

The Challenge of Helping Adults Learn: **Characteristics of Adult Learners & Implications For Teaching Technical Information**

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Probably the single most important concern for the teacher of adults is a **thorough understanding of the learner**. Through such an understanding it is possible to direct your teaching to the specific needs and interests of the adult.

Characteristic #1

The adult learner is primarily independent/self-directed in what he/she learns.

Implications for Teaching:

Try not to treat the adult like a child. Introduce yourself to the group and have them introduce themselves. Use name tags and try to call each adult learner by name. Make sure you allow ample time for discussion. Don't assume that you're the only one with the answer - try having the adults in the group also provide answers to each other. Learning does not occur **only** at your session. Handouts and materials that you provide during your teaching can help the adults continue to learn on their own after your session is over. When adults are learning at their own pace they can use the speed or rate of learning that best fits their own learning style. Different learners learn at different rates.

Characteristic #2

The adult learner has considerable experience to draw upon.

Implications for Teaching:

Provide opportunities for the adult learners to work together and share their ideas/experiences with each other in small group discussions. Present some information and then ask the adults what experiences they have had in the past that relates to the topic. Ask the adults to use their own unique experiences to help provide possible solutions to problems and questions that are presented. Each learner's experience is unique and different. Sometimes an adult's experience may be a barrier to further learning - an adult who has not had a positive learning experience may be hesitant to try it again. Try and understand the experiences of your learners. Avoid the bad experiences and try to build on the good experiences.



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Characteristic #3

The adult learner is most apt to be interested in topics that relate to the developmental stage of his/her life.

Implications for Teaching:

Don't assume that young adults and older adults are interested in the same things. When you organize small groups for discussion try organizing them according to their stage of life - adults who are beginning their career in one group, those in mid-career in another group, and those who are well established in their career in another group. Provide opportunities for the learners to talk about why an idea/concept is or is not important to them. Try to hear from all of the adults in the group - don't just hear from a few of the more vocal ones. An adult learner who is in transition from one developmental stage to another is more apt to want to learn than an adult who is at a stable period in life. Learning is an excellent way to help bring about change in your life.

Characteristic #4

The adult learner is most interested in information and ideas that solve problems that they are presently faced with.

Implications for Teaching:

Try to make your presentation problem-focused rather than just information-focused. Start your presentation by identifying the problems that you will be helping the learners solve. Allow an opportunity for the learners to add their own problems to those that you propose to deal with during your session. Provide time for questions

from the adults and urge them to describe their own specific situation and the unique problems that each of them face. Try to focus your instruction on responding to the problems that they identify. Work to create interaction opportunities during which the adult learners can respond to the unique problems that each brings to the session.

Characteristic #5

The adult learner is most interested in information that can be immediately applied.

Implications for Teaching:

Try to focus on ideas that the adults can put to use immediately after your teaching is finished. Ask the adults how they will be using, making application of, the ideas and information presented. If the adults are not able to provide examples of how they will be using the information, try to find out why. Are they not understanding your information? Is your information not applicable to them? Are they unsure of what application opportunities they have?

Characteristic #6

The adult learner is motivated from within him/herself.

Implications for Teaching:

Offering rewards for learning usually doesn't work very well with the adult learner. You must appeal to the learner at an adult level. Try and find out what the adult places value on. Recognize and respect those things that the adult values. Let the adult know that you are concerned with those things that he/she values. And then, really be concerned!