



# Adult Learning



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# Principles of Adult Learning



**Respect** By the time a person reaches adulthood, he or she has had many experiences and has learned a great deal along the way. Adults are more open to learning new things when they are acknowledged for the wisdom, skills and resources they bring to the new situation. For example, a mother of four in a business management course brings a great deal of wisdom about multi-tasking and balancing the needs and desires of different people. She learned these things from her parenting, but they are skills easily transferred to the business management environment.

To show respect in a learning environment, acknowledge people for who they are, what they know and do, and what they bring to the present situation. The root word for respect is the same as that for “spectacles” ...respect can be literally translated as “I see you”.



**Relevance** When you were in school and a teacher was introducing a new complex theory or some historical minutia or a difficult algebra equation, do you remember anyone asking, “why do we have to know this?” That question represents the learner’s desire for relevance! It’s the same for adults, except that adults are in charge of their own lives – so if a “teacher” doesn’t make the information relevant to the adult learner, that learner will decide it is unimportant and leave the information behind.

To ensure relevance in a learning environment, ask people what they would like to learn and how that information will be useful to them. Then you can work together to find the answers to their questions. Sometimes people don’t know what they don’t know. In such cases, you can help the adult learner to take in new information by explaining how it will be useful in their lives.



**Immediacy** Adults are busy people. For adults to retain new information, there must be a useful application for the information – right away – in their own lives. Immediacy builds on relevance, giving the adult learner a way to put their new knowledge to work for them. For example, an environmental education course on recycling might be interesting to many. But it incorporates immediacy when it addresses the benefits and challenges of recycling in the learners’ own households, and then problem solves those challenges.

To incorporate immediacy, you will need to know something about your learners so that you can point out the ways the information you’re presenting can be put to use - right away - in their situations. Often, if you have done a good job of demonstrating respect and relevance, the learners will figure out the immediate applications for themselves (these often look like “aha” moments). You can also ask about plans for the impending timeframe. For instance, do you already have a plan for how you’d like your first night with your new puppy to go? What can I help you with to make tonight go well?



**Safety** Learning takes a lot of energy and requires focus. People are more capable of learning when it is safe-enough to do so. While there are many variations in how people like to learn, generally a safe learning environment is one that is supportive, free from threat of physical or emotional harm, and that meets at least some of the learners’ needs for comfort (not too warm or cold, ample seating, etc.) and concentration (not too loud or chaotic, etc.).

To practice safety, look for opportunities to praise learners for their accomplishments, as well as ways to correct mistakes that help people retain their dignity. Sometimes the best way to do this is to simply ask, “how would you like to be corrected when you make a mistake?” Safety doesn’t mean there will be no challenge or no corrections; it only means there will be no dumb questions.



**Engagement** There is an old proverb that speaks eloquently of engagement: “Tell me...and I will forget, Show me...and I may remember, Involve me...and I will understand.” People learn best when they are actively involved with the information. Active involvement can include such things as practicing a new skill right away or using new information to solve a problem or having a meaningful dialogue about the ramifications of the information. When expecting parents go to birthing classes, for example, they practice Lamaze breathing, plan all of the details for their birth experience, and talk about their thoughts and feelings about this impending life-changing event.

To reach that 80% of retention – to really engage your learners – look for ways to get your learners to *do* something (right then and there) with the information you’re providing.