

THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING ADULTS

by

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ABSTRACT

This Paper will concentrate on offering to attendees some tools to utilize in meeting the challenge of teaching adults, as we approach the twenty-first century. The Paper will discuss such areas as what motivates adults to return to college, how to satisfy their needs, and how adults learn. The Paper will also touch on human relations and the learning process, and on the power of participation, and will offer a plan for participation. The Paper will cover formats for group work, processes that affect group productivity, assigning group grades, and handling student questions; and will conclude by offering some simple guidelines for more effective teaching.

PAPER

According to Dr. Bill Herlehy of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, "the mature, adult learner who works full-time in a profession does not bring the same experiences and expectations to the classroom as does the traditional full-time student."⁽¹⁾ I can certainly identify with this statement, having been a mature, adult learner myself, working full-time while trying to obtain my degrees. Thus, it is very important to remember that conducting classes in the traditional manner is not the way to approach this unique population. Rather, teaching adults requires understanding their behavioral characteristics, what motivates them, how they learn, and what instructors can do to meet the special needs of this challenging group.

students have, what motivates them, what are the "real" reasons they are taking the course? Then, work at modifying the standard course work and content accordingly.

There are certain basic needs which influence or motivate behavior throughout a person's entire life span. We are all familiar, no doubt, with Abraham Maslow's Need Hierarchy, and how a person will satisfy lower internal needs before moving to another level. Figure 1 shows the overall groups of needs and their ascending order.

A person moves up and down the hierarchy depending on what is going on in his or her life at the time.

Now, how can instructors help adult students satisfy these basic needs? Good instructors can do this by establishing a supportive classroom atmosphere in which each student receives a great deal of attention. But, why not go one step further and determine what specific interests the

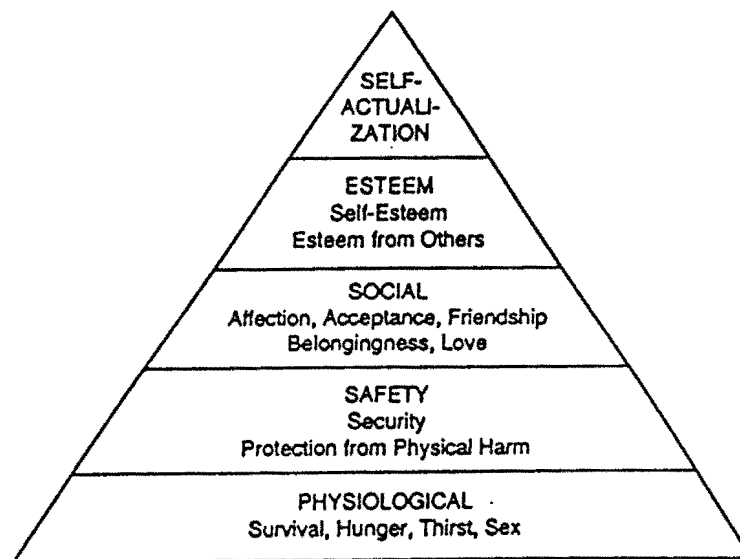


Figure 1 - Maslow's Need Hierarchy

ADULT MOTIVATION AND WAYS TO SATISFY ADULT NEEDS

What do you suppose are some of the most common reasons adults are motivated to attend college? Perhaps they need to feel important, to improve their self-esteem; perhaps they are looking for a friendly, social atmosphere; perhaps they want social approval; perhaps they are looking for an escape mechanism to avoid pain, either mental or physical; perhaps going to school is relaxing for them, and reduces tension; some do it because they want to discover and learn something new; some are looking

for heterosexual adjustment; some are trying to become independent.

Instructors must always create an atmosphere conducive to assessing students' motives and successfully satisfying them. Take, for instance, a specific, identified need such as "to gain a certain skill or knowledge." Here students would want to know how the course work would meet their needs. And this is where the Syllabus can help. Instructors need to identify in the Syllabus the goals and objectives they have set for the class.

It is also very important for instructors to learn why each student enrolled in the course. This can be accomplished by surveying the students on the first day of class. By means of this survey, instructors will find out why the students are taking the course; what they expect to do with the knowledge they obtain; what pre-conceived ideas the student has about the subject matter; what "on-the-job-experience" the student has on the particular subject. The survey can also include questions on students learning preferences--small groups, lectures, independent study?

Another way to gather information on students' backgrounds is to ask them to write a brief autobiography, placing emphasis on their experience with the subject being studied.

An exercise I have found very useful in my classes is to divide the class in groups of two students each. Group members are required to interview each other using a questionnaire I provide, and take notes during the interview. At the end of the exercise, students introduce their interviewees to the class. This works great as an ice breaker and gives the students an opportunity to meet their classmates. Figure 2 provides an example of this questionnaire.

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| <u>PERSONAL</u> | |
| Date_____ | Course Number_____ |
| Course Title_____ | |
| Name_____ | Telephone (optional)_____ |
| <u>EMPLOYMENT</u> | |
| Employer_____ | Telephone (optional)_____ |
| Job Title_____ | |
| How long in that profession?_____ | |
| <u>EDUCATION</u> | |
| Academic Ranking (undergraduate, graduate)?_____ | |
| How far into the degree program?_____ | |
| <u>GENERAL</u> | |
| Why are you taking this course?_____ | |
| How do you hope to use what you learn in this course?_____ | |
| What on-the-job experience have you had relating to this subject?_____ | |
| _____ | |
| How do you learn best (small groups, lectures, independent study)?_____ | |
| Discuss briefly your background?_____ | |
| Any hobbies?_____ | |
| Any pet peeves?_____ | |
| If you were an animal, what animal would you be and why?_____ | |
| _____ | |
| Any other interesting traits?_____ | |

Figure 2 - Student Profile Questionnaire

Regardless of what method instructors use, it is very important that they take into account not only the goals they have for the course, but also the goals the students have, and their backgrounds and learning preferences.

HOW ADULTS LEARN

Another matter to keep in mind is that many older students learn better when they feel they can apply their learning to everyday situations. "Adult students are very task oriented, wanting and expecting their learning to be applicable to problems

with which they are being confronted daily."(2)

This can be accomplished in several ways. One way could be to assign to one student, or to a group of students, the writing of a case study on situations the students are facing, or have faced, on the job. These cases will, then, be analyzed in class. Another way could be to assign students to interview a professional in the field, utilizing the principles being learned in the course; then discuss the results of the interviews in class.

Research has demonstrated that previous learning experiences play a large role in how adults relate their learning to what they already know. Thus, problems and examples must be relevant to this existing knowledge and must also be realistic.

"When presenting information that is new to the student, it is important to help them integrate the new information with information they have already acquired."(3)

A variety of teaching techniques can be used here. One could be to elicit active student participation on the subject and on alternative ways to complete the task. This can be accomplished through large and small group discussions, asking the student questions, role playing. Instructors can also share examples from their own experience, and discuss them with the class.

It is important to remember that better learning takes place when students are actively involved in what is being taught. The climate for learning also plays a big

role. This is one way in the classroom in which adult students can fulfill the social, safety, and self-esteem needs stated in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. A warm, social atmosphere in the classroom, where you and your students know each other by name; an emotional atmosphere of trust and freedom, and a relatively tension-free emotional climate, can contribute to confidence and security. Instructors need to reassure students that all ideas are important and welcome, that no judgment will be passed. This will foster a feeling of belonging.

Instructors also need to show enthusiasm about the students taking the class. Make them realize you want to help them reach their educational and career goals.

Another important aspect to consider in teaching adults is feedback. Learning is greatly enhanced when students receive feedback on how well they are doing in class. This will help the students measure their progress and will provide them a sense of achievement. Grades could be one way to provide feedback, immediate praise for success could be another. Provide feedback in a timely manner by returning graded papers promptly.

Instructors need to keep in mind that adult students also have egos, and some of them are more fragile than others. Lavish praise, especially in front of their peers, can do a lot for those egos and for motivation to continue learning. Give positive reinforcement by concentrating on the positive aspects instead of the negative ones.

HUMAN RELATIONS AND THE LEARNING PROCESS

Let's stop for a minute and think about human relations and learning. It is important to recognize some of the ways students' emotions can be expressed. One way could be through **Projection**--blaming the instructor for their own weaknesses. Students could also **rationalize** the reasons for their weaknesses, which may or may not be the real base. Students could also express their emotions by being discourteous, loud, showing anger, contempt, in other words, through **aggressiveness**. Another way could be finding excuses to miss class, or **flight**. A final way could be showing little or no interest in the class, or **resignation**.(4)

Instructors need to remember that they represent the college to the students. The following five basic human relations practices will help the instructor overcome these blocking mechanisms:(5)

1. "Help students set reasonable standards for themselves, which they can achieve." Instructors need to help students identify their strong areas, as well as their weak ones, and set their standards accordingly.
2. "Help the students help themselves." Instructors need to guide students in resolving their academic frustrations themselves, rather than coming up with a solution for them. This will provide the

students an opportunity to develop in this area. Remind students you are there to help them learn rather than to make them learn.

3. "Keep students informed." Let the students know exactly what to expect at all times. Make expectations clear by defining course goals and objectives.
4. "Encourage the students to tell you how they see you as a leader of the learning group." Ask for their feedback, for ways in which you can help them increase their learning process.
5. "Finally, in adult education, the Golden Rule holds as true as ever. Treat your students as you, an adult, wish to be treated."

THE POWER OF PARTICIPATION

A powerful tool to meet the challenge of teaching adults is through participation. Research has shown that students remember less than 10 percent of what they are told, and their chances of remembering what they are told and shown is one out of four. But when they actively participate, the event or experience is etched in their minds, their attention span and energy level increase, and the flow of information helps the instructor make the message more useful.

I believe strongly in participation,

and I always make it at least ten percent of the final grade. My students always know at the beginning of the course they are expected to participate actively as opposed to passively, but I don't force anyone to do it, for I believe participation works best without pressure and it should be fun. Students don't enjoy being intimidated, threatened, or made to look inadequate in front of their friends anymore than any other adult would, therefore it is important to make the participation easy and enjoyable for everyone.

A PLAN FOR PARTICIPATION

One way to illustrate what I have stated above is to develop a plan for students' participation during the course. This plan should enable the students to state and restate goals, select areas that need to be emphasized, and suggest ways to meet these interests. Examples of ways to stimulate student participation could be:(6)

- a. Standing committees established for the duration of the class
- b. "Buzz-groups"
- c. Class discussion of "next steps"
- d. I n t e r e s t - f i n d i n g questionnaires.

The publication stated in Footnote 5 also suggests the instructor find methods and techniques appropriate for "the level of development of the class and the maturity of their understanding of the subject matter." Examples of individual maturity measures could be norm tests, biographical information, and individual conferences. Examples of class maturity measures could be general class discussion topics, the degree

to which the class accepts democratic methods, and observation of the types of leadership and fellowship displayed.

Instructors should avoid making all the decisions on the class activity, or being the center of the action. Rather, their goal should be to delegate authority, give

constant encouragement, and free the class to display their initiative and share the responsibility.

FORMATS FOR GROUP WORK

Now let's consider formats to use in getting students involved in group work. We will discuss a few of them, from the several that are available.(7)

1. "Think-Pair-Share". Students are required to either think or write their answer to a question asked by the instructor. Their response should include evaluation, analysis or synthesis, and should be shared first with a partner, then within a four-person learning team, and ultimately with a larger group or with the entire class. This exercise gives the students the opportunity to learn by reflection and verbalization, and it improves the caliber of the discussion.
2. "Three-Step Interview". Students share information with each other during a paired interview. What they learned in this interview is

then shared in a four-member learning team. The information could be a reaction to a film or article, or a hypothesis. This exercise can be used as an icebreaker.

3. "Simple Jigsaw". The instructor divides the class into teams and an assignment or topic into four parts. One student from each team volunteers to become an "expert" on one of the parts. All the "experts" on each part work together to master it and discuss the best way to help the other students learn it. Then the "experts" go back to their home teams and teach the other group members.
4. "Structured Controversy". Class is divided in teams and assigned a controversial issue. Each team assumes a different position, and is responsible for discussing, researching and sharing its findings with the rest of the class.

PROCESSES THAT AFFECT GROUP PRODUCTIVITY

Not all groups work well or efficiently. Instructors and students need to be aware of processes that affect group productivity. Let's examine some of them:(8)

1. Some students don't believe others in the group will perform up to their standards, so they decide to do all the work themselves and discourage others from becoming involved.
2. Some students are "no-shows" throughout the duration of the project, and no one knows how to contact them.
3. Some students have good ideas and don't hesitate to offer them and to force their solutions on the group. They don't listen very well to others' ideas and constantly push everyone in their direction, whether they agree or not.
4. And then, there are those students who attend all meetings and come well prepared, but are so quiet the others forget they are there.

How do we deal with these unwelcome group member characteristics? One way is to ask small groups of students to discuss them and come up with strategies for dealing with these behaviors. The answers will, then, be shared with all the groups.

ASSIGNING GROUP GRADES

What about group grades? Suppose you assign a group research as your term project and ask that a paper be written on it. Is it fair to give all the group participants the same grade? How do you know if they all put equal amount of effort? Will group grades undermine motivation?

What I have found to work well for me, is the following. I make it clear in the Syllabus and on the first day of class, that the group research project is worth 20% of the grade, or whatever percentage I decide to give. I ask students to write a combined team report on the team's findings, and present it orally to the class on the next to the last class meeting. Each report must start with an introduction section describing the team members, their mission, their objectives, and their approach. All team members must sign this report and participate in the oral presentation.

In addition, each team member is required to write an individual assessment of the project and turn it in separately on the last class meeting. This assessment is totally confidential and contains the following:

- A. What the team member learned as a result of participating in the project
- B. The team member's relationship with other team members:
 - Was there harmony?
 - Was there agreement or disagreement with other members?
 - Any communication problems?
- C. Did all members participate

and contribute equally?
Discuss in detail.

- D. Any additional comments

I grade the oral presentation based on my own assessment. The confidential paper helps me greatly in assigning grades to the participants on the written report.

I have gotten raving reviews from my students on this type of team project; they think it is challenging, exciting, and a very worthwhile learning exercise.

HANDLING STUDENT QUESTIONS

Now let's change the subject and discuss how to handle student questions. Since adult learners have rich backgrounds which can enhance the classroom learning experience, why not redirect their questions to other students. This not only shows all of them that their peers are a resource for learning, but also encourages more student participation.

Another technique is to answer the question by asking another one; in other words, direct students to something learned previously in the course that would answer the question. Or the instructor may want to ask several students to comment on the question, so as to get differences of opinion about the answer and spread the participation across the class.(9)

"Adjunct Info." offers the following suggestions regarding students' questions:(10)

1. "Encourage questions". Indicate there are no "stupid" questions; tell them someone in the class might want to ask

the same thing but is perhaps afraid to do so, so their questions are helping other students; state that you like them to ask questions because it helps you teach better; make them believe their questions are "intelligent" ones.

2. "Emphasize that 'errors are useful tools for learning'". Tell them you are more interested in receiving "wrong" answers than "right" ones. Why? Because the "wrong" answers indicate to you where the students' confusion lies and what you need to do to help them.
3. "Create a safe learning environment". Make them realize no one will laugh at their mistakes in the classroom, and that you are all there to learn from each other. Assure the students you will not call on them unless they volunteer.

Instructors need to remember that many older students experience insecurity and doubts when they return to school after having been absent several years. They may be afraid to ask "stupid" questions or embarrass themselves in front of their peers, and this can keep them from succeeding academically. Therefore, they need extra encouragement and help in building their confidence. Listen with empathy, try to understand and to "walk in their shoes". Remember that adult students bring a lot of

baggage with them to the classroom; try to look for win/win outcomes. Always keep in mind that to the students, you are the college.

One recommendation that appears very useful here is the use of study partners.(11) Students are encouraged to select study partners the first day of class, after a get-acquainted activity. This helps in several ways. For example, if one of the partners is absent, the other is responsible for taking notes and assignment/handouts; and for handing in or collecting papers or homework. If one of the partners is afraid to ask questions because he or she feels they are too simple, the other partner is responsible for answering or discussing those questions. This technique solves the problem of absent students not having assignments, missing the contents of the lecture, or turning in late papers.

SOME USEFUL TEACHING TECHNIQUES

How do we select teaching techniques that will meet the challenge of teaching adults? How do we determine what works best in a particular situation and with a particular group? Just as when giving a speech it is so important to know your audience, when teaching adults it is very important to know your student population. The student profile questionnaire depicted in Figure 2 is a tool that can help you determine what method to put more emphasis on for that particular group.

Perhaps group discussion, case analysis, independent research, a combination of all of them, or possibly some other method. But whichever one you

select, be sure to stimulate interest by doing a meaningful activity the very first day of class. Remember it is very important to make students think, not just memorize. Therefore, provide opportunities for students to make inferences, draw conclusions, compare and contrast.

It is important to review the previous class at the beginning of each class session, and to give the students the opportunity to ask questions or to raise concerns. Then close the session at the end of each class and give an overview of what's coming up next, including the homework assignment.

Let's discuss other simple guidelines for more effective teaching.(12) The first one has to do with showing your enthusiasm for teaching. Instructors must convey their love for the subject being taught, even if they have been teaching the same course material for years. It is important to keep in mind students are being exposed to the subject for the first time, and the instructor's enthusiasm, or lack of it, can make or break the students' interest and motivation.

Another guideline is to learn as much as possible about the students. Why is this important? Because the more the instructors know about the student population in the classes, the more easily they will be able to tailor the class to the students' needs.

A third guideline deals with organizing each class session well. How can instructors do this? By using the principles of a good speech--an attention-grabbing introduction, a well-organized and logical "body" or main points of the presentation; and a summary of the key points instructors

want students to remember from the class session.

Guideline number four also draws from good public speaking--using a presentational style that will hold the students' attention and interest. How? By establishing and maintaining good eye contact with the students; by using gestures effectively; by varying the voice level; by changing the facial expression, by moving around the classroom. All of these will greatly enhance the students' recall.

And finally, presenting material in a variety of ways. In today's academic environment, it is not enough to stand behind the lectern and deliver a long lecture while students take notes. Today, instructors need to minimize this approach and combine it with good class discussions, simulation exercises, group work, and the latest audiovisual materials, such as transparencies, videos, slides, charts and graphs, and flipcharts, in addition to the blackboard.

CONCLUSION

In our quest for finding ways to meet the challenge of teaching adults, we have discussed what motivates adults, how to satisfy their needs, and how adults learn. We have touched on human relations and the learning process, on the power of participation, and have offered a plan for participation. We have covered some formats for group work, processes that affect group productivity, assigning group grades, and handling student questions. And, finally, we have offered some simple guidelines for more effective teaching.

As we approach the twenty-first

century, we need to move ahead and grow as good instructors. This involves the willingness to embrace new technologies in our fields, to find newer and more innovative ways to encourage and motivate our students in their academic pursuits, to impart freshness and enthusiasm each time we teach the same course, even though we may have been teaching it for years. We must fight inertia, we must resist the temptation to stay as we are, to keep doing things the way we have done them for years.

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BIOGRAPHY

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