**5 Principles for the Teacher of Adults**

**Teaching Adult Learners**

**Principle 1: Make Sure Your Adult Participants Understand “Why”**

Most adults are in your classroom because they want to be. Some of them are there because they have [Continuing Education requirements](http://adulted.about.com/od/professionalcertifications/p/conferences.htm) to keep a certificate current, but most are there because they’ve chosen to learn something new.

This principle is not about why these participants are in your workshop, but about why each thing you teach them is an important part of the learning.

**Principle 2: Respect that Your Participants Have Different Learning Styles**

There are three general [learning styles](http://adulted.about.com/od/whatisadultlearning/a/Learning-To-Learn-A-New-Learning-Style.htm): visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

**Visual** learners rely on pictures. They love graphs, diagrams, and illustrations. “Show me,” is their motto. They often sit in the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions and to watch you, the teacher. They want to know what the subject looks like. You can best communicate with them by providing handouts, writing on the white board, and using phrases like, “Do you see how this works?”

**Auditory** learners listen carefully to all sounds associated with the learning. “Tell me,” is their motto. They will pay close attention to the [sound of your voice](http://sbinformation.about.com/od/marketingsales/a/speaking.htm) and all of its subtle messages, and they will actively participate in discussions. You can best communicate with them by speaking clearly, asking [questions](http://adulted.about.com/od/whatisadultlearning/a/Learning-To-Learn-A-New-Learning-Style.htm), and using phrases like, “How does that sound to you?”

**Kinesthetic** learners need to physically do something to understand it. Their motto is “Let me do it.” They trust their feelings and emotions about what they’re learning and how you’re teaching it. They want to actually touch what they’re learning. They are the ones who will get up and help you with role playing. You can best communicate with them by involving volunteers, allowing them to practice what they’re learning, and using phrases like, “How do you feel about that?”

Most people use all three styles while they’re learning, and of course, this is logical since we all have five senses, barring any disabilities, but one style almost always is preferred.

The big question is, “How do you, as the teacher, know which participant has which learning style?” Without training in [neuro-linguistics](http://healing.about.com/od/nlp/NLP_Neurolinguistic_Programming.htm), it might be difficult, but conducting a short learning style assessment at the beginning of your class would benefit you *and* the participants. This information is as valuable to the participant as it is to you.

**Principle 3: Allow Your Participants to Experience What They’re Learning**

Experience can take many forms. Any activity that gets your workshop participants involved makes the learning experiential. This includes small group discussions, experiments, role playing, skits, building something at their table or desk, writing or [drawing](http://drawsketch.about.com/od/learntodraw/u/learn-to-draw.htm#s5) something specific – activity of any kind. Activities also keep people [energize](http://adulted.about.com/od/icebreakers/tp/partygameenergizers.htm)d, especially activities that involve getting up and moving about.

The other aspect of this principle is honoring the life experiences your participants bring to the classroom. Be sure to tap into that wealth of [wisdom](http://quotations.about.com/cs/inspirationquotes/a/Wisdom1.htm) whenever it’s appropriate. You’ll have to be a good timekeeper because people can talk for hours when asked for personal experiences, but the extra facilitation needed will be well worth the gems your participants have to share.

**Principle 4: When the Student Is Ready, the Teacher Appears**

“When the student is ready, the teacher appears” is a [Buddhist](http://buddhism.about.com/od/basicbuddhistteachings/a/basicshub.htm)[proverb](http://adulted.about.com/od/whatisadultlearning/tp/Inspirational-Quotations-For-Students-No-2.htm) packed with wisdom. No matter how hard a teacher tries, if the student isn’t ready to learn, chances are good he or she won’t. What does this mean for you as a teacher of adults? Luckily, your students are in your classroom because they want to be. They’ve already determined that the time is right.

It’s your job to listen carefully for teaching moments and take advantage of them. When a participant says or does something that triggers a topic on your agenda, be flexible and teach it right then. If that would wreak havoc on your schedule, which is often the case, teach a bit about it rather than saying flat out that they’ll have to wait until later in the program. By then, you may have lost their interest.

**Principle 5: Encourage Your Adult Students**

For most adults, being out of the classroom for even a few years can make training intimidating. If they haven’t taken a class in decades, it’s understandable that they would have some degree of apprehension about what it will be like and how well they’ll do. It can be tough to be a rookie when you’ve been an expert in your field for many, many years. Nobody enjoys feeling foolish.

Your job as a teacher of adult students includes being positive and encouraging. Patience helps too. Give your older students time to respond when you ask a question. They may need a few moments to consider their answer. Recognize the contributions they make, even when small. Give them words of encouragement whenever the opportunity arises. Most adults will rise to [your expectations](http://humanresources.about.com/od/managementtips/a/mgmtsecret.htm) if you’re clear about them.

Here is a word of caution. Being positive and encouraging is not the same as being condescending. Always remember that your participants are adults. Speaking to them in the tone of voice you might use with a child is offensive, and the damage can be very difficult to overcome. Genuine encouragement from one person to another, regardless of age, is a wonderful point of human interaction.

This is your challenge as a teacher of adults. Beyond teaching your subject, you have the opportunity to [inspire](http://adulted.about.com/od/teachers/tp/5-Crucial-Skills-For-The-Teacher-Of-Adult-Education.htm) confidence and passion in another human being. That kind of teaching changes lives.

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