



HANDOUT: PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING

Adults learn best what is relevant to their lives.

Adults like to see a connection between what they are learning and what they need or want to do in the “real world.” They want to make progress toward specific and often immediate goals. Relevant learning that advances goals and improves life is even more meaningful when adults discover something about self or situation that they hadn’t recognized before. In other words, they learn something both relevant and new.

Adults are more willing to incur demands on their time and to take risks when they consider the learning relevant. Strive to address learners’ everyday needs in each lesson. You can use published lessons as a starting point but adjust the content to match learners’ circumstances.

Adults need to apply what they have learned.

They learn best by doing. Adults may prefer different ways of taking in, processing, and organizing new information. But in the end, they are not confident that they have learned something until they have applied the new information or the newly learned skill to a real task.

Adults need and expect to be treated with respect.

Adults learn best when they feel valued, when their opinions are appreciated, and when they feel listened to. They want and deserve to have some say in the classroom and in the direction of their learning. They also want to feel safe in the learning situation—another aspect of respect. Learners want to know that it is okay to make mistakes and that those mistakes will not generate ridicule, either from the instructor or from other learners. Respect is also culturally dependent. Find out what learners expect in the relationship, and then try to meet those expectations.

Adults bring a wealth of skills and experience to learning.

Each adult learner brings a lifetime of experience, problem-solving, negotiation, and accomplishment to the learning situation. Learning is much easier when you make use of these skills and connect the learner’s experience to what is being learned. Learner skills or

experiences can become valuable learning resources for other learners and for you. Taking on the teacher role is a great confidence- and esteem-builder for adult learners.

Adults may have to overcome a number of barriers to learning.

Many barriers grow out of the pressures placed on learners in their other adult roles as workers or family members. Similar to these are barriers that result from the learners' life situation, such as limited access to reliable transportation or childcare. Some adult learners may be dealing with learning differences or disabilities that made traditional instructional approaches ineffective and frustrating. Finally, some of the barriers may be emotional such as low self-esteem or fear of failing. These can prevent learners from taking risks in their learning.

Your job is to accept, guide, and support. Effective instructors create safe environments where learners can take risks. They help learners to identify and cherish their assets and accomplishments. Effective tutors recognize the support they are capable of giving and help learners to seek other resources and support in areas that are outside of the tutor's expertise.