

1

SO, YOU'RE TEACHING ADULTS?

Many years ago, a young student was asked by his professor to teach the last two sessions of his introductory psychology class, on classical and operant conditioning. The young instructor-to-be found himself both excited and terrified as he agreed to teach the classes. With only a few days to prepare, he planned to use a combination of lecture, brief discussion, and a film recommended by the professor. The day of the first class arrived, and the young instructor entered the room. With a shaky voice, he introduced himself and said, "Dr. Burns won't be able to be here for the last two classes so I will be filling in." It turned out to be a long session. The film worked fine, but the lecture was presented a little too quickly and the teacher's lack of confidence was apparent. He did his best to answer questions, but there weren't many, and the session ended early.

As you probably guessed, I was that young instructor. This was my first experience teaching in a classroom setting. What I distinctly remember all these years later were two very different emotions: the first was a sense of failure that I had not done a very good job. The second emotion, however, was a tingling inside that said to me "Whew, I'm glad its over, but *I want to try it again*." This was pretty exciting. I want to teach, and *do it better* next time." As it turned out, the next day's class was cancelled due to a snowstorm and I didn't have my second chance . . . until years later.

4 TEACHING ADULTS

I have shared this story because many teachers are called upon to teach without having had previous experience. In fact, very few people who teach adults have had some sort of training or preparation in how to do so. There are graduate programs that offer master's and doctoral degrees in adult education or learning (I teach in one), but most people don't know they exist. Indeed, many people who teach adults really don't need an advanced degree. What they *do* need are some basic strategies and tools that can help them to reach the learners they are expected to teach.

Most people who teach adults do so as a *part* of the other responsibilities in their lives. Volunteer literacy tutors, community volunteers, ministers, social workers, health care providers, musicians, and others perform many roles in their jobs, and teaching may only be a small part of their responsibilities. Likewise, most of the people who teach non-credit courses for school districts, community colleges, or university continuing education programs are not full-time teachers, but rather professionals for whom what they are teaching is a hobby or personal interest. Here are a few examples of the kinds of people I am talking about:

- A counselor at a diabetes center works with individuals and groups to help them learn about the disease and how they can better manage their own situations;
- A public official is invited to teach a session on ethics to a group of public administration students at the local university;
- A young stay-at-home mother decides to become a part-time literacy tutor in order to “give back” to others and to have a new challenge outside the home;
- A social worker teaches job skills to a group of unemployed young adults as part of a welfare-to-work program;
- A musician gives private guitar lessons to adults and sometimes teaches a class for the local community college;

- A retired engineer volunteers to teach an adult Bible study class at church;
- A man teaches a one-evening class on “Ghost Towns of Montana” to a group of interested people from the community; and
- An elementary school teacher is asked to prepare an in-service program for other teachers on how to use whiteboards in the classroom.

These are but a few examples of situations in which people without preparation in teaching *adults* are called upon to do just that.

My purpose in writing this book was to share with you some of the tips, techniques, and ideas related to teaching adults that I have accumulated over more than three decades of teaching and studying adult learners and the people who help them learn. I don't expect that reading this book will instantly make you an expert on teaching adults; for most people, this takes years of experience, along with learning from trial and error. But if you read this book and follow some of the ideas that I share, you *will* be a more confident and effective teacher of adults, because you will learn something about adult learners, the teaching/learning process, and, perhaps most important, about yourself as a teacher.

A Teacher by Any Other Name

One of the struggles I had when I first started working on this book was what to call those people who teach adults. The logical choice is *teacher* because this describes what we do. However, in the world of adult education, the word teacher often brings up images of elementary and secondary classrooms. *Instructor* is another common term; it is often used in post-secondary education at colleges and universities, community colleges, and proprietary schools. In the workplace, we often use the term *trainer*. Learning in the workplace frequently involves training in skills or procedures, so this

6 TEACHING ADULTS

term fits many situations in which adults are involved in learning. Finally, another term that is often used is *facilitator*. Because *facilitator* refers to a person who **guides** learners rather than **tells** them, the term works for many educators of adults, but it is sometimes thought to be a weak descriptor by others, especially those who identify as trainers.

So what to do? I decided that in this book I will use *all* of these terms—teacher, instructor, trainer, *facilitator*—as well as educator of adults or, simply, educator. I will use these terms interchangeably and, while there are subtle differences, as you read the book, don't let the different descriptors throw you. Feel free to substitute your preferred term. However, I will most often use “teacher” as I share the ideas related to helping adults learn. Despite the reluctance of many adult educators to use a term they often associate with K–12 education, teacher is the clearest way to describe what we are doing . . . we are teaching! A teacher is one who teaches.

A final point before we begin our journey. I am writing this book for readers who teach in many different settings. These include college professors with increasing numbers of adult students in their classes; trainers in business and public service settings; in-service coordinators in schools, health care settings, and other professions; and the many, many people who find themselves teaching adults, sometimes without even realizing it. The challenge in writing this book was for me to make it relevant to such a diverse audience. I have tried to use examples from different settings. Most of my personal examples come from the higher education classroom, where I have done most of my teaching over more than thirty-two years (that's a scary thought as I write this!). But your job as the reader is to transfer these examples to your own practice in order to see the point I am trying to make. If you can read in a proactive way, you should be able to get quite a bit out of the book, even if the examples are spread over a broad landscape of settings.



SO, YOU'RE TEACHING ADULTS? 7

Teaching adults can be intimidating at first, as I learned in the experience that opened this chapter. But if it weren't intimidating at times, there would be no challenge. Teaching adults can be a source of great joy, excitement, and satisfaction. My hope is that you will have this in mind as you explore the following chapters. By understanding a few tips, strategies, and techniques, your journey on the road to teaching adults should be a rewarding adventure.



THINK ABOUT IT

Take a minute to think of yourself teaching adults. This can be an actual past experience or it can be an image you have of yourself teaching in the future. Reflect on the following questions.

- How do I feel about teaching adults?
- What are my fears?
- What are the strengths I bring to teaching adults?
- What knowledge and skills do I need to develop further in order to be a more effective teacher?

Now, write down a few notes for each of the questions. As you read this book, refer to these notes from time to time. Have your responses changed? How so?

Notes: _____





8 TEACHING ADULTS

Further Reading

- Apps, J.W. (1991). *Mastering the teaching of adults*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Apps, J.W. (1996). *Teaching from the heart*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Brookfield, S.D. (2006). *The skillful teacher* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA:
Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, P.J. (2007). *The courage to teach* (10th ann. ed.). San Francisco, CA:
Jossey-Bass.

