

▶ **ADULTS LEARNING**  
Fourth Edition

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## ► Contents

	Introduction	1
1	Adult learners: what you need to know	7
2	Giving feedback	37
3	Understanding your group	50
4	Mixed ability groups	77
5	The first session	92
6	Lectures and demonstrations	105
7	Case studies, role-play, simulation and games	116
8	Discussion and facilitation	133
9	Tutoring open learners	164
10	Coaching and mentoring	180
11	Evaluating learning	202
	<i>Notes</i>	216
	<i>Bibliography</i>	218
	<i>Index</i>	220

## ► Introduction

When I first wrote this book in 1971, I produced the book that I wished someone had given to me when I was new to teaching adults. Now, for this fourth edition 30 years later, that wish remains the driving force behind updating and substantially rewriting the book yet again. I now know a lot more about teaching and learning than I did in 1971, but the core principles of good practice seem much the same. The context has changed, but the needs of adult learners are recognizably what they were then.

I envisaged the original target reader as someone who was a specialist in a particular subject, but lacked knowledge of how to apply that specialism to working with adult learners. Probably I saw my core reader as working in adult education institutions of one kind or another. Now I see a much broader audience. Many tens of thousands of people are involved in helping other adults learn. There are still, for instance, many lecturers in higher education who have little or no training in how to teach. There are the thousands of management consultants who also train. There are the thousands of consultancies teaching people how to use computers. There are people who are working with adult learners in environments as varied as prisons, cruise ships, leisure centres, medical and nursing schools, community colleges and offices.

The possibilities for learning and teaching seem literally unlimited. The quest for 'self development' means that good old favourites like yoga classes are still going strong, but so too are

## 2 *Adults learning*

the thousands of 'be-a-better-person' books. The ultra-rapid pace of change in companies of all sorts as they struggle to stay competitive means that training and development are now open to virtually everyone who is employed and no longer an option or just an indulged pastime of the boy and girlie swots. 'Having a development plan' is no longer the preserve of people who'd been through a hippy stage in earlier life and had never quite got over it, but a sensible strategy for keeping your entire workforce flexible and up to date. Anyone who is a manager needs to accept that they must also be a coach. Leadership is now as much about coaching as it is about setting direction, and coaching is about helping people learn.

The medium through which training is delivered is many times more varied than it was. Where once the only way to learn was assumed to be face to face or with a book, now it can be through open learning manuals, open learning centres, and increasingly by 'e' means, whether through the phone, the Internet or by 'e-coaching'. Whatever the medium or the context, I still believe that the subject is a lot less important than the method. The art of teaching adults is a broad-based and flexible one whose principles can be applied to a wide variety of situations.

This book cannot offer you any easy, infallible guides to 'good' teaching. Teaching and learning are infinitely variable processes. You and your learners will have particular needs, which only you can interpret. The suggestions I offer are meant to outline a range of possibilities from which you and your group can choose, rather than being a set of rules to which you must always adhere.

It is a hard task to write a book about teaching and learning without sounding prescriptive or saintly – or possibly both. In the first two editions, I did not attempt to explain how and why I had come to write it, perhaps because the experience was still too recent or perhaps because I was sensitive to the possible accusation that I was too young and inexperienced to be writing a book of 'advice' at all. The original book came out of two strands of experience: my own in the classroom and an early career experience with the BBC.

My first job as a young graduate was in a college of further education where teaching adults became an important part of a

job which I had originally thought was going to be about the education of 16- to 19-year-olds. To survive and learn your craft in this environment your wits had to be sharp and your sense of humour well to the fore. As the youngest person in my 'adults' class working towards an English exam, I was the teacher but without any of the natural authority that age and experience confer. No wonder that I often felt I was engaged in a role-play rather than the real thing.

In the daytime in the same college, I found myself in some equally tricky situations. For instance, there was a class of 17-year-olds to whom I was 'teaching' economics, a subject I knew literally nothing about. The merciless teasing of my class taught me a great deal about the need to love your subject and the absolute necessity of burning to communicate your pleasure in it.

Where the adult students were polite and reticent, the sparky young people I taught in the daytime never hesitated to give me candid feedback on my performance: 'Bit boring today - too much theory'; or, 'I liked that bit where we read the play instead of you talking'. They had gloriously direct ways of teaching teachers humbling lessons. One day, a group of 18-year-olds was mysteriously late coming into the classroom. Only the two class swots sat there exchanging desultory conversation with me in an empty classroom. After ten minutes of this, I enquired again what on earth they thought had happened to the others. Apparently as baffled as I, they just shook their heads dumbly. Seconds later, the door of the cupboard burst open and out tumbled the other 15 members of the group. 'We know you like discussing things with Tom and Pauline, so we thought we'd play a little trick!' Only 18-year-olds could so ruthlessly and innocently rub home this important lesson. Like many teachers I was talking to the 'good' students far too much. They were telling me that they'd all like a share.

In effect my younger students trained me and I diligently and gratefully applied what I was learning to the adults' classes where the same forces were at work but far more subtly. After all, the adults did not have to be there. If the class was disagreeable, they could simply stop coming. The overriding impact of this

#### 4 *Adults learning*

experience amounted to one simple message. In teaching, the customer, not the subject, comes first and is always right, and the customer is the learner.

However valuable this experience was, it was considerably sharpened by my next job where I worked as an adviser on adult education to the BBC. If only every tutor could, as I did, sit anonymously in other people's classrooms. The 'mistakes' that we all fudge in our own efforts become burningly obvious when looking at someone else making them. I am reminded now of something I say to the people I train as coaches when alerting them to the dangers of disliking something you see in a client: 'If you spot it, you got it!'

Since no one in adult and further education really believed that the BBC knew anything at all about teaching and learning, I was welcomed everywhere. 'It's only some girl from the BBC' I overheard one principal explain to one of his tutors, 'She just wants to sit in at the back'. So as an honorary invisible woman, I saw adult teaching of all types – probably several hundred classes in all – in the raw. I saw bold and innovative teaching that was years ahead of its time and that would still stand scrutiny today as outstanding. Equally, and perhaps more often, I saw tutors struggling because no one had apparently even attempted to show them solutions to the common problems of all teaching and learning: how to motivate, how to simplify without losing the integrity of the original ideas, how to help people learn.

One piece of good fortune fuelled my desire to pass on to others what I felt I now knew. In my first year at the BBC, I was asked to help evaluate a series called 'Teaching Adults'. The series became a classic and introduced me to some of the best brains in the business. Some of them contributed to the book I edited for the BBC, *Teaching on Equal Terms*, but working on this project made me even keener to write a book of my own, hence *Adults Learning*.

It has been a satisfying book for an author, introducing me to many talented and interesting people and giving me the chance to work as a trainer of other tutors making similar journeys. The original publishers, Penguin, sold the rights to the present

publishers, Open University Press. Over the years the book has been translated into several languages including Japanese and Chinese and has sold well in excess of a quarter of a million copies – not bad for something perceived to be an ultra-specialist topic by its first publisher. One of my best moments ever as an author was seeing someone reading it on the underground in London. I am sorry now that I did not follow my instinct and introduce myself to my reader, asking eagerly for feedback. Maybe this was just as well, as the tube is full of crazy people and I don't think I looked very authorial that day.

In the years since writing the third edition, I believe I have become a living case study myself of why adult learning is still such a vital topic. I had had three different careers in earlier life – teacher, internal consultant on education and TV producer. Since then, I have added several more. After working as a commissioning editor for the Open College, I became a manager, running a training department for the BBC. Then, feeling that spending my time on endless 'working parties' (which felt very much like non-working parties) was not for me, I moved again. This time it was to start my own company, Management Futures, where we train, teach, consult and coach. So in addition to continuing training, I have also had to learn how to become an entrepreneur, management consultant, coach and director of a small company.

The 'safe' career is now a fantasy for all of us. This is true for me, for my sons and for my clients. Like so many others, I have needed and wanted to learn new skills as I have shifted into the 'portfolio' economy. I have become computer literate and Internet addicted. I have added satisfying new hobbies to my life, including line dancing, an interest that involves a lot of intensive learning (I am a slow learner here), and which arouses much puzzled amusement among family and friends. I have written several other books, including three on human personality as seen through the lens of psychometric questionnaires. Also, like so many of my contemporaries, I refuse to accept the possibility of the 'R' word. Retirement is not something I can contemplate. I am struck by the truth of one friend's recipe for a happy life: never get divorced, never stop learning, never stop

## 6 *Adults learning*

working – and never spend Christmas with your family. The last perhaps is somewhat controversial, but I strongly agree with the other three.

Carrying on learning is important to me and so is carrying on teaching. I and my company now train people in topics that I certainly never dreamed of when I first wrote this book, but I remain committed to my original vision that the principles of teaching adults are the same, whatever the setting, the medium, the types of learner or the subject. The effective teacher of adults has only one motto, and that is, 'Learners first'. How you might put that motto into practice is what the rest of this book is about.