

# Adult Learning Techniques

Studies on attention span shed light on why students have difficulty with the traditional lecture format. Adult learners can keep tuned in to a lecture for no more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time, and this at the beginning of a workshop. Participants must engage the material to retain it. Presentations should be punctuated with periodic activities of 10-30 minutes duration to enable learners to become re-energized for the next 15- to 20-minute didactic presentation.

## Concepts you can practice:

- Dialogue - interaction between learners and instructors.
- Supportive atmosphere - a comfortable environment facilitates learning along with a nurturing instructor.
- Encouragement of cooperative communication - clear opportunities for discussion between learners and instructors and learners amongst each other.

## Adults respond best to learning that is:

- Active
- Experience-based
- Recognizing the learner as an expert
- Real-life centered
- Task-centered
- Problem-centered
- Solution-driven
- Skill-seeking
- Self-directing

## General Techniques

- Focus on the main topic quickly.
- Find a balance between involving participants (through small group activities, etc.) and providing 'expert advice' on the workshop topic.
- Presentations should be well organized without relying heavily on PowerPoint or "a paper".

- Make presentations widely applicable rather than "case specific".
- Provide hand outs.
- Give contact information for presenters and other experts so that participants can follow up with questions.
- Offer a list of Web sites and other resources on the topic.

## Specific Techniques

1. **Interactive exhibits.** Set up learning stations, displays or demonstrations around the perimeter of the meeting room (or perhaps outside the room if space allows). Provide time at the beginning, middle or end of the presentation to visit these areas. Enlist experienced conference attendees to help staff these stations.

2. **Survey.** Conduct a survey at the beginning of the presentation to learn participant skill level, interest level, etc.

3. **Questions.** Build questions for audience members into the presentation to start discussions. The questions can help bring participant experience and knowledge into the session. Make this fun--give prizes.

- Hand out 3X5-inch cards at the beginning of the presentation and instruct participants to write questions on the cards. Periodically (or at least at the end) take time to collect the cards and answer some of the questions. Tell people the presenters will answer other questions after the conference if time doesn't allow answers to all inquiries. (The card contains space for the person asking the question to list e-mail and phone number.) OWEB could print a large quantity of these cards for use in numerous presentations.

4. **Groups.** Break the audience into small groups to discuss, analyze, brainstorm some aspect of the topic--perhaps focusing on ways to apply the new information. (If the meeting room is too crowded for such purpose, send people into the lobby, exhibit areas, etc., for this exercise.)

- Half way through a talk or at a logical stopping point, break the audience into groups of 5-6 (do this by seating arrangements; it takes less time and adults resist new seating spots even though it's good for their learning). As a group, they write down:
  - a. the most important thing they just learned
  - b. the most pressing question they have

Set a specific and short amount of time for this task (no more than 10-15 minutes). The groups report back to the full group.

- When two speakers are making a presentation, open the session with general remarks, then break the group in half with each presenter working with the

smaller groups, which gives more opportunity for discussion and questions. Then the two groups reconvene as one large group for the end of the session.

ALTERNATIVE: If the two presenters have different materials to cover, the presenters switch groups mid-session. Then in the final wrap-up, the presenters cover points that arose in one session but not the other.

**8. Case study.** A case study provides a detailed report of an incident or event through either an oral or written presentation, perhaps with the aid of visuals. This provides the audience and presenters a focus for discussion. Ask audience members to embellish the case study or discuss similar incidents or events.