



Tips for Teaching Adult Learners

by Diane Zaerr Brenneman

These principles for effective adult learning come from Jane Vella's book (see note below) with my commentary and examples. I've highlighted the ones that seem most helpful to adult Bible study or Sunday School classes. Check out her book for all 12 principles.

Needs Assessment.

Assess the students' background, experience and knowledge to the best of your ability. Are they lifetime or newer church members? Are they familiar and comfortable with the Bible? Do they read and study Bible on their own? What have they studied in the past? Have they had positive or negative experiences? Ask questions. **Adults learn best when the topic is designed around what they want to learn** (kids do, too).

Safety.

Think about the students in your setting or environment. Are they ready to dig in? Or, is biblical study in a small group study new to them. Plan accordingly. Don't ask new-to-the-Bible students to find chapter and verse – provide it for them. **Don't ask anyone to read aloud unless they volunteer or you are confident this will be comfortable.** Arrange learning environment so it's spacious with optional seating choices – be careful about forcing intimacy on introverts who are new to group study.

Build trust by agreeing to the objectives together, working in small groups if the group is large or students aren't confident, and maintain a nonjudgmental atmosphere. Affirm students for their contribution, whether or not you agree with it. **Nothing is worse than the fatal "plop."** Vella: when an adult learner says something in a group, only to have the words hit the floor with a resounding "plop," without affirmation, without even recognition that she has spoken, with the teacher proceeding as if nothing had been said. A great way to destroy safety.

Challenge, yes, but only when you're assured of your student's safety.

Sound Relationships.

Respect the students in your group. Affirm them. Listen carefully. This last one is particularly hard for me to do as I'm usually trying to think of my next point or where I'm going next in the lesson. **Pauses while you find your place or gather your thoughts are fine.** Silence can help us all integrate the learning into our lives. You might share on an introduction Sunday that you are comfortable with pauses and students don't need to feel obliged to fill them. **All learners come with both experience and personal perceptions of the world and deserve respect.**

Clear Roles.

It can be difficult for overly-modest Mennonites to accept leadership roles as we fear it sets us above others and erodes humility. But I think failure to accept leadership given to you isn't humble either. **When teachers take valuable class time denigrating their own knowledge and experience, it misplaces the attention on you as teacher.** So you're not a seminary grad (or maybe you are). You have prepared and you've been chosen to lead.

No group of adult learners is comfortable in the absence of a leader. It isn't always easy to lead peers. But when you are asked to teach, prepare, accept your role, and keep the focus on listening to the students. When your students express appreciation for your teaching, accept it, say thank you, and move on.

Praxis.

A Greek word that means "action with reflection." **Adults don't really learn a concept (or action) without taking time to reflect on its meaning.** Since we don't often "do" something to reflect on in Sunday School, teachers can use case studies (a story, a video) to illustrate the "doing" or action. These questions can help students with praxis.

1. What do you see happening here?
2. Why do you think it is happening?
3. When it happens in your situation, what problems does it cause?
4. What can we do about it?

Ideas, Feelings, Actions.

We know that learning involves more than just the content (ideas and concepts). It also involves feeling something about the concept (emotions) and doing something (actions). Because matters of faith are personal and deep, **emotions are to be expected.** Acknowledge the emotion you sense in students, but don't let one person's emotions derail the whole class period. Plan for movement when possible. Ask students to stand on an imaginary continuum line to express feelings or decisions. Try kneeling over chairs or benches for prayer. **The body needs to participate** with the mind and the heart for effective adult learning.

Immediacy.

When you are preparing, **always take a step back and ask, "Why does this matter?"** Most adults don't have time to waste. Why should they care about the content you're working with? How will it help their faith lives this week? Or how can they be challenged to apply it right away?

Engagement.

To learn, adults must care about the content of the learning. Ask your students if or why this matters. And **watch for interest, energy, and attention.** No one benefits from going through the motions or dragging yourself into study that is not life-giving. Reassess midstream. Ask what really matters today. Dialogue together about study that can address real needs and plan for it.

Want to know more?

Boost your energy for teaching by reading this friendly and approachable book: book *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* by Jane Vella (Jossey-Bass, 1994). Vella illustrates each principle with an inspiring story of her own teaching, often in cross-cultural settings. Contact Shana Peachey Boshart to borrow it the from the formation resource library.