The Adult Learner

The GED® Student

As an adult educator, it is important that you have a basic understanding of the adult learner. If you understand the adult learner, you will be able to develop a learning environment that is supportive and yields the greatest measure of success for your students.

Set the right tone in your GED® classroom. You want to create an environment that welcomes and encourages your students. Remember, many adult students experience anxiety and even fear when beginning a GED® program. It is important that you understand that many adult students do not associate education with positive, inspiring experiences, but rather with negative experiences that often resulted in frustration and failure. The first class meeting is the single most critical time for you, as the instructor, to engage the learner and assist him/her in successfully completing the GED® process.

Characteristics of the GED® Student

It is important to be aware of what historic and social background learners bring with them to the classroom, how each student learns best, and what each student desires from the program. GED® students arrive in your classroom with many different skills and experiences. The following information identifies some of the basic characteristics of adult education students.

The Adult Learner

"Keep your dreams alive. Understand to achieve anything requires faith and belief in yourself, vision, hard work, determination, and dedication. Remember all things are possible for those who believe."

Gail Devers

Adult students bring their varied pasts with them, including:

- History of successes and failures from early in life, school, the military, employment, family, marriage, and interpersonal relationships
- Different qualities of experiences with education, educational institutions, and learning with both positive and negative thoughts and feelings about school
- Different cultural, ethnic, gender, and religious values and norms
- Differing intellectual abilities
- Ingrained "school habits" and ideas about what school is or should be like

Adult students bring differing situations to the classroom, including:

- Differences in their careers
- Different stages in their personal life, e.g. family, job, and other responsibilities may take precedence over school
- Harmonious home environments or those of conflict and extreme stress
- Differing communication skills (verbal, written, and psychomotor skills)

Students have different reasons for attending school, such as:

- Securing a high school diploma
- Transitioning to postsecondary education and training
- Obtaining employment
- Improving skills to upgrade employment or status in life
- Acquiring desired knowledge to improve their personal lives
- Meeting family's or friends' goals
- Building self-confidence and motivation

Adult students may also lack confidence in:

- Their own capabilities and life skills in general
- Their specific ability to learn because they may expect to fail
- Their ability to learn specific subject areas such as math, science, or writing skills
- Their ability to use computers and other technology
- Their skills in academics and the testing required by the GED® program
- The ability of the educational system to be a caring and helpful place

Working with the adult learner is an extremely rewarding and challenging experience. It is important that you recognize the wealth of life experiences that each student brings to your classroom.

The GED® Classroom

The master GED® instructor understands the challenges of teaching the adult learner. The learning environment must be flexible with a variety of instructional approaches geared to meet the characteristics and personal goals of each student.

Adult students generally prefer that educational environments:

- Provide an opportunity to relate new learning to their past and present experiences
- Focus on real-world problems and life situations with practical strategies to address these issues
- Assist them in obtaining the skills necessary to be successful in their chosen career pathway
- Emphasize how learning can be applied to today's workplace
- Provide learning experiences differently than the system they experienced as a child
- Be related to their own goals
- Provide appropriate support, direction, and structure
- Allow debate and the challenging of ideas
- Listen to and respect their opinions
- Encourage them to be resourceful and share experiences with others
- Provide for differences in learning style, cultural background, gender differences, social/economic concerns, and age factors
- Care about them as individuals and treat them as adults

Effective GED® Programs

The GED® instructor needs to understand the challenges of being an adult learner. Each adult learner has different characteristics and goals. However, each student has a reason for enrolling in a GED® class and wants to succeed. It is the goal of the instructor to find that which can help each student be successful in obtaining a GED® diploma.

Effective GED® or adult education programs share four key characteristics. The successful program provides a curriculum that uses:

- Learner experiences
- Learner involvement
- Learner choices
- Real-life experiences with an emphasis on application over theory

Adult learners do learn differently than children. Generally, adult students learn best when:

- Learning is voluntary
- They are actively involved in:
    - Decision-making processes regarding what they wish to learn
    - Interactive learning experiences
- They know what is expected of them and why

- They believe that the skills they are gaining will benefit them in all areas of their life
- Their questions are answered without embarrassment
- They receive sincere praise
- They can acquire a sense of accomplishment in their achievements
- The social and physical setting is adult oriented
- They are competent readers
- They know their instructor is there to help them achieve their goals and is individualizing instruction to meet their specific needs
- The instructor engages in multiple teaching techniques and is actively involved with the students
- The instructor understands adult learners, establishes a supportive learning climate, accepts others' ideas, and is an active listener
- The classroom uses technology to prepare students for the real world

A GED® classroom is different from the K-12 programs that students once attended. The successful GED® classroom:

- Places the student as the primary person in the classroom
- Provides an adequate needs assessment of the student's academic levels, learning style, career planning, and individual goals
- Designs a program to meet individual workplace and personal goals
- Integrates a contextualized approach to learning that fosters teamwork skills
- Changes to ensure that current trends, research-based practices, and state-of-the-art technology are continuously integrated into the learning process
- Develops collaborative workplace and community partnerships
- Provides positive marketing and public relations
- Uses research-based instructional strategies
- Provides a structure based on the learner's experiences, involvement, goals, and needs for being successful in a global economy

Helping Students Become Better Learners

The primary goal of the GED® instructor is to help students become better learners. To do this most effectively, the instructor must incorporate strategies and activities that emphasize active rather than passive learning. A key to getting and keeping students actively involved in learning is an understanding of each individual's learning style preference. Learning style is the manner in which a person thinks or learns.

Four primary perceptual learning styles or ways of receiving information are:

1. Visual
2. Aural
3. Read/write
4. Kinesthetic

The **visual learner** learns through seeing. This learner prefers to learn through written materials or visual materials. Pictorial descriptions, videos, charts, graphs, and illustrations are important to use with the visual learner.

The **aural learner** learns through listening. This learner prefers to learn by discussions, tutorials, making presentations, or through hearing information. Often tape recorders are a helpful tool for the auditory learner.

The **read/write learner** has a strong preference for learning by reading and writing. This learner prefers to learn by reading materials, such as textbooks, handouts, PowerPoint slides, manuals, and then writing the information through lists or notes (often verbatim). Read/write learners prefer instructors who use words well and have lots of information in sentences and notes. Many instructors are read/write learners and teach to this strength.

The **kinesthetic learner** learns by doing and through his/her senses. This learner prefers to learn with a hands-on approach. Movement, music in the background, labs, field trips, trial and error methods, and use of real-world examples and exhibits are good teaching techniques for this type of learner.

Being aware of the diverse learning styles of adult students is one of the most important things an instructor can know. If an instructor uses only one teaching style, that instructor has excluded many students from learning in the classroom. It is important that every instructor recognize the importance of identifying the learning style of each student and make necessary adjustments in teaching strategies, resources, and materials to address those learning styles.

 Resources

Learning Style Inventories
Although there are many different resources on learning styles, the following are a few to get you started, including the VARK.

- VARK: a guide to learning styles
  http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp

- Barsch Learning Style Inventory
  http://www.broward.k12.fl.us/ctace/adult-education/Adult-New/FORMS/BarschENGLISH.PDF

  http://winward.hawaii.edu/trio/forms/participant_inventories.pdf

- Diablo Valley College, Learning Style Survey for College
  http://www.metamath.com/mutiple/multiple_choice_questions.html

- Dr. Richard Felder (NC State University). Learning Styles Survey
  http://www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html

- Kiersey Temperament Sorter II (no charge for summary; small fee for full report)
  http://www.keirsey.com/sorter/instruments2aspx?partid=0

- Learning Styles Inventory
  http://www.ldpride.net/learning-style-test.html

- Learning-Styles-Online.Com
  http://www.learning-styles-online.com/overview/

- Multiple Intelligences Teacher Inventory
  http://jeffcoweb.jeffco.k12.co.us/high

  http://jeffcoweb.jeffco.k12.co.us/high/wotc/confli3.htm

Teaching Styles – What's My Style?

The GED® instructor fills many roles in the classroom. Typically students expect instructors to assume several different roles, such as:

- Diagnostician and Process Planner (determines the areas of student strengths and weaknesses and then creates or assigns exercises that serve as the focus for a learning activity)
- Facilitator (creates a setting in which students will be comfortable sharing their ideas)
- Consultant (provides or points the way to relevant information)
- Quality Controller (redirects students who may be stuck, need help evaluating their strategies and solutions, or pursuing unproductive or unrealistic approaches to their problems)

How each instructor fills these varied roles is based on their teaching style. Each of us develops a teaching style based on our beliefs about what constitutes good teaching, personal preferences, our abilities, and the norms of our particular discipline. Some instructors believe classes should be instructor-centered, where the instructor is an expert and authority in presenting information. Others take a learner-centered approach, viewing their role as more of a facilitator of student learning. Although most of us have a dominant, preferred teaching style, an effective GED® instructor combines elements of different teaching styles. If you wish to take a more open approach to your teaching, a blended approach is the most effective.

Personal Teaching Style Inventory

Numerous teaching style inventories exist. The questions they ask and the criteria they use reflect the author's particular philosophy. Rather than limiting your perspectives, a variety of these inventories are available for you to explore either by participating in an online response form or downloading a print-based survey.

- **Develop a draft of your philosophy of teaching:** Create a statement that synthesizes what you think is effective teaching.
- **Take a survey:** Select a survey from the following list and complete it.
- **Share and compare:** Once you've finished and analyzed your results, share and compare them with a member of your cohort, your mentor, or a colleague.
- **Examine and integrate:** The final step is to revisit your Philosophy of Teaching statement and check for discrepancies between what you've stated as your belief and what you've found in the inventory results. If necessary, rethink your teaching statement and rewrite it to integrate the elements you have determined to be critical to an effective teaching-learning environment.

Resources

The following are samples of different teaching style inventories for you to explore:

- CORD Teaching Styles Inventory
  http://www.texascollaborative.org/tools/TSI.pdf

- Grasha-Reichmann
  http://www.longleaf.net/teachingstyle.html

- Multiple Intelligences Teacher Inventory
  http://jeffcoweb.jeffco.k12.co.us/high/wotc/confli3.htm

- Teaching Perspectives Inventory
  http://www.teachingperspectives.com/html/tpi_frames.htm

Why Do I Need to Know About the Adult Learner?

Most adult learners in your classroom have a practical reason for their return to the educational system. Often, this goal is to obtain a high school diploma as quickly as possible. To be most effective, the GED® instructor must be knowledgeable about the five major academic areas of the GED® tests and about the adult learner. Having a solid understanding of how the adult learns and what styles of learning an individual uses will assist the GED® instructor in providing the best educational setting possible.