
How Adults Learn

Teaching Adults

Adults are a challenge to teach. They are intelligent, inquisitive and usually highly motivated to learn. Adults want their learning to be problem-centered and personalized. A good teacher of adults is accepting of their need for self direction and personal responsibility and involvement in the learning process.

Many adults enjoy learning and are challenged by new ideas and information. They are lifelong learners who usually did well in school and are still comfortable as an adult in "school-like" situations. Other adults are not. Some have negative feelings about their school experiences and are uncomfortable being in the "dependent-learner" role. As a teacher of adults, you will see a wide range of differences in the adults you teach. A question adults frequently ask is "What is the fastest, easiest, and cheapest way for me to learn to...?" Attending your workshop or training session may be the very answer needed.

Adults are Unique

- They know a lot, from their many experiences.
- They have definite opinions, values and beliefs.
- They are highly time conscious.
- They learn by a variety of methods.
- They like to actively participate.
- They are seeking answers to current problems.
- They will not return if the training provided does not meet their needs.

For most adults, learning is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Adults who attend your training session do so because they have a current need for the knowledge or skills being taught.

Barriers to Learning

Resistance to change — if what you are teaching is in conflict with the belief system of the adult learner, they will resist "buying into" the concepts or ideas you are presenting. Unlike children, who come to school eager to learn and open to new ideas,

many adults have definite mind-sets that resist new ideas in all sizes and shapes. Helping an adult change is like dealing with a ice cube. First you help them melt the idea, then you reshape the idea, as in refreezing the water into another shape. Be sensitive to opposing viewpoints. There are many "right ways" to accomplish the same task. As a trainer of adults, you have an opportunity to continue to learn and grow, also. Encourage your learners to try new ideas and expand their horizons. Make learning an enjoyable experience, an opportunity to explore together, and to learn from each other in an accepting environment.

Negative Self-Image

People who feel good about themselves produce good work. This is true for adults and children. It is hard to learn when you are afraid to ask questions or feel your intellectual abilities are limited.

Be sensitive to put-downs. They have no place in your training session. As a teacher of adults, never use criticism or sarcasm to make a point.

What you will make, instead is an enemy — an adult learner who will not return to your training sessions. Strive to enhance the self-esteem of your participants. Simple ways to do this are:

- Learn their names.
- Respect their time — start and finish according to schedule.
- Be interested in their accomplishments.
- Acknowledge their contributions.
- Encourage their opinions and participation in class discussions and activities.

Fear of Failure

Adults, even more than kids, are sensitive to failure and looking foolish in front of their peers.

Although we are capable of learning new things at all ages of our lives, some adults feel insecure and will not participate so as not to look inadequate in a group situation.

Other adults participate frequently and use the group situation as a platform for their own performance. The key to being a successful teacher of adults is balance and control. The skilled teacher learns to balance the presentation of new material, debate and discussion, sharing of participants' ideas, and the clock.

A key to success is to be flexible when developing your teaching plans and methods. Always have a "Plan B" should you want to adjust your lesson to accommodate the needs of the group. Always be supportive of providing positive feedback and encouragement — and help your adult learners grow beyond their fear of failure.

Adults "vote with their feet." If the training is meaningful and has application to their present concerns, they will return for the rest of the series. If not — you will have a "no-show" at your next training session.

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