



What I Learned About Adult Learners

As an adult who did not complete my education until later in life—that is, as a student—and as a former instructor and current tutor of adults—that is, as a teacher—I have a double perspective on adult learning.

It is this: We adults may learn more slowly, but what we learn often seems to imprint itself more deeply. Teaching adults likewise requires patience and an approach that recognizes and takes advantage of the older learner's experience, motivation, and preferred learning style.

Years ago, I completed my degree through evening courses. Because I was a working adult, extending my day required an investment of effort and stamina. I took one or two courses each semester and, whenever possible, paired a relatively difficult course with one that was not quite so challenging.

As an adult college student, I quickly discovered that the key to surviving the gauntlet of academic requirements was simple: Surrender to the process. If that process involved a particularly inept or unreasonably difficult professor, I gritted my teeth, remained faithful to the syllabus, and did everything in my power to meet the instructor's expectations.

As the Borg told that *Star Trek* captain, “Resistance is futile.”

Two years after completing my degree, I latched on to an adjunct teaching position at a community college. Because I was a certified Microsoft Office instructor, I was allowed to teach evening courses in Microsoft software. There I encountered many willing but “computer-challenged” adults who needed to improve their skills for professional or personal reasons.

One semester, I taught both an afternoon class and an evening class. Carrying this double load allowed me to observe differences between the relatively younger students—generally ages 18 to 21—in my daytime class and the older adults, many over 40, who attended at night.

The younger students generally absorbed instructions quickly and were more comfortable with computers. Many, however, treated my “easy” software course casually. They could coast to a low B on their practical ability without paying much attention to the underlying concepts covered by quizzes and other knowledge assessments.

My older students often needed a slower, more methodical presentation of the software steps. What they sometimes lacked in speed, however, they made up for in concentration and commitment. They took the course theory seriously and wanted to understand not only which buttons to click, but why they were clicking them.

Some of my adult learners were understandably apprehensive about unfamiliar technology. They were reluctant to work ahead or experiment, and many feared that one wrong move might damage the equipment. I would half-jokingly reassure the more timid students that they should not worry about “breaking the computer.” It was impossible, I told them. One evening, an adult student proved me wrong by trying to jam a floppy disk into a CD-ROM drive—and actually breaking the computer!

My experiences as both a student and an instructor led me to two conclusions about adult learning:

First, learning is a lifelong activity. Like physical exercise, it tones the mind and nourishes one’s self-image. It is also increasingly important in a demanding workplace where qualifications and current skills help people gain—and retain—that elusive measure of equity in their careers.

Second, adult learners should recognize the significant advantage they possess over many younger students: They understand the value of an education. Some know its value because they slipped through the system earlier in life and suffered the consequences. Others have discovered that academic success—and the process of becoming educated—is deeply satisfying and nourishing in its own right.

Younger students may absorb new information more quickly, but older learners often bring patience, purpose, experience, and determination to the classroom. They may move more cautiously, but they seldom take the opportunity for granted.

As both an adult student and an adult educator, I have found these parallel roles to be life-enriching experiences. Adults who think they are “too old” to achieve an educational milestone—a new skill, a certificate, or a degree—should ask themselves one question: “How old will I be if I don’t do it?”

In that context, age is irrelevant.