

Reports of Practice

The Power of Adult Learning in Fine Arts: Drawing upon Personal Experience

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ABSTRACT

The utility of definitions and descriptions applied to adult learning can be effectively measured only by direct application to a specific field of learning, in this case, fine arts. Based on the author's 12 years of experience as an art educator, the article provides a conceptual framework for those who are at the beginning of their pedagogical career as well as for those who look for new approaches to adult teaching. The article is based on the premise that adult learners are lifelong learners interested in acquiring more knowledge in subjects they feel are relevant to their needs and interests. As lifelong learners, adult students have higher expectations than their younger counterparts with regard to the knowledge and professional conduct of their instructors. They are highly self-motivated individuals who are aware of their technical shortcomings and seek to broaden their creative horizons. Working with adult learners requires more flexibility and individual adjustments on the part of the educator. This applies to every aspect of teaching and classroom management.

RÉSUMÉ

L'utilité des définitions et descriptions qui s'appliquent à l'apprentissage des adultes peut seulement être mesuré efficacement par leur application directe à un domaine spécifique de l'apprentissage, dans ce cas, les beaux-arts. Basé sur les 12 ans d'expérience de l'auteur en tant que formatrice en arts, l'article fournit un cadre conceptuel pour ceux qui en sont à leurs débuts dans le domaine de l'enseignement aux adultes. L'article est fondé sur la prémisse que les apprenants adultes sont des apprenants à vie qui s'intéressent à l'acquisition d'informations supplémentaires dans les domaines qu'ils trouvent pertinents à leurs besoins et intérêts. En tant qu'apprenants à vie, les étudiants adultes ont des attentes plus élevées quant aux connaissances et à l'éthique professionnelle de leurs instructeurs que ne l'ont leurs homologues plus jeunes. Ils sont des individus très auto-motivés, conscients de leurs faiblesses techniques et cherchent à élargir leur horizon créatif. L'éducateur qui travaille avec des apprenants adultes doit être plus flexible et s'ajuster davantage aux besoins individuels. Cela s'applique à tous les aspects de l'enseignement et de la gestion de classe.

INTRODUCTION

The number of adults in the learning environment is growing rapidly. This is a North American social phenomenon, not limited to a certain age category or socio-economic class. Rather, it encompasses people from various walks of life, bringing a broad range of motivations to the learning process. Adult learners differ from younger (children and adolescents), “traditional” learners in many ways, as will be touched on throughout this article; perhaps they should be labelled “non-traditional” students.

There are many descriptions and definitions of adult learning, which arts educators find more or less useful (e.g., Brookfield, 1991; Burns, 1995; Dewey, 1997; Knowles, 1980; Kolb, 1984; Merriam & Caffarella, 1998). In each case, these definitions must be understood in terms of the specific field of learning to which they are being applied. In the case of fine arts, an additional element must be considered, that of genuine talent, or at least a strong inclination toward artistic creation.

Years ago, while an avid fine arts student myself, I listened as an art instructor shared her thoughts about what was needed for someone to become a successful artist. In her opinion, only a person who possessed equal measures of talent, committed work ethic, perseverance, and drive could succeed. I agree with this statement, and I am inclined to apply it to any successful learner, regardless of age. I base my position on personal experience as a successful artist and painter, and as a passionate fine arts instructor working with students of various ages.

DISTINCT DIFFERENCES IN THE APPROACHES OF YOUNGER AND OLDER STUDENTS

In 12 years of teaching adults, I have noticed distinct differences in the approaches younger and older students take to learning. In particular, adult learners have specific expectations when it comes to instructors and their teaching methods. They are open to new, innovative teaching approaches, provided such approaches are based on a foundation of respect and they can trust the instructor’s abilities, commitment, and knowledge of the subject.

Many mature students set high standards for themselves and expect the same from their instructors. Further, adult learners often place a great deal of emphasis on the personality and the interpersonal communication skills of the practitioner: some even indiscriminately take any course a particular instructor offers. On occasion, I have been approached by a mature student who asks that I take them on as an apprentice.

It might be worthwhile to offer courses without specific outlines or predetermined outcomes and, instead, place the emphasis on the student-mentor relationship. Such courses would work on the assumption that adult students are more focused, attentive, and show more patience mastering a new task or experimenting with a new materials. In general, adult learners are lifelong learners seeking to acquire knowledge in subjects they feel are relevant to their needs and interests.

As a fine arts instructor working in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta, I have taught a variety of courses, from abstract painting to life drawing based on realistic approaches to human anatomy. My students work in different media with a variety of materials; interestingly, adult students often do not shy away from challenging and experimental artistic mediums such as encaustic painting, which is often unpredictable in its outcome. It is a

common assumption that adult learners are conservative in their choice of art subjects, but in my experience, time and again that this is not the case.

From my observation, adult learners want to study subjects that, for a variety of reasons, they could not study when they were younger. Perhaps because they finally have the financial resources or the luxury of the time required, I find they are determined and very adventurous. Many have told me, with almost the contrition of personal confessions, how happy and fulfilled they are for having taken the initiative and allowed themselves to follow their dreams.

ACCOMMODATING MATURE STUDENTS

Mature students may have higher expectations regarding the quality of their learning environments; this is based at least in part on their life experiences. Teaching mature students may require some adjustments to the physical space and classroom set-up, for example. Some mature students may not be as mobile as their younger colleagues. To accommodate this, it is up to the instructor to ensure there is enough space for students to move freely and comfortably. Additional accommodations should be made in the case of a person with physical constraints. Students in wheelchairs, for example, must have easy access to their easels and a clear sight line to any life model or props (if they have trouble adjusting their position easily), as well as ready access to the sink to clean their brushes.

I have met a number of adult learners with age-related illnesses or limitations, such as hand tremors or advanced arthritis, that prevent them from creating detailed studies in painting or drawing. My professional obligation as an art instructor is to recognise such problems and, in an encouraging and supportive manner, to help students find an appropriate solution that focuses on artistic creativity and emphasizes other, bolder aspects of the art. For example, I might recommend that they avoid indirect painting techniques and employ direct ones instead, or that they consider heavy applications of paint done with vigorous, energetic strokes. Though the process may differ, the outcome is often of the same calibre as conventional, more-detailed depiction.

While proper lighting in art studios is always of the utmost importance, this is especially true for older students. As an art instructor, it is up to me to ensure that everyone's work station has proper light. A poorly lit work space makes it far more difficult to learn how to properly choose and adjust hues and values in painting. In my opinion, optimal indoor lighting comes from warm fluorescent bulbs. Additional light sources, such as free standing lamps, are often an asset. Having a spotlight projected on the model's body, for example, helps to create stronger tonal contrast, which helps students, with or without impaired vision, render the form more accurately.

Mature students, like their younger counterparts, tend to opt for comfort while creating art. At the easel, for example, the majority will choose a sitting position over a standing one, even when it may be counterproductive to their artistic practices. While painting or drawing from observation, there are obvious advantages to standing, but it sometimes takes quite an effort to convince students of this. I explain the benefits of standing to my students and ask that they comply with this more common practice. Students who can't stand for long periods of time for health reasons are, of course, exempt from this.

It is also important to speak clearly, at an appropriate volume, and at a moderate to slow pace while teaching, especially when lecturing on fine-arts-related issues. I make sure that everyone can see my face as I speak, and I have developed the habit of asking my students often if they can hear me clearly.

NO ROOM FOR DISTRACTIONS

We are a society accustomed to white noise and a never-ending supply of background sound. Some art instructors like to use background music in their classrooms, in most cases either classical or meditative in nature, believing that music helps the students relax and stimulates their creative thoughts. Personally, I prefer meditative quiet background music, but I do not encourage background sound of any kind in my classroom. As my students work on individual projects, I move from one student to another, monitoring progress and providing constructive suggestions. When the room is quiet, students can hear my comments to other students and so can benefit from everyone's feedback; they may choose to apply a suggestion I have made to another student to their own art piece if appropriate. Students benefit from listening to suggestions that have a direct connection to their work or to that of others.

At the beginning of my teaching career, I occasionally yielded to personal requests and allowed students to play their favourite music during class. Unfortunately, rather than creating a pleasurable experience and enhancing the learning process, this often resulted in dissonance. Music may be a stimulus to creativity, however, listening to one student's favourite music can be another's unbearable experience.

Now, I am quite reluctant to allow any kind of background music in the classroom while I am teaching, particularly in courses that require greater concentration. For example, in my portrait painting courses, participants tend to be very quiet and focused, aware of the limited time available for the project, and unwilling to be distracted by outside influences. In less intensive courses (heavy texture painting or abstract painting, for example), adult learners may, by consensus, engage in subject-related discussions. In each of these situations, it is at the discretion of the instructor to adapt the environment to suit the participants. The educator's flexibility is the key to meaningful, successful teaching.

MEETING HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

Adult students have higher expectations than their younger counterparts of the knowledge and professional conduct of their instructors. They value their own time and have very specific needs and expectations; they expect the art instructor to meet those needs. Most do not hesitate to voice their opinions when they are dissatisfied or when their expectations are not met. Personally, I find this both challenging and stimulating.

Instructors must constantly update their teaching techniques, classroom management strategies, and knowledge in the field of fine arts, as well as their social interaction skills. I have noticed that adult students expect me to be not only an accomplished artist, but also a skilled craftswoman whose reputation and expertise has a solid base in art history knowledge. My professional authority in a classroom would be diminished if I lacked even one of these qualities.

The majority of lifelong learners prefer to round out their art education through a combination of hands-on experience and retrospective study of art practices throughout history. When lecturing, a maximum 30 minutes of instruction supported with a power point presentation seems to be optimal.

Adult students, for the most part, are self-motivated people who like to broaden their creative horizons. There is seldom need to remind them about submission deadlines for home projects or about being punctual in meeting those deadlines. While in a classroom, they work diligently and are fully focused on the assignments. As well as arriving on time, they maintain a clean classroom environment, are respectful toward their peers, and are determined to make

the most of their time. They are often aware of their technical shortcomings. Many of them actually conduct an extensive search to select a fine arts instructor who will best suit their needs: an educator who possesses vast knowledge in a specialized field and who will be able to initiate and stimulate a creative flame.

Working with adult learners requires the educator to be flexible in every aspect of teaching and classroom management. For example, unless it is a course that requires the participation of a life model, I do not assign a specific break time. My students are adults who do not need to be reminded of the value of moving away, even if only for a couple of minutes, and coming back to the project with fresh eyes—to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, fix them, and proceed. Some students need frequent breaks, others fewer, but this, as well as the duration of the breaks, is determined by the individuals rather than by a “whole-class-as-one” mentality.

CLEAR DIRECTIONS AND RATIONAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE APPLICATION OF NEW KNOWLEDGE

My adult students often prefer to acquire more than just general knowledge of a chosen subject, so I assign only two or three class projects per course, allowing for in-depth study of specific aspects of the course curriculum. For example, I teach a *Painting I* course at the University of Alberta that consists of 10 three-hour sessions wherein my students complete three paintings. For each of the three projects, a new still life is set as a reference. During the first three sessions, the students develop a monochromatic still life painting. Having the luxury of nine hours time for this particular project, they can study the subject in depth and greatly improve their observational skills. This also allows them to become more aware of the sublime variety of tonal nuances.

By concentrating on tone, the students are not intimidated or overwhelmed by the additional study of colour theory. This gives them time to master the technique of handling brushes and paint application. It also allows them to gradually acquire new knowledge and skills while reinforcing the knowledge and skills mastered in previous courses, such as drawing or design.

As they work on the first in-class project, I ask them to paint another monochromatic painting completely on their own, as a home assignment, to make sure they have fully comprehended the concepts and are able to successfully apply the theory in practice. The majority of my adult students find this particular assignment a valuable introduction to the complex field of using colours.

The next two projects are designed to allow students to investigate the warm and cool relationship of colours, an indispensable element of colour theory. Using predominantly cool colours on a warm colour primer in the second project, then reversing this and using warm colours on a cool colour primer in the third project, lets the students investigate the essential interrelationship of hues, values, and colour saturation in creating a good quality painting. These final two assignments seem to naturally follow the first assignment and are therefore easy for the students to comprehend.

Mature students often find the use of a reference object or an arrangement of objects, especially in the case of a still life painting, very useful when I am teaching the structure of painting. Beginning with this commonly understood reference object, they are more receptive when I demonstrate new techniques. For example, students appreciate being taught how to omit the use of pencil for the sketching part of the painting and how to use paint instead. Any scepticism on the part of students is generally erased after I demonstrate the technique. Adult learners like clear directions, rational justification for the application of new knowledge, and being provided a proper amount of time to conceptualise and digest the new knowledge.

MEETING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

I tend to cater to my students' individual needs rather than to treat them all the same way. I am a true believer in Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), and my mature students prove the validity of his theory. It is a common assumption that someone interested in fine arts must possess well developed either spatial or bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. There is seldom one type of intelligence involved in fine-art proficiency, but rather a melange of multiple intelligences. For example, in one particular class, a number of music teachers were studying the art of portrait painting, and, as a group, they showed a very comfortable and easy inclination toward painting, perhaps because they were already attuned to creativity in a very personal way. Another characteristic that visual artists and musicians have in common is their endurance in the completion of projects. Not surprisingly, people such as Miles Davis, Paul McCartney, John Lennon, or Joni Mitchell have expanded their creative inspiration to the field of visual art.

I have also found that, as a professional group, engineers have a strong inclination toward fine arts. Interestingly, their logical-mathematical intelligence does not prevent them from being aficionados of painting or drawing, perhaps because solving technical problems requires creativity, inventiveness, inspiration, and endurance, which are also the essential qualities of any successful visual artist. It is no coincidence that Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci was celebrated, among many other things, as both a great painter and a superb engineer. Likewise, Alexander Calder, the famous inventor of mobile and stabile sculpture, received an engineering education before launching his artistic career.

As an educator of adult students, I feel my duty is to find the most suitable method of teaching so as to meet the needs of students who demonstrate multiple levels and types of intelligence. Therefore, within the parameters of specific projects, I let the students choose their means of achieving the outcomes. I let them make choices about things such as medium, dimensions, composition, subject, application of paint, mark-making, and brush strokes, so long as they obtain the desired outcome. My way of instructing also varies depending on the specific ways the individual adult learners absorb new material. I use different examples and references to reinforce the material based on the interest, type of intelligence, and professional experience of my students.

Over the years, I have developed a personal style of teaching that seems to fit and is flexible enough to adapt to any adult class. It begins with a relationship based on mutual respect and trust between my students and me. Upon this foundation, I can progressively channel a unique set of instructions to stimulate the creative responses of my students.

VISUAL AIDS AND INDIVIDUAL DEMONSTRATIONS

Since the fine arts consist of disciplines based at least in part on visual perception, any successful class has to be supported with visual aids. I am convinced that my adult students benefit most from brief individual demonstrations done directly on their own canvases or drawing paper. I provide a general demonstration when I am introducing a new project or a new concept, but this is not as effective as individual help. The steps I apply in the general demonstration are often forgotten or missed when students try to duplicate them in their own projects. This is a common problem because each individual comprehends new and acquired material at a different pace.

A missed step may lead to frustration and even to personal doubts regarding artistic abilities. This, in turn, can make adult students quit, a situation that benefits no one. To avoid such problems, I provide short personal demonstrations that perfectly fit the needs of the individual

student. I move from one student's work station to another, monitoring and accurately evaluating their progress, and, where necessary, providing vocal guidance. If a student is still unable to grasp the concept, I demonstrate the solution on a section of the student's own canvas or a sheet of paper. As well as meeting students' immediate needs, presenting the solution in this manner results in a visual reference that can be used as a guide in future. In my opinion, this teaching approach has great merit, especially in the case of adult learners who, in general, prefer clear directions and technical guidance.

SELF-MOTIVATION BASED ON INDIVIDUAL INTERNAL FACTORS

Following my personal pedagogical philosophy, I recognise and respect mature learners as thinkers. Furthermore, I find Knowles' concept of *Andragogy* (1980), with its five andragogical assumptions of adult learners, extremely useful in my own teaching practices. Knowles made five assumptions about adults as learners: they tend to be self-directed learners, they draw from their own experiences to aid their learning, they enter educational settings ready to learn, they want to apply the things they are learning in problem solving, and they are motivated to learn by internal factors.

I agree that in contrast to younger students, mature learners already have well-developed self-concepts due mostly to the fact that they are self-directed rather than dependent upon others. Consequently, once they decide to study fine arts, they follow their convictions and become focused, well-disciplined students. It is worth emphasizing that their self-motivation is based on individual internal factors.

Moreover, adult learners draw from their life experiences and are ready and willing to expand their knowledge. Interestingly, even the subject matter they choose for their art work seems to be closely related to their personal life experiences. They take these experiences and translate them using the new mediums and methods they are learning. Additionally, mature students tend to immediately begin to apply newly acquired skills and knowledge. Giving these adult students the opportunity to exhibit their art works at the University of Alberta's Extension Gallery, making their art accessible to the general public, is an additional incentive.

CONCLUSION

Working with adult students can be a very satisfying and rewarding experience. Their cognitive maturity, task-oriented focus, and constant quest to expand their knowledge all positively reverberate with their instructors. Especially in the field of fine arts, these qualities are of the utmost importance since the appraisal of the works—the outcome of their learning journey—is in most cases regarded as highly subjective. Adult learners are very discriminating individuals who expect the highest quality of instruction and professional conduct from their instructors. Personally, I regard teaching adults as the epitome of a give-and-take relationship. I am amazed how much I have grown professionally thanks to my interaction with mature learners. Being with them in a classroom, I am exposed to fresh, uninhibited ideas and approaches to painting and drawing. This, consequently, has positive effects on my personal art, making it more versatile and innovative. Thanks to my adult students, I continue to become a better artist myself, and this, in turn, benefits my students. As they say, to teach is to learn twice.

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BIOGRAPHY

Izabella Orzelski-Konikowski received her masters in fine arts from the Graduate School of Figurative Art at the New York Academy of Art in 1998. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including a Winspear Fund Grant in Edmonton and a Dahesh Museum Award in New York. She is both an accomplished portrait artist and a respected art educator working for the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta.

Izabella Orzelski-Konikowski a obtenu sa maîtrise en arts figuratifs de la *Graduate School of Figurative Art* de l'Académie des arts de New York en 1998. Elle est récipiendaire de nombreux prix et octrois, y compris de l'octroi *Winspear Fund Grant* à Edmonton et d'un prix du Dahesh Museum à New York. À la fois portraitiste accomplie et formatrice en arts respectée, elle travaille à la faculté d'extension de l'Université de l'Alberta.