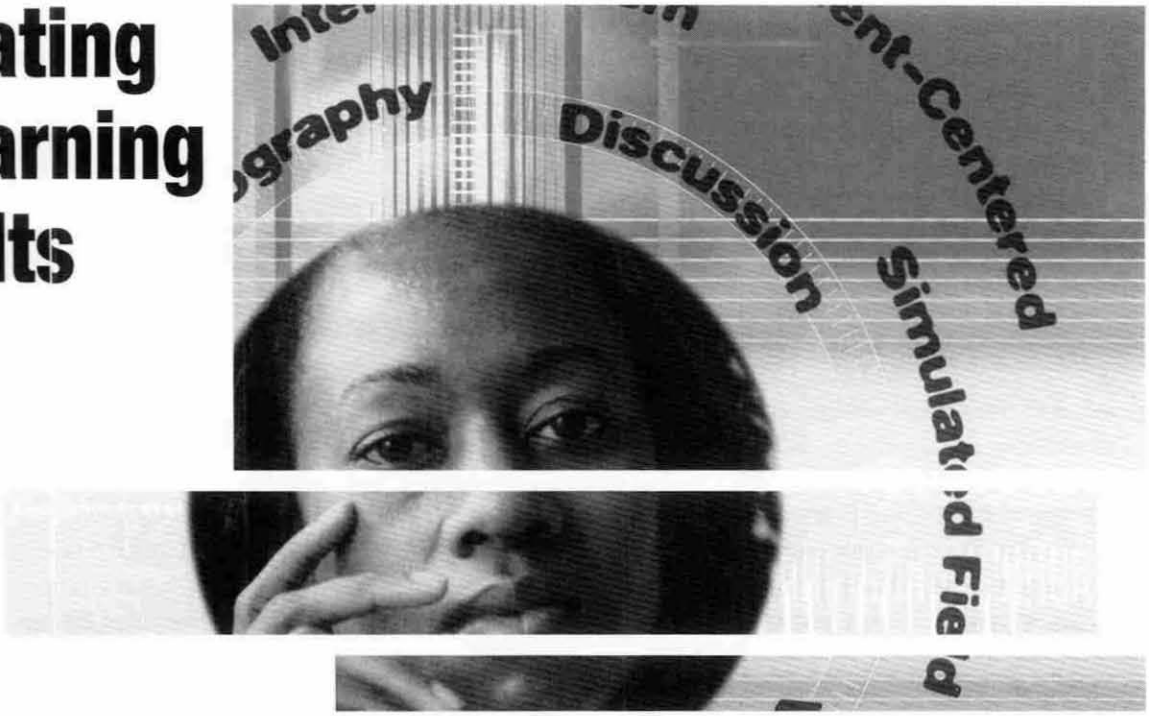
Facilitating the Learning of Adults



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The articles in this issue of *Adult Learning* address varied ways of facilitating adult learning or administering programs. They are designed for different settings and purposes, but all discuss facilitating the learning of adults. Some focus on specific teaching techniques, some on events in the classroom, others on classroom climate, and a few on the philosophies and viewpoints of the teachers of adults. Why an issue focusing on teaching techniques and the classroom environment? It is easy to become distracted from our central focus of teaching adults among the necessary and real requirements of ensuring that programs for adults are planned and administered. Programs need to be created and marketed, students enrolled, teachers hired, facilities located and managed, funds generated, evaluations conducted, and reports written. Demands on teachers of all ages for increased accountability and documentation cost time and money while competing with concerns that the needs of adult students are met and valuable programs survive. An issue of *Adult Learning* that refocuses our attention on the needs of adult students and different approaches to facilitating their learning may be inspiring and revitalizing for adult educators.

Another reason is to return our focus to the central issue of adult learning. In *The New Update on Adult Learning*, Merriam (2001) writes that knowledge of adult learning is at the heart of our practice of adult education, whether we are involved in planning and administering programs, teaching, and/or counseling adults. It is also "the most studied topic in adult education" (p. 1). Unfortunately, many adult education theories do not always come attached with practical ideas for how to apply the information, even when the theories have been drawn from practice. Translation of theory to practice is the work of inspired educators working directly with adult students.

One part of moving away from the distractions of program development and administration is to focus our attention on the adult learners we meet. Employing a humanistic perspective, Nuckles describes student-centered teaching as the alignment of teacher's concerns with the learners. He explains what is needed for teachers and administrators to be more responsive to students' needs and concerns. Student-centered teaching begins with preparation prior to learners arrival, requires understanding of adult learners, self-assessment of one's own teaching style and content mastery, the ability to model skills being taught and modify preferred teaching

styles to accommodate learners with varied preferences, and an administration that is congruent with and reinforces the facultys responsive teaching styles. Recognizing the complexities involved with being empathetic with the needs of diverse students, Nuckles indicates that honest, authentic effort, and not perfection, is the aim.

This issue includes several articles that describe specific teaching practices or techniques. Paul Lones examines the relationship between learning and creativity to explore implications for adult learning. He outlines a model for developing and facilitating creativity with adults students, and uses his experiences of learning to lead mountain club activities as an example. The model requires visualization of what a person wishes to create, a clear view of current reality, and the ability to use the tension between the vision and reality as an energy source for action. Developing actions to activate this vision involves the ability to conceive a new reality, freedom to create it, and critical reflection and discussion.

Even for experienced practitioners, changes in the teaching career and in the literature of the field can impel us to re-examine our practice and activities.

Facilitating a simulated field trip without leaving the classroom also requires creativity and imagination, and involves an attempt to change the perceived reality of a physical space. Douglas describes a method for field trip simulation created for a graduate class in adult education. He notes that the pedagogical literature on field trips has not been examined in adult education. During the field trip, he evoked as many senses as possible including sight, hearing, kinesthetic experiences, and narrative and notes that the sense of smell might also be evoked. New understandings of the brain and how we learn indicate that multi-sensory experiences involving the emotions, such as Douglas created in his simulated field trip, improve both memory and learning (Dirkx, 2001; Hill, 2001).

Using autobiography to evoke personal narrative is a teaching/learning technique described by Larson and Brady. They note that students are able to gain deep, personal understanding of the learning theories presented in class and gain a richer understanding of the diverse ways people learn. Humans are instinctive storytellers and narrative, in the form of autobiography in this example, can provide a valuable learning process since it is intimately linked to meaning-making (Clark, 2001).

Several articles focus on teachers of adults. In a discussion of what makes a good teacher of adults, Gomberg and Gray present principles for managing the classroom. They integrate a discussion of teaching style with adult educators' personal philosophies. In this article, three points along the continuum between teacher-centered and student-centered teaching are designated and related to different philosophical stances. The five principles the authors articulate offer choices about classroom management and an opportunity for adult educators to think about their practice.

Finally, some articles in this issue focus on programs for adults. Wu and Carter describe a model for the professional development of volunteer teachers. Describing an English as a Second Language program that relies heavily on volunteers, the authors discuss their recruitment, training, and retention efforts in this community program and present guidelines including providing support and being responsive to the concerns of teachers, encouraging professionalism, creating a friendly atmosphere, and providing a flexible schedule. This program has been successful in recruiting and retaining a remarkable group of volunteer teachers who are professionals in a variety of fields, many of whom speak several languages and have traveled extensively.

In a description of one Welfare-to-Work program in Alabama, Kohler and Sapp acknowledge the difficulties of creating and administering this kind of education program. Project Learn was a collaborative effort between the education school of one university and its division of human resource management. Negotiating between personnel regulations, the aims of the program, and the realities of the mostly female participants lives presented real difficulties and tensions that are described here. Finally, lessons learned are presented that may be informative to others contemplating the development of a similar program.

Even for experienced practitioners, changes in the teaching career and in the literature of the field can impel us to re-examine our practice and activities. This is healthy. Other practitioners will be looking for ways to keep their practice vital. Many of us felt something 'click' when we found ourselves drawn to adult education, and may even feel a sense of mission about our work. We expend our energies supporting our students in their learning, listening during personal crises, and providing guidance to students who are writing and creating projects. This is rewarding work, but sometimes draining. Many times there is no discernable cultural or organizational support for the work we do. What supports us and helps us keep the excitement that drew us to adult education? Taking the time to reflect and reading about other people's creative efforts may form a part of that support. ▲

References

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