



The adult learner: Not just another brick in the wall

We don't need no education... We don't need no thought control... No dark sarcasm in the classroom... Hey Teacher, leave them kids alone!

For most of us, our formal educational experience consisted of sitting in a series of classrooms over a 12-year period with 30 others of the same age from the same neighborhood and with similar backgrounds. We sat in long rows in uncomfortable chairs listening to much older authority figures lecture to us. We learned to read and we learned to write. We learned about history and math and science. We copied down notes, took tests and did homework. Attendance was compulsory, self-expression was suppressed and adherence to rules was strictly enforced.

We also had other learning experiences while growing up that were different from what we endured in classrooms. We learned how to ride a bike or play a musical instrument or color a picture or sew an outfit or hit a baseball. We learned to drive a car. We learned to say "please" and "thank you" and we learned to open doors for others and to chew with our mouths closed. We didn't learn these things from listening to a lecture in the classroom or from reading a book. Someone showed us how to do them and then helped us to do them ourselves. We participated. We scraped our knees, side-swiped the curb and struck out to end the inning. We tried and failed and then tried again.

Our learning didn't stop when our formal education ended or we reached adulthood; it just shifted gears. We learn differently than we were did as children and teenagers with different objectives and priorities. Because we approach learning differently as adults, we don't respond to the same teaching methods used on us as children. While that might seem obvious, the point seems lost on many who try to teach adults. Just ask those who have sat through a class where the instructor thought that reading the *M-39 Handbook* out loud was a great teaching technique. So let's examine some characteristics of adult learners, keeping in mind that these are generalities and every learner is unique.

One major difference is that adults are, for the most part, voluntary learners. They consent to set aside time from busy schedules—often in the evening after work or on a day off—to come and learn something. Because of this, they have certain expectations of their instructors and of

the course content. They may be fatigued when they attend classes so they appreciate any teaching devices that may spark their interest or add liveliness to the class.

They expect well-prepared instructors who have a clear set of objectives for the class and they expect them to be organized, enthusiastic about teaching and clearly knowledgeable about the subject. Adult learners possess a wide frame of reference obtained through life experiences and are eager to share these experiences and accumulated wisdom in class. They may lack self-confidence having been out of formal education for some years; however, they expect to be treated as peers and resent being talked down to by their instructors.

Adult learners want their learning to be relevant to their daily lives, seeking educational solutions to problems they are experiencing. They want and need to acquire enough information to be able to analyze their problems and arrive at alternative solutions. They require learning to "make sense" and will not participate in a learning activity just because the instructor said to do it. Adult learners desire assignments and activities where they can see themselves improve and measure their progress. If they are given assignments to complete outside of class, they expect these to be dealt with by the instructor the next time the class meets.

Adults are accustomed to learning their own way informally. They are constantly learning by doing, observing, reading, asking questions and talking with others. While this "learning by experience" is very powerful, it often isn't enough. Adults learn better if they have the opportunity to analyze their experience with others, get feedback and new ideas, and expand their understanding.

With this in mind, the main role of the instructor is to organize the material, help students to think about it in a complete and disciplined way, provide a setting where they can hear other ideas and information, and allow them the opportunity to "test" or practice what they've learned.

Although we've made some general statements about adult learners as a group, it is important to recognize that people do not all take in and retain information in the same way. In future articles, we will discuss how each person has his or her own preferred style of learning and how different teaching techniques are used to reach them. ☒