

## Teaching Adult Learners

**Purpose:** Harvard Division of Continuing Education (DCE) instructors teach non-traditional adult learners who often balance work, family, and academic goals. These learners bring a wealth of personal and professional experience to the classroom. This resource provides strategies to connect course content to real-world contexts, facilitate peer learning, and build transparent learning pathways that support meaningful and motivating learning experiences. Whether teaching online or in person, this resource helps instructors design courses that honor adult learners' experiences and provide clear structures for engagement, reflection, and application.

### Why and How do Adults Learn?

Before designing strategies for adult learners, it's important to understand what drives their engagement and success. At Harvard DCE, non-traditional adult learners are motivated by relevance, application, and connection. The following three adult learning principles of motivation, lived experience, and reflection are aligned with questions for learners. This can help you ground your course design in how adults learn effectively.

#### 1. **Motivation:** Why do I need to learn about this?

Be explicit about what learners will:

- a. **Gain:** new experiences, skills, and professional relationships with classmates and teaching team
- b. **Contribute:** their perspectives and expertise
- c. **Impact:** in the classroom, the University, their profession, or society

#### 2. **Lived Experience:** How can I apply my lived experiences through course assignments and activities?

#### 3. **Reflection:** How can I evaluate my learning experience through continuous reflection and feedback?

These adult learning principles serve as a foundation for designing meaningful learning experiences and lead directly into the five key components and strategies that follow.

## Five Key Learning Components

Adult learners at Harvard DCE benefit from learning environments that are structured, relevant, and responsive to their goals and experiences. The following five components support learners in engaging deeply with your course and with each other:

### 1. **Learning from & with Each Other:** What Learners do to Share and Grow

Learners share personal and professional experiences to support peer learning and apply course content to real-world settings.

### 2. **Learning Hopes:** What Learners Want to Gain and Contribute

Learners articulate what they hope to gain from the course, helping instructors connect course content to students' motivations.

### 3. **Learning Goals:** What Learners Will Gain and Contribute

Clear learning goals communicate what learners will gain and contribute, often reflected in course and class learning goals.

### 4. **Learning Expectations:** What Learners Need to Commit to

Transparent expectations about time commitments, participation, and collaboration help learners plan and engage with confidence.

### 5. **Learning Intentions:** What Learners Will do to Achieve Goals

Learners set actionable goals and reflect on their progress through individual and group-based activities.

## Strategies and Steps for Implementation

### 1. **Connect to Real-World Contexts**

- a. Open class with a personal story from your work to frame relevance.
- b. Share examples of real-world challenges and be honest and reflective.
- c. Assign projects that apply course concepts to learners' professional or personal settings.

- d. Use case studies that reflect diverse fields and global contexts.

## **2. Design with Lived Experience in Mind**

- a. Encourage learners to introduce themselves and share their goals in pre-course surveys.
- b. Use discussion boards or opening activities (i.e. Zoom chat, Canvas prompts) for learners to describe what they hope to gain.
- c. Integrate opportunities for students to contribute their insights throughout the course.

## **3. Be Explicit About Learning Goals and Expectations**

- a. List 3–4 clear course objectives under the course description.
- b. Start each class session with a focused learning goal.
- c. Include estimated completion times for readings and media such as videos.
- d. Share expected time commitments for assignments and avoid quick turnarounds.
- e. Build class time for group projects or peer exchanges.

## **4. Encourage Reflection and Peer Learning**

- a. Create recurring group activities to set intentions and track progress.
- b. Include reflection questions tied to course readings or practice.
- c. Facilitate group work with dedicated space (breakouts and shared documents) for ongoing collaboration.

## Instructor Planning Guide

1. **Motivation:** Why does this course matter to my learners? What will they gain, contribute, or impact?
2. **Relevance:** How does the content apply to real-world problems or professional fields?
3. **Experience:** How can learners' lived and work experiences enrich the course dialogue and outcomes?
4. **Clarity:** Are the learning goals and expectations transparent? Have I articulated time commitments for assignments and readings clearly?
5. **Engagement:** Have I included varied opportunities for learners to connect?
6. **Reflection:** How will learners reflect on what they're learning and how they're applying it?

## Instructor Checklist

- ☐ I clearly communicated the overall course and individual class learning goals in the syllabus and at the start of each class.
- ☐ I designed assignments that allow students to apply course concepts to their real lives, work contexts, or fields of interest.
- ☐ I created opportunities for peer collaboration throughout the course.
- ☐ I included realistic time commitments for readings, assignments, and group work.
- ☐ I shared personal stories and professional examples to bring content to life.
- ☐ I facilitated reflection activities to assess and build student learning over time.

## Resources:

1. [Harvard Extension School Faculty Institute](#)
2. [Harvard Summer School Faculty Institute](#)