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Teaching and Supporting Adult Learners



Jackie Scruton and Belinda Ferguson
Series Editor Susan Wallace

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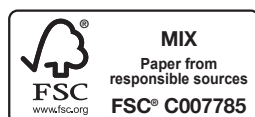
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SAMPLE

Meet the authors



Jackie Scruton

I am a Senior Lecturer at Nottingham Trent University, and part of my role is to support adult learners on a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. I have taught adult learners in a range of settings and on courses, such as Basic Skills and Degree programmes. I have a particular interest in working with learners for whom inclusion may be an issue, including adult learners. This interest was developed as a result of not only working with such learners but also from my experience of 'finding' education later in life.



Belinda Ferguson

I am a Senior Lecturer in Education at Nottingham Trent University, currently teaching on part-time degrees and teacher training courses and previously having taught in FE for ten years on professional courses and initial teacher training. I have worked with adult learners throughout my career, and have seen the challenges and pressures they face along with the pleasure of success and the opportunities created. As a former mature, postgraduate student I have empathy for students who find themselves juggling childcare and work with their studies.

Meet the series editor



Susan Wallace

I am Emeritus Professor of Education at Nottingham Trent University where, for many years, part of my role was to support learning on the initial training courses for teachers in the Further Education sector. I taught in the sector myself for ten years, including on BTEC programmes and Basic Skills provision. My particular interest is in the motivation and behaviour of students in Further Education, and in mentoring and the ways in which a successful mentoring relationship can support personal and professional development. I have written a range of books, mainly aimed at teachers and student teachers in the sector; and I enjoy hearing readers' own stories of FE, whether it's by e-mail or at speaking engagements and conferences.

Introduction

The aims of this book

This book has been written for teachers who want to develop their skills and knowledge in supporting adult learners. It is designed to help you create an inclusive approach to teaching and to enhance the experiences that you and your learners have.

By the end of this book you will be able to:

- understand the policies impacting on post-compulsory education and training and the diversity of adult learners that participate in this sector;
- recognise what motivates adult learners, the barriers they may face and how these impact on engagement with their learning;
- analyse how adults learn and the importance of preparation to ensure an inclusive and structured learning approach;
- ensure that the use of technology supports adult learners and enhances their learning experience;
- analyse the importance of developing a collegiate
- approach when teaching and supporting adult learners;
- critically analyse common teaching situations in order to improve practice.

AQ1

The teaching of adult learners brings with it its own challenges and rewards. This is borne out of the authors' experiences in studying as mature, part-time learners themselves, and their experience (as teachers) of supporting countless students who have also studied this way. We want to share our experiences both as practitioners and as learners. In doing so, we aim to help you explore some of the theoretical concepts and practical strategies that might help your learners in their learning journey.

AQ2

This book is the result of informal conversations over a number of years. They were the kind of conversations you probably have all the time in the office or the staffroom and often went something like this:

Jackie: *You know Tim; I've just had a long e-mail from him. He is struggling to write his assignment. He says he can't find many books or much information on his topic and those books he has are all old. He doesn't know where to start or how to structure his work; he thinks he may have chosen the wrong topic. His two-year-old daughter is ill and is he having to look after her and he is wondering whether he should keep coming to the sessions as it is a struggle or whether he should just give up and leave the course.*

Belinda: *Sounds familiar; like he's having a mid-course wobble. I have had a few of my group saying similar things. It's frustrating as we've talked through a lot of the issues that are raised and the information is available to them if they come and chat with us, and of course in the virtual learning environment.*

Jackie: *Yes I know, we think we've got it right, but maybe we need to think about other things or the same things in a different way. Remember when we ...*

Belinda: *Yes, great and what about ...*

Jackie: *Yes, and maybe we could try ...*

Examples like this often help to develop our knowledge and practice, support our adult learners and give us the confidence to realise we can do it! We firmly believe the saying 'you are never too old to learn' and we anticipate continuing to do this, not only through our own formal study but also from the wealth of knowledge and experience that the adults we teach bring to the classroom. We can all learn from each other; and we hope you can inspire your learners as we have been inspired by the teachers we've met along the way.

When we started to plan what to write about in this book, we discovered that there were a number of published texts (for example, Rogers and Horricks, 2010, Gray et al., 2000 and Gravells and Simpson, 2010) which explore the themes of teaching adult learners. However, most of these texts focus on teaching adult learners within the Further Education (FE) context. In this book we explore this area but also discuss in more generic terms the needs of adult learners within broader educational contexts across adult, higher and Further Education and training. We don't explore specific types of educational establishments but rather the need all adult learners might have for 'different' types of support. For example, they often have busy lives and encounter difficulties with time management or other personal challenges. The strategies you use as a teacher to engage and support your adult learners will apply whatever the sector, level or type of provision.

This book is aimed at trainees and teachers who work in a range of educational institutions, teaching on a diversity of courses. We hope that it enables you to develop your understanding in order to create effective teaching strategies which meet the needs of your adult learners.

Who are adult learners and what do we mean by adult education?

When reading about working with adult learners you may well come across the term ‘andragogy’. The word defines a philosophy and way of teaching and working specifically with adult learners, implying that a specific skill set is required. This skill set is arguably different from the one we need when teaching children, which we refer to as ‘pedagogy’. The specialised concept of andragogy was developed primarily by Knowles et al. (1984). They argued that there were five characteristics that define an adult learner.

- 1 Self concept:** as a child matures into adulthood their self concept changes from being dependent to being self-directed. We give you examples of this in Chapter 3, where you can read a number of different students’ stories.
- 2 Experience:** this clearly comes with age and enables the learner to use their own experiences in their learning. You can read about an example of this in Ben’s story in Chapter 2.
- 3 Readiness to learn:** as a child matures into adulthood the readiness to learn is linked to the development of their role within society. We explore this further in Chapter 4.
- 4 Orientation to learn:** learning in childhood can often take the form of learning knowledge, but without much thought about how that might be applied. As the child matures this changes to become application of knowledge to ‘problem solving’.
- 5 Motivation to learn:** internal motivation develops as learners grow and mature. We discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 3.

As you read this book and engage with the critical thinking activities and student/tutor stories (in Chapter 2), you are encouraged to reflect on how these characteristics may apply to your own adult learners and what they imply in terms of good practice for you as a teacher and supporter of learning.

It is important at this stage that we define the term ‘adult learner’. The following examples provide a range of working definitions.

- Firstly Wlodkowski (1999) suggests that they are people who are responsible for their life and who have some social responsibility. They will be financially independent and either in paid employment or voluntary work.
- Chao (2009) indicates a number of areas that may define an adult learner. These include age; cognitive maturity; employed, retired or unemployed status and career prospects; traditional or non-traditional learners. All of these labels can be attached to the term ‘adult learners’, as can the terms ‘traditional’ or ‘non-traditional’ learner.

- Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) define both the nature of adults and the purpose of adult learning in the following way:

Adult education is concerned not with preparing people for life, but rather helping people to live more successfully. Thus it is to be an overarching function of the adult education enterprises, it is to assist adults to increase competence, or negotiate transitions, in their social roles (worker, parent, retiree), to help them gain greater fulfilment in their personal lives, and to assist them on solving personal and community problems. (p 9)

- You may wish to reflect on whether this view from 1982 is still representative today.
- Kidd (1978) suggests that:

[W]hat we describe as adult learning is not a different kind or order from child learning. Indeed our main point is that man (sic) must be seen as a whole, in his (sic) lifelong development. Principles of learning will apply, in ways that we shall suggest to all stages of life. The reason why we specify adults throughout is obvious. This is a field that has been neglected, not that of childhood. (p 17)

AQ4

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We agree with this argument in the sense that learning is a lifelong process and that teachers need not only to be aware of the myriad 'issues' that these learners bring with them to the classroom but also be prepared to address these with a range of teaching strategies and resources. We explore these in greater detail in Chapters 4 to 6.

It is important for you, as it has been for us, to recognise your own learning journey.

Critical Thinking Activity

- » To help you set the context in which you are teaching and supporting your adult learners, try to 'define' the following:
 - education;
 - training;
 - learning.
- » Have you undertaken any education or training as an adult? What did you do? Where did you do it? And what, if anything, did you gain from it?

The following section, together with your reflections, should help you to understand and develop your own views of some of the terminology used.

What is education and where does it take place?

In developing your skills and knowledge for supporting adult learners it is important to consider carefully what you understand by 'education'. The term is often associated with the formal process of passing on knowledge, for example from an adult to children and young people. This is how we usually think about what takes place in schools, colleges or universities where the effectiveness of the process is often tested by exams. This transfer of knowledge can be viewed by the pupils or students as something that is 'done to' them – a

AQ6

process in which they are passive recipients of learning. This is not a model we would want to apply to adult learning in the context of which education could best be described as the sharing of knowledge, both theoretical and practical. It encompasses not only listening and learning and the sitting of formal exams, but also – and most importantly – collaborative learning and the sharing of knowledge, understanding, and skills for personal development.

Education for adult learners takes place in a wide range of settings, which can include:

- **the local community** (community learning): learning takes place in the local community and is responsive to community needs. This could be in a village hall, local school or the FE college. The type of courses may include family learning and parenting skills, learning a sport or developing a hobby. There are a number of organisations that provide education in this context, such as the Workers Education Association (WEA) and the Women's Institute (WI);
- **Further Education:** again local colleges will provide a range of courses for adult learners. These may include courses that lead to formal qualifications for work-related purposes; courses that enable learners to develop skills and hobbies that may benefit both them and their community; access to higher education (HE) courses; and life skills provision for adults with learning difficulties;
- **higher education:** this provides courses that lead to higher qualifications (Degrees, Masters Degrees) and professional qualifications, and continuous professional development;
- **private training providers:** these often provide training that has been purchased by an employer and that is specifically tailored to meet their business requirements. It can take place in a number of locations including the business premises, local community venue or at the provider's own facilities.

What is training?

It is also important to understand the term 'training' as you may find you are working with adult learners in this context. This is often seen as learning a particular skill for a job. It has a practical and hence more vocational emphasis. This type of 'education' can often be viewed as a way of improving learners' employment prospects and helping them to extend their competence. Training normally takes place within the workplace or in a college of Further Education or indeed both.

What is learning?

This term embraces aspects of both education and training, but also much more. It is something that can happen within and away from the formal educational setting, and it happens throughout our lives. How often have we heard the phrase 'lifelong learning'? The National Adult Learning Survey (1998) defines the two main types of learning:

- **formal taught learning:** both in a classroom and in a practical situation, eg laying bricks, learning to swim, distance learning. These opportunities take place in a

variety of settings: at home, at an evening class, at a leisure centre or at a college or university;

- informal non-taught learning: studying on your own without joining a formal class. Learning by watching and talking to friends, colleagues and family.

AQ7

Learning is at the heart of what we do as teachers. We, too, are always learning both formally and informally.

Working with adult learners

Whether you find yourself working with adults in a Further Education college, in an evening class or in a university, there are some things that most adult learners have in common:

- busy lives;
- the need for careful time management;
- access to resources;
- the ability to work collaboratively;
- wanting to be there: a desire to learn.

However, there are also areas of difference which are important to keep in mind. These include:

- types of qualification already held;
- level and source of motivation to learn;
- amount of time available for studying.

Who are we?

We are both experienced practitioners who have had our own unique learning journey to this point.

Jackie Scruton

I started my formal learning journey as an adult over 20 years ago. Like many adults I had attended a number of courses that were specifically connected to my work. But it was the support and interest from the head teacher of the school I worked in at that time which encouraged me to undertake further study firstly in further and then higher education. The initial relationship with that head teacher and subsequently the building of a strong relationship with my MA teacher was very important to me as part of my learning journey. Without those relationships I would not have continued on my path. I recall that the tutors I worked with were very supportive and this was demonstrated by, for example, their responding to e-mails quickly and being available at 'odd' times for tutorials. I recognised that when studying as an adult the pressures of family life and work were hard to juggle, but it was interesting and challenging because of the encouragement and recognition of my working experiences by my tutors. This was illustrated on an occasion when one of my tutors, after carrying out a

teaching observation, asked if they could come and teach that particular group of learners and did indeed do so. These were young adults with special educational needs. Clearly this was beyond what might be expected of a tutor's role. However, this had a lasting impression and has helped form the way in which I work with my adult learners. We discuss the importance of building relationships in Chapter 7.

I am also interested in using technology to support my learners and this stems from my own experiences as an adult learner. This technology and its use in education has grown enormously over the past 15 years. When I first started on my educational journey, things such as virtual learning environments and ebooks were not available. By the time I completed my Master's Degree things had changed and I recognised and valued the use of such tools in order to support me in my studies. These experiences with the application of technology have given me the impetus to use them in my own teaching. If you are interested in developing your skills in the use of technology to support your learners then you will find Chapter 6 helpful.

Since the start of my teaching career I have taught adult learners in a variety of educational establishments. In Further Education I have taught subjects as diverse as basic skills and agricultural studies. I have also worked with adult learners who have identified special educational needs (SEN) including autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), specific learning difficulties (SPLD) and those with mental health difficulties. This has been both in a school setting and in a Further Education college. Recently I have been working in higher education teaching across a range of courses including traditional undergraduate courses with learners who are aged 18–21 and courses for adult learners returning to study. I also teach and supervise on Masters level courses and have run evening course for adults wanting to learn new skill in sign language. These experiences have helped me to understand the needs of adult learners and, in doing so, to develop the skills I feel are needed in order to support those learners.

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AQ9

Belinda Ferguson

My career in teaching adults began by teaching a professional qualification in the evenings in a Further Education college. I had no previous experience of teaching and, having obtained a science degree through the 'traditional route' of education, I needed a strategic and logical approach to teaching. On my teacher training course, the skills I learnt in developing lesson planning, assessing learners and feedback were particularly helpful to me as they gave me some direction in my teaching. If this is something that you want to develop too, you will find Chapter 4 useful. After I had gained experience in teaching, I made a bold decision to give up my full-time job and take up an assortment of sessional teaching opportunities at various different institutions ranging from short one-day courses to longer qualifications. It was a big risk, particularly as I had a young child to support, but I never regretted it as it gave me so much experience in teaching in a wide range of settings and with a variety of adult learners. As I developed my new career, I started to see the difference that education has on adults and the opportunities that it opens up. I became involved in teacher training for post-compulsory education and found that supporting teachers new to the sector was highly rewarding. I was able to share my experiences with them from both my own teaching and through the numerous lesson observations that I undertook. We have interwoven our own

AQ10

experiences and those of our students and trainees into this book in the hope that you can benefit from them too.

I went on to study for my MA in Education whilst working full-time and supporting a family and so I had to juggle many demands. Luckily I followed this course with a colleague and found the opportunities to discuss our new knowledge and ideas invaluable as it helped me to consolidate and understand in greater depth what I had learned. We discuss the value of peer support in Chapter 7, and I hope that you will find this helpful too. My career has developed and I am now working at a university, still teaching adult learners as well as younger full-time undergraduates; and I am mentoring lecturers who are new to teaching in the HE sector. I work with a proactive team and we have many conversations about how we can support our students better in a way that helps them to succeed but also allows them to be autonomous learners. The conversation at the beginning of this introduction is typical of what you may hear when walking past the office. We hope that you can learn from our experiences. The focus that we have borne in mind throughout writing this book has been *'what would have helped me when I first started teaching?'* We hope this helps you.

How to use this book

By picking up this book you have demonstrated your interest in developing your skills and knowledge to support the adults with whom you are working or are planning to work. There is no right or wrong way of using it, but we have written it in an order that we hope will be helpful to you.

Chapters 1 to 3 explore how you can develop an understanding of your learners. This includes examining the background to adult learning and the types of adult learners you might teach. It also discusses motivation: what it is and how to encourage it in your learners. We also introduce you to stories of students and tutors. These illustrate some of the concepts we explored and that are referred to throughout the book.

Chapters 4 to 6 examine a range of strategies that you can use to further support your learners in their studies. These include areas such as room layout, use of ICT, planning lessons and strategies to engage your learners, and activities to help build confidence.

Chapter 7 provides you with more detailed case studies and the opportunity to critically reflect on what you have learnt and how you might put this into practice.

There are two areas in particular that we would like to draw your attention to. The first is the critical thinking activities, which are designed to help you engage with the material but, more importantly, to think about your own views and practices. Our busy working lives mean that often we do not have time for reflection, so by taking time to reflect whilst reading the book you will be better able to understand and engage with each topic and apply it to your own teaching. Secondly the student/tutor stories have been written to help illustrate some of the key points that we want to make. You may find it helpful to read these first, so that you get to know the 'characters' and start to relate to them.

And finally ...

We hope that you will find this a practical text that explores both theory and strategies relating to working with your adult learners, and that it will enable you to develop the skills and knowledge that will support these learners to succeed.

Taking it further

Other books in this series will help you to further develop your understanding of what it means to work with adult learners, in particular Sheine Peart's (2014) book *Equality and Diversity in Further Education*. In it she discusses how you might overcome barriers to inclusion and create a positive learning environment.

If you are interested in developing and understanding your reflective practice then *Teaching and Learning through Reflective Practice* by Tony Ghaye (2011) and *The Lifelong Learning Sector Reflective Reader* edited by Susan Wallace (2010) will support you.

Full references for these titles are provided below.

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