

### Helping adults learn in the classroom

*(adapted from: Training for Dummies, by Elaine Biech)*

Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding how adults learn best. Compared with children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. The field of adult learning is a relatively new area, based predominantly on the following principles:

- Adults have a need to know why they should learn something before investing time in a learning event. Trainers must ensure that the learners know the purpose for training as early as possible.
- Adults enter any learning situation with an image of themselves as self-directing, responsible grown-ups. Trainers must help adults identify their needs and direct their own learning experience.
- Adults come to a learning opportunity with a wealth of experience and a great deal to contribute. Trainers are successful when they identify ways to build on and make use of adults' hard-earned experience.
- Adults have a strong readiness to learn those things that help them cope with daily life effectively. Training that relates directly to situations faced by the participants is viewed as relevant.
- Adults are willing to devote energy to learning those things that they believe help them perform a task or solve a problem. Trainers who determine needs and interests and develop content in response to these needs are most helpful to adult learners.
- Adults are more responsive to internal motivators such as increased self esteem than external motivators such as higher salaries. Trainers can ensure that this internal motivation is not blocked by barriers such as a poor self-concept or time constraints by creating a safe learning climate.

So how can these principles be applied to ensure that participants learn as desired? Elaine Biech suggests four main approaches, which are expanded below:

- Create a safe haven for learning
- Create a comfortable environment
- Encourage participation
- Facilitate more than you lecture

#### Create a safe haven for learning

- Be prepared early enough so that you can greet participants at the door, welcome them, learn their names, and allow time for them to tell you something that's important to them;
- Share the objectives of the training early, prior to the session, if possible.
- Let participants know how they stand to benefit from the information.
- Demonstrate your respect for each individual.
- Ensure confidentiality — "What's said in the room stays in the room."
- Use names and sincere reinforcement to build rapport.
- Include something whimsical to pique curiosity and add a smile.

### Create a comfortable environment

- Arrive in the training room early enough to make it your own, so that you can welcome the learners in as your guests.
- Turn the lights on brightly (at least for the start of the session). There is nothing more depressing to me than walking into a ballroom where the lights have been left on romantic dim from the party the night before!
- Ask for a room with natural light. Even on a sunless day, natural light is more pleasant than any artificial lighting.
- Learn how to adjust the thermostat for the most comfortable level for most of the participants. Remember you never please all of them all the time. Do your best.
- Ensure that the environment looks comfortable.

Hide empty boxes. Chairs should be straight. Place materials neatly and uniformly at each seat. This order tells the learners that you care and went to the trouble of getting ready for them. It also indicates the level of professionalism expected of them.

- Ensure that you and your visuals can be seen and heard by all learners.

Try sitting in a few seats. Will all participants be able to see your visuals and hear you?

- Arrange the tables to be conducive to learning.

Ensure that everyone has adequate personal space.

- Have extra supplies, pens, and paper available. Have coffee, tea, and water waiting in the morning.
- Plan for ample breaks.

### Encourage participation

Creating active and ample participation could be the most important thing you can do to enhance learning. Here are a couple of thoughts to get you started:

- Use participants' names as often as possible.
- Share something of yourself to begin a trusted exchange of ideas.
- Use body language to encourage participation; positive nods, smiles, eye contact etc. all show that you're interested in others' ideas.
- Create small discussion groups to overcome any reluctance to share ideas or concerns.
- Learn and apply techniques to encourage learners to contribute confidently.

### Facilitate more than you lecture

There are very few times when straight lectures are required. Usually, the facilitation of experiential activities and discussions will enhance learning for everyone.

- Create discussion - not just between you and the learners, but among the learners.
- Elicit some opinions and ideas from the learners before you deliver your message. You may be surprised at how much 'training' the learners can do for you.
- Share personal experiences to build rapport and trust.
- Provide opportunities for participants to evaluate their own learning throughout the session.
- Create experiential learning activities (such as guided exercises) in which participants discover new concepts on their own.

This material was adapted from the following sources:

- Biech, E., *Training for Dummies*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 2004
- Luscre, A. *Planning & Preparing Successful Technology Training: Session Design, Training Materials and Presentation*, Mogadore Local School Network online resource 2007
- Sheltercentre free online training services, 2007.