



Teaching Adults

A Practical Guide for **NEW TEACHERS**

Ralph G. Brockett

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The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series

Teaching Adults

A Practical Guide for New Teachers

Ralph G. Brockett

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Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Art: © Vasya Kobelev | Shutterstock

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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Brand

One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594—
www.josseybass.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for and is on file with the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-118-90341-4 (hbk)

ISBN 978-1-118-90359-9 (ebk)

ISBN 978-1-118-90377-3 (ebk)

Preface

Most of us, at some time in our lives, teach adults. It may be in a classroom or training setting. But most likely, it is in an informal way: teaching a friend or relative a craft or skill that we can pass on, in the workplace when we help a colleague learn a new computer application, during a religious education class at the local church or synagogue, teaching first aid techniques to a group of adult volunteers, or organizing a protest around a controversial issue facing the community. The point is that most people who teach adults do not primarily identify themselves as adult educators. For many educators, such as college instructors, adults usually represent a percentage of all learners. However, adult learning can be found in almost any setting in our society; and where adults are learning, there is someone who is teaching these adults or helping to facilitate their learning.

The purpose of this book is to introduce you to the world of teaching adults. For me, the book presents both a challenge and an opportunity. I have spent my professional life writing mainly for the academic world—those people who identify with the profession and practice of adult education. In this book, my goal is to reach out beyond the academy to share ideas with you in a way that can be read quickly and used as a resource that you can revisit from time to time as you face new challenges and questions in teaching adults. For me the goals are to keep jargon to a minimum and to be sure that the book is grounded in ideas developed from theory, research, and practice in adult education, while presenting these ideas without the extensive use of footnotes and references. I have included a brief list of books for further reading at the end of each chapter for

those of you seeking more in-depth discussion. By writing this book, it was my hope to be able to share ideas I believe are worth sharing with readers like you who may be new to teaching adults or who are seeking new ways to reach the adult learners with whom you are already working.

The book is comprised of twelve chapters and an epilogue divided into three parts. Part One, which includes the first two chapters, begins with Chapter One, which sets the stage for understanding the exciting world of teaching adults. In Chapter Two, I describe seven qualities or attributes of effective teachers and introduce what I envision as four keys to effective teaching. The six chapters of Part Two focus on each of the four keys described above: knowing the content, knowing the adult learner, knowing about teaching, and knowing yourself. In Part Three, four chapters address topics of particular interest in working effectively with adult learners. These include understanding the learning environment, overcoming resistance to learning, motivation, and dealing with special situations that can arise when teaching adults. Finally, a brief Epilogue brings the discussion to a close by summarizing main themes and offering a call to action as you begin to develop your own identity as a teacher of adults.

I wrote this book with four kinds of readers in mind. First, the book is intended for people who are totally new to teaching but who find themselves responsible for some form of teaching. Included here are professionals who are suddenly told they have to offer a training session on an area of their practice; the non-teacher who agrees to teach an adult Sunday School class; people who train volunteer leaders in 4-H, scouting, Junior Achievement, or some other youth group; or the historian who is called upon to teach a group of adults about how to do genealogy on the Internet. These are people who have special skills but have not

previously had an opportunity to help others learn about what they know.

A second audience is made up of people who have responsibility for teaching adults but who don't think of themselves primarily as teachers. These include ministers, social workers, health care providers, and other professionals who identify with a specific profession but who don't *think* of themselves as teachers, even though they know that much of what they do is teaching.

A third audience to whom I have targeted this book is made up of professors or instructors in colleges, universities, community colleges, and preparatory schools. While this group of educators has had a lot of experience with teaching, they often are not prepared to face the challenge of meeting the unique needs of the increasing number of adult and part-time students who enter their classes.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not include as one of the audiences for this book those graduate students in adult education or related fields who are interested in learning about teaching adults. While you need to think of this book as an introduction or overview, I believe it can be a primer that will help you identify areas that you might like to pursue in greater depth during your graduate studies.

I would like to thank several people who have helped to make this book a reality. First, I thank David Brightman, my friend and former editor at Jossey-Bass. His belief in and support of this project was crucial in bringing it to fruition. It has been a pleasure working with such a wonderful editor. Roger Hiemstra has been a constant source of inspiration to me throughout my entire teaching career. He has been my teacher, mentor, colleague, collaborator, and, most important, a trusted friend. Nearly everything I know about teaching adults has been touched in some way by Roger's example, experience, and writings. I would also

like to thank the many students I have taught over more than three decades, first at Syracuse University, then at Montana State University and, since 1988, at the University of Tennessee. I am especially grateful to several students over the past two or three years whose encouragement to write this book truly convinced me that I needed to do it, as well as several students who read earlier drafts of the book in my “Facilitating Adult Learning” course and gave me valuable feedback. Finally, I want to thank my wife, Mary Rowden Brockett, for her support, encouragement, nudging, and, most important, her love. You have truly been the best part of me.

Teaching adults is a journey ... one that is filled with joy, excitement, fear, frustration, doubt, and possibility. My hope is that this book will, in some small way, serve as a map to guide you on your journey. Happy travels.

Ralph G. Brockett
August 2014

About the Author

Ralph G. Brockett, Ph.D., is a professor and the interim head of the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He received his B.A. in psychology and his M.Ed. in guidance and counseling from the University of Toledo, and his Ph.D. in adult education from Syracuse University. Previously, he held faculty positions at Montana State University (1984–1988) and Syracuse University (1982–1984) and has worked in continuing education for health and human services professionals. He is past chair of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education and has served on the board of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. In addition, he is a past editor-in-chief of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* and co-editor of *Adult Learning*, and has served on the editorial boards of four adult education journals. He received the Malcolm Knowles Memorial Self-Directed Learning Award in 2004, was inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame in 2005, and was co-recipient of the AAACE Cyril O. Houle Award for Outstanding Literature in Adult Education in 1997 and the Imogene Okes Research Award in 2012.

Among Dr. Brockett's previous books are *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education* (1997; updated 2007, with S.B. Merriam); *Toward Ethical Practice* (2004, with R. Hiemstra); *The Power and Potential of Collaborative Learning Partnerships* (1998, co-edited with I.M. Saltiel and A. Sgroi); *Overcoming Resistance to Self-Direction in Adult Learning* (1994, co-edited with R. Hiemstra); *Self-Direction in Adult Learning: Perspectives on Theory, Research, and Practice* (1991, with R. Hiemstra); and

Ethical Issues in Adult Education (1988, edited). His major scholarly interests are in the areas of self-directed learning, ethics in adult education, and the study of the adult education field.

Part One

Getting Started

Chapter 1

So, You're Teaching Adults?

Many years ago, a young student was asked by his professor to teach the last two sessions of his introductory psychology class, on classical and operant conditioning. The young instructor-to-be found himself both excited and terrified as he agreed to teach the classes. With only a few days to prepare, he planned to use a combination of lecture, brief discussion, and a film recommended by the professor. The day of the first class arrived, and the young instructor entered the room. With a shaky voice, he introduced himself and said, “Dr. Burns won't be able to be here for the last two classes so I will be filling in.” It turned out to be a long session. The film worked fine, but the lecture was presented a little too quickly and the teacher's lack of confidence was apparent. He did his best to answer questions, but there weren't many, and the session ended early.

As you probably guessed, I was that young instructor. This was my first experience teaching in a classroom setting. What I distinctly remember all these years later were two very different emotions: the first was a sense of failure that I had not done a very good job. The second emotion, however, was a tingling inside that said to me “Whew, I'm glad it's over, but *I want to try it again*. This was pretty exciting. I want to teach, and *do it better* next time.” As it turned out, the next day's class was cancelled due to a snowstorm and I didn't have my second chance . . . until years later.

I have shared this story because many teachers are called upon to teach without having had previous experience. In

fact, very few people who teach adults have had some sort of training or preparation in how to do so. There are graduate programs that offer master's and doctoral degrees in adult education or learning (I teach in one), but most people don't know they exist. Indeed, many people who teach adults really don't need an advanced degree. What they *do* need are some basic strategies and tools that can help them to reach the learners they are expected to teach.

Most people who teach adults do so as a *part* of the other responsibilities in their lives. Volunteer literacy tutors, community volunteers, ministers, social workers, health care providers, musicians, and others perform many roles in their jobs, and teaching may only be a small part of their responsibilities. Likewise, most of the people who teach non-credit courses for school districts, community colleges, or university continuing education programs are not full-time teachers, but rather professionals for whom what they are teaching is a hobby or personal interest. Here are a few examples of the kinds of people I am talking about:

- A counselor at a diabetes center works with individuals and groups to help them learn about the disease and how they can better manage their own situations;
- A public official is invited to teach a session on ethics to a group of public administration students at the local university;
- A young stay-at-home mother decides to become a part-time literacy tutor in order to “give back” to others and to have a new challenge outside the home;
- A social worker teaches job skills to a group of unemployed young adults as part of a welfare-to-work program;

- A musician gives private guitar lessons to adults and sometimes teaches a class for the local community college;
- A retired engineer volunteers to teach an adult Bible study class at church;
- A man teaches a one-evening class on “Ghost Towns of Montana” to a group of interested people from the community; and
- An elementary school teacher is asked to prepare an in-service program for other teachers on how to use whiteboards in the classroom.

These are but a few examples of situations in which people without preparation in teaching *adults* are called upon to do just that.

My purpose in writing this book was to share with you some of the tips, techniques, and ideas related to teaching adults that I have accumulated over more than three decades of teaching and studying adult learners and the people who help them learn. I don't expect that reading this book will instantly make you an expert on teaching adults; for most people, this takes years of experience, along with learning from trial and error. But if you read this book and follow some of the ideas that I share, you *will* be a more confident and effective teacher of adults, because you will learn something about adult learners, the teaching/learning process, and, perhaps most important, about yourself as a teacher.

A Teacher by Any Other Name

One of the struggles I had when I first started working on this book was what to call those people who teach adults. The logical choice is *teacher* because this describes what

we do. However, in the world of adult education, the word teacher often brings up images of elementary and secondary classrooms. *Instructor* is another common term; it is often used in post-secondary education at colleges and universities, community colleges, and proprietary schools. In the workplace, we often use the term *trainer*. Learning in the workplace frequently involves training in skills or procedures, so this term fits many situations in which adults are involved in learning. Finally, another term that is often used is *facilitator*. Because facilitator refers to a person who **guides** learners rather than **tells** them, the term works for many educators of adults, but it is sometimes thought to be a weak descriptor by others, especially those who identify as trainers.

So what to do? I decided that in this book I will use *all* of these terms—teacher, instructor, trainer, facilitator—as well as educator of adults or, simply, educator. I will use these terms interchangeably and, while there are subtle differences, as you read the book, don't let the different descriptors throw you. Feel free to substitute your preferred term. However, I will most often use “teacher” as I share the ideas related to helping adults learn. Despite the reluctance of many adult educators to use a term they often associate with K-12 education, teacher is the clearest way to describe what we are doing . . . we are teaching! A teacher is one who teaches.

A final point before we begin our journey. I am writing this book for readers who teach in many different settings. These include college professors with increasing numbers of adult students in their classes; trainers in business and public service settings; in-service coordinators in schools, health care settings, and other professions; and the many, many people who find themselves teaching adults, sometimes without even realizing it. The challenge in writing this book was for me to make it relevant to such a

diverse audience. I have tried to use examples from different settings. Most of my personal examples come from the higher education classroom, where I have done most of my teaching over more than thirty-two years (that's a scary thought as I write this!). But your job as the reader is to transfer these examples to your own practice in order to see the point I am trying to make. If you can read in a proactive way, you should be able to get quite a bit out of the book, even if the examples are spread over a broad landscape of settings.

Teaching adults can be intimidating at first, as I learned in the experience that opened this chapter. But if it weren't intimidating at times, there would be no challenge.

Teaching adults can be a source of great joy, excitement, and satisfaction. My hope is that you will have this in mind as you explore the following chapters. By understanding a few tips, strategies, and techniques, your journey on the road to teaching adults should be a rewarding adventure.