



# WIDA's Learning Philosophy and Adult Learning

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WIDA's professional learning is a transformative curriculum grounded in principles of adult learning theory and designed to empower educators in their work with multilingual learners and ensure that the professional learning opportunities are relevant, practical, and accessible. WIDA's Learning Philosophy for professional learning curriculum draws from foundational principles of adult learning, focusing on contextualization and relevance, self-direction and autonomy, and collaboration and reflection. Embedded within this foundation are the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy that inform access and opportunities to implement instructional practices with the goal of building educator capacity to serve linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms.

WIDA's commitment to holistic professional learning is evident in four key priorities: accessibility—ensuring all educators can benefit from our programs, products and services; multilingualism—providing tools for educators to support multilingual learners' academic and linguistic development; engagement—developing and delivering a portfolio of offerings; and connection—meeting educators where they are and in consideration of their educational contexts.

WIDA's professional learning responds to what adult education is by providing comprehensive and robust learning spaces where educators can engage with instructional strategies that provide new ways in which to approach the challenges in the classroom. We also design with five guiding principles in mind, outlined here within the context of adult learning.

## Mission

We support educators with relevant, multimodal, evidence-based professional learning that aligns with educational needs and contexts and positively impacts instructional practices that support multilingual learners.

## **Guiding Principle 1: We believe that educators deserve personalized professional learning that honors their professional autonomy and existing knowledge.**

- **Adult learning is self-directed and personalized.**

Adults are autonomous, self-directed learners who engage in learning when the materials are directly relevant and actionable to their context. Self-direction involves setting goals, identifying resources, and monitoring progress (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Research suggests that intrinsic motivation in blended learning environments is linked to learner self-regulation and design features, such as technology quality and interactions (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Kintu et al., 2020; Zimmerman, 2000). WIDA embodies this principle through its high-quality professional learning, where educators take ownership of their learning paths and tailor them to their needs and contexts.

Adults bring a wealth of experience that enhances the learning process (Knowles et al., 2025). Learning is shaped by individuals' experiences and how they perceive, process, and apply new knowledge. Therefore, it is essential to incorporate adult learners' experiences into the learning process. Educators leverage their practical experiences and educational expertise. WIDA's experiential learning approach focuses on applying knowledge through collaboration and real-world scenarios, reflecting classroom practice.

Learning for adults is often problem-centered rather than content-oriented (Knowles, 1990). As such, the focus of professional learning should emphasize problem-solving strategies (divergence, convergence, brainstorming, case studies, and multiple solutions, as described by Drew, 2023) and task-based or project-based approaches. WIDA's resources meet learners where they are.

Adults are motivated by internal factors such as personal growth and job satisfaction. Learning then becomes a matter of personal interest, and professional learning needs to be designed to cater to these intrinsic motivations, ensuring adult learners are involved, acknowledged, fueled in their passion and curiosity, and contributing to their autonomy (Knowles et al., 2025). Finally, the construction and design of professional learning needs to demonstrate the clear relevance of learning for the professional growth and interests of the adult learner (Loeng, 2018).

## **Guiding Principle 2: We design and deliver multimodal professional learning offerings that are rooted in adult learning science and integrate opportunities for practical application.**

- **Adult learning is collaborative and social.**

When adult learning environments are collaborative and social, adults engage through dialogue and interaction with peers. Educators learn from each other within the communities of practice that provide them with opportunities for sharing perspectives, insights, and resources to construct and enhance their knowledge base (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). We aim to provide possibilities for educators

to build professional learning communities oriented toward sharing challenges and successes, making it a community of learning where peers can demonstrate varied ways in which to engage learners in diverse contexts.

- **Adult learning is experiential and contextualized.**

Adults learn better when the content is relevant to their immediate experiences. They are motivated by practical, real-world applications that can be adopted immediately into daily instructional practices (Brookfield, 2017; Knowles, 1980). Experiential learning, or learning that is grounded in the immediate situation, and reflecting on action directly influences an individual's practice because of one's continuous evaluation of what they are learning through the lens of what they are doing or intend to do (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Our designs aim toward diverse approaches, including role-plays, skits, case studies, and a variety of classroom artifacts developed by educators for educators, that describe how to better understand and address the diverse needs of their students.

- **Adult learning is problem-centered and relevant.**

Learning that directly provides practical, immediately applicable, and relevant strategies and solutions for real-world situations fosters deeper understanding and motivation to learn in adults (Knowles et al., 2025). Framing the activities around specific issues that teachers encounter frequently in their classrooms and providing them with strategies and resources to address those specific issues grounds the learning in real-world solutions for relevant and purposeful learning. In our professional learning experiences, we bring a learning-by-doing approach where educators can focus on designing products (activities, lesson plans, etc.) that cater to their context and accommodate their learners' backgrounds, culture, and knowledge and address diverse learner needs.

### **Guiding Principle 3: We incorporate comprehensive design best practices within the professional learning resources and products that we create.**

- **We incorporate comprehensive design practices into our resources.**

Comprehensive design practices, especially in online environments, ensure that learning experiences are accessible and respond to the needs of adult learners. Comprehensive design provides adult learners with access to information by building flexible, adaptable, instructional approaches to appeal to various learner preferences and abilities (Kaiser et al., 2023). Instruction that includes quality interactions and inclusive design practices that apply to the learner's immediate individual context create meaningful and effective learning experiences (Halpern & Turner, 2015). Our offerings include a blend of online, in-person, and hybrid courses with an evidence-based foundation; varied ways to approach content; and hands-on activities that cater to diverse contexts and learning preferences.

## **Guiding Principle 4: We prioritize data-driven continuous learning and improvement to connect professional learning to teacher practice and, ultimately, student outcomes.**

- **We provide opportunities for reflective practice and transformative learning.**

Reflective practice encourages adult learners to analyze and evaluate their own thinking and practices. Both reflection-on-action (evaluating experiences after they happen and then taking an action) and reflection-in-action (evaluating experiences and acting on them as they happen) can lead to professional growth (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Reflective practice is a key component of transformative learning, as is critical assessment of one's experience while exploring one's belief systems while engaging in learning that contributes to practice (Mezirow, 2018). Because our work is founded on research and relevant theory from the field, it gives educators an opportunity to critically reflect, engage in peer feedback and conversation, and analyze and determine the impact of their own teaching practices.

## **Guiding Principle 5: We anchor our content in culturally responsive pedagogy and effective instructional practices.**

- **We ground our content in culturally sustaining pedagogy.**

Darling-Hammond et al. (2021) outline principles from the science of learning and neuroscience that can ground educational practice, including the context in which educational experiences occur, the importance of human relationships in learning and development, the social and emotional nature of learning, and the cultural underpinnings that form a crucial part of the environment. These principles are the foundation from which knowledge is co-constructed within the shared contexts, experiences, and relationships in the learning environment. As educators make shifts in their practice, at first through professional learning and then by direct classroom application, there is a potential of paradigm shifts humanizing pedagogy and building social-emotional landscapes to thrive and a community of learning where all backgrounds, cultures, and languages are valued and elevated.

- **We value and emphasize culturally responsive pedagogy and multifaceted instructional practices.**

Gay (2018) describes these practices as those where the emphasis is on valuing learners' diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. The aim is to build an environment that is safe where everyone is respected and supported. The intention of including culturally responsive pedagogy aims to enhance learner engagement, improve achievement, and contribute to social emotional skills development. The body of work included in professional learning designs examines how the practices bridge cultural gaps, offer a sense of belonging, and contribute to the quality of life of all learners regardless of who they are and where they come from. Our offerings ensure that these practices are interwoven and that there are ample opportunities for practice, analysis, and creation of materials and lessons that build safe spaces for learning and develop the whole child.

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