

OEEF's Preferred Characteristics for Adult Learners (General Public Audiences)

OEEF prefers to support projects that are tailored to provide a meaningful learning experience for adults. Where appropriate, applications should demonstrate how the following adult learning principles have been built into the educational program.

Readiness: Adults are motivated by needs, benefits or interest. Get to know the intended learners and what they want and need to know. Link learning to the topics most immediately useful to them. Example: provide specific examples of how other homeowners took actions to protect the environment, with measurable results and cost savings, such as by replacing incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs.

Flexibility: Adults have many different roles and responsibilities, with competing demands upon their time. Schedule events to meet learner needs and availability. Offer flexible time schedules and advance scheduling. Examples: schedule a workshop during the evening or on weekends. Offer regional workshops rather than one statewide event. One grantee set up farmer-to-farmer learning circles that met at kitchen tables during the winter, because this was more convenient and comfortable for the farmers than formal classrooms.

Self Direction: Adults are self-directed and want others to see them that way. Involve learners in as many aspects of selecting, planning, doing and evaluating objectives and learning experiences as possible. Example: ask participants who have already grappled with a particular problem to design case study scenarios for the group to "solve".

Association: When presented with new information, adult learners unconsciously ask, "How does this information relate to what I already know?" Adults learn best when they can bridge the gap between the known and the unknown. Help learners relate their experiences to new concepts and skills. Build upon the learners' knowledge and vocabulary while providing a common denominator. Example: draw linkages between actions they can take to protect the environment, and actions they take to prevent disease or injury.

Application: Adults want learning to be relevant to their life, and immediately applicable. Use a problem-centered rather than a subject-centered approach. Example: One grantee offered a tour to showcase low-tech and high-tech methods that different property owners had used to prevent stream bank erosion.

Active Learning: Adults learn most effectively by doing. Provide hands-on learning opportunities. Examples: Allow the learners to conduct a waste audit in a real home, or practice using water quality monitoring devices.

Segmented Learning: Adults need time to assimilate one group of facts before accepting the next group. Provide educational materials that are divided into parts and presented one step at a time in a logical sequence. Provide educational experiences based on job and/or life situations relating new or difficult concepts to existing base of experience.

Sensory Learning: Adult learning is enhanced when it appeals to multiple senses and includes sight, hearing and kinesthetic approaches. Use a variety of teaching styles. Examples: simulation, case studies, role playing, small group discussion, and facility tours or other field demonstrations.

Feedback: Adults need feedback on how they are progressing. Adults learn from their mistakes. Provide learners with continuous evaluation and feedback relating to personal learning objectives. Example: Ask others in the training to comment on what one group did well and poorly during a simulation.

Reinforcement: Adults are motivated to learn more when they are successful. Some adults may lack confidence in their ability to learn. Encourage sharing of success stories and reinforce and highlight information that is key to learning. Conduct educational programs over an extended period of time and include one or more follow-up sessions. Example: Instead of sending participants home from a one-day training with a binder of information, schedule the group to reconvene three months later with a specific homework assignment, to share their experiences trying to put what they learned into practice.

Recall: Adults gradually forget what they've learned. Provide opportunities to frequently repeat, recall or review material. Example: One facilitator set up a list-serve for a weekly on-line chat room where those who attended the training could discuss their experiences putting what they learned into action.

Comfort: Adults learn best in an environment that is physically comfortable and supportive. Some adults face barriers to learning, including diminishing physical abilities. Be aware of physical limitations and arrange learning environments for ease in hearing and sight. Stress mutual setting of goals and encourage free exchange of ideas. Allow learners to set their own pace and work toward their own goals. Provide sufficient time to allow the participants to comfortably interact one-on-one or in groups.