

On Teaching Adult Learners Online

<http://www.gvsu.edu/idel/>

Adults need to know why they should learn something.

- Students need and deserve to believe that what they are doing is important. They will invest considerable energy if they will gain from learning it
- Design courses so that students can apply them toward their career goals
- Demonstrate how your course matches their goals.

Adults bring their own experience, which they expect to have valued.

- Student-centered instruction acknowledges the real-life experiences and knowledge of adult learners.
- Find out what is salient and worthwhile to the students
- Provide opportunities for students to share knowledge and experience.
 - Build them into open-ended discussion questions
 - Add them to reflection prompts
 - Have students draw on personal/professional experiences in presentations
 - Does a work/life situation fit into a relevant case study?

Adults come ready to learn what they need to apply to their real-life.

- Help them to draw relevant connections between themselves and the content
 - Ask them to connect why it's important
- Present theories and concepts within the context of application to real-world issues
- Use Case Studies
- Problem Based Learning
- Assign real world scenario to small groups and have each group develop solutions to the problem (use Design Thinking!)
- Draw on their own identified critical incidents
- Have them write critical reflections or journals
- Interview assignments provide real-world application to pull threads together

Adults are more prepared for self-regulated Learning

- To any degree that you can, turn control of the learning experience over to the learners themselves.
- Leave assignments as open ended as possible for students to choose their approach or subject within your content.
- Allow learners to design their own course projects
- Organize modules so learners can start with what interests them most
- Monitor progress, require self-evaluation, and provide feedback

Impostership!

• • •

Feeling like a fraud is a common phenomenon and is prolific among the post-traditional learners in higher education, especially those taking online courses. It may be due to the technology presenting anxieties, feelings of isolation, or difficulties in finding a quiet time and place to work that contribute to wondering if they belong. Mostly, there is widespread fear of not being good enough, and waiting to be “found out.”

Be sure to stay connected to your adult students and facilitate their connection to each other.

Perhaps several would benefit from a virtual study group.

Provide detailed and supportive feedback with practical suggestions for working with the material.

Offer support and help them access university resources.

Adults need to feel connected and not isolated

Frequently use video and voice so students feel connected to you (remember to include transcripts or closed captioning!)

- Post a welcome video
- Post weekly video or audio announcements
- Brief video introductions to weekly content or lectures (no more than 5-minute segments!)
- Audio or video feedback in the grade center
- Use Flipgrid (flipgrid.com) for initial introductions, or other brief response assignments
- Begin a new unit with students posting a recording of themselves answering “What I know” and “What I want to know” about the upcoming content. At the end of the unit they can wrap up with “What I learned” and “How I can use this.”

Online Discussion

- A first week question: “Share an example of when you excelled at learning something. How did you go about learning it?”
- Open-ended questions that apply theory (or content) to a personal experience (such as a work environment, community volunteer, etc.)
- In small groups or teams, have students share primary responsibility for facilitating the discussion – including a prompt (at least one that might be in addition to one you post), critical questions for follow-up replies, and summarizing.
- Have students take on a different persona for online discussion – participate as if they were (fill in the blank – a person from history, from a novel, a construct from a theory, etc.)
- Instead of text-only, students can post a brief video clip or image that responds to a prompt. Others challenge it, or post another for comparison.
- Use pop-culture references for discussion, for example, post pop-culture representations from different eras that represent hegemony. Follow this up with written reflection, or a team podcast about the implications for today.
- Be very clear about your discussion expectations and provide examples of what you are looking for. Students will prefer that you are prescriptive about the required number and days for posting – they may exceed the requirement, but will be anxious without the guidelines.
- Provide a rubric that includes your quality expectations.

References

- Brookfield, S. (1999, January/February). What is college really like for adult students? *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience*, 10-15.
- Decker, G., Cox, S. (2007) Applying andragogy in online discussion. Lilly North Conference on College Teaching, Traverse City, MI.
- Galbraith, M. W. (Ed.). (2004). *Adult learning methods: A guide for effective instruction* (3rd ed.). Melbourne, FL: Krieger Publishing. (Original work published 1998)
- Kasworm, C. E., Polson, C. J., & Fishback, S. J. (2002). Appendix B. In *Responding to adult learners in higher education* (pp. 169-176). Professional practices in adult education and human resource development series. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). *The adult learner, sixth edition: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (6th ed.). Philadelphia: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Shank, Patti (2013). More on designing and teaching online courses with adult students in mind. *Faculty Focus Higher Ed Teaching & Learning*. <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/more-on-designing-and-teaching-online-courses-with-adult-students-in-mind/>.