

The

# Adult Basic Classroom

*For Florida Adult Basic  
Education Practitioners*

VOLUME 1 - 2003

[www.ABEFlorida.org](http://www.ABEFlorida.org)

## Who are the adults who come into our ABE/GED classrooms?

How are they different from traditional high school students and other adult learners? Certain traits are unique to adults in an ABE/GED program. Recognizing those traits will influence the methods and atmosphere in a classroom so that success is more likely. So...what is it we need to know to better serve our students?

### STUDENTS UNDER STRESS

First, it is helpful to remember that Florida's Adult Basic Education programs serve students 16 years old and older. Whether they are 16-year olds needing help with division or 96-year olds struggling to read food labels, both feel the stress of living out of the mainstream.

Most ABE/GED students bring to your classroom a history of failure in other educational settings. They do not think of themselves as students and need someone to believe that they can learn so that they, too, may believe. Not succeeding in an educational environment makes the adult learner feel different and isolated. There is an assumption that everyone is better at school than they are and there is little confidence that this ABE/GED class will prove to be any different. To counteract this, adult education teachers must take time to listen to their students. An intake interview is the first way to listen, but it must not be the last. Adult education teachers should learn each student's name as quickly as possible and make time to talk individually with students frequently, not only about educational goals, but about their lives outside the classroom. This not only gives you, the teacher, some insight into how to maintain the students' interests, it also communicates to the students that you are interested in them as people and that, just maybe, you understand that school is one of many important

things in their busy lives.

While it is true that many adult education students require special support inside the classroom to be successful because of specific educational needs or learning differences, it is even more common for adult students to need the teacher to allow them flexibility in the classroom as they deal with pressing social and personal stresses.

A primary personal stress for most ABE/GED students is lack of money. Money for transportation, childcare, textbooks and school supplies can seem overwhelming. Some students may know that more education will ultimately help them get a better job with better pay but cannot see past the immediate reality that the hours spent in class cost them so much in wages that paying the electric bill will be difficult.

Besides the stress caused by tight finances, most ABE/GED students are isolated. They are isolated from their peers because they are not doing what their peers are doing; they are not working or in traditional high school or in college. Many have spouses or partners who do not encourage education or are hostile to it. Many have parents, adult children and other family members with whom they have little contact or from whom they receive little encouragement or help.

Finally, because they are adults, most ABE/GED students feel the stresses of survival. Laundry, shopping, cooking, cleaning, paying

bills and making plans makes focusing on school one of many activities competing for their time. Balancing all that adult life has to offer is difficult for the typical ABE/GED student and when the balance is challenged, school is the easy one to drop. An adult education teacher can help students balance these stresses first by acknowledging them and second by using them in classroom instruction. Doing math problems that connect to time management or bill paying can accomplish both educational and life goals. Reading and summarizing insurance forms or a child's report card or a traffic citation can be easily intergrated into basic skills education. The adult education teacher must make sure that every aspect of classroom education is connected to the real-life world of adult students.

### STUDENTS IN VARIOUS STAGES OF ADULTHOOD

Part of the real-life world of adult students is developmental, for adult learners go through developmental stages like children do. Young adults seek independence, personal definition, and some connection with the wider adult world that honors that definition of self. Middle-aged adults are evaluating past choices and making plans for future ones. Older adults are seeking to make their mark, to be sure they have something to pass down to the younger generations. This reminds teachers that their adult

students are not only seeking basic educational skills but must do that learning in particular ways. Developmentally appropriate magazines such as *Self* and *Senior Living*, personalized writing activities that ask twenty-year olds to define themselves and seventy-year olds to advise their grandchildren about money, and math activities that ask forty-year olds to chart the pros and cons of particular choices are classroom activities that acknowledge the developmental stages of adulthood.

### STUDENTS IN THE LEARNING MODE

Adults who enroll in adult education programs do so because they believe it will improve their economic or personal situations. This means that they come to us in a learning mode; they see the connection education has to their "real" life. This also means that we are obligated to further the connection between education and real life in the classroom.

One way to connect real life to the classroom is to find out about the rich experiences adults bring to the classroom. Though we have acknowledged the stresses adults bring to the classroom, we cannot afford to ignore the strengths they bring. Adult students bring experiences with relationships, employment, daily living and the world that allow them to ask different questions and to teach each other. An adult student who struggles with reading may be an expert car mechanic; an adult student who cannot generate a page of coherent writing may be able to talk for an hour about music; an adult who is uninterested in reading novels may be very interested in books on child development because he is a parent. Teachers of adult students should always allow adult students to use and share what they know. This makes the learning more meaningful and therefore more memorable; it connects classmates to each other which helps encourage students to come back the next day; it allows students to develop the confidence to begin to question and to think within a discipline. All of these positives are

accomplished when the teacher knows his students and takes the time to make sure that book lessons are intersecting with each individual set of life lessons.

Because adult students are competent learners in other areas, teachers can ask them more directly about the new information being learned in the ABE/GED classroom. Adults can tell teachers more about how much they understand and what they are having trouble understanding and why. Adults, with a little encouragement, can recognize conflicts between personal experiences and lessons, between personal value systems and lessons and between personal dreams and lessons. ABE/GED teachers should facilitate their students' ability to be self-directed. Action plans, accountability strategies and follow-up, and pre/post skill evaluations are all ways that help adults gain control over their learning.

### IN CONCLUSION

So, have we answered the question with which we began? Our adult students are people who come to us with complicated lives, often in transition, seeking to better their lives and focusing on immediate learning and goals. They want to have a say in their education, they want to be able to learn at the pace they need, they want their education to relate to their lives and they want to feel respected in the classroom. They expect us to understand the other pulls on their attention and time, to be prepared to teach them and to be enthusiastic and positive about their potential. They expect us to motivate them when they can't motivate themselves. They differ from traditional high school learners by their breadth of experience and they differ from other adult learners by their needs, stresses and lack of a support system.

Understanding adult learners means teachers will learn students' names, listen to stories about their lives, give them choices in the classroom and be as flexible as is responsible to accommodate for adult student stresses outside the classroom.

### Resources Available in the ABE Florida 2001 Resource Guide:

Draves, William. How To Teach Adults. See Learning Resources Network (LERN) at [www.lern.org](http://www.lern.org) or e-mail [info@lern.org](mailto:info@lern.org)

"Teaching Adults: Is It Different?"  
Online source: Path: OTAN Resources/  
Document Library/Adult Educational AE0338/  
Teaching Adults

"Using Adult Learning Principles In Adult Basic and Literacy Education." Doc. Code/  
Section: AB0052/PT01

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

Zemke, Ron and Susan. "30 Things We Know For Sure About Adult Learning." Training, June 1981.

### Other Resources:

Adult Basic Education Workbook.  
OTAN Doc. Code/Section AB0022

"Counseling the Adult Education Student."  
OTAN Doc. Code/Section AB0036

Gerstner-Horvath, Marilyn ED.D,  
Coffee Break Inservice: Topic 1 – "Creating a Learning Environment for Adults." Murray, KY: Longmuir/Jones Publishing, Inc., 1993.

Gerstner-Horvath, Marilyn ED.D,  
Coffee Break Inservice: Topic 2 – "Adults as Learners." Murray, KY: Longmuir/Jones Publishing, Inc., 1993.

Gerstner-Horvath, Marilyn ED.D,  
Coffee Break Inservice: Topic 3 – "Self-Directed Learning." Murray, KY: Longmuir/Jones Publishing, Inc., 1993.

**Editor:** Margaret Wright-Cleveland  
**Writers:** Fran Riotte  
Margaret Wright-Cleveland  
**Editing:** Glenda Anderson  
Glenda Norvell

This newsletter was developed by the Adult Basic Education Practitioners' Committee with an Adult Education State Leadership Grant, 2002-2003, from the Florida Department of Education, Office of Workforce Education.

We hope you enjoy this newsletter. If you have any comments or questions, please contact Lynn Cunill, Leon County Schools Adult & Community Education, (850) 922-5343, [cunilll@ACE-Leon.org](mailto:cunilll@ACE-Leon.org)