

## Basic Concepts and Assumptions about Adult Learners

2019 Garden Docent Training  
Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

Taken from an article by Lawrence A. Allen in *Museums, Adults and the Humanities: A Guide for Educational Programming*

### Five basic concepts about adult learning:

1. Adults are self-directing, interested in setting up their own kinds of learning. They want autonomy in what they are taught, rather than a prescribed curriculum.
2. Adults are interested in immediate applications of learning to their own lives. Adult learning is problem-oriented, not subject-oriented. That doesn't mean that we should eliminate content, but rather that we must relate the content to issues that our visitors are interested in.
3. Adults come to the museum voluntarily. The built-in rules of forced learning situations are changed in the museum.
4. Adults have experiences that form a pool of resources we can use in the learning process. Adults understand a new idea or concept better when we can relate it to their past experiences.
5. There are certain times in their life cycles when adults exhibit a readiness to learn about a specific topic, when it is more effective for a person to learn something specific than at other times.

### Assumptions that emerge from these five basic concepts:

1. Adults continually learn.
2. In order to learn, they must want to. Learning is internal – it comes more from people's needs than from the program imposed on them.
3. Adults can diagnose their own needs.
4. Adults learn best by doing. Looking at a painting is a visual learning experience, but most people still have to learn how to learn visually. Docents can help visitors learn this process by involving them in the process of seeing and inquiring. This will help the visitor learn more effectively and internalize the learning.
5. Adults learn experientially. They need to be involved in a discussion, a simulation, a case study, etc.
6. Adults evaluate themselves. They will engage in a functional self-evaluation or assessment. "How well am I doing; how far have I progressed?"