

## Principles and methods of Adult education

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**Abstract:** 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. Most adult students are in your classroom because they want to be. Some of them are there because they have Continuing Education requirements to keep a certificate current, but most are there because they've chosen to learn something new. This principle is not about why your students are in your classroom, but about why each thing you teach them is an important part of the learning. I'll use my own pickle-making lesson as an example.

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### Introduction:

Adult illiteracy feeds the state's unemployment, its welfare rolls, and the correctional institutions. Adult illiteracy severely hinders the life chances of young children, undermines school reform, and limits the opportunities for postsecondary education.

Despite landmark reforms in public schools, too many Kentuckians continue to drop out of school, thereby perpetuating the chronic problem of adult illiteracy. Too many young Kentucky parents are unable to read and lack the basic literacy necessary to provide the necessary stimulating, supportive family environments for young children. It is known that children's literacy levels are strongly linked to the educational level of their parents and that children of parents who are unemployed and have not completed high school are five times more likely to drop out.

As indicated earlier, a strength of adult education in Kentucky is the dedication of the many teachers often serving under difficult conditions, without adequate support, and often with compensation and benefits less than teachers in the public schools. Testimony before the task force characterized the work of adult educators as "missionary" work. Recognizing the seriousness of the adult literacy issue in Kentucky, it should be a major concern that the Commonwealth does not have a comprehensive approach to the professional preparation, development, and support of adult educators. The challenge for Kentucky will be to move from a system that still depends on teachers with limited training in working with adults, to one in which professional competence in working with adults is a basic requirement. Any strategy to make this transition

must involve both professional development and support for the teachers now in the field as well as a new system for a new generation of adult educators.

### Principles for the Teacher of Adults Teaching Adult Learners

The teacher of adults has a different job from the one who teaches children. If you're teaching adult students, it's important to understand the five principles of teaching adults. It's important to know how adults learn.

Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer in the study of adult learning, observed that adults learn best when:

1. They understand why something is important to know or do.
2. They have the freedom to learn in their own way.
3. Learning is experiential.
4. The time is right for them to learn.
5. The process is positive and encouraging.

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

Most adult students are in your classroom because they want to be. Some of them are there because they have Continuing Education requirements to keep a

certificate current, but most are there because they've chosen to learn something new.

This principle is not about why your students are in your classroom, but about why each thing you teach them is an important part of the learning. I'll use my own pickle-making lesson as an example.

When I learned to make pickles, my teacher and neighbor, Marilyn, explained:

- It's important to soak the cucumbers in ice water over night. This helps make the pickles crisp.
- If you put a towel under the jars in the canner, they won't bounce against each other and break.
- When sterilizing the jars, it's important to fill each at least halfway with water, AND fill the canner they're sitting in with water. Too little water and the towel mentioned in the previous bullet will catch on fire. You know this kind of information comes from experience.

### **Principle 2: Respect that Your Students Have Different Learning Styles**

There are three general learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

**Visual** learners rely on pictures. They love graphs, diagrams, and illustrations. "Show me," is their motto. They often sit in the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions and to watch you, the teacher. They want to know what the subject looks like. You can best communicate with them by providing handouts, writing on the white board, and using phrases like, "Do you see how this works?"

**Auditory** learners listen carefully to all sounds associated with the learning. "Tell me," is their motto. They will pay close attention to the sound of your voice and all of its subtle messages, and they will actively participate in discussions. You can best communicate with them by speaking clearly, asking questions, and using phrases like, "How does that sound to you?"

**Kinesthetic** 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 and how you're teaching it. They want to

actually touch what they're learning. They are the ones who will get up and help you with role playing. You can best communicate with them by involving volunteers, allowing them to practice what they're learning, and using phrases like, "How do you feel about that?"

**Pickle Example:** I'm generally a kinesthetic learner. Marilyn talked to me about her pickling process, explaining why she uses the ingredients she does, and showed me how she dips a liquid measuring cup into the hot brine and pours it into the jar using a wide-mouthed funnel, but my greatest learning came when I fumbled through the second jar all by myself.

Most people use all three styles while they're learning, and of course, this is logical since we all have five senses, barring any disabilities, but one style almost always is preferred.

The big question is, "How do you, as the teacher, know which student has which learning style?" Without training in neuro-linguistics, it might be difficult, but conducting a short learning style assessment at the beginning of your class would benefit you and the students. This information is as valuable to the student as it is to you.

There are several learning style assessments available online, some better than others. I like the one at Ageless Learner.

Share your thoughts about learning styles.

### **Principle 3: Allow Your Students to Experience what they're learning**

Experience 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.

The other aspect of this principle is honoring the life experiences your students bring to the classroom. Be sure to tap into that wealth of wisdom whenever it's appropriate. You'll have to be a good timekeeper because people can talk for hours when asked for

personal experiences, but the extra facilitation needed will be well worth the gems your students have to share.

**Pickle Example:** Once Marilyn had shown me how to prepare one jar, she busied herself in the kitchen doing her own thing, close enough to keep an eye on me and to answer my questions, but allowing me the autonomy to go at my own speed. When I made mistakes, she didn't interfere unless I asked. She gave me the space and the time to correct them on my own.

#### **Principle 4: When the Student Is Ready, the Teacher Appears**

“When the student is ready, the teacher appears” is a Buddhist proverb packed with wisdom. No matter how hard a teacher tries, if the student isn't ready to learn, chances are good he or she won't. What does this mean for you as a teacher of adults? Luckily, your students are in your classroom because they want to be. They've already determined that the time is right.

It's your job to listen carefully for teaching moments and take advantage of them. When a student says or does something that triggers a topic on your agenda, be flexible and teach it right then. If that would wreak havoc on your schedule, which is often the case, teach a bit about it rather than saying flat out that they'll have to wait until later in the program. By then, you may have lost their interest.

**Pickle Example:** My mom canned pickles all during my childhood years, but I had no interest in participating, or even in eating them, sadly. Several years ago, I helped Marilyn can pickles, and even then, I was simply helping and not really learning. When I finally started enjoying pickles and planted my own cucumbers, then I was ready to learn, and Marilyn was right there to teach me.

#### **Principle 5: Encourage Your Adult Students**

For most adults, being out of the classroom for even a few years can make going back to school intimidating. If they haven't taken a class in decades, it's understandable that they would have some degree of apprehension about what it will be like and how well they'll do. It can be tough to be a rookie when

you've been an expert in your field for many, many years. Nobody enjoys feeling foolish.

Your job as a teacher of adult students includes being positive and encouraging. Patience helps too. Give your older students time to respond when you ask a question. They may need a few moments to consider their answer. Recognize the contributions they make, even when small. Give them words of encouragement whenever the opportunity arises. Most adults will rise to your expectations if you're clear about them.

A word of caution here. Being positive and encouraging is not the same as being condescending. Always remember that your students are adults. Speaking to them in the tone of voice you might use with a child is offensive, and the damage can be very difficult to overcome. Genuine encouragement from one person to another, regardless of age, is a wonderful point of human interaction.

**Pickle example:** I'm a worrier. I worried about spilling brine all over Marilyn's stove, about dropping the full jars as I lifted them out of the hot bath, about making a mess of her kitchen. Marilyn assured me that spills were easily cleaned up, especially when vinegar was involved since it's used for cleaning anyway! She encouraged me as I gingerly moved boiling hot jars. Throughout the pickle-making process, Marilyn remained calm, unruffled. She paused by me every once in a while to comment, “Oh, don't they look beautiful!”

Because of Marilyn's understanding of how to teach me, her adult student, the art of making dill pickles, I now have the confidence to make them in my own kitchen, and I can't wait for my next batch of cucumbers to be ready.

This is your challenge as a teacher of adults. Beyond teaching your subject, you have the opportunity to inspire confidence and passion in another human being. That kind of teaching changes lives.

#### **Conclusion:**

Beyond the issues relating directly to DAEL (Department of Adult Education and Literacy), the task force heard a number of concerns about the Commonwealth's overall approach to adult literacy.

- Lack of coherent statewide leadership and coordination among multiple complementary initiatives aimed at the same problem.
- Lack of continuity in state leadership. Cited in particular was the difficulty sustaining a high level commitment to the issue long enough to make a difference because of changes in priorities of the state's political leaders. A high level of turnover in the leadership of the Department of Adult Education and Literacy has also contributed to the instability.
- Tendency to think of adult education as a separate categorical program rather than a strategy that cuts across the mission and responsibility of multiple Commonwealth programs and initiatives (e.g., early childhood education, welfare reform, economic development, and corrections).
- Multiple uncoordinated categorical federal initiatives that tend to drive (and fragment) policy for an overall state effort that is largely funded by Kentucky.
- Inadequate coordination of services to meet the needs of individual adults, communities, employers, and regions is hindered by:
  - Vertical financing and regulatory relationships between separate federal and state programs and local providers and administrative units. These vertical relationships can hinder the horizontal coordination of services for individual adult learners, communities, and employers.
  - Turf wars among providers, local politics, and long-standing conflicts among neighboring counties.
    - Inadequate links with and leverage of other public and private initiatives and investments to reach the target population. Major sources of help include employers, postsecondary education, and workforce development.
    - Lack of a state financing policy and strategy for provider performance incentives and collaboration, and tax and other employer incentives for leverage of non-state resources.
    - Lack of programmatic and administrative flexibility to meet the rapidly changing needs of adult learners, employers, regional economies, and communities.

When the issue is examined from a county-by-county perspective, a significant mismatch is found between the availability of services and the target population.

The problem is partially one of resources. Yet an even more serious problem is the lack of local leadership and coordination of available resources—both public and private. A deliberate strategy is needed to focus state priorities on the target population at the lowest literacy levels (Levels I and II) and in the counties with largest percentages of adults at these levels. Unless Kentucky can narrow the disparities within the state, the Commonwealth will be unable to narrow the disparities in per capita income and other critical indicators between Kentucky and its competitor states.

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