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Tips for Teaching Adult Students

By: [Brooks Doherty](#) in [Effective Teaching Strategies](#)



With the number of non-traditional students growing, many educators have discovered that adult learners are fundamentally different than their younger counterparts in many ways. Yet, most instructors have been left to their own devices to figure out how best to reach these students who come to class with an entirely different set of challenges, demands and expectations, and generally at a much different level of maturity.

How can instructors better accommodate and encourage adult student success in a classroom setting? Here are a number of ways to create a better environment for adult learners, no matter what the subject material.

- **Treat them like the adults they are.** Adult learners are generally more sophisticated and experienced than their younger counterparts and they benefit from realistic examples of skills they can use in “real life.” “Adult learners will be empowered as they discover they have a great deal to teach their younger classmates, and the dynamic is mutually beneficial,” said Thomas Lisack, an instructor at Rasmussen College in Wausau, WI. Lisack recommends incorporating intergenerational discussions on issues that otherwise have a generational divide as appropriate for the subject matter to engage learners of all ages.
- **Be aware that their classroom skills may be “rusty.”** Some adult learners have not been in a classroom for 30 years, so you may need to remind them of basic rules and etiquette, such as raising a hand if you have a question. At the same time, reassure them that, as the instructor, you will not be judgmental of their life experiences or their perspectives, and that they will be evaluated only on their mastery of the content. Be generous when it comes to formatting issues such as APA writing guidelines. Instead, focus on content. “I have found adult learners to be self-conscious, even apologetic, when it comes to being in the classroom,” Lisack noted. “They might even exhibit some shame because they feel decades behind their classmates. The more you can break down these walls of insecurity, the better.”

- **Consider and acknowledge the technology gap.** Students in their 50s and 60s are generally not nearly as tech savvy—or tech dependent, as some would argue—as 18 or even 30 year olds. Assess each student’s level of proficiency as it relates to class requirements and compensate. Lisack said he once spent three hours after class teaching a group of displaced workers—many of whom had never used a computer—the finer points of Microsoft Word. “The students were very grateful. I felt I’d accomplished something important to help them on their educational journey and it was very satisfying,” he said. Even if they are skilled with technology, adult learners tend to have dramatically different habits. “While younger students may be tethered to technology, adults have longer attention spans and traditional classroom approaches appeal to them,” Lisack said. “This does not mean you can lecture to them for three hours, but you can expect the older learner to concentrate on complex material without feeling ‘withdrawal’ of from a technology device.”
- **Be efficient with lessons and activities.** “Move fast and don’t waste anyone’s time,” advises Andrea Leppert, adjunct instructor at Rasmussen College in Aurora/Naperville, IL. “Adult students have jobs, sometimes children and tons of responsibilities, so pack every class with information and useful activities.” Consider balancing instructional time with “lab” time, giving students an opportunity to do modeling work or homework in class to give them a better chance of accomplishing all the requirements on time. Leppert also suggests being “strictly flexible” — diligent in your expectations, yet understanding about busy lives, illness and working late. “Like any job, it’s not to be abused, but as grown-ups, we have priorities that sometimes take precedent over finishing assignments,” she said. “Build in safety nets that allow a limited number of late assignments to maintain flexibility, accountability and expectations of excellent work.”
- **Be creative:** Use the unique vibe or personality of each class to teach the lesson and choose activities that engage, and even entertain to some degree. Pair highly motivated students with those less skilled on projects to create peer encouragement and mentoring. Leppert says this strategy keeps students interested, attendance high and motivation strong.

Finally, beyond specific tactics, both Lisack and Leppert emphasize personal growth when working with adult students. While younger students are encouraged to do well on standardized tests and accustomed to being compared to their peers in this way, adult learners are challenging themselves. Consider making personal growth in ability and skills part of the actual grade. Leppert said, “I compare the first speech to the last one given when I grade to determine how they are personally improving. It helps build confidence and give tangible areas for improvement. School is hard enough...we should point out the positives.”

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