

Principles of Adult Learners

Treat Learners the Way We All Would Like to Be Treated

We all have years of experience and a wealth of information to share.

Focus on the strengths learners bring to the classroom, not just gaps in their knowledge. Provide opportunities for dialogue within the group. Tap their experience as a major source of enrichment to the class. Remember that you, the teacher, do not need to have all the answers, as long as you know where to go or who to call to get the answers. Students can be resources to you and to each other.

All of us form values, beliefs and opinions that we hold dear.

Demonstrate respect for differing beliefs, religions, value systems and lifestyles. Let your learners know that they are entitled to their values, beliefs and opinions, but that everyone in the room may not share their beliefs. Allow debate and challenge of ideas.

Our style and pace of learning has probably changed during our lives.

Use a variety of teaching strategies such as small group problem solving and discussion. Use auditory, visual, tactile and participatory teaching methods. Reaction time and speed of learning may be slower, but the ability to learn is not impaired by age. Most adults prefer teaching methods other than lecture.

We all relate new knowledge and information to previously learned information and experiences.

Assess the specific learning needs of your audience before your class or at the beginning of the class. Present single concepts and focus on application of concepts to relevant practical situations. Summarize frequently to increase retention and recall. Material outside of the context of participants' experiences and knowledge becomes meaningless.

Our bodies are influenced by gravity.

Plan frequent breaks, even if they are 2-minute "stretch" breaks. During a lecture, a short break every 45-60 minutes is sufficient. In more interactive teaching situations, breaks can be spaced 60-90 minutes apart.

We appreciate having our opinions respected.

Support the students as individuals. Self-esteem and ego are at risk in a classroom environment that is not perceived as safe or supportive. People will not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of being put down or ridiculed. Allow people to admit confusion, ignorance, fears, biases and different opinions. Acknowledge or thank students for their responses and questions. Treat all questions and comments with respect. Avoid saying "I just covered that" when someone asks a repetitive question. Remember, the only foolish question is the unasked question.

We have a deep need to be self-directing.

Engage the students in a process of mutual inquiry. Avoid merely transmitting knowledge or expecting total agreement. Don't "spoon-feed" the participants.

As we grow older, our individual differences increase.

Take into account differences in style, time, types and pace of learning. Use auditory, visual, tactile and participatory teaching methods.

We tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning.

Emphasize how learning can be applied in a practical setting. Use case studies, problem-solving groups, and participatory activities to enhance learning. Adults generally want to immediately apply new information or skills to current problems or situations.

Note: New information and skills must be relevant and meaningful to the concerns and desires of the students. Know what the needs are of individuals in your class. Students do not wish to learn what they will never use. The learning environment must be physically and psychologically comfortable.

Adapted from:

<http://www.hcc.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-1.htm>