

# Guiding Principles for Working with Adult Learners: California School Garden Educators

## *Characteristics of Adult Learners*

- **Adults come to training events with a wealth of previous experience and knowledge.**  
Participants in training events are contributors to learning, not just recipients of information. Recognizing and encouraging participants to share their knowledge and skills with the group is motivating and builds an atmosphere of mutual respect. It also provides an important connection between new learning and the participants' own experience, which strengthens the depth of understanding and retention of new information.
- **Adults come ready to learn.**  
For the most part, adults are voluntary learners. They attend training events with a goal or expectation of how the training will enhance their skills or knowledge. A good facilitator will address these expectations, and discuss anticipated outcomes. This enables participants to be responsible for their own learning.
- **Adults have individual learning styles.**  
Children and adults alike learn in different ways. Incorporating training activities that address **auditory, visual and kinesthetic learning modalities** will help trainers to capitalize on each person's strengths and ensure the absorption of information. Adults also learn by sharing and networking. Allowing for this social dimension in the training process will help ensure a memorable event.

## *Training Concepts*

- **Adult training should be of immediate use or benefit.**  
Adult learning is often on a "need to know" basis. Adults choose to participate in training events because they want to learn new skills to increase their effectiveness in fulfilling the responsibilities of their job or other area of their life. Therefore, the content should be relevant and pragmatic. Successful trainings will offer opportunities to apply the new learning specifically within the context of a participant's own work.
- **Adult training focuses on the learner rather than the teacher.**  
Although the instructor may offer brief lectures on some topics, training, for the most part, is structured so that the participants are actively engaged in the learning activities. Learning becomes an interactive process, and the instructor becomes a guide and facilitator for the group, eliciting knowledge and responses from its members.

- **Adults learn best with an experiential and hands-on approach that actively involves them in the learning process.**  
Research has shown that people retain new information at a much higher rate if they practice by doing, and better yet, if they teach others the new information. This finding reveals that in training adults, educators must be sure to include many opportunities for hands-on experiences and opportunities to practice or apply the learning.
- **Adults gain greater depth of learning by reflecting on the learning experience with peers.**  
By sharing new learning with other adults, participants are able to reflect on how the learning may be affected by context of real environments and how it may apply to their specific needs. The discussion of different perspectives, challenges and opportunities that arise during practice activities can help participants further connect with the material presented.

## ***Training Strategies***

- **Determine your audience.**  
Get a sense of your audience and their level of knowledge or familiarity with the subject. You can do this in a variety of ways, including asking a few pertinent questions on an application form or over the phone. Consider to what uses they will likely put the information they gain. In what context will they implement their new knowledge? Try to design your material to be as relevant and useful as possible.  
  
In general, pitch the content towards the high end (assuming a higher level of previous knowledge), but structure in plenty of redundancy for those who are less familiar with the subject. Also, provide an encouraging atmosphere and many opportunities for sharing previous experiences and for asking questions.  
  
Remember that, because of their depth of experience and self-confidence, adults can sometimes be a more demanding audience than children. Acknowledging and appreciating their contributions, and occasionally calling upon them to lead or teach others, can go a long way in creating a collaborative atmosphere.
- **Plan your goals and desired outcomes. Be sure they are learner centered!**  
Develop specific learning goals for the event. Learning goals are the frame upon which to build content and activities. To determine goals that are appropriate to the audience, consider the following:
  - **What specifically should participants know** by the end of the training?
  - **What specifically should participants be able to do** by the end of the training and what skills are necessary for them to be able to do it?
  - **How will I know if participants have achieved the desired skills and knowledge** by the end of the training?

Make learning goals specific, measurable and realistic. Don't try to cram too much content or too many goals into too short a time period. People retain information better when presented with a few main points and some reinforcing examples or activities. Build in some flexibility in the event that a particular objective needs to be modified.

- **Employ a variety of learning configurations. Plan activities to facilitate skill building and knowledge exchange.**

Including opportunities for participants to experience new information and skills through a variety of activities and learning styles will help keep participants engaged. To maximize learning and retention, be sure your activities address different aspects of the learning cycle:

- **Intra-personal:** Activities that require reflection on personal knowledge or ideas, such as journal writing or visualization.
- **Inter-personal:** Activities that require communication or cooperation between two people, such as interviews or problem solving.
- **Small group:** Activities that take place in groups of three or more, such as brainstorming, discussions or group presentations.
- **Large group:** Activities that include all participants simultaneously, such as listening to a lecture, viewing a video or holding a whole-group discussion.
- **Inter-group:** Activities in which each small group creates material to share with the large group.

- **Keep participants active and involved.**

Whatever methods you use, vary the modes and actively involve adult learners. We are all familiar with the notion that enjoyment and retention increase the more actively involved we are in the learning process. Retention is highest when participants hear, say and perform the information/tasks being presented (see Learning Triangle).

- **Tips for a successful training:**

- Start and end on time, fully prepared. Set up and test equipment ahead of time. Set up chairs and tables ahead of time. Have name tags and registration materials organized when participants arrive.
- Make the learning environment comfortable and inviting. Plan for logistical elements such as room size, rest rooms, adequate space for planned activities. Provide appropriate snacks and beverages.
- Prepare an agenda with goals or objectives clearly spelled out, plus any handouts, evaluations and supplementary materials. Make sure that there are enough copies for trainers as well as participants.
- Determine who will lead each section of the training and how you will assign participants to groups. Practice the training content and timing until you feel comfortable.
- Have a flexible teaching plan in mind, but be ever on the lookout for the "teachable moment."

- Be mindful of pacing: if they're bored, speed up, if they're lost, slow down.
- Be positive and supportive toward learners: Smile, encourage, guard against sending unintentional messages (condescension, racism, sexism, etc.).
- Give of yourself: A personal anecdote, a joke, a laugh, or even just eye contact goes a long way.
- Encourage and foster conversation. It's not every day that teachers, parents, school administrators, and community partners get to spend a day together thinking about school gardens. Take advantage of their expertise by providing ample time and space for participants to share.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know. Let's find out!" This may be the beginning of one of the best learning experiences your students have.
- Honor questions by helping learners to find answers: possibly by researching, experimenting, or telling them what you know and how you learned it.
- Be yourself. Relax and have fun.
- Reflect and adapt for next time.

**Finally—We're all adults, so we can relax, have fun, and enjoy each other!**



Dreher, Richard. 1994. Training for Trainers. *Pacific Mountain Review*. 12:3

Zemke Ron and Susan. Adult Learning: What do we know for sure? *Training Magazine*, June 1995.