

Engaging Adult Learners in the Classroom

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For learning to occur, trainees must be engaged in the learning process. This engagement must start as learners enter the classroom or before, if possible, so that they become an active participant rather than a passive bystander. This is one of the basic elements of adult learning - people must be involved in the learning process in order to gain, retain, recall and use what they experience.

Unlike children, who often have little intrinsic motivation to be in the classroom and little previous knowledge or experience from which they can extract meaning and assimilate new information, adults typically want to be present and learn. They often seek new knowledge and skills that they can immediately apply on the job or in their life.

Research indicates that long-term memories are formed when multiple senses capture sensory data and the brain assimilates the new information or matches it with existing knowledge. To help accomplish this when you are training adults look for ways to tap into various sensory channels through the use of environmental elements such as, color, sound, images, motion, smells, novelty, movement and physical activity.

Additionally, you can encourage retention of key concepts and information through use of repetition. For example, consider building in some form of review activity every 15-20 minutes to hold attention and reinforce what has been shared. By using *these interim reviews* rather than waiting until the end of a session, you enhance the possibility that your learners will walk away with more useful knowledge and skills.

Some easy interim review formats include the following:

- Create strips of paper with different key ideas or concepts covered in the session up to that point on each one. Next, place one strip inside small plastic eggs of various colors (the type used in children's Easter baskets). When you are ready to review, pass around a basket or box with these in it and have volunteers take one egg. Once all eggs are distributed, ask for volunteers to stand, open their egg and read what is on their strip of paper. Ask for anyone else in the room to define or explain the idea or concept. Reward the volunteer who answers correctly, then repeat the process until all eggs have been opened. A variation of this is to use various colored balloons placed on the wall before the session and have them retrieved and popped by volunteers for the review. This type of activity involves brain-based learning concepts of fun, novelty, repetition (review), color, sound (if using balloons) movement and learner engagement.
- When ready to review, have learners turn to another participant and share one key concept learned thus far and how they plan to use it.
- Depending on the session topic, use a *What if?* activity in which, at some point, you have each person take out a piece of paper and write "What If?" at the top of

the page. Next have finish the statement with some key idea or concept learned in the session that they could immediately apply to their job or life.

- Use a *Share the Knowledge* review in which you have a volunteer team leader start a piece of paper around their table by first writing one key idea or concept learned up until that point in the session, then passing the paper to their left. Subsequent learners repeat the process until everyone has contributed something. Let them know before starting that it is okay to *cheat* and look at their notes if they cannot think of something to add. After everyone has written something have the leader lead a discussion on which item the group believes to be most significant and discuss why they believe this to be true. Allow 5 minutes for this process, then have each team leader share the item their team selected with the rest of the groups. Reward team leaders with a small prize or piece of candy.

Training does not have to be boring or tedious. Think of ways to make your learning events come alive and engage your learners while reinforcing ideas and concepts.

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