

Reflections on Teaching in Adult Education

By Thomas A. Lifvendahl, Ed.D.

Educating Adults

The education of adults requires instructor sensitivity to the fact that adult learners are also practicing professionals. Their expectation will be that in teaching them you, as the instructor, will honor their professionalism and integrate that hard earned knowledge into any learning experience. Therefore it is suggested that you approach teaching in a manner that integrates three specific spheres of knowledge (Lifvendahl, 2004) into a coherent whole. These include:

1. **Theory** – the specific information needed by participants to successfully pass a course. This sphere presupposes that intelligent and comprehensive understanding of theory supports rational decision making.
2. **Professional Practice** – the formal and informal methods professionals employ to successfully accomplish organizational objectives. This sphere encompasses the extent to which one feels competent at accomplishing tasks. It is also dependent on the level of knowledge acquired by professionals to apply practiced methods to “real world” situations. These methodological procedures are in a constant state of flux but can be presented, in the classroom, as a set of common themes through which participants filter and analyze ever changing data.
3. **Personal Experience** – the lived lives of class participants. Each person attending your class is an adult who brings to the class a wide range of collective knowledge and tested perceptions acquired by field experience that you, as the instructor, need to integrate into your teaching. Fully doing so will enrich participant understanding and enliven your teaching.

It has been my experience that effective instruction is designed around performance outcomes that are focused on observable behavior and conditions of performance that require the student do demonstrate proficiency in a way that can be directly measured for speed, accuracy, quality, or level of success. A secondary feature of effective instruction is the design of instructional outcomes that test the level of cognitive development (thinking skills), affective change (attitudes and values) and psychomotor achievement (increased physical skills).

Teaching Techniques

As an instructor of professionals you wear two hats. You are expected to be a content expert. It is assumed that you have significant experience in your chosen field and you have been given your instructional position on the recommendation of administration based on skills you have developed over your career. This advice is designed around that assumption. The other hat you wear is as a teacher of adults. Adults, as students, are naturally skeptical. They weigh what you say against their own personal experience. Your job as an instructor is to overcome that natural skepticism and replace it with a desire to learn. On this fact the following information is provided to help you become the best instructor you can be.

Adult Learning

Methods for Enhancing Adult Learning

As an educator of adults you have an opportunity to convey your unique knowledge and experience. In order to effectively impart this information you need to be reminded of the mental references many of your students bring to the classroom. Students come to your class room with a range of preconceptions, self-images, and past educational experience that range from high academic success to barely passing work. They expect that whatever they learn will be immediately useful in the field. They are also older. Inherent with this statement is diminishing speed and mental ability to retain learning coupled with decreased perceptual abilities that impair acquisition of information (i.e. decreased hearing and eyesight).

Your students come to your classroom as mature, self directed adults. They naturally seek learning situations that honor this self-informed status. Integrating their knowledge into the classroom is crucial to creating a dynamic educational experience. Many students live their work lives in a dynamic atmosphere that requires you, as an instructor, to create a stimulating learning environment. Decreased learning is directly connected to passive instruction; that is, you lecture and they listen. Diminishing reliance on this teaching style is a good first step in increasing your classroom teaching effectiveness.

A key to successful instruction is to present your expectations of successful learning early and often throughout the classroom experience. Clearly stated outcomes, goals, and performance standards are crucial to providing instructional feedback to all stakeholders (students, instructors, and institutional supervisors). The classroom thus becomes a place for honoring excellence that also supports an environment for free and open exchange of information. Instructor and students both equally gain from the experience.

Your students are entering the classroom with rich life experiences. This fact makes them different than younger learners. Their lived lives inform the ways in which they interpret the information you present. This information can, when properly used, enrich not only your teaching but will enhance their learning experience. Integrating this lived experience into all phases of your teaching will make your job of instruction easier. Presenting information and new skills in ways that require learners to challenge their past experience against new knowledge creates a powerful learning dynamic. Integrating teaching techniques such as: group discussions and focus groups; interactive demonstrations and role-plays; and any modality of learning that closely replicates “work situations” should demonstrably enhance the classroom experience.

Adults enter the classroom with a set of “fixed beliefs”; skills and techniques for living life acquired over time. Your job as an instructor is to challenge those fixed beliefs in ways that demonstrate to the learner that holding onto old ways of doing things costs more mental and physical energy then doing the new, improved management techniques

your teaching provides. Diminishing learner desire to hold onto old belief systems and “patterns of response” is the key to successful instruction. Adults also enter classrooms with a range of feelings driven by past experience of failure or success. Your job is to create a classroom dynamic that recognizes success through meeting short-term goals that build learning to an overall achievable outcome.

Adult Learner Belief Structures

Adult learners come into the classroom with mental preconceptions. Your job as an instructor is to both understand those preconceptions and use them to enhance learning. These “views of learning” include:

Entry Voice

1. Value theoretical knowledge. This learner is a new student; they are responsive to what is presented to them without being hindered by many preconceptions.
2. Feedback is important. This learner seeks to know if he/she is doing the “right thing”.
3. Instructor is successful when he or she guides learners and provides clear measures of success.
4. Successful instructor/student relationships are based on helping learners pass the program.

Outside Voice

1. Value real world knowledge. This learner is a veteran professional; they respond to instruction that directly relates to the value of their personal experience and appreciate instruction that acknowledges this “school of hard knocks” information.
2. Reinforce and validate individual expertise. This learner is constantly listening to confirm or deny their field experience.

3. Instructor integrates the learner's valuable expertise with new course provided information.
4. Successful instructor integrates both to increase work competencies.

Cynical Voice

1. Theoretical knowledge is not highly valued. This learner is also a veteran professional; he or she comes into the classroom wanting the instructor to "prove" the value of the information being presented to them.
2. Participate because he/she has to in order to gain a credential or check off what she/he need for a promotion.
3. Instructor is not seen as an expert. This learner believes that their field experience far outweighs instructor knowledge. The instructor needs to "prove" that what he or she is teaching is worth learning.
4. Non-interactive in the classroom. Getting this person to interact with other students and yourself in the classroom is like pulling teeth. He or she sits in the back and almost dares the instructor to teach them.
5. Desires non-graded activities. The instructor must work to integrate learner resistance into the classroom experience so that this learner directs themselves to become motivated to fully participate in the class activities.
6. Values only real-world knowledge. The instructor provides evidence from the activities of working cops to overcome cynical resistance. Showing how a given theory or practice works well in the field can decrease learner resistance.

Straddling Voice

1. Values both theoretical and real world knowledge. This learner is a veteran professional; he or she comes into the classroom with a practical frame of mind. This student is open to learning new concepts as long as their field experience is valued and integrated into learning.
2. Desires class activities that connect both. This learner seeks opportunities in the classroom to test what he/she has learned in the field against well articulate theory.
3. The successful instructor integrates both into the course learning experience
4. Desires collaborative learning that synthesizes and critiques his/her perceptions of themselves as effective professionals.
5. Engaged with many different types of learning groups. The instructor may discover that this person loves to learn and is constantly seeking others who will support them in this process.

Inclusion Voice

1. Values learning and is constantly seeking new information. This can be either a veteran professional or a new student. He or she comes to the classroom motivated to learn and will push instructors to provide the “latest” information or techniques.
2. Develops complex world views. This is the student who can think “sideways”; they see things as a system of interacting events and enjoy creating a new way of doing something.

3. The instructor acts as a co-learner in all phases of learning. Because of the dynamic nature of these students it is important that their enthusiasm be well directed but that their views should be valued and used in class discussion.
4. Theory, Professional Practice, and Personal Experience are all intertwined. This learner naturally creates a classroom dynamic where all critical phases of an instruction are fully integrated into the learning experience. Everyone benefits from the class activities.
5. The learner enjoys intellectually challenging activities. He or she seeks to package their learning into understandable documents that can be used to better inform all classroom participants. She or he seeks to contribute new ways of doing things to increase the effectiveness of otherwise routine activities.
6. Values all outlets that lead to intellectual growth. This is an student who does not limit their life to just everyday work. He or she is active in their community and seek to have an impact on residential life beyond protecting and serving their fellow residents.

Adapted from: Kasworm, C. (Feb, 2003).

Adult Learner Ability

Research has shown that “memory functioning peaks around the late teens or early 20s and slowly declines into the 70s. Recall shortly after learning reduces the amount of forgetting, and spaced or distributed practice further facilitates retention”. In essence, use it or lose it. As adults and as instructors of adults we all have the experience of learning something new and having not used it, losing the skill. Practice, over time, does make for perfection. As a former competitive marksman I can recall the impact that frequent marksmanship training had on my personal performance. Without practice you are lucky if you hit the target, much less the “bulls eye”. Your job as an instructor of adults is to create opportunities for demonstrating performance that reinforce learning over the long

term. You should seek to create frequent “bulls eye” opportunities. Changing learner behavior is hard. It can be likened to changing the behavior of a “loved one”...if its hard getting that loved partner to quit some undesired habit, how hard is it to change student behavior. Remember, you do not unlearn bad habits; you extinguish bad behavior by replacing it with new learned patterns of conduct.

As we get older we physically change. We do not hear as well as we used to. Seeing up close or far away without visual aids becomes difficult. Our bodies do not respond as quickly to unnerving events. And, maybe most importantly for learning, our bodies can not take being in one place over an extended period of time without moving. Adults naturally seek comfort. Our job as instructors is to create a learning environment that honors adult learner physical needs without diminishing educational effectiveness. As we all have experienced, warm classrooms, long periods of sitting, and droning lecturing are a great way of inducing sleep. Get your students up and about. Take frequent breaks and limit lecturing to no more than 20 minutes a session.

As an instructor of adults one needs to decrease as many barriers to learning as possible. Decent lighting, not too warm rooms, and audio visual support go a long way to enhance the instructional environment. There is an expanding body of literature that focuses on improving learner cognition but suffice it to say that there are some simple techniques one can apply to “packaging” your instruction:

1. Use simple and precise visual aids. We have all experienced the instructor who copied a page from a book (6-8pt type), made an overhead and then presented it as part of an instructional package. It could not be clearly read from the first row of the classroom, much less from the back. Solve this problem by creating presentations with large legible type and limited to no more than seven lines containing 6-7 words per line. If writing on a chalk board; write big, so your work can be seen from the back of the room.

2. The older we become the less we hear. Use audio support. There is nothing wrong with speaking loudly and clearly, at a level that even the person in the back of the room can hear you. Insure this by asking if they can hear what you are saying. If doing this is not your style use audio amplification and write what you are saying on a board or overhead to reinforce learning. Tie audio and visual content together as much as possible. Research indicates that the more senses you involve in instruction, the greater the impact of your presentation.
3. Finally, do as much as possible to create a dialogue between you and your learners. Ensure that everyone hears what you say, see what you want them to see, and have time to question what they don't understand.

Adapted from: Kennedy, R.C. (April, 2003).

Learning Styles

Learning and teaching are interrelated activities. Adult learners have definite preferences for both the method of teaching you employ and activities you guide your students through. The dominant style that many instructors use is based on abstract thinking; discussions, lectures, or other oral methods. Many action oriented students (police officers, fire fighters, paramedics, nurses and health care professionals are typical of this type) prefer doing something over talking about something. Active participation, application, and directed exercises are a preferred method of learning. The more you vary your teaching methods and provide interactive activities to reinforce learning the better off you are.

Educators tend to create structured environments for learning. Professionals are used to this and expect the instructor to predetermine learning and package it for consumption. In order to foster a new dynamic in your classroom you need to structure your teaching around the following questions:

1. What are the key skills and information that your students need to learn? Note: instructional syllabi provide specific objectives and learning outcomes that must be achieved.
2. What portion of these skills and information do your students know before they enter your classroom?
3. What methods can you use to efficiently bridge the gap between the two?
4. What kinds of class activities effectively support information exchange while still achieving course outcomes and goals?
5. What aspects of the learning environment hinder information exchange?

Increase Participant Involvement

As an instructor of adults you are facilitating learning through processes that challenge participants to fully engage in class activities. In order to do these you need to keep in mind that:

1. Actively engaged adults are fully participating when they question what they are taught. Encourage discussion.
2. If you ask them a question don't answer it yourself. Many instructors feel driven to cover content at all costs. We all have experienced sitting in a classroom where the instructor asks for your comments and then does not pause to "wait for it"; giving the student time to compose an answer in their mind. No one wants to be seen as "dumb" in answering a question therefore pause your teaching and give folks time to properly answer the question.
3. Provide constant reinforcement to your students. Adult students are no different than any other learner; they like to know if they are doing well. Continually take the opportunity to reinforce proper student behavior.
4. Match teaching methods to group capabilities. We all have experienced classroom instruction where the instructor talks above or below our capacity to

understand. Ask questions periodically to ensure student comprehension. If you believe that students do not understand, stop and review. Assume nothing.

I hope that you find this information useful. If you want to further carry on this conversation please feel free to contact me at tlifven@execpc.com.

Commonly Used Adult Teaching Methods

Brainstorming – A problem-solving technique in which members of a group suggest solutions to problems without interruption or discussion by other members of the group.

Buzz Groups – A teaching and learning technique in which members of a class briefly discuss in small groups a point that has been raised during the session.

Concept Mapping – A method to visualize idea and perceptual interrelationships in order to enhance learning in a given unit of instruction.

Cooperative Group Work – A method to harness individual experience and knowledge to achieve a common goal of instruction.

Debates – A teaching methods whereby two or more people make opposing presentations so that the breadth of an issue may be examined.

Demonstrations with Discussions – A method of teaching that allows for an interactive learning environment in which an instructor shows precisely how to complete a procedure while still allowing for interactive communication between instructor and student.

Discussion Group – A teaching method whereby the group is divided into small units in order to share interests, concerns, insights or to solve problems. A common adult education teaching method since it enables the expertise of all course participants to be utilized. It is assumed that the instructor has the skills to practice this technique.

Documented Problem/Set Solution Technique – A directed learning event in which a specific incident is stage in order to elicit a programmed response (used to evaluate compliance with SOPs).

Feedback – The process of giving information about an inquiry, piece of work, or performance. Research shows that this is necessary if effective learning is to occur.

Fishbowl – A teaching and learning technique in which group discussion is employed in two different ways. Initially a small group from the larger class sits in the middle of the class and discusses a specific subject, while the remainder of the class sits around the central group and observes and listens to the interaction. Thereafter the whole class discusses what occurred within the smaller group.

Guest Interviews – A method of instruction in which content experts are brought into class or interviewed by students in order to gather information pertinent to instruction.

Journal Writing – A method of record keeping in which students' record their observations about learning and reflections they make on their own learning styles.

Laboratory or hands on Training Exercises – A method of instruction that is designed to replicate “real world” working conditions in order to enrich the learning experience.

Learning Contracts – A formal agreement between instructor and learner to learn certain knowledge. Skill, attitude or value required by the learners. The agreement is frequently made in writing, but this is not essential to this form of learning. Usually, the contract specifies that objectives, the methods used, the objectives, the methods used, the resources, the date by which the contract will be met, the criteria by which it will be evaluated.

Learning Styles – Psychological preferences for presentation of information utilized by a given student in a classroom situation. The term sometimes refers to the characteristic and preferred approaches to learning other than the cognitive, such as strategies adopted to learn more effectively, but it also refers to the individual differences in the way that people think and learn.

Lecture (Basic Format) – A formal presentation that is primarily one direction (instructor presents with little if no time for student questioning).

Simulation – A teaching method in which a real-life situation is recreated in the teaching and learning process so that learners can have the opportunity to practice their responses, or their learning, prior to performing it in reality. This technique is used in many forms of affective education to assist learners in reflecting upon their emotional response to situations. The process is to be as safe as possible but still allow the student to practice and be tested in applied tactics and decision-making abilities, under a wide range of circumstances.

Socratic Questioning – After the Greek philosopher Socrates who was noted for this method of teaching through posing questions and building dialogue between instructor and student based on the response(s) provided by students. This is a teacher-led method of instruction,

Student Presentations – A method of monitor in which student learning is formally communicated within specific evaluative objectives.

Video/Realia/Pictures – The use of actual objects or visual information to support student learning.

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