

Teaching Children vs. Teaching Adults

by Kate Thomas

During my experiences as a high school teacher and as a university professor I learned how different it is to teach adults over children and vice versa. If you are anything like me, you probably jumped to the conclusion that teaching adults would be easier than teaching children - yet this isn't always the case. You will still have the "talkers" in the back chatting throughout the class and the eager "I want to answer every question!" in the front row. The differences between engaging adults and children is substantial and it is important you are aware of them while making your decision about teaching abroad.

Here are some of the significant differences between teaching adults and children based on my experiences with some helpful strategies to use in the classroom. It is worth noting that the following information is a generalization and you must adapt to your own classroom where appropriate. It should be particularly helpful during your initial planning but as you get to know your class things may change.

Motivation

Adults are likely to be seeking educational solutions to help them get to where they want to be in life which they will have specifically outlined in their minds prior to joining your class. For example, I taught Journalism at university level and each student knew whether they were interested in print or broadcast journalism and made decisions based on these choices. Adults are very problem centered and results oriented, and if their expectations do not materialize they are likely to drop your class.

Children are usually following the expectations of society and/or their parents and will likely not be aware of how your class will affect their future or their goals. Kids are subject and future orientated and are in your class because they think they should be there.

Teaching Strategies: The first approach we recommend you should take to a classroom of adults is to find out their expectations and alternative motivations from the lift off. Start a conversation from the very beginning about what the students' goals are for the class and keep this in mind when you plan future classes. Also make your students are aware that you permit (or encourage) debate and challenges so they feel like they can control the direction of their learning as much as you.

In comparison, children need structure and focus because they are unaware of what this class will do for them in the future. Engage them in conversation and debate but make sure you know what you want them to learn.

Direction

As an instructor you can rely on adults to be more self-directed than children who will depend on you for focus and support. The high school students that I taught in the past would rather gossip than listen to you, so it's important to keep them on track. Children

depend on others (i.e. you) to organize their learning progression and will be hesitant to accept responsibility for their own learning.

Adults will accept responsibility for their own learning especially if they think the learning is apt, appropriate and makes sense.

Teaching Strategies: To make adults feel self-directed you need to involve your students in designing the learning process. Once you have tried out a new approach, such as paired work, ask the group about how they felt about it. Adults like to experience more than one teaching strategy and like to control the pace of a class. Ask them if they had enough time and trust their responses. While children will also benefit from a variety of teaching strategies, as you grow and gain experience as a teacher you will pick up on signals that show you are engaging the class, as they may not be able to evaluate their own learning at this point. Some teachers use a strategy where they ask the class to write down three things they learned in class to see if the students met the teacher's goals for them.

Trust

Adults are more likely to be skeptical about new information and will prefer to test out the information before they believe and accept it. This isn't to say you will face more challenges from adults, they just may need a bit more convincing. Children will often accept information at face value and will not pursue trying things out or questioning information in any way.

Teaching strategies: Let your adult students learn through discovery and let them interpret the information you give to them. You should see your self as a facilitator and then let them run with it.

When it comes to children, you use more direct, instructor-centered teaching. You need to be in control of the course content, the activities and the pace, because if your student's don't know the foundation of the skills you are trying to teach, it is unlikely that they will be able to discover it themselves. That said, it can also be helpful to provide some hands-on, self-discovery activities that will reinforce what you are teaching.

Experience

Something to remember is that adults have a lot they can bring to the table and they will expect to be able to share their life experiences and knowledge in the learning environment. They will seek education that directly relates to their lives and that connects with their encounters. I found that engaging adults with their experiences not only contributed towards their learning but to our teacher/student relationship too.

While children accept that most of the information they are absorbing will be used in the future, not immediately, if you are able to relate the content to their current experiences and lives, they will be much more engaged in what you are teaching.

Teaching Strategies: Use the life experiences of your adult learners to your advantage in the classroom. Try using open-ended questions to draw information and knowledge out of students and provide chances for conversation to develop between classmates.

Younger students also have knowledge that will be helpful but you have to be aware of guiding the conversation so that they stay on track.

Feedback

Finally, adults will be more sensitive to errors and will take constructive criticism more personally. Having been out of the learning environment, they will have forgotten what it feels like to receive feedback regularly, while children are more used to it. You will need to seriously consider how you approach that aspect of your teaching and learning as the last thing you need is a confrontation with an adult that you are teaching.

Teaching Strategies: When it comes to giving adults feedback, it is a good idea to make it impersonal by giving feedback to the class as a whole instead of individually. If a one-to-one basis is necessary then try giving encouraging new ways of doing things instead of criticizing what has already been submitted.