

Characteristics of Adult Learners

Adult learners are qualitatively different than younger learners. You certainly can “teach an old dog new tricks” by understanding the cognitive and social characteristics of adult learners. Using the right instructional strategies to maximize the learning advantages and address the learning challenges of adult learners can make all the difference in their success. **Adult Learner Cognitive Characteristics**

1. Generally speaking, most adult learners share the following characteristics:

2. Tend to be self-directed and want control over their own learning
3. Have self-imposed cognitive barriers due to years of academic failure and lack self-confidence
4. Can be resistant to new ideas or approaches—;are less open-minded than youth
5. Under-estimate their ability to learn
6. Desire pragmatic and relevant instruction that they perceive as valuable
7. Are intrinsically motivated
8. Interpret new learning in the context of old learning
9. Learn at a slower pace than that of youth
10. Are very concerned about the effective use of their time

Adult Learner Social Characteristics

1. Generally speaking, most adult learners share the following characteristics:
2. Can be resistant to group work
3. See teachers as peer partners in the learning process
4. Demand teacher availability and easy access
5. Want flexibility and see learning as secondary to other pre-occupations in their lives

Adult Learner Instructional Strategies

1. Adult learners need to be actively included in their own evaluation of assessment data. Students set personal goals and use learning activities that directly address assessment deficits and demonstrate incremental progress toward their short-term and long-term goals. Reading workshops can easily be individualized to allow adult learners to work at their own pace.

2. A few talking points may be helpful to bolster the confidence of adult learners and to provide the motivation needed for success:

“Unfortunately, some of your past reading instruction was poor; it’s not your fault that you have some skills to work on.” a.k.a. “blame someone else”

“You can learn in this class. If you come to class willing to try, you will significantly improve your reading, I promise.” I will be flexible and work around your schedule.

“I know you have tried before, but this time is different.”

“You will be able to chart your own progress and see what you are learning in this class.”

“Don’t give up. Adult learners can learn. Although they sometimes learn a bit more slowly than children, they learn at a deeper and more memorable level. The pay-off will be huge for you when you complete this class.”

About the Author

Mark Pennington is an educational author, presenter, reading specialist, and middle school teacher. Mark is committed to differentiated instruction for the diverse needs of today’s students. Visit Mark’s website at <http://www.penningtonpublishing.com> to check out his adult learners teacher resources and books: Teaching Reading Strategies, Teaching Essay Strategies, Teaching Grammar and Mechanics, and Teaching Spelling and Vocabulary.

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