



The Volunteer Teacher Series: Teaching Adults

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Teaching Adults

Teaching adults is challenging and rewarding. Every day, adults teach other adults in a variety of situations, including informal ones. Teaching in an informal setting includes volunteer teaching for civic, service and church groups or Extension programs. Some adults do nonformal on-the-job teaching or training as part of their work assignment. Nonformal teaching is any organized non-credit or noncertification education.

As a teacher of adult learners, you can strengthen your teaching by understanding adults' needs and their concerns about learning. Successful lessons include strategies that help adults overcome their concerns and build on their strengths.

Flexibility is also important in teaching adults. A teaching situation can change or become less than ideal. The effective volunteer teacher creatively adapts the lesson and methods to meet the needs and the situation of the adult learner.

Adults as Learners

When adults teach other adults in a nonformal or volunteer situation, they often teach the way they were taught in school. Learning served a different purpose then, and they were taught for that purpose. Youths and adults are different, however, and how and why they learn can vary, too.

Adults and youths tend to differ in how they learn in five areas:

- Self-concept (including physical ability)
- Life experiences
- Readiness to learn
- Concept of time
- Motivation

Table 1 outlines these differences. As you review the information in the table, note that it describes adults and youths/children as learners in general. There are always exceptions.

Table 1 also suggests teaching strategies you use can accommodate the characteristics of adult learners. For these tips, check the **What does this mean for your teaching?** section under each general characteristic. You can use these suggestions as you focus the topic of a lesson, select teaching methods, and make audiovisuals to support a lesson. Consult fact sheet T-8203, "Do-it-yourself Visuals," for more in-depth information on visuals.

Special Concerns of Some Adult Learners

As a teacher of adults, you may meet some adult learners with special concerns. For example, some adults may doubt their ability to learn simply because they have been away from a formal classroom setting for some time. Also, some adult learners have unpleasant memories of school. They may believe that learning situations are hopeless. With the appropriate teaching strategies and environment, you can help them overcome their concerns and build on their strengths.



Table 1. Characteristics of Adults and Youths as Learners.

Characteristic	Adults as Learners	Youths as Learners
Self-concept	<p>Independent</p> <p>Value adulthood; resent being treated as children</p> <p>Like to choose what to learn</p> <p>Usually self-directed, responsible</p> <p>May have set ways of thinking; may resort to judging and stereotyping</p>	<p>Dependent</p> <p>Depend on teacher to determine what they need to learn</p> <p>Expect to be told what to do</p> <p>Flexible patterns of behavior</p>
<p>What does this mean for your teaching? Involve adults in planning what they will learn. When possible, contact adult learners before your presentation to find out what they hope to learn. If you do not know who will attend until they show up, spend a few minutes at the beginning of your lesson discovering what they expect from the session.</p> <p>Adult learners' independence and self-direction can vary based on their familiarity with the topic you are teaching. With a new or unfamiliar topic, adult learners may be more dependent on you and need more direction from you. Frequent, brief progress reports help them keep pace with your teaching. Include nonthreatening, fun ways to quiz learners and reinforce learning.</p> <p>Provide a supportive, people-centered climate appropriate for adults. Use a get-acquainted activity to help learners get to know you and each other. Show them that you value their participation. Encourage questions. Be positive. For more ideas, consult the Checklist for Interpersonal Relations.</p> <p>Some adults are uncomfortable in learning situations. Because of previous negative experiences in school, they may distrust teachers and education. They often have exaggerated ideas about teachers' abilities and expectations of students. Also, they may give up before really trying. Help them set realistic goals for what they want to learn. Build their self-confidence by including frequent opportunities for positive reinforcement and success. Remind them often of what they've learned. Design your teaching so that each new idea builds on what they've just learned.</p>		
Physical Ability	<p>Slower reaction time but greater power to learn</p> <p>May have vision and hearing problems depending on age and health; slower physical reactions, sometimes causing discouragement</p>	<p>Sharp, quick reaction but shorter attention span</p> <p>Sound physical condition, generally</p>
<p>What does this mean for your teaching? Provide a learning environment that considers adults' physical needs. Change the pace of your lesson at least every 20 to 30 minutes. You can do this by changing topics or teaching techniques. Use learning activities that keep adult learners involved. For sessions longer than 30 minutes, include an occasional learning activity that allows adult learners to move around. Also for longer sessions, plan time for 10- to 15-minute breaks about every 90 minutes. The Checklist for Physical Surroundings suggests several ideas.</p>		
Life Experiences	<p>Have lived longer, experienced more things</p> <p>Will have many different experiences in a given age group</p> <p>Want to apply their experience to new learning</p> <p>Are capable of being both learner and teacher, depending on the setting</p>	<p>Limited life experience</p> <p>Generally much similarity within a given age group</p> <p>Not intent on applying the learning now; are learning for the future</p> <p>Are mostly in the role of learner</p>
<p>What does this mean for your teaching? Respect the experience the adult learners bring to your session. Realize that some adult learners participating in your session may know as much or more about your topic as you do. Think about how you can involve these participants to enhance their learning as well as that of the other participants. Consider techniques such as small group discussion or group problem solving.</p> <p>Adults value learning which is linked to their experiences. Teach your topic in a way that builds on what the adult learners already know about it. Find out before or at the beginning of your session how familiar participants are with your topic. Remember that the adult learners at your session will have different backgrounds and experiences, and will probably not all have the same level of experience with your topic.</p> <p>Adults may need to unlearn incorrect or outdated facts, attitudes, or skills. Begin by finding out what they currently know, believe or do related to your topic. Develop a lesson that helps them understand the new, and bridge the gap between the</p>		

old knowledge, attitudes, or skills to the new. Provide an opportunity for them to practice what they are learning through quizzes, role playing, or demonstrations.

When asking questions, allow some “wait time” for adults to plan their answers. Adults have more experiences to review as they prepare an answer to a question and need time to reflect.

Some adults are somewhat isolated from the mainstream of society with quite different life experiences. Invest time in learning to know what is important to them. Help them to see how their life experiences relate to what you’re teaching.

You may have adult learners who have limited or no reading skills. Keep words to a minimum on handouts and visuals, using illustrations whenever possible. Lecture is one way to give out information, but nonreaders (any learners!) will generally learn more from demonstrations, field trips, videos, role playing, games and simulations, and discussion groups.

Characteristic	Adults as Learners	Youths as Learners
Readiness to Learn/Motivation	Decide when to learn based on immediate real-life needs	Let parents and teachers determine when and what to learn
	Self-motivated to learn	Usually motivated more by reward and punishment
	Value learning of immediate use in their lives	Learn for the future, generally
	Learn along with other responsibilities	Learning is the main responsibility
<p>What does this mean for your teaching? Be in tune with your learners’ needs. Avoid telling adults they must learn something; they’re more likely to learn what they feel they need to learn. Some adults recognize exactly what they need to learn; others may not. You may need to help adult learners understand the need for and importance of what you’re teaching and how it affects them.</p> <p>Adults prefer to focus on a problem rather than a topic. For example, let’s say that your lesson topic is solid waste management. You could teach that topic by having the adult learners look at the problems related to landfill availability, selection, and management and how all this affects them.</p> <p>Adults are often motivated to learn because they want to take action on something. Examine your topic. Is there something about the topic that would inspire the adult learners to action? If so, build that angle into your lesson.</p> <p>Respect the fact that adults have other responsibilities besides learning what you’re teaching. Be aware that time restrictions can be stressful to adult learners. Consider working individually or in small groups with adult learners so that they can practice self-paced learning. Perhaps you can develop or adapt your lesson to a correspondence or take-home format.</p> <p>Some adults have less concern for the standards of middle class living, identifying instead with a cultural subgroup that supports their own standards of behavior and achievement. They may have strong religious ties, especially the mother in the family. Their motivations may be very different from the mainstream of society. Learn what motivates them, and put it to use in your lesson and recruitment materials you develop.</p>		
Concept of Time	Approach learning as something that can be applied to the present	Learn for the future
	Realistic concept of future	Children see future as vague; adolescents see it as vague, but unlimited
	View time as important	“All the time in the world”
<p>What does this mean for your teaching? When you plan a session, remember that adults have other responsibilities and restrictions on their time. Find out what times and dates are convenient for your target audience. Start and end session on time. Keep the time period of your session to an appropriate length. Narrow the focus of your session to avoid cramming too much content into the time available.</p> <p>Time restrictions can be stressful for busy adults. Try developing lessons that allow adult learners to learn at their own pace.</p> <p>Some adults may be more concerned in living for today than for the future, because today is enough of a challenge. They value comforts that make today more liveable. Understand their concerns. Make the content of your lesson meet their immediate needs.</p>		

This table highlights some of the differences in general between adults and youths in the ways they approach learning. In some situations, however, adult learners may have some of the traits of youth learners. For example, when adults enter a new, unfamiliar content area, they will likely depend on a teacher until learning enough to be self-directed again.

The Learning Environment

The learning environment includes the physical setting as well as the relationship between learner and teacher. It can directly affect the motivation and behavior of the learner.

You have some control over the learning environment. Review the following checklists to prepare for your teaching.

Checklist for Physical Surroundings

- _____ Comfortable space
- _____ Appropriate furniture
- _____ Adequate lighting
- _____ Minimum outside or inside noise distractions
- _____ Comfortable temperature
- _____ Good ventilation
- _____ Seating that promotes interaction with others
- _____ Healthy, appropriate refreshments
- _____ Rest rooms available
- _____ Safe, adequate nearby parking
- _____ Easy-to-read nametags
- _____ Suitable audiovisuals and equipment

Checklist for Interpersonal Relations

- _____ Welcome, friendly tone
- _____ Get acquainted exercise
- _____ Good communication techniques
- _____ Balance between teaching that is people-centered and task-oriented
- _____ Some way to help you and the learners identify their learning needs
- _____ Mutual planning of what is to be learned
- _____ Appropriate breaks and snacks
- _____ Democratic leadership
- _____ Learners' evaluation of learning experiences

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Suggested Readings

In addition to the references above, the reader will find the following to be worthwhile sources on teaching adults.

- Adult Learning*. The journal of the American Association for Adult & Continuing Education.
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Fact sheets in The Volunteer Teacher Series:

- T-8201 Becoming a More Effective Volunteer Teacher
- T-8202 Teaching Adults
- T-8203 Do-it-yourself Visuals