and support their educational goals 	<p>4. Orientation to learning Adults learn best when learning is problem-centric. Adults want to use their experience and knowledge about their jobs to understand why the subject is important and how it will help solve real professional problems.</p>	<p>Georgia Department of Education Professional Learning</p>
<p>Before every scheduled course (except for open courses), trainers will meet with school officials to tailor their approach to the teachers, school, or district needs. The motivation to learn Shared Inquiry is greater when teachers know the materials have been purchased. However, even in cases where the materials are not used, the methodology of Shared Inquiry builds motivation in the teachers because they can see how it helps their students be better readers, thinkers, writers, and speakers.</p>	<p>5. Motivation to learn Most adults (and especially teachers) want and like to learn new things. Adults' motivation for learning is more intrinsic compared to children, who are often externally motivated.</p>	<p>New Jersey DOE Professional Learning Standards</p>
<p>Teachers have, at the core of their motivation for attending professional development, the desire to support and help their students learn. In learning Shared Inquiry and working with Junior Great Books materials, teachers can see how the program helps their students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop critical thinking skills • Engage in civil discourse • Develop ideas in speaking and writing • Collaborate with peers 	<p>6. What's in it for me To help adults make the most of the time given to professional development, training should address the question, "What's in it for me?"</p>	<p>New York DOE Professional Development Standards</p>
<p>Teachers are encouraged to take advantage of the safe space that their trainers create. There is time throughout the training that allows participants and trainers to develop trust.</p>	<p>7. Safe space Adult learners need to feel that the learning environment welcomes and supports all learners of all abilities.</p>	<p>California Department of Education Quality Professional Learning Standards</p>