

The Art & Science of Teaching Adults

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“Learning is most often considered a process of getting rather than giving. This is most evident in conceptions of student/teacher roles: teachers give and students get. Yet, in adult learning both the giving and getting are critical.” – David A. Kolb

Adult learners require some unique approaches that tap into both the art and the science of teaching. Unfortunately, many health professionals find themselves teaching adults with little to no knowledge about the fundamentals of adult education and learning theory. Have no fear—while there are fantastic degree programs out there for adult education, you don’t necessarily need a degree to teach adult learners, but you can certainly benefit by understanding the basics and knowing how to apply them in your instruction.

Good teaching starts with a foundation of good curriculum, content, and materials. Amazing teaching knows how to take these things and blend them with the concepts of pedagogy and andragogy to make the class fun, engaging, and worth attending.

First, what is pedagogy and andragogy? Here’s the short version of a heavily researched topic. Pedagogy is the art and science of teaching. With pedagogy, there is an assumption that the learner comes to the learning environment with little previous learning on a topic and the educator provides the tools for learning. This is common when teaching children. With andragogy, the learner (typically an adult) brings substantive experience and prior knowledge to the class. The role of the educator is to provide information (expertise) and guidance. Most adult learners are self-directed, motivated, and invested in their learning. The educator is merely a facilitator and partner in the learning experience.

Most likely, you have taken a class or training as an adult and you know when you’ve had a great teacher versus a just-okay teacher. You were engaged. You remember the information or content that was covered. You got something out of the class that you could readily apply personally or professionally. You felt respected and heard. In fact, you probably gave the instructor positive feedback. If that was not your experience, then the feedback was likely less than positive.

Have you ever received feedback like this?

- My childbirth educator showed us a PowerPoint and read it to us word for word.
- The discharge nurse rushed through the information, never asked any of us new parents if we had questions or acknowledged that there were a few mothers and fathers in the room who spoke very little English.
- The teacher talked to us like we were children who knew nothing about babies or breastfeeding.
- The leader of our 3-hour newborn care class never got out of her seat or had us move around. We just sat there and listened to her talk the entire time.
- The teacher was rude when some of us asked questions that challenged her point of view.

Let’s face it, as educators (and humans) we like positive feedback. That said, we can (and should) learn from negative feedback. Remember, the best teachers are also students.

Adult Learning Theory—The Short Version

Simply put, adult learners oversee their own learning. As a result, the teacher of adults has a different job from the one who teaches children. Malcolm S. Knowles, an American adult educator, famous for the adoption of the theory of andragogy, postulated that adult learners:

- Need to know why they are learning something
- Learn through doing
- Are problem solvers
- Learn best when the subject is of immediate use
- Prefer social interaction
- Want to use their life experiences in the classroom
- Want to integrate new ideas with existing knowledge

The Fab Four: Basic Principles for Teaching Adults

Knowles' research from the 1970's led to four basic principles for teaching adults. Think about how you already apply these principles into your teaching and reflect on what areas you could use some improvement. These are some of the ways that adult brains learn best.

1. Make sure your learners understand the “why” behind your class

Your learners need to see the relevance about why what you are teaching is an important part of their learning. Remember, adult learners are motivated to learn when they have a need to know. Throughout your class, your learners are asking themselves:

- What's in it for me?
- Why do I need this information?
- How will I benefit from it? How will my baby benefit from it?
- Will this help me change my behaviors (and my health)?

One way to address these questions is by establishing and sharing learning goal(s) and objectives. These goals and objectives should address what knowledge, skills, and attitudes your students will obtain as a result of the learning experience.

2. Adults learn best through multiple learning and teaching styles

There are three general learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (movement) or tactile (hands-on). Keep in mind, that most adults learn best when they are taught through multi-modal instruction. In other words, learning happens most effectively when information is processed through multiple senses. As a result, the retention of learned material is enhanced if presentations are multisensory and interactive (for example, your instruction might include both video clips, a PowerPoint, and hands-on activities).

Other effective learning strategies that engage the adult brain and belong in your teaching “tool box” include:

- Visuals
- Storytelling
- Humor and celebration
- Role playing, simulations or demonstrations

- Movement
- Games and icebreakers
- Brainstorming and discussion prompts
- Writing and reflection prompts
- Assessments or quizzes

3. Your learners should feel respected, included, comfortable, and safe

Feeling respected means that you acknowledge your learners' experience and current knowledge. This leads to an environment that conveys respect for everyone in the room. If people feel that they are being condescended or ignored, their focus is sidetracked from learning. As the teacher, you can create a productive learning environment. Here are some ways to do this:

- Show respect for the learner's individuality and experience
- Get to know your learners
- Be authentic and have a sense of humor
- Words matter—be sensitive to the language you use so that learners are not offended
- Be open to different perspectives
- Show that you care
- Let students be active participants in their learning

4. Use experiential learning as much as possible

Experiential learning does two things:

1. It honors the life experiences and knowledge that your adult students bring to the learning experience.
2. It invites active participation.

When you use experiential learning, you encourage your students to share their wisdom and experience whenever it's appropriate. Ask your students to share stories or myths they have heard. You can also use case studies and problem-solving exercises. These are memorable for adult learners and improve retention of new information. You can also try small group activities or discussions, role playing, or a hands-on activity. These strategies keep adult learners energized and engaged. In fact, research shows that kicking your class off with a quick activity can engage adult learners and encourage more active participation. As the instructor, this can provide you with valuable feedback about your learners' current knowledge and experience regarding a specific topic.

So, when teaching adults, consider these quick tips:

- Plan some activities where students can direct their own learning.
- Use active participation and groups for social interaction.
- Use a variety of teaching and learning methods, including hands-on learning.
- Make the learning relevant to what students will be doing when they leave the classroom.
- Spend less time lecturing and let learners work on solving problems through discussions and activities.

- Provide a supportive learning environment with multi-modal learning, breaks, and time for questions, discussions, and reflections.

Kristen Gosse, BA, BS, M.Ed., Senior Curriculum Writer & Researcher at InJoy has her Master's in Adult Education and Training! We rely on her talents to help create the material you may be using in your classroom, one-on-one, or by the bedside.