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ABSTRACT

Teachers of adults, if they are to be really effective, must be sensitive to the particular characteristics and needs of adult learners. Adults have many physiological, psychological, and social characteristics that are the result of normal aging. In determining which characteristics interfere with learning, it is found that all have an impact on the learning processes but few impair the adult from learning. Even though, as adults grow older, visual and audio acuity decrease, attention spans grow shorter, and energy decreases, the effects are usually not monumental. As adult educators become more familiar with these problems they are able to cope with them by planning, for example, more visual aids, better voice projection, and shorter, more concise assignments. As teachers become more sensitive to the characteristics and needs of adults, the positive attributes of aging begin to outweigh the detriments. The freedom of choice that adults have in their educational ventures can help overcome their learning difficulties. Further, adults are generally settled in their lifestyles, are more mature in their thinking, have life's experiences on which to draw and are serious about how they spend their time. Although some characteristics of adults may slow learning, lifelong learning can become a reality as adult educators become more aware of adult needs. (EM)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULTS  
THAT FACILITATE AND/OR INTERFERE  
WITH LEARNING

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People involved in adult education today have widely diverse abilities, interests, motives, and socioeconomic characteristics. Participation in adult education is influenced by factors that are components of the physical abilities, personality, and social group life of the individual. These factors exert profound influence upon the form, content, and character of educational activities.<sup>1</sup> It has become increasingly clear that teachers of adults, if they are to be really effective, must be very sensitive to the particular characteristics and needs of adult learners. In order to achieve and maintain this sensitivity to the fullest degree, adult learning facilitators must acquire a thorough knowledge of physiological and psychological changes and environmental pressures that take place in adulthood as a part of normal aging, and recognize the implications which these changes hold for the teaching/learning processes.<sup>2</sup>

#### PHYSICAL ABILITIES

Physical abilities undergo continuous change as age advances. These changes include sensory decline; loss in strength; lengthening of reaction time; decline in sexual capacity; changes in skin texture, muscle tone, and hair color; and a general decline in energy.<sup>3</sup> Such physiological changes occur gradually and at different rates among individuals, yet the overall trend is constant. Among disadvantaged adults, the onset of aging occurs earlier in life and decline is more rapid so that an individual becomes old before his time.<sup>4</sup> Most adults are unaware of these changes until some traumatic experience accentuates it. These changes may cause an adult to underestimate his power to learn or to perform tasks. This underestimation may be reflected in

changes in interests and motivation.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most obvious changes experienced by an adult is a decrease in visual acuity. The peak of visual acuity is reached some time between twenty and twenty-five years of age. From that point there is a consistently slight decline until about forty to forty-five years of age when it takes a sharp drop and continues at a faster rate of decline throughout the balance of the lifespan. Such factors as age, disease, injury, or diet may produce some malfunction in the eye which will affect its ability to focus, to respond to illumination, and to detect color. If the eye's response to visual stimuli is blocked or retarded, the adult's perception is altered.<sup>6</sup> These changes mainly affect reading since the nearpoint of vision moves progressively further away until reading glasses become necessary. Since many adults are unwilling to admit the need for glasses, this further hampers their feeling of confidence in a learning situation.

Such changes in visual acuity necessitate different approaches to learning. Adults need stronger lights to compensate for lessened ability of the eye to admit light. They need larger sizes of print and sharper contrasts in colors. Also, they cannot read as fast as when they were younger, thus requiring shorter rather than longer reading assignments.<sup>7</sup>

Another obvious change with age is the decline of audio acuity. Although an adult may be able to perceive sound, he may not comprehend its meaning, and this comprehension is influenced by his own perception of his ability to hear. The inability to hear clearly and to comprehend

can produce emotional disturbances such as depression, anxiety, or frustration. Learning cannot be achieved until these problems have been brought under control.<sup>8</sup> This imposes upon the facilitator the responsibility of compensating for hearing loss. This can be achieved by well-modulated voice control; by facing the group so that those who unconsciously lip-read can see what is said; and by using visual aids.<sup>9</sup>

The ability of the human body to maintain a constant internal temperature is called homeostatic adjustment. This adjustment changes with age as the body loses its ability to maintain internal temperature. Therefore, as age advances adults cannot adjust to external conditions easily and cold or drafts become barriers to learning.<sup>10</sup>

The loss in energy that increases with age influences the adult's ability and willingness to participate in further education. So much energy may be expended on the adult's vocation that none may be left for educational tasks. This necessitates adjustments in the educational requirements so that the tasks are not prohibitive in terms of energy available.<sup>11</sup>

Listed below are other changes to the physiology of man as he grows older:<sup>12</sup>

1. Gradual tissue desiccation.
2. Gradual retardation of cell division, capacity for cell growth, and tissue repair.
3. Gradual retardation in the rate of tissue oxidation (lowering in the basal metabolic rate).

4. Cellular atrophy, degeneration, increased cell pigmentation, and fatty infiltration.
5. Gradual decrease in tissue elasticity, and degenerative changes in the elastic connective tissue.
6. Decreased speed, strength, and endurance of skeletal neuromuscular reactions.
7. Decreased strength of the skeletal muscle.
8. Progressive degeneration and atrophy of the nervous system, impaired vision, hearing, attention, memory and mental endurance.

All of these physiological characteristics must be taken into consideration when reviewing adult learning.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL ABILITIES

The peak of learning ability is reached between twenty and twenty-five years of age. After that age, it is generally agreed that any adult can learn almost anything he wants to learn at any age. Further, the more experience an adult has in learning, the easier learning becomes. The greater the amount of intelligence and the greater the amount of education, the slower the decline in learning ability.

A person's self is the hidden key to his learning behavior and is formed through his perception of what others think of him.<sup>13</sup> Thus, our motivations, aspirations, and perceptions have much to do with our learning experiences.

Adults are unlikely to learn unless they are motivated. It is estimated that by the age of twenty-five, most people have learned

the greater part of what they want to learn. Motivation is best seen within the framework of an adult's needs, goals, habits, values, and self-concept. An adult's willingness to engage in learning depends on such factors as his perception of the value of learning, his acceptance of what and how to learn, his need for self-esteem or social affiliation with others, and his expectations from life.<sup>14</sup>

As adults grow older they are less able to hold an attention span over long periods of time. This is due, in part, to changes in sensory perception with aging, but it is also a product of experiences with everyday life. The natural societal setting provides more stimuli than an adult can handle and some must be ignored. As a result, adults experience a progressive loss of stimulation to which they are ready to respond.<sup>15</sup>

Attitudes and interests exert a profound affect on an adult's involvement in further learning. Attitudes are learned and are relatively stable. They change only as a result of circumstances which are highly important to the individual. Activities of adults are usually the results of their interests. Younger adults tend to be more interested in physical or adventurous activities, while older adults shift from physical pursuits to activities which are more sedentary in nature.<sup>16</sup>

#### SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

The single most significant factor affecting participation in adult education is socioeconomic status. Educational level,

which affects occupation, which affects income, which affects educational level generates the socioeconomic circle feeding adult education today. Age is not a significant barrier to participation; but adults participate less frequently the older they become.

Further, married people are generally more active participants in adult education than are singles.

Every person who takes part in learning activities does so for his own unique reasons. Some learn because they want to achieve a goal which will make their lives better. They want higher paying and more satisfying jobs. They want to know how to be good husbands or wives, good parents, good homemakers, or good citizens. They want to know how to get along with other people, or how to enrich their leisure hours by more rewarding hobbies and amusements. They want to know how to carry out some special responsibility which life has brought, that of being, for example, a company executive, a shop steward, a foreman, a school board member, or a club president.

Some people learn because they enjoy the various processes of learning. They may belong to a discussion group because they are stimulated by the vital interchange of opinion among several minds. They may go to a lecture because they like to hear a particular subject outlined with authority, directness, and clarity. They may read a great deal, and therefore always try to have plenty of books on hand.

Some people learn simply because they want to know. They have a passion for literature, for the theater, for philosophy, for history,

for photography, or for any of the thousands of other aspects of human knowledge. Such people seek no practical rewards. The sheer joy of knowledge or understanding or accomplishment is all they want.

There may be other reasons for learning than these. Probably, however, the great majority of the people taking part in various learning activities do so primarily because they want to reach a goal, because they enjoy the act of learning, or because they simply want to know. Most of the others who study do so because of some combination of these three basic reasons.<sup>17</sup>

#### SUMMARY

Adults have many characteristics -- physiological, psychological, and social. In trying to determine which characteristics facilitate learning and which characteristics interfere with learning, we find that all have an impact on the processes of learning, but few really impair the adult from learning if he really wants to learn. Even though visual and audio acuity decrease as adults grow older, attention spans grow shorter, energy decreases, and other aging difficulties arise, the effects are usually not monumental. As adult educators become more familiar with these problems they are better able to cope with them by planning, for example, more visual aids, better voice projection, and shorter, more concise assignments. As adult educators become more sensitive to the characteristics and needs of adults the positive attributes of aging begin to outweigh the detriments.

Adults have freedom of choice in their educational ventures. This fact alone can help adults to overcome the difficulties in learning. Freedom of choice means that the adult is participating in the activity because he wants to participate. Further, adults are generally settled in their lifestyles. They are more mature in their thinking, they have a vast store of knowledge resulting from life's experiences on which to draw, they are serious about how they spend their time, and they are sincere in their aspirations. Adults are realistic about additional education, as the following statements indicate.<sup>18</sup>

1. Adults know that they are rather rusty as compared to younger people.
2. Adults want to do the right thing. Just tell them what is expected of them and they will give it a try.
3. They may be more impatient of sham learning than younger students.
4. A fresh concept can be easier for an adult to understand because they are less used to being directed, but it can also be harder because their prejudices have had longer to get entrenched.
5. Older people have a fund of knowledge from their own experiences against which the claims of theories can be tested.
6. The attitude of older people to their work is more serious than that of young students: they have more at stake. Polite tolerance of boredom is less likely: if they do not like what they are given, they may protest or cease to come, but they will not stay and waste their time.

Adults of any age can learn. Some characteristics of adults may temporarily slow the learning of some adults, but as adult educators

become more aware of and more sensitive to the needs of adults,  
lifelong learning will be a reality for all adults.

#### FOOTNOTES

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2. H. T. Pruett, "A Review of Physiological and Psychological Changes in Aging" (An Unpublished Typewritten Report), p. 1.
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5. Verner, op. cit., p. 18.
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7. Verner, op. cit., p. 19.
8. Verner and Davison, op. cit., p. 15.
9. Verner, op. cit., p. 19.
10. Ibid. p. 20.
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12. Pruett, op. cit., p. 7.
13. William H. Puder and S.F. Hand, "Personality Factors Which May Interfere with the Learning of Adult Basic Education Students" (Adult Education Journal, Volume XVIII, Number 2, 1968), p. 1.
14. Verner, op.cit., p. 4.
15. Ibid. p. 5.
16. Ibid. p. 26.
17. Cyril O. Houle, Continuing Your Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), p. 7.
18. M. F. Cleugh, Educating Older People ( London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), p. 36-38.

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