

HOW ADULTS LEARN...and How Does This Impacts An Instructor

During a recent instructor-training seminar, I was asked to discuss the topic, "How Adults Learn". It presented enough food for thought, that it was suggested that I share my research with you via the newsletter. I hope you find it as interesting and helpful as I did.

First, stop for a minute and think about how you learned as a child. You were probably a dependent learner - you carried out the teacher's directions. You came to your classes with little experience, and were no doubt motivated by external pressures such as teachers, parents, competition for grades, and the consequences of failure. You saw learning as a process of acquiring prescribed subject matter, and your readiness to learn was a function of age; that is, you were told what you had to learn to advance to the next grade level.

In contrast, **ADULTS** usually have these characteristics:

1.) Adults are **self-directed**. They like to pursue their own interests and make their own decisions about what they want to learn or accomplish. They may feel resentment or resistance when not asked.

IMPLICATION - Know your students. When you call your students before Canoe/Kayak School, discuss their motivations, interests and needs. Talk about how you are meeting their goals during the weekend.

Adults want freedom; so don't be too rigid in conducting the class. Whereas some courses have defined objectives in order to obtain a certificate or degree, learning to canoe or kayak for pleasure is different.

2) Adults are **experienced**. They have a great quantity and often a different quality of experience from each other, (full time worker? spouse? parent?, etc.).

IMPLICATION - Generally, in the canoe/kayak setting, your students are not in competition with one another and it enhances leaning if you can establish a climate of collaborative ness. Your students may be the richest resource for one another. Consider group discussions when covering topics such as first aid kits, securing gear in boats and river courtesy.

Since the range of experience in a group of adults will be varied, try to give individualized attention or challenges when possible. Associating with someone's experience is often a successful way to clarify and build knowledge. Ex. A sailor may use some of the same knots. Experience becomes increasingly the source of an adult's identity. If you ignore it, it is as if you are rejecting or do not value his or her experiences, and may even be perceived as not valuing him or her!

Can there be disadvantages to having experience? Yes. Habits and patterns are often developed, as well as preconceptions and prejudices. You, the instructor, have the challenge and the opportunity to help students become more open-minded. Another disadvantage may be the talker who has an "experience" on every subject.

3) Adults **have periods of readiness to learn**. That is, adults are ready to learn when they have a need to know or do something.

IMPLICATION - You may have to induce some readiness. If a student is content with a habit, such as only using his/her arms to perform a stroke, model what an effective stroke can do. Help students assess where their abilities are now and where they might want to be. Ex. Tempt them with rivers and trips that will make then conscious of what they need to know to enjoy them. Make it clear how your instruction is relevant to what they need to know. Ex. Relate a maneuver to a particular rapid on the river.

4) Adults **are task oriented and problem centered.** They often learn in order to perform a special task or solve a particular problem.

IMPLICATION - Don't have rigid rules. Introduce all required skills, giving a logical teaching progression, but be willing to customize your style of teaching to meet your students' needs. Ex. Someone may not be able to kneel all day. Let me be quick to add, however, that safety rules must be taught, emphasized and enforced!

5) Adults **don't want to feel they are wasting their time.**

IMPLICATION - Be prepared. You and your co-teacher need to be organized. Work to keep your students posted as to what is next and what is expected.

6) Adults **may have serious doubts about their abilities to succeed at new tasks.** They may also tend to worry about the accuracy of a skill.

IMPLICATION - Students may become anxious when expected to perform new skills and may try to reduce their anxiety by holding on to familiar ways of thinking and doing things. Give students an opportunity to talk about old and new methods in a supportive environment. Give adequate practice time. Poor performance is obvious to other students and could cause personal embarrassment. Be sensitive to their self-esteem and self-confidence, giving corrective feedback in a positive manner.

7) Adults **often want to try the 'whole' skill on their own, first.**

IMPLICATION - The whole approach works well with simple skills and skills for which the learner can transfer past experience such as lake canoeing learned at scout camp. However, the "part-whole" approach is probably most suitable when you want to focus on a key concept or one part of a skill. Ex. Involving the torso in strokes.

SUMMARY

When a child learns a skill, he or she is also learning *how* to learn a skill. Adults already have many strategies they rely on to acquire a skill. They have extensive learning histories - experience, knowledge and how they acquired the knowledge.

Adults come with a great diversity of interests - (love of the outdoors, this is just a lark); needs - (want exercise, looking for new friends after a move); concerns - (a sister drowned, want to look good), and habits - (husband always plays the dominant role, perfection in all things). Add to that the difference among themselves in strength, size, functional ability, general health and fitness. We have been conditioned to count the years to determine age, but perhaps we should classify people in terms of what they are able to do.

FOR SUCCESS IN TEACHING ADULTS, CONSIDER PAST EXPERIENCE, CURRENT GOALS AND PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS, AND, AS IN ALL TEACHING, MAKE IT FUN!

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