

# Chapter 4

## Characteristics of Adults as Learners (Kathryn Patricia Cross)

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### ABSTRACT

*In the same way as other facets of education, understanding of adult learning has developed over time. Merriam (2018) said that 'what we do have is collection of principles and explanations that form an ever-evolving knowledge base of adult learning'. Indeed, this evolution is a reflection of increasing recognition of the diverse learning needs of adult learners. Cross (1981) brought emphasis to lifelong learning, highlighting the need of constantly learn in rapidly shifting societies give rise to examination of the characteristics of adult learners. In light of this, this chapter explores how the Characteristics of Adults as Learners model developed by Kathryn Patricia Cross significantly influences adult learning. Furthermore, future research directions are proposed to improve comprehension and application of the CAL model across diverse educational contexts. Recommendations are intended to address its implementation among a variety of educational settings, such as formal and informal and to enhance the model's flexibility to the changing requirements of adult learner populations.*

### INTRODUCTION

The increasing acceptance of ideas about lifelong learning and the need to meet the dynamic demands of the workforce has brought adult learning to the center of both theoretical and practical discussions. For instance, people are experiencing

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more competition for work opportunities as a result of the shifting economic conditions. Moreover, globalization has given rise to new sectors, placing individuals in situations where they must adapt to maintain their competitive edge. As a result, there is a growing need for individuals to pursue further education, training, or self-improvement to succeed in these evolving roles and industries. For instances, the challenges were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as a significant number of individuals were compelled to acquire new skills and undergo additional training in order to effectively navigate the resulting changes (Vowels et al., 2022). On the other hand, many adult learners face significant challenges in overcoming the 'glass ceiling' due to insufficient familiarity with technology, availability, and reluctance to adopt it, all of which impede their capacity to compete in a global context (Beck & Hughes, 2013). Enhancing digital competencies has become essential for adult learners, both for advancing in the modern workforce and for supporting academic and personal development. In light of these changes, adult learners whether they are working professionals, retired individuals, or university students need to increasingly engage in education and skill development to maintain adaptability and resilience in an ever-evolving global landscape.

Unraveling the intricacies of adult learning begins with a fundamental step: defining the essence of what it means to be an adult learner. Knowles (1970) defines an adult as “an individual who perceives themselves as responsible for their own life and has adopted corresponding social roles and behaviors”. Knowles (1970) further highlighted that adult learners, categorized as non-traditional, possess a strong awareness of both the purpose and the subject matter of their learning. Additionally, adult learners are typically defined by their high levels of independence and self-guided, often taking charge of their own learning (Malone 2014; Prakash et al., 2019), and striving for learning that aligns with their personal interests and career goals (Prakash et al., 2019).

Beyond these conceptual definitions, the literature also includes more static definitions, with some researchers specifying adult learners based on particular age ranges. While the term “adult learner” was used by Kahu et al. (2013) to describe individual who is above the age of 22, Safford-Ramus et al. (2018) categorized them as those aged 25 and older, highlighting the broad spectrum of skills and backgrounds within this group. In addition, OECD and UNESCO characterize adult learners as individuals ranging in age from 24 to 64.

Levinson (1978) also proposed a more comprehensive model of adult development that includes transitional periods in Figure 1. This model provided that every stage of a person's life is a developmental phase that is distinguished by activities that are aimed at establishing or altering the structures of their lives. Importantly, Levinson's model underscores that the development of life structures is a continuous journey throughout life because Levinson (1986) recognizes that mid-life transition

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