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## Preface

When it comes to teaching adults, people often ask, 'Is it easier to teach adults or kids?' The answer is always an unequivocal; 'Kids are easier! Adults get grumpy.' Of course, that statement about being grumpy is said with tongue-in-cheek. But the truth of the matter is, it is harder to teach adults.

When teaching adults, the adrenaline is pumping. You are addressing your peers. It's different! It's challenging! It's high stakes! In fact, there is a myth that holds that public speaking is the greatest fear an adult has. It goes on to say that the second greatest fear is death. Now, whether this is fact or fiction, it hints at the perceived level of risk involved when adults speak to peers. Adults teach adults. And, no matter how experienced one is working with the adult learner, a notable level of anxiety is always there.

We have total respect for the species called the adult learner. It's in this view that this piece explains some of the things we know.

Enjoy,

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## Introduction

*The Adult Learner: Some Things We Know* addresses the 'warrior' who rises to the challenge of teaching the adult learner. The discussion is designed as a catalyst for dialogue about the adult learner and to uncover the complexities of teaching this rare and riveting species.

This book is organised around three interlocking themes: Some things we know about the adult learner; some things we know about change; and some things we know about professional development. In the process of reading the book, the reader gets a glimpse into the research that supports the theory of the adult learner, into the principles that guide the learning practices of the adult learner, and into the strategies that 'work in the work setting' for the adult learner.



# Chapter 1: Some things we know about adult learners

## Telltale comments

After working with adults for twenty years, we find that there are some predictable things that adult learners inevitably say. These anecdotes, based on more than cursory comments, are culled from our long experience with this unique species called the adult learner.

These telltale comments actually reveal the underlying issues and concerns of the adult learner. In fact, each of the sayings addresses a critical attribute of the adult learner's attitude that can signal the source of the fortunes and the failures of things to come for the adult teaching other adults. For that reason, each of the ten sayings is illuminated briefly in this opening discussion.

### Telltale 1: 'I hope this isn't a waste of my time.'

Time is a priority, and adult learners want to know that the time they spend in a training, seminar or workshop is being well spent. They want a well-organised, high-level activity that speaks to their immediate, perceived, or 'recognised' need.

#### Case in point

'Curves' is an exercise centre that optimises the adult's time with a pre-determined 20–30 minute routine using a pre-set equipment sequence. It's efficient, predictable and effective.

## Telltale 2: 'Is this practical?'

Adults are exceptionally pragmatic about their learning. They want ideas, skills and procedures that are readily available for their use. They want ideas that are practical, easy to use and 'ready to wear'.

### Case in point

A couple planning their wedding day may take dance lessons with the specific goal of being able to dance that first dance at the wedding reception.

## Telltale 3: 'Can I use this right away?'

Adults learners want to take 'something' back to the work setting that they can use immediately; something that helps them do their job or do their job better!

They want to put ideas into practice. So they are looking for connections from the training to the workplace. They want to know how the new learning relates to what they already do on the job.

### Case in point

The book *Who Moved My Cheese?* is about how adults embrace impending change and is related directly to the reader's work setting.

## **Telltale 4: 'How does this fit for me?'**

Adult learners question the relevance first and the application second. They want to know how it is relevant to their situation and then they want to know how it applies to their specific circumstances.

### **Case in point**

Classroom instructional strategies for teachers need specific examples at various year levels for relevant and easy transfer.

## **Telltale 5: 'Who says? Who says this is better?'**

This is a frequent question heard in the adult training room. Adult learners are curious about theories or research that support a given idea. They do not desire voluminous supporting research, but they do want some evidence of expert support that gives them some understanding of the 'why' behind the practice. They would like some proof that the new way is not just the latest fad.

### **Case in point**

Participants often question what they are hearing and may even say that it is the exact opposite of what they have learned.

## **Telltale 6: 'Show me how!'**

Parallel to Telltale 5, in which the adult learner expects some substantive rationale for the innovation, is Telltale 6, in which the adult learner really wants to focus on the how. 'How does one do it? How does it work? How does the process or procedure unfold?' Adults want to leave the learning activity knowing how to do it on their own. They want things modelled in real-world applications that, through demonstration, lay out the steps and illustrate the skills.

### **Case in point**

'Inspiration' software serves as a planning tool for developing mind maps, which are planning tools.

## **Telltale 7: 'I want an expert.'**

Adult learners want to know that the adult teaching them knows more than they themselves know about the topic. They want a certain level of proficiency, they want stellar credentials and they want someone who can walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

### **Case in point**

Proof is the popularity of a 'personal trainer' for customised workout routines.



## **Telltale 8: 'I want to look this up on my own.'**

Adult learners frequently want to continue the formal lesson on their own through research either online or through sources such as books or journals.

### **Case in point**

Taking lessons in a foreign language and supporting the work with searches about the country or the culture.

## **Telltale 9: 'I'm here with a colleague.'**

Adult learners often enter into a learning setting in pairs or as a team. They come with a colleague for motivational support as well as for real support in practising the skill. When adult learners collaborate their confidence is boosted and their commitment to using the new information is stronger. Adult learners seem to do well in learning situations when they are accompanied by work mates and can support and coach each other.

### **Case in point**

Exercise class – go with a friend! Or for an author reading at a bookstore, go with a colleague for discussion afterward.

