



# Adults as Learners: Effective Teaching Strategies

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## Characteristics of Adult Learners

Because the adult learner is primarily in charge of his or her own learning, the teacher of adults has a different job from the one who teaches children. Since the 1970's, adult learning theory has offered a framework for educators and trainers. Malcolm S. Knowles (1973), a pioneer in adult learning, based his work on the concept of "andragogy" (the art and science of how adults learn). He noted the following characteristics:

- **Need to know why they are learning something**
- **Learn through doing**
- **Are problem solvers**
- **Learn best when the subject is of immediate use**
- **Prefer social interaction**
- **Want to use their life experiences in the classroom**
- **Want to integrate new ideas with existing knowledge**

## Key Tips for Teaching Adults

- Plan some activities where students can direct their own learning
- Use active participation and groups for social interaction
- Use a variety of teaching and learning methods, including hands-on learning
- Make the learning relevant to what students will be doing when they leave the classroom
- Spend less time lecturing and let students work on solving problems
- Provide a supportive learning environment with multiple resources, breaks, and opportunities to ask questions and correct mistakes

## 4 Principles for Teaching Adults



### Principal 1: Make Sure Your Adult Students Understand "Why"

This principle is not only about having participants see the relevance of the training, but about why each thing you teach them is an important part of the learning. Adult learners are motivated to learn when they have a need to know. Tell participants explicitly how the training and individual activities will be useful to them on the job. And early in the training, share the clearly defined goals, objectives and agenda for the training. They want to know how the instruction will help them and often ask themselves the following questions:

- What's in it for me?
- Why do I need this information?
- How will I benefit from it?
- How can I make use of it in a practical, real way on the job?
- How will it make me a better worker or professional?

**M**otivate  
**I**nform  
**M**onitor  
**E**ngage



## Learning Objectives

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Attitudes

## INFORM

### Principle 2: Adults Need to Learn in Their Own Way

There are three general learning styles for providing information: *visual*, *auditory*, and *kinesthetic or tactile*.

**Visual** learners rely on pictures. “Show me,” is their motto. You can best communicate with them by providing handouts, graphs, diagrams, illustrations, and writing on the white board.

**Auditory** learners listen carefully. “Tell me,” is their motto. They will pay attention to the sound of your voice and actively participate in discussions. You can best communicate with them by using stories, examples, case studies, mnemonic devices to help them remember information, discussion and oral reports of working groups.

**Kinesthetic or Tactile** learners need to physically do something to understand it. Their motto is “Let me do it.” They trust their feelings and emotions about what they’re learning. They prefer activities, role playing, simulation games, and allowing them to practice what they’re learning.

While people generally have a preference for one type over the others, they simultaneously process information through multiple senses. As a result, the retention of learned material is enhanced if presentations are multisensory (visual and auditory components) in combination with interactive activities.

### Methods of Instruction

#### Group Activities

- Case Studies
- Simulation
- Games
- Problem Solving

#### Individual

- Self Assessments
- Quizzes
- Reflection
- Lecture

## MONITOR

### Principle 3: Participants Feel Respected and Encouraged

Feeling respected means the instructor acknowledges the adult learner’s experience and current knowledge and creates an environment that conveys respect for everyone in the room. If people feel that they are being talked down to, patronized, or even ignored, their energy is diverted from learning to dealing with those feelings. The trainer can help foster a comfortable, productive learning climate through the attitude he or she projects:

- Show respect for the learner’s individuality and experience
- Be sensitive to the language you use so that learners are not inadvertently offended
- Be open to different perspectives
- Adopt a caring attitude and show it

One way the instructor can monitor the classroom climate and encourage learning is through the use of good questions and reflection. “*Probing Questions*” can invite participation and encourage participants to reflect on what they learned. Ingrid Bens (2012) shares a framework of six types of questions to get people thinking about issues from a different perspective: fact-finding, feeling-finding, telling more, best/least, third party, and brainstorming ideas. (See Tip Sheet on Probing Questions)

**L = P + Q + R**  
**Learning = Program Knowledge + Good Questions + Reflection**

Marquardt, M.J. (2004). *Optimizing the power of action learning*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black.

# ENGAGE

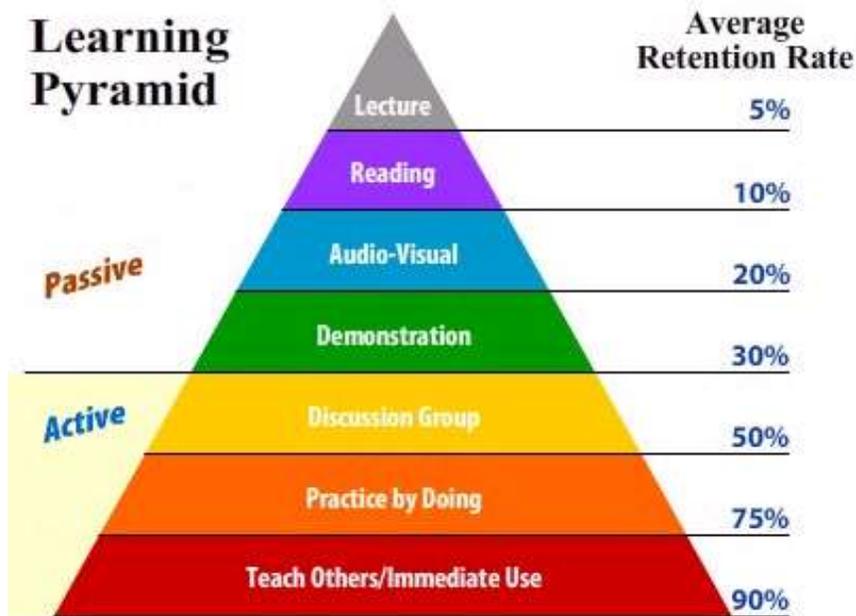
## Principle 4: Use Experiential Learning

The word “*experiential*” holds two meanings for the teacher of adult learners: 1) honoring the life experiences and knowledge an individual brings, and 2) active participation in activities during the session.

The first aspect of this principle is to tap into the wealth of wisdom and experience of the participants whenever it’s appropriate. This is done with asking participants to share stories, using case studies and problem solving exercises

The second aspect can take many forms. Any activity that gets your students involved makes the learning experiential. This includes small group discussions, experiments, role playing, skits, building something at their table or desk, writing or drawing something specific – activity of any kind. Activities also keep people energized, especially activities that involve getting up and moving about. More importantly, research shows that adult learners’ retention rate increases significantly when engaged in active learning methods.

**Warm-Up Activities or Energizers** - Research shows that beginning your session with a 5-15 minute activity can engage adult learners and increase their participation. They can serve to focus your participants on a new topic, open up creative thinking, and help them to apply their own learning in new ways. The feedback can also give the instructor a reading of the current knowledge and experience the participants already have. **(See Tip Sheet with 10 Warm Ups and Energizers)**



Source: National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine

## Tip Sheet

# Probing Questions



### QUESTIONS FOR INVITING PARTICIPATION

Different types of questions create specific responses, so it is important to understand how each of the six question formats in this set receives a slightly different outcome. Use these to help you develop your skills in knowing how and when to ask probing questions when you want to encourage participation.

#### Details on the Method

This framework comes from Ingrid Bens in her book *Facilitating with Ease!* where she shares (pg 12) this insight:

*“The importance of knowing how and when to ask great probing questions can’t be stressed enough...Questions invite participation. They get people thinking about issues from a different perspective.”*

Here is a brief overview of each of the six types of questions that invite participation.

Notes about “Probing Questions”	Sample Questions for Inviting Participation
<p><b>Fact-finding questions</b> are targeted at verifiable data such as who, what, when, where and how much.</p> <p>Use them to gather information about the current situation.</p>	<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <p>“What kind of supplies and how much of each do you have on hand?”</p> <p>“What types of training have volunteers received this past year?”</p> <p><b><u>Facts</u></b></p>
<p><b>Feeling-finding questions</b> ask for subjective information that gets at the participants’ opinions, feelings, values and beliefs.</p> <p>They help you understand views and they contain words like <i>think</i> or <i>feel</i>.</p>	<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <p>“How do you feel about the quality and effectiveness of the new equipment?”</p> <p>“Do you think the staff felt they received enough training?” Why or why not?</p> <p><b><u>Feelings</u></b></p>

Notes about “Probing Questions”	Sample Questions for Inviting Participation
<p><b>Tell –me-more questions</b> can help you find out more about what the participants are saying.</p> <p>They encourage the speaker to provide more details.</p>	<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <p>“Tell me more. Can you elaborate on that?”</p> <p>“Can you be more specific? Please share examples”</p> <p><b><u>Tell me more...</u></b></p> 
<p><b>Best / least questions</b> help you find out more about what the participants are saying.</p> <p>They nudge the speaker to think about different perspectives.</p>	<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <p>“What’s the best thing about receiving new equipment?”</p> <p>“What’s the worst thing about the new equipment?”</p> <p><b><u>Best-least</u></b></p>
<p><b>Third-party questions</b> help uncover thoughts in an indirect manner.</p> <p>They’re designed to help people express sensitive information.</p> <p><b><u>Third Party</u></b></p>	<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <p>“Some people find that the training is too time consuming. How does that sound to you?”</p> <p>“There is some concern about domineering volunteers in the program. In what ways have you observed this?”</p>
<p><b>“Magic wand” questions</b> let you explore people’s true desires.</p> <p>They’re designed to brainstorm ideas and are useful in temporarily removing obstacles from a person’s mind.</p>	<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <p>“If time and money were no obstacle, what sort of a computer system would you design for the department?”</p> <p><b><u>Magic Wand</u></b></p> 



## 10 Warm Ups and Energizers

Beginning your orientation with a five-to-fifteen minute warm up or energizer can serve to focus your students on a topic, open up creative thinking, and help them to apply their own learning in new ways. The feedback you get from students also can give you an instant reading on their experiences.

### 1. EXPECTATIONS

Expectations are powerful, especially when you're teaching adults. Understanding your students' expectations is key to your success. Use this as a warm up activity but also to find out what expectations your students have about the training or topic.

### 2. BRAINSTORM (OR DATA DUMP)

Find out what your group knows about a topic before you begin a new lesson. Divide them into teams of four and present the topic. Ask them to brainstorm and list as many ideas or questions as they can come up with in a given amount of time.

### 3. THE POWER OF STORY

Adults come to your classroom full of powerful personal experiences. When your topic is one that people are certain to have experienced in different ways, what could be a better introduction to a lesson than real-life examples. The only danger here is in controlling the time factor. If you're a good facilitator of time, this is a powerful warm up and unique every single time. An example is to ask students to tell the story of how they chose their career or vocation. Who or what influenced them?

### 4. THREE WORDS

This is a fast warm up that's easily adaptable to any topic. Ask your students to come up with three words they associate with the new topic. The value in this for you, as a teacher, is that you'll discover very quickly where your students' heads are. Are they excited about this? Nervous? Unenthusiastic? Completely confused?

### 5. A FEW OF MY FAVORITE THINGS

This warm up is a good one for customizing to any topic. Ask your students to share their top three favorite things about whatever it is you're there to discuss. If you have time, go back around for the flip side: What are their three least favorite things? This information will be even more helpful if you ask them to explain why. Will your time together help to solve any of these issues?

## 6. PLAY-DOH SCULPTURES

This warm up takes a significantly longer time, but depending on your topic, it just might be the magical experience people remember forever. Allow 15 minutes for them to make a sculpture (an animal or object) that they will use in introducing themselves. Ask each student to give their name, present their sculpture, and explain why it's important to them and why they created it the way they did.

## 7. SUPER POWERS

Super Powers is a good warm up for topics to spur creativity. Give your students a minute to think about which super power they would want if they could choose just one. Bionic hearing? Faster than a locomotive? Ask participants to introduce themselves and share which super power they would choose and what they would do with it.

## 8. WHERE DO YOU STAND

This is a good activity to get students up and moving while learning about each other. Have students stand in the middle of the room. Tell them to choose between a pair of words and move to the side of the room indicating their choice. Ask some individuals to briefly share why they made that choice. Move through the word pairs rather quickly and don't do more than five times. ( Examples: Fall/Spring, Coffee/Tea, Rock n' Roll/Country, Early Riser/Night Owl, Spontaneous/Planned, Read the book/See the Movie, etc.)

## 9. IF YOU WON THE LOTTERY

What would your students do to create change in your given field if money were no object? This warm up lends itself well to social and corporate topics, but be creative. You might be surprised by its usefulness in less tangible areas as well.

## 10. M&M'S

This activity helps students get to know each other. It can be done as a warm up before the training or in the middle as an energizer. Pass around a bowl of plain M&M's (or individual bags). Everyone takes some and picks 1 or 2 pieces. Students then share something about themselves according to the colors that they selected. Example: green – personal passion/hobby; blue – favorite trip or trip planned for future; red – best book you've read/favorite author; brown – personal goal in coming year/resolution; yellow – favorite music/artist; orange – favorite food/beverage). Everyone shares their color answer and eats the rest!

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