

Engaging Adult Learners

Academic Matters, OCUFA's journal of higher education had this to say about the student population of Canadian universities:

“Undergraduates in Canada and the U.S. are studying less, working more, and taking longer to complete their degrees... Just one quarter of university students today follow the path of the traditional, full-time, residential undergraduate. If these trends continue, universities may have to rethink the model of an immersive, four-year, undergraduate degree program. Indeed, many schools have already started experimenting with three-year accelerated programs, part-time offerings, and distance education to serve these 'non-traditional' students” (Steele, 2010)

Non-traditional students are usually older, and may have different commitments or priorities than younger students. They may be taking night classes because they work during the day, or they may be trying to enter a new field mid-career.

When teaching a course with a population of “non-traditional” students, keep in mind some characteristics unique to adult learners:

1. *Adult learning is selective.* This means that adults learn what is meaningful for them. They are “not very inclined to learn something they are not interested in, or in which they cannot see the meaning and importance” (Rubenson, 2011, p. 49).
2. *Adult learning is self-directed.* Adults take responsibility for their own learning. Malcolm Knowles defined self-directed learning as “a process by which people identify their learning needs, set goals, choose how to learn, gather materials, and evaluate their progress” (Rubenson, 2011, p. 53).
3. *Many adult learners have been away from formal schooling for many years,* and may have had negative experiences with school. These adult learners may be reentering schooling with anxiety and low self-esteem (Rubenson, 2011, p. 53).
4. Conversely, *adult learners also bring years of previous knowledge and experience* to the classroom, as well as an established system of values and beliefs governing their thought (Jarvis, 2004, p. 144). They expect to be treated as adults.
5. *Adults often have a problem-centered approach to learning,* and are interested in content that has a direct application to their lives. They want to see immediately how the course content is relevant to their current problems or situations (Rochester Institute of Technology).

These characteristics of adult learners require a different approach to teaching than would be used for the “traditional” population of undergraduate students, and therefore the design of a course should take the makeup of the student body into account.

Best Practices for Teaching Adult Learners

Keillor and Littlefield (2012) have developed the following list of best practices for “promoting an adult’s readiness to learn.”

1. Create a safe, welcoming learning environment
2. Create a culture of empathy, respect, approachability, authenticity
3. Collaborate on the diagnosis of learning needs
4. Collaborate on developing learning objectives and in instructional planning
5. Ensure the practicality of all learning activities

When teaching students who may have had little experience of formal education, or are returning to school after a long break, Lee Bash stresses the importance of creating a “link between the world the adult knows and the academy he or she is about to enter.”

1. “Introduce and orient new students to the specific institution and what makes it distinctive for adult learners.
2. Help the students make adjustments to college-level work while preparing them for some of the potential problems they are likely to encounter as adult learners.
3. Prepare the student for the responsibilities they are about to assume and understand what faculty members typically seek in good students” (Bash, 2003, p. 161).

Teaching Methods that Support Adult Learning

Jarvis and Rubenson have identified some over-arching concepts governing good teaching methods for adult learners.

1. *Teachers should facilitate learning.* They should create the environment in which learning occurs, and guide the students through the learning process; however, they should not dictate the outcome of the experience. “They may seek to create an awareness of a specific learning need in the students; to confront students with a problem requiring a solution; to provide the students with an experience and encourage reflection on it” (Jarvis, 2004, p. 153)
2. *Teachers should provide autonomy and independence.* This can mean the freedom of pace, choice, method, content, or assessment. For instance, students “should be free to work at their own speed, choose to study particular aspects of a course, choose to study particular aspects of a course, adopt whatever learning style suits them best, and be free to choose what they learn” (Jarvis, 2004, p. 154).
3. *Teaching should empower learners.* As a corollary to the need to provide autonomy and independence, teachers should share power and decision-making roles with their students. Teachers should “avoid being in the position of providing right answers.” They should make sure that there is equal access to all resources, include self-evaluation in graded courses, involve students in managing the learning environment, and be open and explicit about what is happening and why (Rubenson, 2011, p.57).

There are many specific teaching methods that can be used to support adult learning. Jarvis provides a list, dividing it into two categories, teacher-centered and student-centered.

Teacher-centered methods include lectures, guided discussions, demonstrations, mentoring, and tutorials. Student centered methods include group discussions, debates, buzz-groups, fishbowls, role-playing, simulations, and gaming (Jarvis, 2004, p. 165). Some of these methods are highlighted below, with a special focus on aspects that are beneficial to adult learners:

- **Didactic Teaching**
A didactic approach can be very effective when used to encourage students to analyze the course content rather than just learn it by rote. This can be done by encouraging learners to ask questions, thus initiating the learning process themselves. Further, if a student asks a question to which the teacher doesn't know the answer, Jarvis stresses the importance of asking the class if anyone knows the answer, and then suggesting students go out and find the answer themselves. When a teacher admits to not knowing the answer and trusting the students to be able to figure it out, this demonstrates a respect for the students' knowledge and experience, as well as facilitating their independent learning (Jarvis, 2004, p. 150).
- **Socratic Teaching**
The Socratic method “introduces questioning into the teaching and learning process; it consists of the teacher directing a logical sequence of questions at the learners, so that they are enabled to respond and to express the knowledge that they have, but which they might never have crystallized in their own mind.” The Socratic method is an effective method to employ when teaching adults because it:
 - “utilizes both their store of knowledge and their experience of life”
 - “help the learners create rather than reproduce knowledge”
 - actively engage learners in the learning process (Jarvis, 2004, p. 151).
- **Problem-Based Learning**
The distinctive feature of problem-based learning, and the one that makes it so well suited to adult learners, is “the focusing of the learning process on the identification, exploration, and attempted resolution of realistic problems” (Tight, 2003, p. 105). By presenting “a problem as a simulation of professional practice or a ‘real life’ situation... getting students to identify their own learning needs and appropriate use of available resources, and reapplying this new knowledge to the original problem and evaluating their learning processes,” the instructor has engaged adult learners in relevant problems, given them responsibility over their own learning, and valued their existing knowledge and experience (Tight, 2003, p. 105).

For more on information on some of the above-mentioned teaching techniques, including lecture methods, leading discussions, and active learning exercises, see the LTO's page of ***Teaching Tips Handouts***:

http://ryerson.ca/lt/resources/lto_handouts.html

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