

Teaching Adults: Is It Different?

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The adult education literature generally supports the idea that teaching adults should be approached in a different way than teaching children and adolescents. The assumption that teachers of adults should use a different style of teaching is based on the widely espoused theory of andragogy, which suggests that “adults expect learner-centered settings where they can set their own goals and organize their own learning around their present life needs” (Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross – Gordon 1993, p. 148). However, even in the field of adult education debate occurs about the efficacy of a separate approach for teaching adults. Some believe that adult education is essentially the same process as education generally (Garrison 1994) and therefore does not require a separate teaching approach: that is, all good teaching, whether for adults or children, should be responsive in nature.

The question of whether teaching adults is different remains ambiguous. For example, research summarized in an “ERIC Digest” (Imel 1989) has shown that even those educators who say they believe in using an andragogical approach do not necessarily use a different style when teaching adults. Additional myths and realities related to teaching adults are explored in this publication. Two areas are examined: types of adult learning and what learners themselves want from teachers.

Different Types of Adult Learning

One way to approach the question of whether teaching adults is different is by examining the types of learning in which adults engage. Drawing upon the work of Habermas and Mezirow, Cranton (1994) classified adult learning into three categories:

- Subject-oriented adult learning – In adult learning contexts that are subject oriented, the primary goal is to acquire content. The educator “speaks of covering the material, and the learners see themselves as gaining knowledge or skills”(ibid., p. 10).
- Consumer-oriented adult learning – The goal of consumer-oriented learning is to fulfill the expressed needs of learners. Learners set their learning goals, identify objectives, select relevant resources, and so forth. The educator acts as a facilitator or resource person, “and does not engage in challenging or questioning what learners say about their needs” (ibid., p. 12).
- Emancipatory adult learning – The goal of emancipatory learning is to free learners from the forces that limit their options and control over their lives, forces that they have taken for granted or seen as beyond their control. Emancipatory learning results in transformations of learner perspectives through critical reflection (Mezirow 1991). The educator plays an active role in fostering critical reflection by challenging learners to consider why they hold certain assumptions, values, and beliefs (Cranton 1994).

Of the three types of adult learning, only emancipatory has been described as unique to adulthood but even that claim has been challenged (Merriam and Caffarella 1991). Subject-oriented learning

is the most common form of learning engaged in by youth. Collaborative and cooperative learning and other types of experiential learning that are more consumer oriented are also found in youth classrooms. However, according to Mezirow (1981), emancipatory learning, with its emphasis upon learner transformation, can take place only in adulthood because, “it is only in late adolescence and in adulthood that a person can recognize being caught in his/her own history and reliving it” (p. 11). In adulthood, “rather than merely adapting to changing circumstances by more diligently applying old ways of knowing... (individuals) discover a need to acquire new perspectives in order to gain a more complete understanding of changing events and a higher degree of control over their lives. The formative learning of childhood becomes transformative learning in adulthood” (Mezirow 1991, p. 3). As a result of the research and theory-building efforts of Mezirow—fully described in “Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning” (1991)—emancipatory adult learning has become more commonly known as transformative learning.

Teaching Approaches for Transformative Learning

If transformative learning is unique to adulthood, does it require the use of teaching approaches that are geared specifically to adults? This is not clear. It is true that transformative learning requires that learners address problems through critical reflection. Some strategies used to facilitate transformative learning, e.g., such as journal writing, critical incidents, and experiential methods, are used in other types of learning as well. (See Cranton 1994 and Mezirow and Associates 1990 for a full discussion of these and other methods that can be used to promote transformative learning.)

What is clear is that fostering transformative learning demands a different approach by the educator. Although learners must decide on their own to engage in transformative learning, educators who wish to promote transformative learning have the responsibility to set the stage and provide opportunities for critical reflection (Cranton 1994). When educators are operating in the domain of transformative learning, they help learners examine their beliefs and how they have acquired them by creating situations in which they can debate how their values, assumptions, ideologies, and beliefs have come to be constructed (Newman 1993). Instead of congratulating themselves for having made their point when a learner says, “I never looked at it that way before,” educators can help learners engage in transformative learning by responding with, “How did you see things?” and then, “What made you see things like that?” and then “If we can understand how you came to have a set of ideas and attitudes then, let’s look at how you come to have the ideas and attitudes you have now” (ibid., p. 182).

Of course, not all adult learning is transformative in nature; many adult educators also do not believe that they have a role in helping adults engage in critical reflection and, consequently, never operate in the transformative domain. Those who do, however, perceive that teaching adults is different.

What Do Adults Expect from Teaching?

Examining what adult learners expect from teaching provides another perspective on whether teaching adults is different. In this context, the question might be more appropriately posed, “Based on adult students’ expectations, should teaching adults be different?” In an effort to answer this question, Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon (1993) combined and reanalyzed research that examined adult college students’ expectations of effective teaching and compared them with those of traditional students.

Previously, each of the authors had conducted investigations that looked at aspects of this question. Donaldson (1989) used a case study approach to examine student letters recommending faculty members for an excellence in off-campus teaching award. Flannery (1991) interviewed 68 returning students during the first semester back at school, asking them what they expected of instructors in the classroom. Ross-Gordon (1991) used the Critical Incident Technique to collect examples of the best and poorest instructors that respondents had encountered during college. Data for Ross-Gordon's study were collected through a questionnaire mailed to a randomly selected sample of adult undergraduates. The results from all three studies suggested that adult students might have "different" expectations for teachers that in some ways paralleled the assumptions underlying an andragogical approach, but each researcher also found some similarities to expectations for a teacher-directed approach. By combining the results of their studies, the researchers were able to confirm and extend their individual results and also add an element that compared the expectations of adult students to those of traditional students as reflected in the literature.

In the combined results, the six most frequently mentioned attributes adult learners expected of effective instructors were as follows (Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon 1993, p. 150):

- to be knowledgeable
- to show concern for student learning
- to present material clearly
- to motivate
- to emphasize relevance of class material
- to be enthusiastic

Thus, the adult learners in this study demonstrated preferences for characteristics associated with both student-centered (e.g., relevance of material, concern for student learning) and teacher-directed (e.g., knowledge, clarity) instruction. When adult expectations for good teaching were compared with those of traditional students, many similarities existed in how the two groups characterized good teaching. However, four teacher characteristics mentioned by adults that were not among the top items for undergraduates were as follows:

- creates a comfortable learning atmosphere
- uses a variety of techniques
- adapts to meet diverse needs
- dedicated to teaching

Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon (1993) point out that the first three of these items are congruent with the principles of instruction found in the adult education literature. Perhaps, as

suggested by the researchers, when it comes to teaching adults, “the issue is not to continue to promote an either/or approach with regard to teaching expectations of adults, but rather to concentrate on the particular attributes which adults consistently select as important for effective teaching” (ibid., p. 150).

Conclusion

Is teaching adults different? Based upon the literature discussed here, the answer is both yes and no. Perhaps a better way to frame the question would be “Should teaching adults be different?” The answer to that would, of course, depend upon the purpose of the teaching-learning situation, including what approach and methods seem to be appropriate, as well as the needs of the learners. Many of the myths related to teaching adults emerge from an uncritical acceptance of the theory of andragogy. Unfortunately, the assumptions underlying the theory are still largely untested through research. Pratt (1993) also points out that adult educators need to examine the philosophical assumptions underlying andragogy in order to clarify “the underlying values and beliefs and ... central concept of [adult] learning” (p. 87).

Online source provides generous bibliography.

The body of knowledge on the subject is just beginning to accumulate, but there are some truisms (we think).

30 Things We Know For Sure About Adult Learning

by Ron and Susan Zemke

We don't know a lot about the mechanisms of adult learning. At least, not in the "What are the minimum—necessary and sufficient—conditions for effecting a permanent change in an adult's behavior?" sense of knowing.

In that, we're not alone. Dr. Malcolm Knowles came to much the same conclusion in *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*. Eight years ago, he equated his efforts to summarize what was then known about adult learning to a trip up the Amazon: "It is a strange world that we are going to explore together, with lush growth of flora and fauna with exotic names (including fossils of extinct species) and teeming with savage tribes in raging battle. I have just made a casing-the-joint trip up the river myself, and I can tell you that my head is reeling." Today Knowles says, "The river is much tamer. We are beginning to understand what we do that works and why it works." But as we listen, we have the distinct impression that what our point man Knowles sees as tame travel can still be white-water rapids for the rest of us.

While there are hundreds of books and articles offering tips and tricks for teaching adults, the bulk of that knowledge is derived from three relatively limited spheres. The first is "My life and times in teaching," wherein one teacher/trainer of adults shares his or her career's accumulation of secrets with others. Though intriguing and interesting, this literature focuses more on teacher survival than anything else, and while we learn much about living, we learn relatively little about learning.

The second common source is the "Why adults decide to study" research. Here we learn some interesting, even fascinating things about the conditions and incidents that motivate adults to engage in a "focused learning effort." But in most of this research, the adult seems assumed to be a learning machine who, once switched on, vacuums up knowledge and skill. It is more indicative than instructive, suggestive than substantive. A cynic would call this body of knowledge about adult learning a form of market research.

The third source is extrapolation from theory: both adult learning theory and research and that derived from work with children and nonhuman subjects. The adult learning theories in question are really holistic treatments of human nature: the Carl Rogers/Abraham Mallow sort of theory from which we can only infer, or guess at, rules of practice. "Would you rather learn from a lecture or a book?" or "On your own or with direction?" are interesting questions, but ones that beg the issue of results or learning outcomes. A trainee may prefer listening to lectures but learn best from practice and application exercises.

The nonadult theory and research is a broad lot—everything from child development studies to pigeon training. The tendency seems to be to draw guidance from the B. F. Skinner/behavior modification/programmed instruction, and the Albert Bandura/behavior modeling/social learning schools of thought. While other schools are generating research and results, they are still shorter on proven practices than pontification and speculation. No single theory, or set of theories, seems to have an arm-lock on understanding adults or helping us work effectively and efficiently with them.

Still and all, from a variety of sources there emerges a body of fairly reliable knowledge about adult learning—arbitrarily 30 points which lend themselves to three basic divisions:

- Things we know about adult learners and their motivation.
- Things we know about designing curriculum for adults.
- Things we know about working with adults in the classroom.

These aren't be-all, end-all categories. They overlap more than just a little bit. But they help us understand what we are learning from others about adult learning.

Motivation to learn

Adult learners can't be threatened, coerced or tricked into learning something new. Birch rods and gold stars have minimum impact. Adults can be ordered into a classroom and prodded into a seat, but they *cannot* be forced to learn. Though trainers are often faced with adults who have been sent to training, there are some insights to be garnered from the research on adults who seek out a structured learning experience on their own: something we all do at least twice a year, the research says. We begin our running tally from this base camp.

1. Adults seek out learning experiences in order to cope with specific life-change events. Marriage, divorce, a new job, a promotion, being fired, retiring, losing a loved one and moving to a new city are examples.
2. The more life-change events an adult encounters, the more likely he or she is to seek out learning opportunities. Just as stress increases as life-change events accumulate, the motivation to cope with change through engagement in a learning experience increases. Since the people who most frequently seek out learning opportunities are people who have the most overall years of education, it is reasonable to guess that for many of us learning is a coping response to significant change.
3. The learning experiences adults seek out on their own are directly related—at least in their own perception—to the life-change events that triggered the seeking. Therefore, if 80% of the change being encountered is work related, then 80% of the learning experiences sought should be work related.
4. Adults are generally willing to engage in learning experiences before, after, or even during the actual life-change event. Once convinced that the change is a certainty, adults will engage in any learning that promises to help them cope with the transition.
5. Although adults have been found to engage in learning for a variety of reasons—job advancement, pleasure, love of learning and so on—it is equally true that for most adults learning is not its own reward. Adults who are motivated to seek out a learning experience do so primarily (80-90% of the time) because they have a use for the knowledge or skill being sought. Learning is a means to an end, not an end in itself.
6. Increasing or maintaining one's sense of self-esteem and pleasure are strong secondary motivators for engaging in learning experiences. Having a new skill or extending and enriching current knowledge can be both, depending on the individual's personal perceptions.

The major contributors to what we know about adult motivation to learn have been Allen Tough, Carol Aslanian and Henry Brickell, Kjell Rubenson and Harry L. Miller. One implication of their findings for the trainer is that there seem to be “teachable moments” in the lives of adults. Their existence impacts the planning and scheduling of training. As a recent study by the management development group of one large manufacturer concluded, “Newly promoted supervisors and managers must receive training as nearly concurrent with promotions and changes in responsibilities as possible. The longer such training is delayed, the less impact it appears to have on actual job performance.”

Curriculum design

One developing research-based concept that seems likely to have an impact on our view and practice of adult training and development is the concept of “fluid” versus “crystallized” intelligence. R. B. Catell’s research on lifelong intellectual development suggests there are two distinct kinds of intelligence that show distinct patterns of age-related development, but which function in a complementary fashion. Fluid intellect tends to be what we once called innate intelligence: fluid intelligence has to do with the ability to store strings of numbers and facts in short-term memory, react quickly, see spatial relations and do abstract reasoning. Crystallized intelligence is the part of intellectual functioning we have always taken to be a product of knowledge acquisition and experience. It is related to vocabulary, general information, conceptual knowledge, judgment and concrete reasoning.

Historically, many societies have equated youth with the ability to insatiably acquire information and age with the ability to wisely use information. Catell’s research suggests this is true—that wisdom is, in fact, a separate intellectual function that develops as we grow older. Which leads to some curriculum development implications of this concept.

7. Adult learners tend to be less interested in, and enthralled by, survey courses. they tend to prefer single-concept, single-theory courses that focus heavily on the application of the concept to relevant problems. this tendency increases with age.
8. Adults need to be able to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep—and use—the new information.
9. Information that conflicts sharply with what is already held to be true, and thus forces a reevaluation of the old material, is integrated more slowly.
10. Information that has little “conceptual overlap” with what is already known is acquired slowly.
11. Fast-paced, complex or unusual learning tasks interfere with the learning of the concepts or data they are intended to teach or illustrate.
12. Adults tend to compensate for being slower in some psychomotor learning tasks by being more accurate and making fewer trial-and-error ventures.
13. Adults tend to take errors personally, and are more likely to let them affect self-esteem. Therefore, they tend to apply tried-and-true solutions and take fewer risks. There is even evidence that adults will misinterpret feedback and “mistake” errors for positive confirmation. Dr. K. Patricia Cross, author of *Adults As Learners*, sees four global implications for designing adult curriculum in Catell’s work. “First, the presentation of new information should be

meaningful, and it should include aids that help the learner organize it and relate it to previously stored information. Second, it should be presented at a pace that permits mastery. Third, presentation of one idea at a time and minimization of competing intellectual demands should aid comprehension. Finally, frequent summarization should facilitate retention and recall.”

A second neat new idea that impacts curriculum design is the concept of adult developmental stages. Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg and others have seen children as passing through phases and stages for some time. It is only recently, thanks to Gail Sheehy, Roger Gould, Daniel Levinson and others, that we’ve come to acknowledge that there are also adult growth stages. A subset of this concept is the idea that not only do adults’ needs and interests continually change, but their values also continue to grow and change. For that insight, we can thank Clare W. Graves and his pioneering work in value analysis. The implications, though still formative.

14. The curriculum designer must know whether the concepts and ideas will be in concert or in conflict with learner and organizational values. As trainers at AT&T have learned, moving from a service to a sales philosophy requires more than a change in words and titles. It requires a change in the way people think and value.
15. Programs need to be designed to accept viewpoints from people in different life stages and with different value “sets.”
16. A concept needs to be “anchored” or explained from more than one value set and appeal to more than one developmental life stage.
A final set of curriculum design guides comes from the research on learning media preference. Researchers have for years been asking students if they preferred learning XYZ from a book, a movie experience or another person. Though there are limitations to the value of this sort of data, enough of it is accumulating to be of some help to the design effort.
17. Adults prefer self-directed and self-designed learning projects 7 to 1 over group-learning experiences led by a professional. Furthermore, the adult learner often selects more than one medium for the design. reading and talking to a qualified peer are frequently cited as good resources. The desire to control pace and start/stop time strongly affect the self-directed preference.
18. Nonhuman media such as books, programmed instruction and television have become popular in recent years. One piece of research found them very influential of the way adults plan self-directed learning projects.
19. Regardless of media, straightforward how-to is the preferred content orientation. As many as 80% of the polled adults in one study cited the need for applications and how-to information as the primary motivation for undertaking a learning project.
20. Self-direction does *not* mean isolation. In fact, studies of self-directed projects involve an average of 10 other people as resources, guides, encouragers and the like. The incompetence or inadequacy of these same people is often rated as a primary frustration. But even for the self-professed, self-directed learner, lectures and short seminars get positive ratings, especially when these events give the learner face-to-face, one-to-one access to an expert.

Apparently, the adult learner is a very efficiency-minded individual. Allen Tough suggests that the typical adult learner asks “What is the cheapest, easiest, fastest way for me to learn to do that?” and then proceeds independently along this self-determined route. An obvious tip for the trainer is that the adult trainee has to have a hand in shaping the curriculum of the program.

In the classroom

We seem to know the least about helping the adult maximize the classroom experience. There are master performers in our trade who gladly pass along their favorite tips and tricks, but as Marshall McLuhan observed, “We don’t know who discovered water but we can be pretty sure it wasn’t a fish.” In other words, the master performer is often a poor judge of how one becomes a master performer. There certainly are volumes of opinion and suggestion, but by and large they rest more on theory than hard data. Ironically, some of the strongest data comes from survey studies of what turns off adults in the classroom. Likewise, there is a nicely developing body of literature on what makes for good and bad meetings that has implications for training.

21. The learning environment must be physically and psychologically comfortable. Adults report that long lectures, periods of interminable sitting and the absence of practice opportunities are high on the irritation scale.
22. Adults have something real to lose in a classroom situation. Self-esteem and ego are on the line when they are asked to risk trying a new behavior in front of peers and cohorts. Bad experiences in traditional education, feelings about authority and the preoccupation with events outside the classroom all affect in-class experience. These and other influencing factors are carried into class with the learners as surely as are their cold Cross pens and lines yellow pads.
23. Adults have expectations, and it is critical to take time up front to clarify and articulate *all* expectations before getting into content. Both trainees and the instructor/facilitator need to state their expectations. When they are at variance, the problem should be acknowledged and a resolution negotiated. In any case, the instructor can assume responsibility only for his or her own expectations, not for that of trainees.
25. Instructors who have a tendency to hold forth rather than facilitate can hold that tendency in check—or compensate for it—by concentrating on the use of open-ended questions to draw out relevant trainee knowledge and experience.
26. New knowledge has to be integrated with previous knowledge; that means active learner participation. Since only the learners can tell us how the new fits or fails to fit with the old, we have to ask them. Just the learner is dependent on us for confirming feedback on skill practice, we are dependent on the learner for feedback about our curriculum and in-class performance.
27. The key to the instructor role is control. The instructor must balance the presentation of new material, debate and discussion, sharing of relevant trainee experiences, and the clock. Ironically, we seem best able to establish control when we risk giving it up. When we shelve our egos and stifle the tendency to be threatened by challenge to our plans and methods, we gain the kind of facilitative control we seem to need to effect adult learning.

28. The instructor has to protect minority opinion, keep disagreements civil and unheated, make connections between various opinions and ideas, and keep reminding the group of the variety of potential solutions to the problem. Just as in a good problem-solving meeting the instructor is less advocate than orchestrator.
29. Integration of new knowledge and skill requires transition time and focused effort. Working on applications to specific back-on-the-job problems helps with the transfer. Action plans, accountability strategies and follow-up after training all increase the likelihood of that transfer. Involving the trainees' supervisor in pre-/post-course activities helps with both in-class focus and transfer.
30. Learning and teaching theories function better as a resource than as a Rosetta stone. The four currently influential theories—humanistic, behavioral, cognitive and developmental—all offer valuable guidance when matched with an appropriate learning task. A skill-training task can draw much from the behavioral approach, for example, while personal growth-centered subjects seem to draw gainfully from humanistic concepts. The trainer of adults needs to take an eclectic rather than a single theory-based approach to developing strategies and procedures.

Study of the adult as a special species of learner is a relatively new phenomenon. We can expect the next five years to eclipse the last fifty in terms of hard data production on adult learning. For now, however, we must recognize that adults want their learning to be problem-centered, personalized and accepting of their need for self-direction and personal responsibility. When you think of it, that's quite a lot to work with right there.

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Using Adult Learning Principles In Adult Basic and Literacy Education

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Eric Clearinghouse on Adult, Career & Vocational Education -
Practical Application Brief by Suan Imel, 1998; Available online through OTAN

Adult basic and literacy education (ABLE) is a complex undertaking that serves diverse learners with a variety of needs and many individual ABLE programs successfully attract and retrain students. Only 8 percent of eligible adults participate in funded programs, however, and, of those who do, most (74 percent) leave during the first year (Quigley 1997). A number of reasons exist for the nonparticipation and high attrition rates, including the complicated nature of the lives of many adults. The way ABLE programs are structured may also be a factor. The fact that most ABLE programs still resemble school (Quigley 1997); Velazquez 1996) may mean that many eligible adults may not choose to participate or, once enrolled, do not find a compelling reason for persisting until their educational needs are met. Structuring programs around adult education principles can be one solution to developing programs that are more appealing to ABLE learners. ***This Practice Application Brief*** describes how adult education principles can be used in ABLE programs. Following a discussion of adult education principles, it provides recommendations for practices based on the principles and literature related to adult basic and literacy education.

Adult Education Principles

No definitive list of adult education principles exists in the literature, but there is a great deal of agreement about what constitutes good practice in adult education. The list of principles that follows was developed by synthesizing information that appears in a number of sources (Brookfield 1986; Draper 1992; Draves 1997; Grissom 1992; Imel forthcoming; Knowles 1992; Velia 1994).

- Involve learners in planning and implementing learning activities. Including learners in the planning and implementing of their learning activities is considered to be a hallmark of adult education. Their participation can begin with the needs assessment process where members of the target population help establish the program goals and objectives and continue throughout the learning activity to the evaluation phase.
- Draw upon learners' experiences as a resource. Another often-cited principle of adult education revolves around the idea of using the experiences of participants as a learning resource. Not only do adult learners have experiences that can be used as a foundation for learning new things but also, in adulthood, readiness to learn frequently stems from life tasks and problems. The particular life situations and perspectives that adults bring to the classroom can provide a rich reservoir for learning.
- Cultivate self-direction in learners. Self-direction is considered by some to be a characteristic of adulthood but not all adults possess this attribute in equal measure. In addition, if adults have been accustomed to teacher-directed learning environments, they may not display self-direction in adult learning settings. Adult learning should be structured to nurture the development of self-directed, empowered adults. When adults are encouraged to become self-directed, they begin "to see themselves as proactive, initiating individuals

engaged in a continuous re-creation of their personal relationships, work worlds, and social circumstances rather than as reactive individuals, buffeted by uncontrollable forces of circumstance” (Brookfield 1986, p. 19).

- Create a climate that encourages and supports learning. The classroom environment should be characterized by trust and mutual respect among teachers and learners. It should enhance learner self-esteem. Supporting and encouraging learning does not mean that the environment is free of conflict. It does mean that when conflict occurs, it is handled in a way that challenges learners to acquire new perspectives and supports them in their efforts to do so.
- Foster a spirit of collaboration in the learning setting. Collaboration in the adult classroom is frequently founded on the idea that the roles of teachers and learners can be interchangeable. Although teachers have the overall responsibility for leading a learning activity, in adult learning settings “each person has something to teach and to learn from the other” (Draper 1992, p. 75). Adult learning is a cooperative enterprise that respects and draws upon the knowledge that each person brings to the learning setting.
- Use small groups. The use of groups has deep historical roots in adult education, and adults learning in groups has become embedded in adult education practice. Groups promote teamwork and encourage cooperation and collaboration among learners. Structured appropriately, they emphasize the importance of learning from peers, and they allow all participants to be involved in discussions and to assume a variety of roles.

The principles discussed here reflect some of the widely held beliefs about adult learning. The next section provides recommendations for using these principles in adult basic and literacy education programs.

Recommendations for Practice

A growing number of ABLE programs base their practices upon many of the principles described, and recent resources have advocated programs that are more student centered and participatory in nature (e.g., Auerbach 1992; Fingeret 1992; Nonesuch 1996; Sissel 1996; Stein 1995). The following recommendations for practice that reflects adult education principles are based on information found in several of these resources.

- Involve adults in program planning and implementation. The need to consult adults is a theme that is woven throughout the ABLE literature (e.g., Auerbach 1992; Nonesuch 1996; Sissel 1996; Velazquez 1996). Adult basic and literacy educators frequently give lip service to the importance of learner involvement, but they do not always follow through. They must listen to what adults say about their previous educational experiences and their current learning goals and use this information in program development. Auerbach (1992) provides a rationale for using a participatory approach that is based partly on the idea that “adult education is most effective when it is experience-centered, related to learners’ real needs, and directed by learners themselves” (p. 14). In participatory ABLE programs, activities reflect students’ lives and are student centered. ABLE programs can involve students in program planning and implementation in any number of ways, including asking them to assist with orientation for new learners, appointment them to serve on advisory boards, and soliciting their suggestions for learning activities.

- Develop and/or use instructional materials that are based on students' lives. An important part of the participatory approach is using instruction that reflects the context of students' lives. Sometimes referred to as contextualizing learning, this instruction—and the instructional materials—draw on the actual experiences, developmental stages, and problems of the learners. Students are the center of the curriculum and it is directly relevant to their lives (Auerbach 1992, Dirkx and Preger 1997; Nash et al 1992). Dirkx and Preger (1997) refer to this approach as “theme based” and describe how it promotes the integration of academic content with real-life problems. Furthermore, it has the advantage of integrating academic skills, rather than focusing on learning academic subjects separately, the theme-based approach focuses on their commonalities and promotes learning them in ways that are meaningful to the student. By using this approach the classroom becomes more authentic because adults learn to use skills in real-life situation.
- Develop an understanding of learners' experiences and communities. Engaging in participatory adult literacy begins by respecting learners' culture, their knowledge, and their experiences (Auerbach 1992). Within adult basic and literacy education, a great deal of attention has been focused on individualizing instruction to meet individual needs. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this concept, preoccupation with serving individuals can suppress issues of gender, race, and class, issues that reproduce the realities of the lives of many adult literacy students (Campbell 1992). A growing number of adult literacy educators are advocating for understanding learners both as individuals and as members of their particular communities or groups (Nonesuch 1996; Sissel 1996) and tailoring instruction to address those particular contexts. Nonesuch (1996) describes how the experiences of women can be used effectively in developing a curriculum.
- Incorporate small groups into learning activities. Small groups can help achieve a learning environment that is more learner centered and collaborative than either large group or one-on-one, individualized approaches to instruction. In addition, learning in small groups more accurately reflects the contexts in which adults generally use literacy skills. Small groups have a number of advantages including providing peer support for learning and easing the distinction between teachers and learners by creating a cooperative, participative environment that is less hierarchical than environments produced by traditional approaches. Small groups can be an effective tool for generating themes and ideas that will form the basis for learning activities (Imel, Kerka, and Pritz 1994).

ABLE programs that incorporate these recommendations will foster increasing self-directedness and critical reflection in learners. Learners who are involved in planning and carrying out contextualized learning activities will develop heightened awareness of their own particular circumstances and the ability to make changes in it.

Conclusion

If adult basic and literacy educators are to be successful in attracting and retaining more adults in their programs, they must change how they think about their programs (Quigley 1997). The schooling model that predominates must be exchanged for one that is based on adults' perceptions of their goals and purposes and that addresses the realities of their lives. Using adult education principles can be one vehicle for effecting this change.

How Adults Learn

This selection is the second chapter of William Draves' book *How to Teach Adults*. It is reprinted by permission from the Learning Resources Network (LERN), the leading association in lifelong learning. For more practical, how-to information, email info@lern.org or visit www.lern.org.

"A teacher must be a learner himself. If he has lost his capacity for learning, he is not good enough to be in the company of those who have preserved theirs."

Harry Overstreet, early 20th Century adult educator

When 12 people walk into your class for the first time, each one will come already equipped with various experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and ideas. Each person will organize his or her thoughts differently, and each will be able to absorb new knowledge and ideas in his or her own way.

The adult's mental learning state is not a black chalkboard on which you, the teacher, can write as you wish. Neither is the adult learner's head an empty pail for you to fill with your knowledge and ideas. The adult learner's chalkboard already has many messages on it, and his mental pail is almost full already. Your job as teacher is not to fill a *tabula rasa*, but to help your participants to reorganize their own thoughts and skills. A prerequisite to helping adults learn is to understand how they learn.

As complex human beings, we bring to the learning situation a combined set of emotional, physical, mental, and social characteristics that make each one of us unique. The way to approach this diversity in learners is with variety in your teaching. To do that, it is best to understand some of these characteristics of adults.

Emotional Characteristics

Adults' emotional states are inextricably tied up in their ability to learn. To learn, an adult must be emotionally comfortable with the learning situation. Indeed, some educators have gone so far as to equate a good emotional state with learning. Says J. Roby Kidd in *How Adults Learn*, "Feelings are not just aids or inhibitors to learning; the goals of learning and of emotional development are parallel and sometimes identical and can probably be most conveniently stated as self-realization and self-mastery."¹

Throughout the ages, one's emotional state has always been manipulated to try to induce learning, but somehow the attempt to produce positive feelings became distorted in the mistaken belief that greater learning would occur if one produced negative feelings of pain, fear, or anxiety.

The dunce cap, a sign of humiliation, was not originally intended to be so. Instead, the cone-shaped headgear was believed to have magical powers, just as some contemporaries believe the similar pyramid shape has unknown powers. Putting the cap on one who had missed a question or needed help was not a punishment, but was believed to help that person learn. Over the years symbolism changed from a positive helping gesture to a sign of humiliation and ignorance.

Unfortunately vestiges of the punishment principle either consciously or unconsciously are present in even the most enlightened classes. Learning can be inhibited by frowns and other gestures.

In helping a person learn, the teacher must be able to help create a positive emotional climate, and the key to that state is one's *self-image*.

Although most adults come to a class mentally ready to learn, at the same time they may be inhibited for learning by a poor self-image. That poor self-concept may not be correct, may not be rational, but nevertheless exists in many people. It comes from various sources.

A shy person may feel unable to participate to meet the expectations of others in the class. A manager who has been turned down for several promotions may feel trapped in a dead-end job and doubt the value of learning anything. A housewife who has stayed at home with children for many years may feel she is not current or informed enough to converse on an adult level again. Someone who has been out of school for several decades may feel incapable of studying any more and may fear being left far behind the other students. The causes of a less than sensitive self-image are many. They stem from natural feelings about inadequacy and growing older and some that are induced artificially by society.

Physical Characteristics

Abraham Lincoln may have been able to read at night by firelight, and children may have learned in straight-backed wooden desk in drafty log cabin schools, but today's adults can detect and be influenced by the slightest changes in comfort. Adults are more attuned to comfortable surroundings, more sensitive to discomfort.

Make sure your setting is comfortable, neither too warm nor too cold. Older people chill more easily, and your sense of warmth may not coincide with that of your group. In a small crowded room, your participants will become hot and stuffy sitting next to each other sooner than you will. Ask your participants to tell you if they are uncomfortable.

All adults in your class, even the younger ones, are declining physically. Everyone is aging, even those who refuse to admit it. Our physical state affects our capacity to learn. Physique and intelligence are related because our bodies influence how and whether we can learn.

To compensate for visual difficulties of learners of all ages, think carefully about how you can make words, charts, objects, even yourself, clear to all your participants.

Set up your room so that no one has to look directly into sunlight. Make sure there is enough overhead lighting. If you use a flip chart, use large letters when writing on it. Seat people so they can see each other. Participants will engage in discussion and learn more from each other if they can see each other.

Just as important as seeing well is hearing well. Inability to hear well, either because of one's own capability or because of the setting, can make learners feel insecure, less intelligent, isolated, and far less willing to participate.

In preparing your class, think about how you can ensure that every participant will hear you. Try to select a room that is reasonably free of outside street noises, or noises from other rooms in the same building. Listen for any interference from heating sources, air conditioning, coffeepots, and any other systems or appliances in the room.

Design your space so that you can always be heard by your participants and so that they can hear each other. If you have a large class, experiment to see if a microphone helps or hinders. Speak in clear, loud, and distinct tones. Don't talk to your group with your back turned to them or while you are concentrating on something else, like setting up some projection equipment. Ask as often as you need to whether people in the back can hear you. When others in the class are talking, make sure they are facing the majority of the class. Ask people to stand up if necessary. Repeat questions from the group so everyone can hear them.

Mental Characteristics

Although adults may come to the learning situation with bodies that are not always in prime shape, the story is different for their mental attitudes. Mentally, adults are eager to learn – otherwise they would not be there.

Several aspects of adult learning mentality relate to your helping them learn: a readiness to learn, problem orientation, and time perspective.

A readiness to learn. Adults for the most part will come to your class ready to learn. Almost all-adult learning is voluntary these days, and even societal coercion, such as peer pressure, does not seem to affect adult learners. They attend because they want to.

Part of that readiness may be a natural growth process in which “true learning” – self-study, personal inquiry, or self-directed learning is more welcome after one’s formal schooling or education ends. Even the sixteenth century master of self-study, Montaigne, wrote about his education, “At thirteen...I had completed my course, and in truth, without any benefit that I can now take into account.”² Whether their experiences in school were beneficial or not so positive, adults want to view their adult learning experiences as separate from more formal schooling, and will approach them differently. This may be because adults are not only ready to learn but need to learn.

Problem orientation. Education for children is often subject-centered, concentrating on various disciplines like philosophy and science, and the abstract as well as the practical. Adult learning, on the other hand, is more problem-centered. Adults want to learn to solve or address a particular problem, and are more satisfied with their learning if it applies to their everyday experiences, is practical, or is current.

Adults are oriented toward problem solving because they are faced with certain developmental tasks stemming from the roles they assume, or want to assume, in their families, work, and society. These tasks and roles demand a good deal of adjustment, accomplishment, and learning. Although society pushes few adults into the classroom, it certainly creates enough needs and wants to encourage adults to perform their best in various roles and life stages.

Another and related impetus for problem-orientation in adult learning is that an adult’s *time perspective* is different from that of children. As a child, time, both past and future, is a vast quantity. A year ago is a long time. And the future is endless. Increasingly as one become older, time becomes less expendable and more limited. The future is not too endless after all, and the past blurs a little so that ten years wasn’t all that long ago. As time becomes more limited, it becomes more important. In the learning situation, adults prefer what can be learned today or in the near future to what can be learned over a longer period of time. The adults’ interest in solving problems within their older time perspective makes adults more concerned with specific, narrow topics of relevance than broad, generalized or abstract subjects.

A readiness to learn, problem orientation, and specific time perspective contribute to an internal motivation to learn.

The time and problem orientations do not imply that everything adults want to learn is so immediate as fixing the plumbing. Many different kinds of issues, thoughts, and ideas may constitute a timely problem. For one person, finding out whether beauty lies in a museum painting or in a mountain-top view may constitute a legitimate learning problem. For another person determining how the ancient philosophers combined work with study may be an equally immediate problem.

Social Characteristics

The most important social characteristic of adult learner is an abundance and variety of *experiences*. This aspect alone makes teaching adults different from teaching children or youth.

Your participants will be coming from different backgrounds, occupations, types of upbringing, ethnic heritages, and parts of town. Each one will have a different mix of experiences and previously formed perceptions when entering your class. Some of these perceptions are about school, group interactions, and the subject.

School. Even if you are not working in a school-like atmosphere, structured learning situations are inevitably associated with the previous schooling. For many people their formal

schooling was less than successful. Many adults received low grades in school and have some stigma attached to that period of time. Others may have outwardly done well in school, but inwardly felt the experience was boring or a waste of time. Generally speaking, it is best to reduce the number of associations with formal schooling in your references, style, and approach to the subject. When teaching those with unfavorable school experiences, it is wise not to repeat those mannerisms and actions which may remind your participants of their past situations. The imprint of our schooling is still on all us, and if those memories are not good, it is best not to revive them.

Group interactions. Your class is just one kind of group adults participate in. Some will come with positive expectations about interacting in a group; some will not. Some will come wanting to be leaders in the group; others will already have decided before the class starts to be passive or take a minimal role in-group participation. Some will see the group as an opportunity to display talent and knowledge while others will see it as a possible threat to exposing their lack of talent and knowledge.

The subject. Every adult coming to your class will have some perception about the subject to discuss. Some will have a degree of proficiency in the topics: others will have been acquainted more superficially. Some will have had a negative encounter with the topic, or gained some misinformation. Others will have thought about it from a distance, but come with curiosity and some ideas not based on reality but on what others have said or done.

Social psychologist Gardner Murphy says that adults, contrary to common assumption, are not able to detach themselves emotionally from the subject at hand. “The adult has not fewer but more emotional associations with factual material than do children although we usually assume that he has less,” he says.³

Working with your participants’ experiences is perhaps your most rewarding challenge. These varied and copious experiences need to be handled on two levels. First, you as a teacher need to deal with the backgrounds your participants bring to class. If someone has a negative image of schooling, you may have to help that person see this situation as different from past schooling. If a person in the group has gained some misinformation about the subject, you will need to clarify the misinformation. If some of your participants automatically shy away from participating in a group, you may want to try to draw them out or structure exercises to give them as much interaction as your overeager students have.

On another level, you have an abundant resource at hand in the past experiences of class members. Each has some vent, skill, idea, or knowledge worth sharing with the rest of the group. As Sharon Merridan and Rosemary Catarella note, “Life experience functions in several ways...Adults call upon their past experiences in the formulation of learning activities, as well as serving as one another’s resources in a learning event.”⁴ You can tap into the variety in backgrounds to illustrate your points, to encourage discussion, to stimulate peer teaching, to gain new knowledge yourself. It is this wealth in your participants that makes teaching adults so exciting and new interaction every time you teach; to ignore the past is to miss out on something valuable and special.

The total one’s mental, emotional, physical and social states determines a person’s motivation to learn. Much attention throughout history has been paid to how to motivate people. Generals have tried to motivate troops, supervisors have tried to motivate boards of directors, and boards of directors have tried to motivate staff.

The quest for motivation has led to much thought on the subject as well. Those writing about the power of positive thinking can stay on the best seller list for weeks or even years, and those speaking about it can fill halls with rallies on motivation.

Most authorities on adult learning advocate encouraging self-directed learning. For example, author Laurent Daloz says, “We teachers sometimes speak of pushing our students to higher stages of development. We want the best for them after all, and need to know that we have made a difference in their lives, an important difference. To push a person to change is about as effective in the long run as trying to push a chain uphill. People develop best under their own power.”⁵ As a teacher, you will doubtless be confronted by people with a range of motivations, from those so highly motivated you will be reluctant to give them your home phone number, to those who seem inert and lifeless and unreceptive to anything you say or any way you say it. How much time you want to devote in your course to stimulating motivation is up to you.

A few things are certain, however. One is that it is ultimately the individual’s responsibility to learn. Another is that you as a teacher can help or hinder another person’s attempt to learn. By failing to recognize limits, by ignoring or even constructing barriers, by not understanding how a person learns, you can be a negative influence on someone’s learning. By facilitating learning and helping your participants, you can be a positive influence.

¹ J. Roby Kidd, *How Adults Learn* (New York: NY: Association Press, 1973, 1959), page 95.

² Ronald Gross, *Invitation to Lifelong Learning* (Chicago, IL: Follett Publishing company, 1982), page 48.

³ Kidd, page 95

⁴ Sharan Merriman and Rosemary Cafarella, *Learning In Adulthood* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), page 307

⁵ Laurent A. Daloz, *Effective Teaching and Mentoring* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986), page 157

For Adult Learners...Remember...

First impressions are the most lasting:

First class sessions are very important.
Thorough preparation is vital.
Awareness of student needs is critical.

Adults remember pleasant experiences better than unpleasant ones:

Make class interesting and vivid.
Provide for continuous success.
Avoid dull presentations.

Practice makes perfect:

A skill that is not practiced is soon forgotten.
That which is being practiced must be correct.
Practice should follow instruction as soon as possible.

Adults learn what is meaningful to them:

Base instruction on stated needs.
At each session provide new information or a skill that can be used immediately.
Present information on the level of an adult.
Incorporate the background and experience of the adult student.

Allow for the transfer of information:

Learning is easier when new facts are related to known facts.
Move from the simple to the complex.
Teach the concrete, then the abstract.

Adults enjoy an informal, friendly, secure climate:

Be enthusiastic.
Give praise.
Be willing to learn from adult students.
Allow for interaction.
Demonstrate respect.

The greater the degree of student involvement with instruction, the more likely the student will learn:

Allow for participation in the various phases of instruction.
Provide opportunities for students to help one another.
Encourage students to learn cooperatively.

Source: Leon County Schools Adult and Community Education Retention Guide.

Identification List for At-Risk Adults

Effective intervention decreases the risk of dropping out. The characteristics listed here indicate the degree or intensity of the problems facing the adult student. Students with characteristics in the “Danger Risk” profile need immediate attention or the student will be lost from the program. The “High risk” student requires regularly scheduled assistance and support to find solutions to problems. “Moderate Risk” students require periodic checks to monitor progress. At all times, attention must be given to insure that additional problems are not compounding the student’s level of risk.

DANGER RISK

- Work schedule conflict
- Childcare problem
- No transportation
- Loss of transportation
- Spouse/significant person opposed to participation
- Absence from first class
- Late entry to program
- Failure on a test
- Three consecutive absences
- Trauma
- Record of leaving programs
- Substance involvement
- Uncertain housing

HIGH RISK

- No goal
- Unrealistic expectations
- Personal health problems
- Family health/hygiene problems
- Nonreader
- Teen pregnancy
- No history of overcoming obstacles
- Frequent absences
- Absent from first week of class
- Change in work schedule
- Experiencing a “plateau” in progress
- Mandatory attendance
- No phone number

MODERATE RISK

- Unclear expectations of self or program
- Limited work experience
- Limited family support
- No friend to talk to
- Lack of confidence/self doubt
- Teen parent
- Communication problems
- External motivation
- Lack of knowledge of how program can help them reach a goal
- Periodic absences
- Isolation in class