



An Education That Never Really Ends

One of the more persistent misconceptions about education is that it belongs primarily to the young. We attend school, acquire whatever knowledge is necessary to begin making a living, and then supposedly spend the remainder of our lives putting that knowledge to work.

Unfortunately, nobody told the world to stop changing.

This article explores something I learned from both sides of the classroom: Adults often make exceptionally capable students. They bring experience, determination, and a practical appreciation of knowledge that younger students may not yet possess. They also bring anxieties, competing responsibilities, and occasionally the mistaken conviction that they're too old to learn something new.

Having spent years as both an adult student and an instructor, I've reached a few conclusions about why adults learn, what sometimes holds them back, and why education should never have an expiration date.

Returning to the Classroom

My formal education didn't end when I completed my early schooling. Like many adults, I eventually discovered that additional education could open doors that had previously seemed closed.

After serving in the Navy, I entered a second career in education. As a vocational education specialist at a community college, I helped students identify career goals, understand educational requirements, and prepare for employment. I also became an adjunct instructor, teaching computer applications over six semesters.

My subjects included Microsoft Windows, Word, and Access databases. This was during an era when personal computers were becoming essential workplace tools, and many adults were discovering that the skills they had relied upon for years were no longer sufficient.

Some students were returning to school after long absences. Others were preparing for new careers, hoping for promotions, or simply trying to keep pace with technology. Their ages, backgrounds, and academic preparation varied considerably, but most shared one important characteristic: They had a reason for being there.

Adults Want to Know Why

Children generally attend school because they're required to. Adults usually attend because they have decided that learning something will improve their circumstances. That difference is enormously important.

An adult learning a word-processing program may need to prepare business correspondence, write reports, or qualify for employment. Someone studying a database application may already understand the business problem but lack the technical skills to solve it.

These students are seldom satisfied with learning a procedure simply because the instructor says it's important. They want to understand how the procedure applies to their lives.

I learned that explaining the practical value of a lesson often accomplished more than a lengthy lecture on its theoretical foundations. Once students understood why a particular skill mattered, their motivation frequently took care of itself.

Good teaching, I concluded, involves more than transmitting information. It requires connecting new knowledge to something the student already understands and values.

The Computer Doesn't Know How Old You Are

Teaching computer applications provided some memorable lessons about adult education. Consider the humble floppy disk, once an indispensable accessory for anyone using a personal computer. Students had to learn not only how to create documents but also how to save them, retrieve them, and avoid losing hours of work through an innocent misunderstanding of computer terminology.

For experienced users, these operations eventually became second nature. For beginners, however, the computer could seem like an unpredictable machine whose principal purpose was to expose their ignorance.

Older students sometimes approached the keyboard with considerable apprehension. They worried about pressing the wrong key, damaging the computer, or looking foolish in front of their classmates.

I tried to reassure them that computers were remarkably indifferent to their age, previous education, and social standing. The machine didn't know whether the person operating it was eighteen or eighty. It simply responded to instructions. Sometimes it responded incorrectly, but that was another lesson entirely.

The important breakthrough usually occurred when students stopped worrying about making mistakes and began experimenting. Once they discovered that most errors could be corrected, their confidence improved dramatically.

Experience Is an Educational Advantage

Adult students bring something to the classroom that no textbook can supply: years of practical experience.

A person who has managed a household budget already understands many financial principles. Someone who has supervised employees understands organizational behavior. A veteran may possess considerable knowledge of leadership, logistics, administration, and responsibility without having studied those subjects in a conventional academic setting. The instructor's challenge is to recognize that experience and build upon it.

This doesn't mean adults automatically learn more easily than younger students. They may have forgotten mathematical procedures, grammatical rules, or study habits they once knew. Some have been away from formal education for decades.

But they possess a framework of experience into which new knowledge can fit. When an instructor successfully connects unfamiliar material to familiar situations, learning becomes considerably easier.

I also discovered that adults appreciate being treated as adults. They don't need condescension or excessive reassurance. They need clear explanations, useful examples, opportunities to practice, and honest feedback about their progress. Above all, they need to know that the instructor respects the effort they're making.

The Greatest Obstacle May Be Confidence

Many adult students underestimate their own abilities. They remember struggling with mathematics in high school, failing to understand a particular subject, or receiving discouraging comments from teachers. Decades later, those experiences can still influence their willingness to attempt something unfamiliar.

Others worry that younger classmates will learn more quickly. They may believe that advancing age has somehow deprived them of the ability to master new information.

Certainly, learning can change as we grow older. Memorization may require more repetition, and unfamiliar technology can be frustrating. But patience, determination, and accumulated experience often compensate for these difficulties.

One of the most satisfying moments in teaching occurs when students who initially doubts their ability suddenly understand something that had seemed impossible. The expression on their faces tells the instructor that a barrier has disappeared.

They haven't merely learned a new skill. They have discovered that he is still capable of learning.

Two Lessons I Never Forgot

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

First, adults learn best when they understand the purpose of what they're learning. They respond to practical applications, meaningful goals, and instruction that respects their existing knowledge. The more directly a lesson relates to their needs, the more likely they are to remain interested and motivated.

Second, the greatest limitation on adult learning is often not age but attitude. People who convince themselves that they're too old, too inexperienced, or insufficiently intelligent may never discover what they're capable of accomplishing.

I have seen adults acquire computer skills, improve their writing, pursue new careers, and undertake educational challenges they once considered beyond their abilities. Their achievements reminded me that education is not simply preparation for life. It is part of life itself.

How Old Will You Be If You Don't Do It?

Perhaps the most discouraging statement an adult student can make is, "I'd like to do that, but I'm too old." Too old for what?

Too old to learn another language? Too old to earn a degree? Too old to master a computer application, write a book, or explore a subject that has always fascinated you? Age may impose certain limitations, but curiosity need not be one of them.

Suppose you're sixty years old and considering a four-year college degree. You hesitate because you'll be sixty-four when you finish. The obvious question is: **How old will you be in four years if you don't do it?** The answer, of course, is sixty-four.

The years will pass whether you pursue your ambition or abandon it. The difference is what you'll have accomplished along the way. That may be the most important lesson I've learned about adult education. Learning isn't reserved for the young, and personal growth doesn't end when we retire.

As long as we remain curious, willing to make mistakes, and determined to understand something new, there's still plenty of classroom left in life.

And fortunately, nobody has to ask permission to enroll.