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Adults as Learners: Teaching Adults in Extension

Tanya Dvorak, Community and Leadership Development

Teaching adults is the foundation upon which rests the Cooperative Extension mission, “to enable people to improve their lives and communities through learning partnerships that put knowledge to work.” Agents and university faculty began targeting adult audiences through Extension programs that predated the Smith Lever Act of 1914, and adult education is as important today as it was more than 100 years ago. As an adult educator, it is important for you to better understand your adult audiences and their educational needs to ensure that Extension remains the world’s largest non-formal educational program. Although teaching adults in a non-formal arena does not yield a formal degree or certification, the training or other education avenues are vital to their lives and businesses.

Adults are a specialized audience of learners; therefore, you should consider several aspects when developing and hosting educational programs for them. There are also numerous differences in teaching approaches of adults versus youth. For instance, adults bring experience and education, among other aspects, with them. As an adult educator, you are both an educator and a facilitator of learning. You are primarily responsible for educating your learners and teaching in an engaged, active way. You also serve as a facilitator of learning by calling upon adult learners to share their knowledge and experiences with the group. This enables the program participants (and you) to all learn something from each other. Therefore, it is important to provide a climate conducive to learning, or an “educative environment.”

An educative environment for adult learners includes:

- A safe, non-threatening learning environment
- A place where their personalities are respected

- Allowing adult learners to participate in decision making, freedom of expression, and availability of information

- Mutuality of responsibility in defining goals, planning and conducting activities, and evaluating the learning

These principles are in line with the process utilized by the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service agents for the development of successful plans of work. For Extension programs to be well attended and well perceived, these concepts must be fully understood and followed. It is critically important to engage community members and advisory councils in decision making about educational programs, thus adding value and buy-in. Furthermore, adult educators should call on community members to seek insight on program planning in order to discover ideas for effective teaching techniques to reach members of specific communities or groups. Similar to engaging advisory councils, allowing others to help define goals for your programs and help you plan, conduct, and evaluate programs fosters additional opportunities for adults to learn and provide their expertise. Not every adult learner will be able to be involved in every step, but a committee, council, or stakeholder’s assistance will enhance the program—and its outcomes—far better than what you as an individual adult educator can do alone. Thus, this assistance will aid in providing curriculum developed with the adult learners’ needs and interests in mind.

Principles of Teaching Adults

Research on adult education dates back to the early 1900s. The theory of teaching adults is known as andragogy, which was introduced in the United States in the

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1970s by Malcolm Knowles. Knowles is known as the father of andragogy. Andragogy is a Greek word, which when translated means “the art and science of helping adults learn.” Andragogy, in essence, focuses on adults as learners and is the prolog for lifelong learning. Knowles established the following set of core adult learning principles, which are applicable to teaching adults in any circumstance and within any topic area.

The Learner's Need to Know

An adult needs to know why they need to learn information before attending a training. Sometimes adults readily realize they need information. For instance, a person recently diagnosed with diabetes typically wants to learn information more about their new condition and will often seek out educational programs to acquire it. However, oftentimes adult learners need to understand their need to learn this new information, so help them! Let them know upfront what they will learn, how they will learn it, and what impact this will have on their lives and the lives of those around them in your program marketing materials to create buy-in. With this new knowledge they will be much more likely to attend your educational program.

Self-Concept of the Learner

The self-concept of adult learners is different than that of children. Adults are independent learners and self-directed in their learning. They believe and know they are responsible for their own learning. They will attend educational programs because they want to be there and learn information. As an adult educator, you must respect that the adult learners “want” to be at the training, therefore, taking into consideration what they want to learn is important. A good way to do this is either by sending out a preliminary questionnaire to participants who are registered for your training or ask participants during the introduction to the training what they want to learn. Furthermore, it is helpful for you as the educator to assess the current knowledge of adults, which may also be done prior to the training or at the beginning of the training. This will provide the adult educator with insight about the learners. Pre-tests, questionnaires, interviews, and surveys are all good methods for collecting this type of background information.

Prior Experience of the Learner

The prior experience of an adult learner will affect how much the adult learner may learn during the educational program. Every person has different life experiences, and prior experiences can provide a rich foundation for learning. The instructor of adults must realize that some participants may have significant experience in a certain area, while some may have little or no experience. The instructor should utilize adult learners who have more experience in order for the program to remain of use to the adults. Adults with lots of experience should be called on to provide personal expertise and experiences along with the content being provided by the adult educator. In general, adults like to talk, so providing those with prior experience the opportunity to share their knowledge will empower them as program participants and enhance the overall educational program. This will also help them feel personally needed as they are able to contribute to other learners. Assessing learners’ prior knowledge will again aid the adult educator in utilizing participants during the program, yet it may also be impromptu.

Readiness to Learn

Readiness to learn refers to the fact that adults learn information when they are ready to learn it. For instance, a person will learn more about managing their finances, through the Managing in Tough Times Program, and apply the knowledge and skills they learn when they are ready to begin managing their finances better or when they know their family will be facing a change or has had a change in their financial situation. A person is ready to learn about a topic when they need to cope with a situation in life or perform a specific task. Adults are self-motivated to learn information that immediately applies to their lives. This is important in the early stages of program development as you market your program to the proper target audience. Adult educators want to attract adults who are ready to learn program content to attend their trainings.

Orientation to Learning

The orientation to learning is relative to why adult learners are at an educational program. Just as they need to be ready to learn, adults are life-centered and want

to learn as a result of a problem they want to solve or other contextual situation they are in to solve a problem, complete a task or live in a more fulfilling way. The more oriented to learning a specific topic an adult is, the more likely they will be to learn.

Motivation to Learn

Adults are more intrinsically motivated to learn than extrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivation for adults to attend an Extension program to learn new knowledge or skills may be improved self-esteem, an improved quality of life, recognition, self-actualization, or self-confidence. For example, if an adult wants to begin composting, he or she will attend a training where the adult educator provides information on how to build a compost bin, what may be composted, what to do with the compost over time, acquiring further resources and allow time for discussion. An adult may leave this program feeling empowered to go home and create their own compost bin. In this example, the personal payoff will be reducing waste by recycling and having compost material to utilize in their home garden or landscape.

Adult educators must consider each of these core adult learning principles when developing and hosting educational programs since a standardized approach to teaching adults will be ineffective. Adults need to be respected as individuals with needs and desires for new knowledge and skills that may be applied to their lives.

Categories of Adult Learners

Adult learners who attend continuing education programs fall within three categories: goal-oriented learners, activity-oriented learners, and learning-oriented learners (Table 1).

Table 1. Categories of adult learners.

Categories of adult learners	Characteristics
Goal-oriented learners	Attend educational programs to learn a new skill or knowledge to meet a need.
Activity-oriented learners	Attend educational programs to build relationships and communicate with others.
Learning-oriented learners	Attend educational programs to gain knowledge because they love learning.

Goal-oriented learners attend an educational program to learn something that applies directly to their lives. These learners become interested in a new skill or knowledge they wish to learn, and therefore attend the program to acquire it. A new homeowner might like to learn how to begin a home vegetable garden, so she seeks out a Saturday Extension home horticulture workshop in her county. Goal-oriented learners may be those “one time program attendees” who attend Extension programs to learn something specific in order to accomplish their own objectives.

Activity-oriented learners like to attend educational programs to participate in discussion, develop relationships, and meet new friends with similar interests. These learners like to join classes, clubs and groups and will choose to attend an educational program based on how much interaction that the program may allow them to have with other participants. Community members who join Homemakers’ Clubs not only seek out the learning opportunities, but also actively seek the communication and relationship building aspects of the program. Plan accordingly to attract these types of participants by allotting extra time for conversations and allowing snacks to be served at trainings.

Learning-oriented learners are those who simply want to learn for the sake of learning. Learning-oriented adults are those who learn while on vacation. They read newsletters, visit educational websites, tune in to radio and television shows purposefully to learn new information.

Extension agents and/or specialists may identify these three general categories of educational program attendees once they get to know why adults are attending their training or what they wish to learn when introductions take place, or when getting to know local community members. Adult educators should consider *all* of these categories of adult learners when developing and marketing educational programs. Knowing the categories of adult learners will assist the adult educator in effectively hosting an educational program that meets the needs of the community and in recruiting learners to attend future programs.

Learning Styles

Adults who participate in Extension educational programs may possess different learning styles, or ways they process information and prefer to learn. Teaching in only one specific way is not an effective method of reaching and engaging a broad array of learners. Researchers suggest there are various learning styles models, but four general types of learning styles have been identified—visual, auditory, reading, and kinesthetic, which make up the VARK Model (Table 2).

Table 2. VARK Model learning styles.

Learning style	Characteristics
Visual	Graphics, pictures, flow charts and other visuals are helpful in learning.
Auditory	Hearing information is a prominent part of learning. Listening to lectures or recorded information to play again is useful.
Reading/writing	Reading written text or writing notes is important in comprehending and retaining information.
Kinesthetic	Motion and space, or hands-on experiential learning is helpful. Being able to practice something learned to make it real is appreciated.

Learning styles are developed based on a person's previous learning experiences, genetic make-up, culture, and the society in which they live. These differences in each adult learner must be respected instead of disregarded. Adult educators must step out of their common teaching comfort zone and vary their teaching techniques during their educational programs in order to engage all styles of learners. As a result of utilizing multiple techniques of teaching, participants will increase their learning and usefulness of the information. By adapting to learners and their situations, the new knowledge and skills will be more applicable for adult learners.

Teaching Techniques

There are multiple teaching techniques that may be utilized to teach an Extension educational program. However, lecture is the most well-known and commonly utilized. Lecture is not the only way to teach adults, and it is not an effective method in increasing learning for all learning styles. Teaching techniques should be varied and can include, but are not limited to, demonstrations, quizzes, question and answer time, discussions, storytelling, games, project activities, videos, and case studies

(Table 3). As stated previously, using a variety of teaching techniques when teaching adults is pertinent in reaching a higher learning satisfaction and retention based on learning styles, and it will also keep adult learners engaged. As an Extension educator, you should also plan for frequent breaks which allow for participant interaction.

Factors such as knowing the adult learners' background of experiences and categories (of adult learners) in which they fall, as well as the amount of time you have to teach, will help adult educators select the best teaching techniques for a specific topic/learning objective(s) to be learned. As adult educators, Extension agents and specialists must learn to adopt a variety of teaching techniques to improve their educational program impact. Adopting other teaching techniques besides the familiar lecture (or those in which we are most comfortable) may seem challenging, but over time the benefits of expanding your teaching practices will be evident in the success of program outcomes.

Summary

While creating your Extension plans of work, enlist the help of adults in the community, such as your advisory council members and/or other stakeholders, to help you ascertain which teaching techniques would be effective in reaching all Extension educational program adult learners with various learning styles and reasons for attending your program. These adults in the community will also be able to aid you in identifying the best time of day and day of the week to host your educational program and the ideal format of your educational program (one-time program, hands-on workshop, series of trainings, etc.) to recruit your target audience. Empower adult learners so that they may provide their experience and expertise through discussion and other teaching techniques during your next Extension educational program to make your program an invaluable and memorable learning experience. Who knows, you may just find a new and highly motivated volunteer!

Adult educators must step out of their common teaching comfort zone and vary their teaching techniques during their educational programs in order to engage all styles of learners.

Table 3. Teaching techniques.

Teaching technique	Characteristics
Lecture/direct instruction	Lecture should be limited to 15 to 20 minutes at a time. Learners lose focus if only sitting and listening for a longer period of time.
Demonstrations	Demonstrations allow for learning by observation of how to do something. May be used with both large and small groups.
Quizzes	A quiz may be given to each individual or given to a group as a group quiz, which allows for interactions and discussions about information presented. Quizzes do not have to be done formally. Quizzing learners allows the adult educator to know what and how much is being learned.
Question and answer (Q&A)	Setting aside question and answer time during an educational program provides an opportunity for learners to ask questions they still have. This time is often at the end of a program, however, it is effective to allow Q&A time during the program if possible.
Discussions	Learning takes place in a social context and adult learners become resources for new knowledge for one another as well as the adult educator. Discussions allow for information sharing and comprehension.
Storytelling	Adult educators and learners can provide knowledge through real-life experiences – telling stories – during educational programs, which can enhance understanding.
Games	Teaching through the use of games is a fun way for adult learners to model actual situations or problems they may face.
Project activities	These include simulations and problem solving activities where learners may experience how to do something being taught during the educational program. Experiential and active learning helps learners apply the learning to their personal situations.
Videos	Videos may provide a memorable learning experience that enhances knowledge but should be used intermittently and no more than 20 minutes at a time without engaging the learners.
Debate	Debate may be used to help adult learners complete empirical research to develop reasoned arguments for or against a proposition. The process of debate allows learners to critically analyze both sides of an argument.
Case studies	Case studies allow adults to better understand and analyze learning. They also allow for discussion and the transfer of knowledge/skills learned to other situations.
Educational tours	Educational tours, or field days, have been used since the beginning of the Cooperative Extension Service. Educational tours are a way for adults to observe and learn to adopt new practices by seeing how things work/have worked. Tours also enhance understanding of information.
Guest speaker/panel discussion	Guest speakers and panels are a way to enhance an educational program by bringing in experts in fields relative to the topic being taught. The guests may provide knowledge and answer questions adult learners have. Panel discussions are a great way to develop discussion when there is a large group of program participants.
Handouts/fact sheets/ other written materials or websites	Adult learners sometimes like having resources for additional information once an educational program is completed. Provide handouts, fact sheets, web links and/or other written material to adult learners to reinforce learning.
Distance learning	Webinars, both live and recorded, and online courses are a valuable way to educate adult learners. Distance learning enables adults to have some control over their learning as they may possibly be able to take part in learning at their own pace and in their desired location.

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