How to Teach Adults

Growing up, many of us were educated in a typical "classroom" environment that we often see reproduced in the media. We tend to think of a classroom with a teacher at the front of the room who is the expert presenting information to a room of students. The students are often sitting behind rows of desks taking notes. Their learning experience is centered on a lecture or presentation given by the teacher, and students can raise their hands to ask questions. There generally aren't many activities or interaction beyond question and answers, and it can have a "top-down" feel where the students are there to learn, and the teacher is the authority with the correct knowledge to share with them.

This model is now considered outdated, but it has remarkable staying power. This same outdated approach is often replicated and reinforced in professional development programs and other learning contexts at a great cost. And, sadly, opportunities to discover, develop, refine, and customize effective approaches using teaching best practices are also often limited for instructors. And if it is the only model we have direct experience with, we tend reproduce it for lack of a better approach.

We encourage having a more interactive approach that is based on what we know about how adults learn, since most of your participants will be adults.

So how can you create a better learning environment? You can use some of the main principles of adult learning to form your approach and event by asking yourself the following questions and making the event more "participant-centered."

- Have participants provided input into what they'll be learning? This might be through the use of pre-event surveys or interviews with participants, breaking a room up into small groups to focus on different topics, giving participants various options for what they can do with the time they have available, or co-designing a series of training events with a group over time. But the more they can co-direct what they're learning, the more engaged they're likely to be, and you'll benefit by knowing more about who they are and what they need.

- Do participants understand and agree with *why* you're teaching them something? Adults need to understand and accept the reason for learning a specific skill. An example of this is asking for participants to share their experiences and opinions about something before going into the depths of the topic. Also encourage them to ask questions, and demonstrate that there are no bad questions.

- Are you taking a "problem-centered approach," or are you giving participants a list of things to do? We learn best as we seek solutions to problems. When you cover a particular topic, start with defining and describing a particular problem or challenge before you start talking about ways to solve that problem.

  - One example of this is not being "tool-centric" and focusing on telling them about "the right" tools they should be using without clearly establishing what problem a tool is designed to help with. For example, good password habits are a challenging problem for everyone. We can address this by going over what makes a good password, the dangers of password reuse, and demonstrating the benefits of using a password manager. If you start by outlining the problem and challenges involved, and then go into practical solutions, participants are more likely to be "on board" with you. But If you only give them a list of things they "should" be doing, without clearly demonstrating how those will solve a problem for them, they won't have an incentive to learn or use what you're teaching them.

- Are you creating space for participants to try things out for themselves? Is there an environment where they can make mistakes and learn from them? We tend to learn best from experience, including errors. For example, if participants are installing a new tool, leave enough time for them to practice using it with others and ask for help if they get stuck.

- Is what you're teaching immediately useful or relevant to their lives? Do they see it that way? If not, they may not consider your session worth their time. Most adults are interested in learning what has immediate relevance to their professional and social lives.

If you'd like to learn more about adult learning principles, and an example of how to structurally integrate them into curriculum design, [check out LevelUp's Approach to Adult Learning](#).