

Principles of Adult Education



Adults are people with years of experience and a wealth of information.

Focus on the strengths participants bring to the course. Ask people what they already know. Tap their experience to provide a major source of enrichment for the class.

Adults have established values, beliefs and opinions.

Demonstrate respect for differing beliefs, religions, value systems and life-styles. Allow equal time for differing viewpoints.

Adults relate new information to previously learned information and experience.

Assess your group's level of knowledge prior to the training or at the beginning of class. Information needs to be relevant.

Adults are people with bodies influenced by gravity. Plan adequate breaks.

Adults have pride.

Self-esteem and ego are at risk in a learning environment that is not safe and supportive. Acknowledge or thank participants for their responses and questions. Treat all questions with respect.

Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.

The role of the facilitator is to engage participants in a process of mutual inquiry.

Individual differences among people increase with age.

Take into account differences in style, types and pace of learning. Use a variety of of teaching strategies such as problem solving, discussion and role playing.

Setting the Stage for Effective Training

1. Set the Stage for Learning:

At the beginning of a class, participants are reluctant to talk or get involved. They wait for another participant or an instructor to provide leadership. The facilitator's role in climate setting is to:

- encourage active involvement of the participants;
- establish connections and relevance between the learners' personal objectives and the course objectives;
- make learners feel safe and comfortable enough to disclose personal information;
- set a non-judgmental tone for the class;
- mold a diverse group of individuals into a cohesive working group.

Strategies for reducing early group discomfort include: careful planning the first 20 minutes of your class, designing an optimal seating arrangement, and creating a psychologically safe and supportive environment. Group trust does not just happen. The facilitator/teacher must make it happen. To make the most of the initial part of your training:

- Neutralize the teacher/student hierarchy by involving the participants as early as possible
- Ask participants to describe their expectations of the course or questions they hope to get answered. This serves as an assessment of the group's educational needs, and as an icebreaker for further interaction.
- Tell a relevant anecdote, pose a dilemma, or ask a question which the educational program will answer.
- Act energetic. Stand up, move around and smile!
- Carefully plan, in advance, how you will introduce yourself modeling how you want them to follow you in their introductions.

2. Physical Environment: Visit your training room prior to the workshop to plan how to adapt the physical conditions, e.g. lighting, tables/chairs, electrical outlets. Mastery of the physical surroundings prevents logistics from detracting from the educational group process.

Seating influences learning. Uncomfortable seats may distract a participant from learning. Theater or classroom seating works best for lectures; however arranging tables and chairs in a U-shape allows more eye contact, and encourages more interaction. A podium or table between you and the learners serves as a physical barrier perpetuating the teacher-student hierarchy.

3. Social and Emotional Environment: Creating a climate that supports learning requires assurance that participants can feel safe, supported and respected. Articulating ground rules e.g. there are no stupid questions, it's okay to disagree with the facilitator and participants as long as it is done constructively, can establish a climate of trust. Model the behaviors you would like the participants to display. Encourage questions and comments. Show respect for differing opinions.

Facilitation of Adult Learning

The root of “facilitation” is the Latin word “facil” meaning “to make easy.” Facilitators of adult education are responsible for making learning easy. There is a difference between teaching performance and learning. A teacher can perform magnificently, yet not facilitate learning. The major principle of facilitation of learning is to engage the thinking of the listeners.

Outstanding Teachers

cooperative, democratic
kind, considerate
sense of humor
interest in students
flexible
knowledge of subject

Poor Teachers

unfriendly, never smiles
flies off the handle
partial, has favorites
superior, aloof
overbearing
sarcastic

The most successful facilitators or teachers demonstrate three basic behaviors and attitudes:

1. **Interpersonal Interaction:** This is the ability, and belief in the value of, using interaction as a teaching modality; the facilitator must give up some control over the teaching process and its outcome by recognizing that the participants share the leadership of the teaching process as well as the responsibility for its success or failure.
2. **Professional Intimacy:** This is the capacity to reveal personal thoughts, values and emotions to the learners; demonstrating tolerance of divergent opinions and values; comfort relating to people of different levels of education or professional status; and non-judgmental acceptance of learner statements and opinions.
3. **Moderating Tension Level:** Good trainers monitor the tension level in the group. This is accomplished by using a relaxed conversational tone and being approachable and sincere through your facial expressions, tone of voice and choice of words. Humor is also a useful tool as long as it is genuine for you.

If telling were the same as teaching, we'd all be so smart we could hardly stand it.
Mager, 1968

There is no gene for good teaching; good teachers are made, not born.
Whitman, 1982

Difficult People and Difficult Questions

There is a free-floating dissatisfaction in most workplaces; anxiety, frustration, and anger can accrue from daily events. Unfortunately, some people do not leave their emotional “baggage” at the training door. As a facilitator, you can become a target for this dissatisfaction. Remember, this anger is not really about you personally.

The Rambler: wanders around a question but never actually asks one.

Possible responses: “Are you asking...?”

Quiet but body language or gestures are not supportive: eye-rolling, balancing a checkbook, reading a newspaper

Possible responses: You can confront directly with something like “You seem like you don’t agree with this information, is there something you’d like to share?” Or in the case of reading a newspaper, the best strategy is to physically move closer to the person.

The Talker: there are several versions of this problem learner, the Know-It-All, the Manipulator, and the Chronic Whiner.

Possible responses: acknowledge the comments, limit time to express their viewpoints, and if need be, say something like “I’d like to hear from some different people.” OR “I understand your view, does anyone else have a different one?” and then move on.

The Sharpshooter-trying to shoot you down or trip you up.

Possible responses: Admit that you do not know the answer and redirect the question to the group or to the individual who asked it.

The Arguer-disagrees with everything you say.

Possible responses: “I appreciate your comments and I’d like to hear from others.” OR “It looks like we disagree. That’s not a problem for me.”

The Grandstander-loves to hear own commentary and opinions.

Possible responses: “It’s time we moved on to the next subject” OR “I’d like to hear from others.” Be sure to acknowledge their expertise on the topic.

The Overtly Hostile Person-can be angry and belligerent or can couch angry words or intent in a question.

Possible responses: “You seem really angry. Does anyone else feel this way?” Remain calm and polite, move physically closer to the person, maintain eye contact, and always allow him or her a way to gracefully retreat.

If hostility surfaces, remain calm and in control, and try not to take it personally.

Move on as quickly as possible for the sake of the group.

Treat each person and comment with respect.