

Theory to Practice

Practical Strategies for Adult Educators

Patricia Lawler

Abstract

Adult educators come from as many and as diverse backgrounds as the adults they teach. Many educators committed to providing programs and instruction to adults have little or no training in the foundations and practice of adult learning. For this article, Six Keys based on theoretical constructs and research have been formulated to facilitate the learning process for both the educator and the participant. These keys are: 1) Understand and reduce anxiety; 2) Elicit and incorporate expectations; 3) Acknowledge and utilize experience; 4) Provide and encourage active participation; 5) Identify and incorporate relevant content; 6) Facilitate change and growth. Each key is explained and practical strategies for implementation are provided.

Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) point out that organizations and institutions that deliver adult education often are "out of synchrony with the character of the adult experience" (p.1) and frequently do not recognize adult education programs as central to their missions. Deliverers of training seldom see themselves as adult educators, and they come to their work without formal education in the theory and practice of adult learning. Training is largely dependent upon the occupation or "the role that the practitioner plays" (Galbraith & Zelenak, 1989, p. 130), which may not be defined as adult education.

How can we as adult educators gain a better understanding of adult learning in order to deliver the best and most effective programming and instruction? Many of us come to adult education from backgrounds as diverse as our students' backgrounds. Learning as we go in our profession is the norm. What can be done to gain a better understanding of adult

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learning and then to deliver the best and most effective programming and instruction?

Following are six guidelines designed to help adult educators develop and implement practical strategies for success. I call these guidelines "Keys" because the use of them has the potential both to remove pedagogical constraints many trained teachers bring with them to adult education practice and to unlock the facilitative abilities of all adult educators. Formulated from previous research and based on theoretical foundations (Freire, 1970; Knowles, 1980; Lawler, 1988; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Mezirow, 1981), these Keys are useful to the formally educated practitioner as well as the professional whose background is in another discipline. All keys presented here are based on the premise that adults learn more effectively and efficiently when they actively participate in the educational activity.

Key 1— Understand and Reduce Anxiety

Adults may feel anxious and insecure as they enter a classroom or begin a training program. An unfamiliar or new setting and negative memories of education are possible causes of anxiety; we tend to remember our negative educational experiences. It is important to be aware of the tension that many adults bring to the classroom, defuse the anxiety, and help them to have realistic expectations. Remember that you are interested in having adults be active participants (see Key 4); include opportunities for information sharing and discussion.

These three strategies can help to reduce anxiety:

1. Present the overall agenda at the beginning of the program, and the class agenda at the beginning of each class.
2. Describe both the activities and the content that will be covered.
3. State clearly your expectations of the participants.

An adult educator's goals should be to help participants feel comfortable and welcome, respected as adults, and confident in their capabilities. Incorporating the strategies above into the introduction and opening comments will help reduce anxiety in those crucial first minutes of a seminar or class, and a successful start will enable students to engage in the activity and participate to their fullest potential.

Key 2 — Elicit and Incorporate Expectations

As Knowles (1980) suggests, adults are oriented to relating their educational endeavors to developmental tasks for immediate application and thus bring their own expectations to an educational activity. They take a class, seminar, or training program to satisfy immediate needs in their lives. Participant expectations and needs can act as a starting point in the design of a program.

Conducting a needs assessment with potential participants is the foremost strategy required to facilitate this Key. Whether it is formal and takes place prior to program development, or whether it is informal and during the class, the needs assessment is crucial to the success of the program; it is during this process that who our participants are and what they want is discovered.

Useful strategies for informally eliciting and incorporating participants' expectations during class are:

1. Provide an opportunity at the beginning of the program for participants to share their expectations with each other and with you. Listing expectations on a flip chart and sharing goals are examples of such introductory exercises.
2. Refer back to these expectations throughout the program to reinforce the immediacy of what is being learned. Be flexible enough in content and process to allow a few minutes to relate information to their needs, and ask the participants to share an example of how the content will relate to their world.
3. Give the participants an opportunity, at or near the conclusion of the program, to compare their expectations and the objectives with what they actually have experienced and gained. This can be done in several different ways. Evaluation forms listing the course objectives and goals as well as the objectives and expectations elicited from the participants at the beginning can be useful. This information can also be discussed in small groups or with the entire group by reviewing the list of their expectations formulated at the beginning of the class. Taking this step is especially important if some of the participants' expectations are unrealistic because the process helps participants to realize what can be accomplished and helps to promote a more positive feeling, even when some of the participants' expectations are not met.

Working with adults means being flexible. This is particularly true when incorporating their needs and expectations into a program and instructional method.

Key 3 — Acknowledge and Utilize Experience

Adults bring a rich reservoir of experience to our classroom (Knowles, 1980). This is one of the primary things that makes an adult student different from a child. Therefore it is important to ask participants what they know and have them contribute their ideas to the topic at hand. Information presented by the participants contributes a different point of view, a broader perspective. Also, their participation in the class illustrates the fact that the student-teacher relationship in an adult class is very different; both are adults with expertise and knowledge.

It is important to remember that adult students never should be seen as empty vessels that teachers fill up with facts and information. That attitude is not very successful with adults. Adult students want information and knowledge when they come to a class, but that information and knowledge can come from many sources, including the participants themselves.

Education can be a sharing experience, a dialogical relationship (Shor, 1987); this is especially true of adult education. Involving the participants can give them a sense of empowerment and can enliven the educational experience. Adult educators can also be learners in these situations by learning new techniques to broaden their repertoire. Participants' expertise in various areas of their lives should not be threatening to adult educators; these participants probably are enrolled in the class or seminar because they see a need to increase their expertise or to expand their knowledge in a new area.

Strategies which can be used to acknowledge and utilize participants' rich reservoir of experience are:

1. Let the participants share their own experiences with the topic as an introductory exercise.
2. Use group exercises to provide good opportunities to share experiences with varied topics.
3. Use case studies to allow the participants to draw on their own experiences to solve problems and present solutions.

When adults can see that they have a wealth of information, that they are capable of sharing this expertise, and that they can adapt skills from other areas of their lives to the problem at hand, then they are engaging in confidence-building activities. Such activities help adult educators expedite participants' change from dependent learners to more independent, autonomous learners. These opportunities, which also help the participants become actively involved in the learning process, provide another important key to facilitating adult learning.

Key 4 — Provide and Encourage Active Participation

Brookfield (1989) states: "Facilitators must be alert to those teachable moments when learners' attentions are engaged in some unanticipated way and, being alert to these moments, facilitators build on them" (p. 203). When working with adults, it is important to create a learning atmosphere that encourages the active involvement of the participants; adults have work and family responsibilities and are used to taking an active role in their daily lives.

Active participation not only enhances learning but maintains interest. We have all been put to sleep in the afternoon by a long lecture during a seminar. Interspersing active participation with other methods helps keep people involved and interested. Also, a variety of learning activities helps us meet the different learning styles of adults that we would see in a classroom.

Research has shown that "adult education is best facilitated in a participative environment" (Lawler, 1988, p. 49). This means having a learning climate which encourages and facilitates the active interchange of ideas, content, and experience, and the active involvement of each participant. Active participation can be fostered by the following strategies:

1. Design the overall program with numerous opportunities for participant involvement.
2. Use group exercises, role playing, case studies, group discussion, and practice.
3. Provide opportunities for participant feedback throughout the program, and encourage participants to discuss how they feel about the learning process.

Key 5 — Identify and Incorporate Relevant Content

We have seen that adults plan their educational activities in relation to their developmental tasks, as responses to particular events in their lives, and to help them solve problems related to their roles in life. Adults want to put their learning to use right away. In fact, they may not be interested in what you are presenting unless the information is meaningful to something immediate in their lives. When preparing programs, adult educators should ask themselves: Is the content related to the goals of the educational activity? Is the content appropriate to the participants' level of experience? Is the instructional methodology applicable to the content and to the learner's level of expertise? Can the information be utilized by the participants in the time frame they are expecting? With these questions in mind, we can make sure the information we have identified and incorporated into our programs is on target for our participants.

Helpful strategies for implementing this important key are:

1. Take participants' needs into consideration when planning and designing program and instructional methodology.
2. Have participants list their expectations and objectives at the beginning of the educational activity. This is a way to stay on target while adjusting to the needs and expectations of adult learners.
3. Provide participants with models of how to put the information to work immediately by using real examples and referring to real problems and issues from the participants' own experiences.
4. Use exercises for small group work that reflect real life situations. Information from the needs assessment and profiles of participants can be helpful in incorporating real life situations.
5. Have the participants work on an action plan at the end of the semester, class, or training period. What will they do next? How will they take what they have learned and put it to immediate use? What goals will they set for themselves in implementing their learning experiences? Constructing this plan can help the participants focus on the content of the educational activity and assess their learning.

Adults attempt to make sense of their learning, to fit it into their world. There are many settings in which adult educators do and can take advantage of this fact. In literacy training, for example, it is effective to have adults practice on examples from their own lives — the newspaper, the church hymnal, their children's homework, the prices in a supermarket, their telephone bill. In a graduate course in decision making, the class can contribute incidents from their professional lives which represent various dilemmas. In staff development for high school teachers, an adult educator can present strategies which will fit the socio-economic culture of the school.

Being responsive to the needs and experience of adult learners does not mean that adult educators forsake theory. It does mean that educators make the principles and theory relevant to learners' needs by presenting the information in a way that helps learners make a relationship. Establishing a relationship to learner needs creates a climate conducive to growth and change.

Key 6 — Facilitate Change and Growth

Several of the philosophical traditions of adult education, concerned with personal development and personal and social improvement, seek to promote individual growth and involvement in society. Following this tradition acknowledges that education can have a powerful effect on the learner. It is our responsibility to understand that process and to be aware of our role in our participants' educational lives.

Recognizing that adults do change and grow throughout their life span is vital to successful adult education. "As we learn to see people in the context of their potential for growth, the possibilities for enriching their educational experience expand rapidly" (Daloz, 1986, p. 45). Adults seek out education as a response to the change they experience and to help them cope with life tasks and effectively negotiate life transitions. It is also during an educational activity that adults experience growth by expanding their worlds and their thinking. Daloz (1986) points out: "We must be concerned not simply with how much knowledge our students have acquired but also with how they are making meaning of that knowledge and how it is affecting their capacity to go on learning, framing the world in ever more inclusive and comprehensive ways" (p. 237).

Education can be empowering. However, in order to promote and facilitate growth and development of adult learners, adult educators first need to respect their learners and understand who they are and what their needs are. "The adult educator who demonstrates respect is unwilling to use his or her position to coerce others to act or believe in a given way or to exploit those who are oppressed" (Brockett, 1988, p. 13). Many of the techniques discussed here, such as role plays, group exercises, and case studies, can be opportunities for abuse and disrespect if careful consideration for participants is not taken by the teacher or program developer in the designing and implementing these methodologies. Such consideration is vital for the participants' well being and the success of our programs.

If education is to help adults change and grow, adult educators must remember that the adult learner is an autonomous person, deserving of respect. Establishing a climate where the participants feel comfortable sharing and learning can be the key to making education work for them. Some useful strategies are:

1. Remember that adults are experts in many other areas of their lives. Building on that confidence and illustrating ways in which their abilities can be newly applied will enhance the educational experience for them.
2. Use positive reinforcement and encouragement throughout the educational event. This is especially important during group discussions and question and answer periods; these are periods in which the adult may be taking a risk.
3. Be open to participants' ideas, suggestions, and feedback. Adult education moves away from a teacher-centered orientation toward a dialogical encounter between instructor and participant. The instructor, too, needs to take risks.
4. Be aware that adult students are uniquely different and varied. This diversity and variety can enliven the educational experience and enhance the learning process.

If adult educators ground their personal educational philosophies in respect for their learners as independent adults, then they will seek to create a climate conducive to helping their adult learners grow and develop. Creating a supportive environment can help adult learners build confidence, take appropriate risks, learn, and grow.

Conclusion

The keys described here can provide the novice as well as the seasoned and schooled adult educator with valuable strategies for working with adults in a wide variety of settings. Most adult educators would agree that teaching and working with adult learners is a rewarding experience. Adult educators willing to be flexible in their practice and to take risks along with their participants will find that these keys can help them to open up a new and richer education for both teachers and students.

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