

## Considering the Whole-Part-Whole learning model

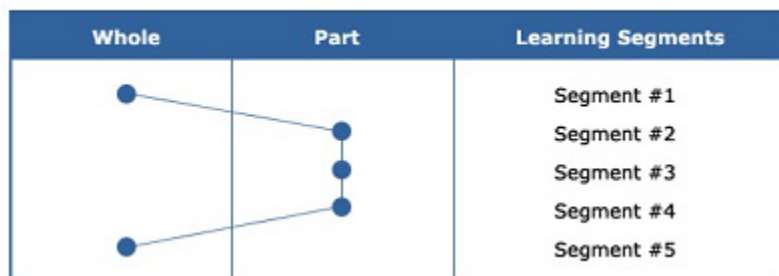
The Whole-Part-Whole (WPW) learning model offers a helpful framework for developing training and instruction for adults. It was developed to combine theory and best practices in the design of learning programs. The model is meant to mirror the natural whole-part-whole rhythm in learning.

The steps in the WPW learning model are outlined in [The Adult Learner](#) by Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson, a book that has been described as the definitive classic in adult education and human resource development.

### WPW learning model

As can be seen in the chart, learners are exposed to the first “whole,” in which they are prepared for new instruction by being presented a “mental scaffolding”—the learning objectives and building-block concepts placed within the larger framework of the topic. This clear, learner-oriented introduction also serves to motivate learners and provide context for learning.

**Basic Whole-Part-Whole Learning Model**



Then instruction focuses on the “parts”— what has been defined as the details of knowledge, expertise, and activity. After learners have mastered the specific, structured material, it is time to return to the “whole.” The second “whole” helps learners place their newly-mastered skills in context. In many cases the whole cannot truly be understood (or, in the case of skills, performed) without an understanding and proficiency of the individual parts, so the return to the whole allows the learner a second chance to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the whole concept. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson note:

This learning template can be used at both the program design and lesson design levels. From a systems perspective, each of the program segments, whether they are classified as a part or a whole, can then constitute a subsystem.

The WPW learning model can be used for different types of training, ranging from technical to managerial. As well, many sports coaches have found it helpful in instructing athletes. For example, a coach might teach the triple jump by first demonstrating the “whole” action (hop, step, and jump in sequence) and then have the athlete practice each of the components or “parts” of the event. Finally, the coach would again demonstrate the complete triple jump and have the athlete combine the three components and practice the entire sequence.

The WPW learning model is a particularly useful template for presenting difficult and complex educational content. The model is effective because it encourages training or instruction that gives learners an overview of what they are about to learn, drills down to the specifics, and then integrates the new knowledge or skills into a broader framework.

### **Online WPW learning**

Online learning is well suited for using the WPW learning model’s structure. Hyperlinked navigation can map out the relationship between the parts and the whole. Developing modular learning objects further aids in guiding the learner through a connected whole-part-whole learning program.

For example, an online course on budgeting might start with an overview of the master budget and show how it is decomposed into the operating and financial budgets before teaching how each of the sub-budgets is sequentially prepared. The course might conclude with the learner creating a master budget through creating its constituent parts (sales budget, production budget, direct materials budget, etc.). This WPW-inspired format develops the learner’s cognitive skills on all levels (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), leveraging the learner’s newly-acquired skills to reinforce the understanding of the overall concept.

Good course designers can rein in hypertext’s potential for inducing fragmented learning by keeping the WPW learning model in mind during planning and development, ensuring that course navigation and presentation of content reinforce the relationship between the parts and the whole.

### **Resource links**

Knowles, Malcolm S., Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson, [\*The Adult Learner, Sixth Edition\*](#), Butterworth-Heinemann (2005)

Johnson-Eilola, Johndan, “[Click Here...No, Here...Maybe Here: Anarchy and Hypertext](#),” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991)