

four seasons in one day –

literacies in changing climates

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Relevant Theory + Best Practice = Harmonious Classrooms

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The Equation:

19 students + 2 CGEA certificates + 8 skill levels + 52 years age difference + 7 physical and psychological disabilities + 9 language backgrounds + ongoing enrolments + limited resources = 1 teacher!

The aim of this workshop is to look at the underlying principles of effective learning and teaching of adults. What works and why and what doesn't work and why not!

The dynamics of the ALBE classroom can change continuously depending on the participants, the teacher, the subject and / or the current social environment of the time. As teachers we need to be aware of triggers that could cause unrest and learn how best to avoid them. What practices could be put in place to avoid unnecessary conflict in an otherwise harmonious setting.

Although I don't confess to have all the answers, I am going to look at the theories behind what have been successful strategies for me. Hopefully these strategies and theories will help alleviate a little of the stress that can be felt when dealing with classroom management.

LET'S START FROM THE VERY BEGINNING.....

Life inside the Adult learning environment begins with the initial interview / enquiry. It is paramount that adults who have made the decision to return to 'formal' education are made to feel that they have made the right decision and that they are in the right place. For the majority of students this decision is a very emotional and difficult one. Their past educational experiences will be forefront in their minds and for many of them these experiences would have been quite negative. At the initial interview their fears and concerns need to be expressed and we need to allay these fears by convincing them that there will be other students in the class who have reading and writing difficulties. Give them concrete examples if that is what it takes to convince them. I have often shown a piece of current student work to a prospective client (no name indicated of course!) as up until that point they have convinced themselves that no one could possibly have lower skills than themselves. The look of relief on their face is priceless! During the interview let them know you are assessing them to make sure they will be placed in the right class group. The assessment is NOT a *test*. Don't even use the 't' word as again it can bring forth unnecessary stress.

Talk to the client about why they are returning to 'school' and what have they been doing since they left school. Find out why and when they left school or if they have even been to school. All these snippets of information will be invaluable to you when you finally have them in the classroom. You may remember that '*Student A*' mentioned in the initial interview that he had a fear of reading aloud because he was ridiculed at school by his peers whenever he was told to read aloud in primary / secondary classes. Having this piece of information stowed away will prevent you from making the same mistake. By not making this mistake you will gain his trust and he will be focused during reading activities instead of fearing that you are going to ask him to read at any given moment.

Discuss the client base with the prospective student during the interview. Let them know that they will be in a class with people of all different ages, cultural backgrounds and abilities. Talk to them about the type of learning they will encounter (life skills, current events etc) so they can see that there will be some relevance to their daily lives. Explain that everyone brings something to the class...we all learn from each other. Let them take control of the decision to return....are they happy about being in a class with different age groups, cultural backgrounds etc. If not, then maybe they need to seek a class

elsewhere. By discussing all these issues at the initial interview you are taking away the fear of the unknown. You are also minimising the risk of a student saying, at a later stage, they never wanted to be in a class with 'old' people or 'young' people. You explained everything clearly at the outset and the decision to continue with the enrolment was made knowing all these factors.

FIRST STEP INTO THE CLASSROOM.....

The first few days in the classroom will make or break some students (and sometimes some teachers!). It is important to continue setting the ground rules, (you started these in the initial interview) so that everyone is aware of what will and will not be tolerated. The manner in how you approach this is of the upmost importance! Always remember that you are talking to adults, not to little kids who are having their induction into primary school. Don't talk **down** to them, discuss with them. Let them feel that you are working as a team and you value their contribution. Explain the **reasons** behind any rules. Eg: no mobile phones. Why? Because if everyone let their phones ring during class time it would be very disruptive and concentration levels will be affected. Listen to them if they have an issue with this rule and discuss what could be changed. E.g: "My child often gets asthma and the school may need to contact me at any given time." Be **flexible** and allow the mobile phone to be left on but on silent and you need to leave the room as soon as it rings.

Your aim in the first few days of classroom teaching is to establish a trust between you and the student. If you do not listen to them, are they going to listen to you? Confidence also needs to be established and this will continue to grow as the year progresses. Initially though, the students need to have the confidence to express themselves. Let them see that you, and everyone else values what they say. Let them see that everyone has their own opinion and it's important to listen and evaluate each other's opinions. Everyone brings something to the class and we can all learn from each other.

Discuss the process of their learning. What type of work will you be covering? What areas would they like to cover? Discuss your expectations with work requirements. I take the view that I can only do so much and the rest is up to them. I can't make them practice their reading but they may find progress slow. It's a matter of empowerment – they are in control of their own learning.....I am only there as a guide and to assist where I can. Keep this discussion positive and fun....it is not a lecture. Remember that you are aiming to develop a united classroom where **all** members have respect for each others learning, knowledge and skills.

BASIC PRINCIPLES.....

The basis of what I have been discussing so far stem from some of the 'Principles of Adult Learning'. The other principles will be connected to what I will discuss in learning and teaching strategies. These principles, however, should be ensconced in all areas of adult teaching....from your planning, to delivery and assessment.

What are the 'Principles of Adult Learning'? Many people have differing ways of interpreting these principles although the basis remains the same. My understanding of these principles is as follows:

- Adults have to know why they are learning something. They need to see the importance of learning a new skill or acquiring new knowledge
- Adults need to be included in deciding what they learn

- Adults connect their own life experiences to their learning so curriculum needs to be designed to make these experiences inclusive
- Adults require meaningful and relevant content in learning tasks / activities
- Adults bring their own beliefs and opinions and respect needs to be shared and shown
- Adults relate to positive feedback and promotion of self esteem.

When you read through these principles and think about what they imply, ask yourself if this is the way you would like to be treated if you were a student. If your answer is yes and you consider these principles important to teaching, your planning, control and delivery of classes will become a lot more manageable and satisfying.

PLANNING YOUR DELIVERY.....

When planning your delivery content, keep in mind the principles of adult learning. Have material that is:

- Relevant and practical
 - Will the learner be able to use this in their everyday lives?
 - Can the learner relate to the content?
 - Can the learner give their own opinion based on prior experience and / or belief?
 - Can the learner see the relevance of this material?

Deliver material in a manner that is:

- Interactive – listen to the opinion of students. See yourself as a facilitator. Don't let the learning be teacher dominated – learn from each other.
- Fair and equitable – ensure students listen to the opinion and beliefs of each other and express their opinions in a non offensive manner.

Don't be afraid to deviate from your planned activity. If you sense that students are disinterested or not understanding, don't continue. Re think your delivery, subject matter and / or material content and change if you feel the need. We need to be able to keep students interested and motivated to enhance learning. Adult students will appreciate your effort in improved delivery. They know just as well as you do when things are not working as well as they should be!

Be confident with the material / content you are delivering. Don't rely on getting all your teaching information from worksheets. Can you add your own experiences? Will the students be able to relate to what you are teaching? **Be concrete, not abstract.** Adult learners generally want to be active participants in the classroom. Make sure your subject matter allows for this.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT.....

The class I mentioned at the beginning of this article was my own class at the beginning of the year. A group of people from all different backgrounds, (NESB and ESB), whose ages ranged from 18 – 70 years and who all had different reasons for returning to education. Some students had recognisable disabilities including cerebral palsy, work place injuries, (backs etc), and partial blindness. Others had disabilities / conditions that were often not readily recognised but, from a teacher and classroom manager's perspective, needed to be acknowledged and kept in mind at all times. These included depression, cancer (both past and present), schizophrenia and mild intellectual disabilities. With all this, of course, came 19 different personalities and prior experiences.

I would often describe my teaching sessions as a 'juggling act'. I would have to be continuously aware of where every one of my students was at any given time with their class activities. My ears were attuned to the many different conversations that may have been going on just in case I needed to 'steer' that conversation in a different direction to avoid conflict. At the same time I had to be mindful that every one of these students had just as much right to express their opinion as the next person and every opinion and recollection was just as valuable as the next. We worked hard but I believe together, we developed a positive, inspiring and genuine learning environment where everyone was made to feel comfortable and self-esteem was high. There was a real sense of wanting to learn, not only from me but also from each other.

This environment did not happen automatically. I worked on creating this learning environment from the moment clients attended their initial interview or made that first phone call enquiring about suitable courses. I used all the strategies that I have already mentioned plus a few others that you may or may not be able to utilise. One of the most important being, to develop a sense of ownership of their learning environment. If possible try and have a 'home room'. Make this room inviting and pleasant to walk into each morning. Display work you have covered as well as other 'bits and pieces' that may come in handy during a discussion. Eg: map of the world / Australia. Have word lists and definitions on display. Order a newspaper and have that in the classroom each day, (very handy to have for early finishers!). Have a resource cupboard where you can keep materials that you need to use, eg: dictionaries, atlases, coloured pencils, butchers paper etc. Keep the atmosphere positive and relaxing.....there is no need for stress in an ALBE classroom! There are no exams, there should be no time limit and learning is self paced.

SOME USEFUL TEACHING STRATEGIES.....

As mentioned earlier, within every ALBE classroom there will be a wide range of skill level. This is the norm in every classroom in every school in the country so why should it be any different in the ALBE classroom! We cannot control this, we just have to find ways of dealing with it! If we don't, we will find that we have students that are either:

- a) bored because the work is too easy, or
- b) frustrated because the work is too hard.

As effective teachers we need to find a **balance** and **range** activities that will keep everyone happy without making our workload higher than it already is! It is also important to try and not openly differentiate between the work requirements as this could lead to self esteem problems. Teach everyone the same subject matter but let individuals know how much you expect from them.

One of my favourite teaching strategies is the use of '**Mind Maps**'. Mind maps can stem from discussions, excursions, something that has been read, a video, an informative talk by a guest speaker etc. All students can participate in the design of a mind map and then they can use it to model their own writing. Let the lower level students keep the copy of the mind map and work with them to sequence ideas. From this they can write their own sentences. The higher level students may be able to add a few extra points to the mind map or even produce their own. From this they can sequence the ideas and write a passage. Look for an introduction, a middle and a conclusion. The important thing here is that everyone is working on the same topic, everyone has been involved (no segregation), your preparation is minimal but the end results are positive, can cover different Certificate level assessment criteria, and all students will have a sense of achievement.

Model everything you do. If you want the students to write a story, model how to write one. If you want them to write a letter, model it. Leave these models displayed around the room for future reference. With the lower level classes use the whiteboard

instead of worksheets for explanations. It is much easier for a student with limited literacy skills to follow what you are writing on the board than to follow instructions on a worksheet. Talk as you write. Explain things as you go. Answer questions, check for clarification and understanding by asking leading questions.

Don't give one hit wonders! Make your classes flow from one day to the next or one week to the next. If you start a subject area, introduce it, expand on it and conclude it. This may take weeks but the learning process will be invaluable for your students. Again they need to see the importance of what they are learning, where is it leading them, is it going to help them in their everyday life, can they relate to the topic?

Listen to, and use, students own opinions and experiences. This is a valuable and 'no cost' resource! Develop your own worksheets / activities drawing on student discussion.

Be aware of different learning styles. Teach a range of activities / strategies. For example a reading task is commonly assessed by students answering a set of given comprehension questions. This method may not suit everybody. It can also become very boring. Try using different approaches:

- design a mind map showing main facts that you have read. *(good for lower levels)*
- write a short speech explaining about what you have read. Deliver this speech.
- Write a letter to someone explaining about what you have read and giving your opinion on the subject matter. *(challenging for higher levels)*
- Make up your own set of questions relating to this article. *(Students will find that they have to actually have to think about the answer as well as write the question. Very good method to assess comprehension skills).*

IN CONCLUSION.....

I personally feel that there is no better reward than teaching a class of ALBE students. Although it can be challenging, frustrating and demanding, if done properly and managed well, it can be extremely rewarding and personally satisfying. To have a group of people, often nervous and with low self esteem, come together as strangers at the beginning of the year and walk away at the end of the year confident, happy and as friends is professionally rewarding. To me, they don't have to walk away with a completed certificate. What is more important is that they leave having life skills they can call on, confidence to actively participate in their community and a belief in their own self worth.

If we, as teachers, apply the basic principles of adult learning to the everyday running of our classrooms, I think we can achieve a great deal not only for our students but for ourselves. We too are on a journey of life long learning, teach what you can to your students but also learn from them. Listen to them and show respect and they will reward you tenfold with understanding and patience. Make mistakes and admit them. Giggle, have fun but also be serious. Control but don't undermine. Be their facilitator, mentor, guide, not just their teacher'. Enjoy their company...appreciate their knowledge.