

Adult Learners

Characteristics of adult learners

Adult learners

- may be fearful of and intimidated by formal school settings
- may be fearful of and intimidated by evaluation and test-taking
- may be more nonverbal than verbal
- may be timid or apologetic
- may come from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds
- may have a wide range of values, goals, and attitudes
- may be unemployed and unaware of job opportunities
- may have a great deal of life experience
- may be highly successful and respected members of their communities
- may have unique educational goals
- will have individual rates and styles of learning
- may have heavy responsibilities at home, school, work, church, and in the community
- are voluntary learners and can leave at will
- expect information to be relevant and to see progress
- may be highly knowledgeable in specific areas
- may need additional time to formulate thoughts before responding

Adult learners' rights

The following is a list of “rights” identified by adult learners at a recent national conference.

Adult learners have the right to

- receive quality instruction
- utilize appropriate books and adequate materials
- be treated with respect
- be heard
- be assured of privacy
- be treated like adults
- make individual decisions
- say no
- participate on the program's board of directors
- choose not to learn
- request a change in tutors
- stop and start lessons as situations demand
- recruit other adult learners
- take ownership of the program
- receive program explanations before instruction begins
- ask questions and receive adequate explanations
- attend program meetings

Recruiting adult learners

Ways of locating adult learners

- word of mouth referrals from successful students are the best recruitment tools
- public service announcements on the radio and television
- personal stories on the radio, TV, or in newspapers
- referrals from schools, technology centers, adult education programs
- posters in grocery stores, clinics, laundry facilities
- notices in social service agencies and employment offices
- contacts with businesses and chambers of commerce
- cards in the offices of optometrists, doctors, dentists
- large outdoor signs on busy streets
- notices in church bulletins
- person to person through neighborhood groups
- speeches to civic groups and other organizations
- programs in workplaces
- public school teachers
- community service agencies, such as
 - United Way
 - social services offices
 - YMCA/YWCA
 - Salvation Army
 - banks
 - jails
 - migrant groups
 - Head Start
 - Department of Motor Vehicles
 - Social Security offices
 - labor unions
 - Urban Renewal
 - Vocational Rehabilitation
 - rescue missions

Adult learner guidelines

It is a good idea to establish guidelines for learners. If learners know what to expect, retention may increase. The following is a sample of learner guidelines that you may consult when establishing guidelines for your program.

Sample learner guidelines

- Learners must be at least 18 years old.
- Learners must be able to arrange meeting times with tutors. Interpreters can assist.
- Learners must meet with their tutors for at least one hour per week for one year.
- Learners will meet with their tutors in the library or at another location the literacy program has chosen. Tutors and learners must not meet in homes.
- Learners must call their tutors if they cannot come to a session.
- Learners should call the literacy program if they have any questions or concerns.
- Learners must not bring children to tutoring sessions.
- Learners must not bring other people to tutoring. Instead, refer others needing assistance to the literacy program.
- Learners must not be under the influence of drugs or alcohol during tutoring.
- Learners should not ride in cars with tutors. The driver is responsible for any liability.

Adult learner confidentiality

Local programs should develop policies and procedures that respect confidentiality and the privacy of adult learners.

Choosing books for adult learners

When choosing books for adult new readers, consider the following

Subjects

- skills, how-to books
- recreation, fiction, history, sports
- children, books to read to children, help with school work
- coping, health, family life, money management
- religion, one of the biggest reason adults wish to learn is to read the Bible
- special interest, magazines and newspapers with many pictures
- poetry

Format

- adult appearance, but with pictures and white space
- attractive covers or book jackets
- paperback, thin
- clear, black print, easy to read type
- short chapters

Writing style

- interesting, quick-moving plot
- one centralized theme
- uncomplicated characters
- humor, suspense, and familiar situations
- concrete writing
- simple words and grammar
- positive, uplifting tones

Publicizing the adult learner collection

- Mark the books with special stickers or keep them together in a special section. Identify the section as “Reader Development” or “Read Up” etc. rather than the “Literacy Collection.”
- Make tutors and learners aware of the collection.
- Help adult learners get library cards and show them how to use the local library.

Involving adult learners

Many literacy programs have discovered the benefits of involving adult learners in their activities.

- Who is better qualified to talk about the benefits of the local literacy program than adult learners? Personal stories and experiences not only provide interesting speeches for media, civic groups, and council meetings, but are also useful in recruiting new learners and tutors.
- Involve learners in tutor trainings. They can help with registration, make presentations, and answer questions from the learner’s perspective.

- Include adult learners on the local board of directors as they add an important point of view.
- Enlist learners to help at literacy booths and exhibits at local fairs, parades, fundraising functions, etc.
- Encourage learners to form a support group. These groups have been formed in several Oklahoma literacy programs and have been successful in involving learners with council activities.
- Feature adult learners in local newsletters and forward learner news to the LRO for the state newsletter.
- Encourage learners to attend the statewide literacy conference and annual learner leadership conference. Send learner representatives to regional and national conferences where they may attend special sessions for learners.
- Recognize adult learners with certificates available from LRO.
- Host a learner/tutor luncheon, holiday party, or other special event.
- Get a learner's point of view when selecting program curricula.
- Be aware of what learners want from the program and try to meet those needs

Adult learners as board members

Why have adult learners on the program's board of directors?

- It makes the board representative of the program and people it serves.
- Some board members may not know any adult learners. Having an adult learner on the board encourages interaction between learners and volunteers and may give a more realistic perspective to the board's decisions.

Qualifications of adult learners for board membership

- Understands the overall program. For example, has spoken publicly for the program or has volunteered in the literacy office
- Is willing to share his/her thoughts and ideas
- Is dependable and will attend the meetings

Preparing the adult learner for the board

- Inform the learner of his/her rights and responsibilities as a board member.
- Instruct the learner as to how a meeting is run.
- Prepare the adult learner before the meeting so she/he understands the budget and reports.
- Introduce the adult learner to other board members before the first meeting.
- Appoint a mentor to offer assistance as the adult learner adjusts to the board.

Things that board members should do

- Be aware that the adult learner may feel intimidated. This may be a new experience. Explain what to expect.
- Help the adult learner feel part of the board. Ask for and listen to his/her opinions.
- Treat the adult learner as an equal.

Adult learner's obligations

- Attend all meetings.
- Ask questions. Learn about the program and how it operates.
- Speak up. Express opinions when appropriate.
- Share facts about the program with other adult learners. Other learners may want to serve on the board in the future.

Opportunities and Resources for Oklahoma's adult learners

Oklahoma's adult learners meet regularly. OLC and LRO bring together learners from across the state to discuss adult learner issues. In past years, adult learners have attended leadership conferences, as well as local, regional, and national literacy conferences.

Each year, at the Oklahoma Literacy Conference, scholarships are offered to adult learners and outstanding learners are honored for their hard work. Adult learners statewide became published authors with their written contributions to "Celebrating Our Journey," Volumes I, II, & III. A new publication of learner stories will be released in the fall of 2007.

VALUE

Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE) is a national organization of adult learners in the United States. The organization was formed during a three-day meeting in March 1998 at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. The founding meeting was organized by a planning committee headed by Archie Willard, an adult learner from Iowa.

For more information, contact VALUE

2217 Providence Avenue
Chester, Pennsylvania 19013
610-876-7625
office@valueusa.org
www.valueusa.org

Oklahoma has an active VALUE chapter. For more information on VALUE and Oklahoma adult learners, contact Kerri Miles

Western Oklahoma Learning Center
1502 W. 8th Street
Elk City, Oklahoma 73644
580-225-3456

VALUE recommends the following sites as resources for adult learners and practioners

The Maine Fertilizer. A newspaper for adult educators and adult learners across the state. Includes articles written by, about, and for adult learners. For more information, contact www.umaine.edu/call/pubs/fertilizer.html to view the latest volume.

The National Adult Literacy Database. A website of resources for adult educators and adult learners. Includes a *Story of the Week* written by adult learners. Visit www.nald.ca to view the stories or access a variety of available resources.

System for Adult Basic Education Support (formerly the Boston Adult Literacy Resource Institute). A great website with information for adult educators and adult learners, including sections on assessment, curriculum, technology, and student leadership. Visit www.sabes.org to access these resources.

Literacy Resources/Rhode Island. Useful information for adult educators and adult learners, including advocacy, learning disabilities, English language learning, and workplace education. Visit www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer_Center/Literacy_Resources/ to access these resources.

The Oklahoma Adult Learner Website. A website where adult learners can find help and information, learn new things, and meet other learners. Includes a *Student Writings* section, a *Success* page to praise learners when they have met goals, earned awards, etc., and a *Literacy Forum* section for learners and tutors to meet others, share ideas, and ask questions. Visit www.ok-adult-learners.com for these resources.

ProLiteracy. A website containing information about national and worldwide literacy initiatives, programs, and events; materials and resources; and other activities in the literacy field. Visit www.proliteracy.org to access this information and more.