

# 5 Principles for the Teacher of Adults

Teaching Adult Learners by [Deb Peterson](#), About.com Guide

The teacher of adults has a different job from the one who teaches children. If you're teaching adult students, it's important to understand the five principles of teaching adults. It's important to know how adults learn.

Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer in the study of adult learning, observed that adults learn best when:

1. They understand *why* something is important to know or do.
2. They have the freedom to learn in their own way.
3. Learning is [experiential](#).
4. The time is right for them to learn.
5. The process is positive and encouraging.

## Principle 1: Make Sure Your Adult Students Understand "Why"

Most adult students are in your classroom because they want to be. Some of them are there because they have [Continuing Education requirements](#) to keep a certificate current, but most are there because they've chosen to learn something new.

This principle is not about why your students are in your classroom, but about why each thing you teach them is an important part of the learning. I'll use my own [pickle-making lesson](#) as an example.

When I learned to make pickles, my teacher and neighbor, Marilyn, explained:

- It's important to soak the cucumbers in ice water over night. This helps make the pickles crisp.
- If you put a towel under the jars in the canner, they won't bounce against each other and break.
- When sterilizing the jars, it's important to fill each at least halfway with water, AND fill the canner they're sitting in with water. Too little water and the towel mentioned in the previous bullet will catch on fire. You know this kind of information comes from experience.

## Principle 2: Respect that Your Students Have Different Learning Styles

There are three general learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

**Visual** learners rely on pictures. They love graphs, diagrams, and illustrations. "Show me," is their motto. They often sit in the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions and to watch you, the teacher. They want to know what the subject looks like. You can best communicate with them by providing handouts, writing on the white board, and using phrases like, "Do you see how this works?"

**Auditory** learners listen carefully to all sounds associated with the learning. "Tell me," is their motto. They will pay close attention to the [sound of your voice](#) and all of its subtle messages, and they will actively participate in discussions. You can best communicate with them by speaking clearly, asking questions, and using phrases like, "How does that sound to you?"

**Kinesthetic** learners need to physically do something to understand it. Their motto is "Let me do it." They trust their feelings and emotions about what they're learning and how you're teaching it. They want to actually touch what they're learning. They are the ones who will get up and help you with role playing. You can best communicate with them by involving volunteers, allowing them to practice what they're learning, and using phrases like, "How do you feel about that?"

Pickle Example: I'm generally a kinesthetic learner. Marilyn talked to me about her pickling process, explaining why she uses the ingredients she does, and showed me how she dips a liquid measuring cup into the hot brine and pours it into the jar using a wide-mouthed funnel, but my greatest learning came when I fumbled through the second jar all by myself.

Most people use all three styles while they're learning, and of course, this is logical since we all have five senses, barring any disabilities, but one style almost always is preferred.

The big question is, "How do you, as the teacher, know which student has which learning style?" Without training in [neuro-linguistics](#), it might be difficult, but conducting a short learning style assessment at the beginning of your class would benefit you *and* the students. This information is as valuable to the student as it is to you.

There are several learning style assessments available online, some better than others. I like the one at [Ageless Learner](#).

### **Principle 3: Allow Your Students to Experience What They're Learning**

Experience can take many forms. Any activity that gets your students involved makes the learning experiential. This includes small group discussions, experiments, role playing, skits, building something at their table or desk, writing or [drawing](#) something specific – activity of any kind. Activities also keep people energized, especially activities that involve getting up and moving about.

The other aspect of this principle is honoring the life experiences your students bring to the classroom. Be sure to tap into that wealth of [wisdom](#) whenever it's appropriate. You'll have to be a good timekeeper because people can talk for hours when asked for personal experiences, but the extra facilitation needed will be well worth the gems your students have to share.

Pickle Example: Once Marilyn had shown me how to prepare one jar, she busied herself in the kitchen doing her own thing, close enough to keep an eye on me and to answer my questions, but allowing me the autonomy to go at my own speed. When I made mistakes, she didn't interfere unless I asked. She gave me the space and the time to correct them on my own.

### **Principle 4: When the Student Is Ready, the Teacher Appears**

"When the student is ready, the teacher appears" is a [Buddhist](#) proverb packed with wisdom. No matter how hard a teacher tries, if the student isn't ready to learn, chances are good he or she won't. What does this mean for you as a teacher of adults? Luckily, your students are in your classroom because they want to be. They've already determined that the time is right.

It's your job to listen carefully for teaching moments and take advantage of them. When a student says or does something that triggers a topic on your agenda, be flexible and teach it right then. If that would wreak havoc on your schedule, which is often the case, teach a bit about it rather than saying flat out that they'll have to wait until later in the program. By then, you may have lost their interest.

Pickle Example: My mom canned pickles all during my childhood years, but I had no interest in participating, or even in eating them, sadly. Several years ago, I helped Marilyn can pickles, and even then, I was simply helping and not really learning. When I finally started enjoying pickles and planted my own [cucumbers](#), then I was ready to learn, and Marilyn was right there to teach me.

### **Principle 5: Encourage Your Adult Students**

For most adults, being out of the classroom for even a few years can make going back to school intimidating. If they haven't taken a class in decades, it's understandable that they would have some degree of apprehension about what it will be like and how well they'll do. It can be tough to be a rookie when you've been an expert in your field for many, many years. Nobody enjoys feeling foolish.

Your job as a teacher of adult students includes being positive and encouraging. Patience helps too. Give your older students time to respond when you ask a question. They may need a few moments to consider their answer. Recognize the contributions they make, even when small. Give them words of encouragement whenever the opportunity arises. Most adults will rise to [your expectations](#) if you're clear about them.

A word of caution here. Being positive and encouraging is not the same as being condescending. Always remember that your students are adults. Speaking to them in the tone of voice you might use with a child is offensive, and the damage can be very difficult to overcome. Genuine encouragement from one person to another, regardless of age, is a wonderful point of human interaction.

Pickle example: I'm a worrier. I worried about spilling brine all over Marilyn's stove, about dropping the full jars as I lifted them out of the hot bath, about making a mess of her kitchen. Marilyn assured me that spills were easily cleaned up, especially when vinegar was involved since it's used for cleaning anyway! She encouraged me as I gingerly moved boiling hot jars. Throughout the pickle-making process, Marilyn remained calm, unruffled. She paused by me every once in a while to comment, "Oh, don't they look beautiful!"

Because of Marilyn's understanding of how to teach me, her adult student, the art of making [dill](#) pickles, I now have the confidence to make them in my own kitchen, and I can't wait for my next batch of cucumbers to be ready.

This is your challenge as a teacher of adults. Beyond teaching your subject, you have the opportunity to inspire confidence and passion in another human being. That kind of teaching changes lives.

Resource: <http://adulthood.about.com/od/teachers/a/teachingadults.htm>