

ADULT EDUCATION: CONSIDERATIONS & APPROACHES

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Abstract

In today's competitive environment, there is a need to constantly evolve as an individual to keep pace with the volatile nature of the working environment. More and more working / adult individuals are now opting to continue their formal education in spite of their busy working life. Career and studies seem to be interconnected as the emerging trend amongst individuals is to advance their professional qualifications whilst in the midst of their busy working life.

This paper will aim to showcase the different approaches required in teaching adults in an ESL classroom. It will also answer the very pertinent question which is the role of the tutor in an adult learning classroom and the best approaches that work in this classroom. The differences between Adult Education and Traditional Undergraduate Education will also be an important element in this presentation as it aims to explain the different approach that is required to facilitate learning in an adult learning classroom. To elucidate this aspect, the following areas will be analyzed and compared:

- Work / life experience(s)
- Maturity levels
- Attendance/Schedules
- Full time/ Part time
- Daytime/ Evening
- Networking
- Technology
- Classroom Management

These ideas will be further illustrated by providing examples of teaching adults and traditional undergraduate students that were implemented in the classroom by the presenter in her course of teaching in both environments.

As Adult education is based on an original theory of andragogy (the art and science of helping adults learn) as distinguished from pedagogy (teaching children and youth), this paper will conclude with the finding that adults in certain crucial respects are different from young people as learners, and that a different approach is needed.

Keywords: Adult learning, Approaches, Considerations, Facilitator, Key elements

1. INTRODUCTION

What is adult education? Simply said in reverse, it reads as education for adults. A few years ago, the term 'adult education' had a completely different connotation. It meant that adults who were illiterate educated themselves for the sole purpose of learning to read and write. They were no different than a regular student who could be a beginner in learning a language. Today, it means those adults who have completed their education to some degree and who want to continue their education for reasons that are important to them. So, it is safe to assume that they are not illiterate! Then, what is the driving force for adults to continue their education when they have well-established themselves in their workplaces? What makes them to strive for balance between their hectic work life and studies with the added responsibilities of their personal lives? What do they hope to achieve with their education at this mature stage of their lives? These are some of the questions that will be explored in this paper along with the considerations and approaches that are required in an adult education classroom.

2. Considerations & Approaches

2.1. Considerations

As a first step, before developing a curriculum or syllabus targeted at adult audiences, it is prudent to try to glean the difference between traditional undergraduate learning and adult- centered learning. Most people go

through school education for an average period of 12 years followed almost immediately by 3 to 5 additional years of higher education as young adults. Therefore, the educational models fixed in our minds are the pedagogical models-- the art and science of teaching children and young adults--drawn from these experiences. As adult trainers, it is almost natural for us to teach how we experienced teaching which brings to mind the adage: 'One size fits all' which is entirely wrong. We need to focus and consider the changes that may be required to teach adults. Why? Adults continue their education for reasons that are important to them rather than as a natural progression of their high school education which is the mind set of traditional undergraduate students. Therefore, the expectations of these students are completely different from traditional undergraduate students.

What are the considerations?

One simple way of finding out the differences would be to put yourself in the place of an adult learner and try to answer the following questions:

- i. If you are a student, what would be your expectation with regard to the curriculum?
- ii. How do you expect and like to be taught?
- iii. What should your classroom environment be like for you to comfortable?
- iv. How should your tutor treat you in the classroom?
- v. What do you hope to achieve at the end of your learning?

These questions will probably give you an initial insight as to the basic differences between adult learning & traditional undergraduate learning. It should have provided the answers given below:

- i. Adults have an innate need to know the reason to learn something. One of the first tasks of the tutor teaching adults is to develop a 'need to know' or 'why' in the learner — to demonstrate the value of what is going to be taught to them.
- ii. Adults have a deep need to be self-directed. However, more often than not when they do resume their education they revert back to their conditioning as children and start to become dependent. To resolve this, as tutors we must help adult learners make a quick transition from seeing themselves as dependent learners to becoming self-directed which is what they are.
- iii. Adults bring into the learning situation or a classroom a background of diverse experiences that is in itself a rich and a valuable resource for many kinds of learning for themselves and their peers. At times it facilitates learning that is directly related to the curriculum. So, the classroom environment must be dynamic that gives room to the adults to freely express themselves but at the same time that which is in subtle control of the tutor.
- iv. Adults become ready to learn when they experience in their life situation a need to know or be able to do in order to perform more effectively and with greater satisfaction. *Adults learn best when they choose voluntarily to make a commitment to learn.* Therefore, the tutor should give the impression that he /she is a peer and that he / she is only facilitating learning though the tutor is in full control of the learning environment.
- v. Adults enter into a learning experience with a task-centered (or problem-centered) orientation to learning akin to their approach in work life. So, adult learning activities are better received when designed around tasks, problems, or life situations. Very often, if they can relate what they have learned to a recent experience or situation, they can better appreciate the newfound knowledge and skills.

To sum up, adults are motivated to learn by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors. At times, they may not be motivated to learn what we want to teach them, hence the importance to develop "a need to know" as a basic ingredient of adult training. The most potent and persistent motivators for adults are intrinsic motivators such as self-esteem, broadened responsibilities, power, and achievement which form the key words for considerations towards adult education.

2.2. Approaches

Now that we have considered the conditions for effective adult education, the methodology or the implementation also plays a pivotal role in packaging the entire process of adult education. It is imperative that the considerations discussed above are interwoven into the approaches in delivering the learning to adults. It has to be borne in mind that considerations lead to the approaches and these must be practical and must be

kept flexible to suit the adult learner's needs. The curriculum prescribed may not be very different from what is prescribed to a group of traditional undergraduate students. The approach to the delivery of the curriculum makes all the difference to the adult learner. Depending upon the approach taken, the learning that takes place in an adult learning classroom can either make an adult learner pursue his studies even further or can completely demotivate him /her from ever pursuing his /her education.

What are the approaches?

- i. **Work / life experience(s):** These have to be woven skillfully by the tutor into the learning process of an adult learner. These situations have to be created in the classroom deliberately and strategically so that these situations and the actual concept that are taught is one seamless package.
- ii. **Maturity levels:** This by far is one of the most important aspects when planning the approach to learning in an adult learning classroom. It is a fact that most adult learners are mature working individuals who are probably well placed in their working life and at times have years of experience that supersedes the experience of the tutor itself! Therefore, the tutor has to approach the learning environment that his /her learners will expect respect, friendliness and interaction within the classroom which is not so dissimilar to their working environment.
- iii. **Attendance/Schedules:** As adult learners are mostly self-directed learners and are also mature, they understand the importance of time keeping and attendance. However, there are situations when they might find it difficult to attend scheduled tutorial sessions due to their work / personal commitments. What should be the stance of the tutor in these cases? While continuous and regular absence should not be tolerated, a one-off absence should be treated empathetically but also firmly to convey that though it is understandable, it cannot happen again. This is important as it drives home the point that you as a tutor are flexible but not so much that you don't care about absences.
- iv. **Full time/ Part time:** Adult learners tend to lean towards part time tutorials as it allows them to pace their learning. In fact, more and more institutions are now offering weekend sessions, to facilitate and adjust to an adult learner's schedule. This also means that the tutor will have to facilitate learning that can be accommodated in the limited time versus the time that is available for a full time student. The adult learner expects that same content to be delivered with no compromises irrespective of the time allotted. So, the approach here is to carefully plan the teaching / learning to incorporate all concepts concisely.
- v. **Daytime/ Evening:** Adult learners for obvious reasons of their work commitments prefer generally to attend classes during the evening hours. These timings though suit the adult students can pose a challenge to tutors as they might encounter reduced interaction and passivity in the classroom due to physical and mental tiredness after a long working day. It is the responsibility of the tutor to plan the delivery of the lesson / concept in such a way that it offsets and surmounts this issue.
- vi. **Networking/ Technology:** Generally speaking, adults are not very comfortable with technology as younger adults are. However, with the advent of part time learning options, the use of technology is an integral part of the learning experience. Learning management platforms are very useful in facilitating networking amongst peers and tutors. They are also user-friendly and promoting the use of these platforms amongst adult learners will also ease their discomfort levels.
- vii. **Classroom Management:** Teaching and learning should take place to where it incorporates their experiences wherever possible. This helps in retention and activates prior knowledge. The theory that is presented by applying it to a practical situation helps them to relate, understand, connect and retain. This relation to their work /life experiences helps them alleviate and ease any anxiousness that they might have when they start to learn. The tutor has to bear in mind that an adult learner is probably getting back into the 'student mode' after a long gap.
- viii. **Objectives & goals:** As the target audience are mature adults, it is imperative that they understand the purpose of their learning in a session. As it is safe to assume that most adult learners are working individuals and hence are used to dealing with objectives, goal setting and deadlines, their learning is also goal-centered and benefit driven. Learning has to be facilitated in three stages as purpose, application and result.

3. Conclusion

Adult education is a trend today as more and more people understand the need to qualify themselves academically to stay ahead of others. Innovative ways of learning have emerged as technology has shrunk distances and in some cases made formal classes redundant. Impressions about adult education have also changed over the past few years and are almost considered a necessity today to empower oneself. Competitive working environments require dynamic professionals to keep pace with the latest trends in almost all fields. All these trends and developments have led to the streamlining of adult education. Though the concept of Andragogy has existed for many years now, it has now become an important aspect to equip yourself as a tutor with the right skills that are required in an adult learning classroom.

The following chart identifies key differences between young adults and adults as learners:

Young adults	Adults
Rely on their tutors to decide what is important to be learned.	Decide for themselves what is important to be learned.
Accept the information being presented at face value.	Need to validate the information and the reason that they are learning
Expect what they are learning to be useful sometime in the long-term future.	Expect what they are learning to be immediately useful and applied
Have little or no experience that can be used as a resource	Have experience in work /life situations upon which parallels can be drawn. Possible to have fixed viewpoints and independent thinking and rationalizing abilities
Little or no ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource to tutor or fellow classmates.	Significant ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource to the tutor and peers

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