

Doc 4.5. Teaching and training the adult learner

Tips on Teaching¹

Good teaching is as much about passion as it is about reason. It's about not only motivating students to learn, but teaching them how to learn, and doing so in a manner that is relevant, meaningful, and memorable. It's about caring for your craft, having a passion for it, and conveying that passion to everyone, most importantly to your students.

- Good teaching is about substance and treating students as consumers of knowledge. It's about doing your best to keep on top of your field, reading sources, inside and outside of your areas of expertise, and being at the leading edge as often as possible. But knowledge is not confined to scholarly journals. Good teaching is also about bridging the gap between theory and practice. It's about leaving the ivory tower and immersing oneself in the field, talking to, consulting with, and assisting practitioners, and liaising with their communities.
- Good teaching is about listening, questioning, being responsive, and remembering that each student and class is different. It's about eliciting responses and developing the oral communication skills of the quiet students. It's about pushing students to excel; at the same time, it's about being human, respecting others, and being professional at all times.
- Good teaching is about not always having a fixed agenda and being rigid, but being flexible, fluid, experimenting, and having the confidence to react and adjust to changing circumstances. It's about getting only 10 percent of what you wanted to do in a class done and still feeling good. It's about deviating from the course syllabus or lecture schedule easily when there is more and better learning elsewhere. Good teaching is about the creative balance between being an authoritarian dictator on the one hand and a pushover on the other.
- Good teaching is also about style. Should good teaching be entertaining? You bet! Does this mean that it lacks in substance? Not a chance! Effective teaching is not about being locked with both hands glued to a podium or having your eyes fixated on a slide projector while you drone on. Good teachers work the room and every student in it. They realize that they are the conductors, and the class is the orchestra. All students play different instruments and at varying proficiencies.
- This is very important -- good teaching is about humor. It's about being self-appreciating and not taking yourself too seriously. It's often about making innocuous jokes, mostly at your own expense, so that the ice breaks and students learn in a more relaxed atmosphere where you, like them, are human with your own share of faults and shortcomings.
- Good teaching is about caring, nurturing, and developing minds and talents. It's about devoting time, often invisible, to every student. It's also about the thankless hours of grading, designing or redesigning courses, and preparing materials to still further enhance instruction.
- Good teaching is supported by strong and visionary leadership, and very tangible institutional support -- resources, personnel, and funds. Good teaching is continually reinforced by an overarching vision that transcends the entire organization -- from full professors to part-time instructors -- and is reflected in what is said, but more importantly by what is done.

¹ Inspired by Richard Leblanc, Good Teaching: The Top Ten Requirements

- Good teaching is about mentoring between senior and junior faculty, teamwork, and being recognized and promoted by one's peers. Effective teaching should also be rewarded, and poor teaching needs to be remediated through training and development programs.
- At the end of the day, good teaching is about having fun, experiencing pleasure and intrinsic rewards ... like locking eyes with a student in the back row and seeing the synapses and neurons connecting, thoughts being formed, the person becoming better, and a smile cracking across a face as learning all of a sudden happens. Good teachers practice their craft not for the money or because they have to, but because they truly enjoy it and because they want to. Good teachers couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Understanding Adult Learners²

Most of the trainees in TREE training programs are considered adults in view of their status in life, environment, and real-life experiences. In this regard, the trainer must have sufficient knowledge on how to deal with them as adult learners.

- Adults are people with years of experience and a wealth of information - Focus on the strengths learners bring to the classroom, not just gaps in their knowledge. Provide opportunities for dialogue within the group. Tap their experience as a major source of enrichment to the class. Remember that you, the teacher, do not need to have all the answers, as long as you know where to go or who to call to get the answers. Students can be resources to you and to each other.
- Adults have established values, beliefs, and opinions - Demonstrate respect for differing beliefs, religions, value systems and lifestyles. Let your learners know that they are entitled to their values, beliefs and opinions, but that everyone in the room may not share their beliefs. Allow debate and challenge of ideas.
- Adults are people whose style and pace of learning has probably changed - Use a variety of teaching strategies such as small group problem solving and discussion. Use auditory, visual, tactile and participatory teaching methods. Reaction time and speed of learning may be slow, but the ability to learn is not impaired by age. Most adults prefer teaching methods other than lecture.
- Adults relate new knowledge and information to previously learned information and experiences - Assess the specific learning needs of your audience before your class or at the beginning of the class. Present single concepts and focus on application of concepts to relevant practical situations. Summarize frequently to increase retention and recall. Material outside of the context of participants' experiences and knowledge becomes meaningless.
- Adults are people with bodies influenced by gravity - Plan frequent breaks, even if they are 2-minute "stretch" breaks. During a lecture, a short break every 45-60 minutes is sufficient. In more interactive teaching situations, breaks can be spaced 60-90 minutes apart.
- Adults have pride - Support the students as individuals. Self-esteem and ego are at risk in a classroom environment that is not perceived as safe or supportive. People will not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of being put down or ridiculed. Allow people to admit confusion, ignorance, fears, biases and different opinions. Acknowledge or thank students for

² Inspired by American Vocational Training Association, California Nurses Association Train the Trainer program

their responses and questions. Treat all questions and comments with respect. Avoid saying "I just covered that" when someone asks a repetitive question. Remember, the only foolish question is the unasked question.

- Adults have a deep need to be self-directing - Engage the students in a process of mutual inquiry. Avoid merely transmitting knowledge or expecting total agreement. Don't "spoon-feed" the participants.
- Individual differences among people increase with age - Take into account differences in style, time, types and pace of learning. Use auditory, visual, tactile and participatory teaching methods.
- Adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning - Emphasize how learning can be applied in a practical setting. Use case studies, problem solving groups, and participatory activities to enhance learning. Adults generally want to immediately apply new information or skills to current problems or situations.
- Sometimes adults want to act like children. Watch for these moments and play with them as they wish to.