

# TEACHING THE ADULT LEARNER



# How Adults Learn

This selection is a summary of 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, E-mail [info@lern.org](mailto:info@lern.org) or visit [www.lern.org](http://www.lern.org).

## Emotional Characteristics

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An adult must be emotionally comfortable with the learning situation to learn. Many adult learners come to our classrooms with a low self-image and a recognition that they have failed in some way. There are natural feelings about inadequacy that stem from growing older; some feelings are artificially induced by society; some feelings come from past personal experiences with family, peers, and educators. It is important to recognize that adult students must feel welcomed, encouraged and enabled. They should not be judged or criticized.

## Physical Characteristics

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Adults are attuned to comfortable surroundings and more sensitive to discomfort than younger learners. Set up your room so that it is as comfortable as possible. Set no one to face the sunlight; be sure charts, board writing, overhead materials and handouts can be read by everyone, even those with limited vision; remove any sources of noise, or seat learners as far away as possible from them. Be sure that not only you can be heard, but that individual learners can be heard when they talk as well.

## Mental Characteristics

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Mentally, adults are eager to learn. Part of that readiness to learn may be a natural growth process in which "true learning" – self-study, personal inquiry, or self-directed learning – is more welcome than formal schooling. Adult learning is problem-centered. Adults come to class to 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 aware of their limited time and prefer what can be learned today or in the near future to what can be learned over a longer period of time. Adults' interest in solving problems within this time perspective makes them value specific, narrow topics of relevance over broad, generalized or abstract subjects.

## Social Characteristics

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The most important social characteristic of adult learners is an abundance and variety of experiences. Adults come with both positive and negative experiences of group interaction, so that some will see the group (the class) 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. Every adult will come to your class with some perception about the subject to discuss. Social psychologist Gardner Murphy says that adults, contrary to common assumption, are not able to detach themselves emotionally from the subject at hand. This means the backgrounds and value systems and current living situations of your adult learners greatly influence how you must teach them in the classroom.

# 30 Things We Know For Sure About Adult Learning

By Ron and Susan Zemke

## Things We Know About Adult Learners and Their Motivation

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1. Adults seek out learning experiences in order to cope with specific life-changing events such as marriage, divorce, a new job, a promotion, being fired, retiring, losing a loved one or moving to a new city.
2. The more life-changing events an adult encounters, the more likely he or she is to seek out learning opportunities.
3. The learning experiences adults seek out on their own are directly related – at least in their own perception – to the life-changing events that triggered the seeking.
4. Adults are generally willing to engage in learning experiences before, after, or even during the actual life-changing event.
5. Adults who are motivated to seek out a learning experience do so primarily 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.

## Things We Know About Designing Curriculum for Adults

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1. 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.
2. Adults need to be able to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep - and use - the information.
3. Information that conflicts sharply with what is already held to be true, and thus forces a re-evaluation of the old material, is integrated more slowly.
4. Information that has little “conceptual overlap” with what is already known is acquired slowly.
5. Fast-paced, complex or unusual learning tasks interfere with the learning of the concepts or data they are intended to teach or illustrate.
6. Adults tend to compensate for being slower in some psychomotor learning tasks by being more accurate and making fewer trial-and-error ventures.
7. 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.
8. The teacher must know whether the concepts and ideas will be in concert with or in conflict with the learner and his/her values.
9. Programs need to be designed to accept viewpoints from people in different life stages and with different value “sets.”
10. A concept needs to be “anchored” or explained from more than one value set and appeal to more than one developmental life stage.
11. Adults prefer self-directed and self-designed learning projects over group-learning experiences led by a professional.
12. Non-human media such as books, programmed instruction and television have become popular in recent years.

13. Regardless of media, straightforward how-to is the preferred content orientation.
14. Self-direction does not mean isolation. In fact, studies of self-directed projects show they involve an average of 10 other people as resources, guides and encouragers. Lectures and short seminars are well-received if they give the learner face-to-face, one-to-one access to an expert.

### **Things We Know About Working with Adults in the Classroom**

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1. 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.
2. Bad experiences in traditional education, feelings about authority and the preoccupation with events outside the classroom all affect in-class experience.
3. Adults have expectations, and it is critical to take time up front, during the intake process, to clarify and articulate all expectations before getting into content. It is important for both student and teacher to state expectations.
4. Open-ended questions are useful for drawing out relevant student knowledge and experience.
5. New knowledge has to be integrated with previous knowledge; that means active learner participation. Since only the learner can tell us how the new fits or fails to fit with the old, we have to ask them.
6. The instructor must balance the presentation of new material, debate and discussion, sharing of relevant student experiences, and time restraints.
7. 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.
8. Integration of new knowledge and skill requires transition time and focused effort.
9. The trainer of adults needs to take an eclectic rather than a single theory-based approach to developing strategies and procedures, as many offer valuable guidance when matched with an appropriate learning task.

Overall, adults want their learning to be problem-centered, personalized and accepting of their need for self-direction and personal responsibility.

Summarized from Training, June 1981.

# Using Adult Learning Principles in Adult Basic and Literacy Education

## ABSTRACT

Most adult education students (74%) leave their educational program during the first year. A number of reasons exist for this high attrition rate, but one overlooked reason may be that too many adult education programs resemble school. Structuring programs around Adult Education Principles may help to better involve adults in their own education and give them a more compelling reason to return day after day.

## APPLICATION

### Adult Education Principles

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1. Involve learners in planning and implementing learning activities. This can begin with an intake that allows the learner to assess his/her own needs and set goals and objectives that the educational program can meet.
2. Draw upon learners' experiences as a 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.
3. Cultivate self-direction in learners. When adults are encouraged to become self-directed, they begin to see themselves as engaged in their own recreation and not simply shaped by uncontrollable outside forces (Brookfield 1986, p. 19)
4. Create a climate that encourages and supports learning. The classroom environment should be characterized by trust and mutual respect among teachers and learners.
5. Foster a spirit of collaboration in the learning setting. Adult learning is a cooperative enterprise that respects and draws upon the knowledge that each person brings to the learning setting.
6. Use small groups. Groups promote teamwork and encourage cooperation and collaboration among learners.

### Recommendations for Practicing the Adult Education Principles

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1. Create classroom activities that reflect students' lives and are student centered; consider allowing students to take turns leading the class in learning about something that is important to them.
2. Ask students to assist with the orientation of new students, perhaps pairing new students with a mentor for a limited amount of time.
3. Create a record keeping system that allows students to set their own goals and keep track of their own progress towards those goals.
4. Appoint an advisory board for your classroom, allowing students to solicit suggestions for learning activities and work with you in implementing them.
5. Develop and/or use instructional materials that are based on students' lives.
6. Develop an understanding of your particular learners' experiences and communities. Ask questions, make writing assignments, direct reading, etc. to discover and allow your student to identify and communicate their experiences and communities to you.

7. Include your students' communities in their learning. Send work home with parents that can be done with small children; make assignments about aging for older students or for those caring for the aged; ask students to think about their community's probable response to issues raised in class.
8. Duplicate communal living by having students work in small groups. Consider both long term groups and short term groups.
9. Conference regularly with students and ask them to report to you both in writing and orally the progress they have made since the last conference.
10. Establish student "experts" in class and use them as references for other students. For example, a student with children in school may become the resident expert on public school issues and a student aiming to join the military may become the resident American military expert.

For complete, original article, see Doc. Code/Section: AB0052 / PT 01  
ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career & Vocational Education – Practical Application Brief by Susan Imel, 1998; Available online through OTAN

# Teaching Adults: Is It Different?

## Types of Adult Learning

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Subject-oriented adult learning makes the primary goal, to acquire content information. This can be teacher-directed or student-directed.

Through consumer-oriented adult learning, in which students set their own learning goals and teachers act as facilitators or resource persons.

Emancipatory adult learning is transformative education in which the educator plays an active role in fostering critical reflection. They challenge learners' assumptions, values, and beliefs in an effort to free them from the forces that limit their options.

## What do Adult Learners Expect from their Teachers?

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- To be knowledgeable
- To show concern for student learning
- To present material clearly
- To motivate
- To emphasize relevance of class material
- To be enthusiastic
- To create a comfortable learning atmosphere
- To use a variety of techniques
- To adapt to meet diverse needs
- To be dedicated to teaching

For full text article see this online source: Path: OTAN Resources/Document Library/Adult Educational AE0338/Teaching Adults

## **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