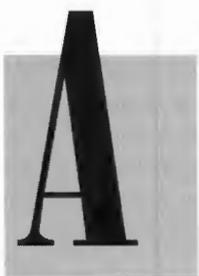


FIVE ESSENTIAL RULES

for Designing Distance Degree Outreach Materials for Adult Learners



Vicky Phillips

Adult distance learners remain the new kids on the academic block. The nature of adult learners and what they need and want from college at mid-life is

much debated. What unique services should colleges provide for adult distance learners? Since distance learners won't be coming to campus, the outreach materials used to recruit, advise, and retain them should be carefully developed with their needs in mind.

In an attempt to better design outreach materials for adult learners, the academic counseling division of the Electronic University Network, a private online educational service, collected and reviewed the outreach materials used by eighty-four undergraduate degree granting colleges. We then queried fifty adult learners enrolled in the Electronic University's distance learner's academic counseling service for their opinions on these outreach materials. These adults were all seeking distance degree programs in fields ranging from architecture to telecommunications. Their average age was thirty-six.

Our informal study led us to develop the following five essential rules for use in developing future outreach materials.

Rule #1: Adopt an Attitude

Most adults have been away from "the books" for two decades. Adult learners are out-of-step developmentally. Adults returning to college do so with doubts. "No one but me is this far behind in life! I'm too old to take tests!"

Distance learning materials must affirm that learning is not age bound in a culture that conveys the contrary. They need to adopt an encouraging you-can-do-this attitude. The display of real life role models may be crucial for adult distance learners who are attempting higher education anachronistically, in isolation from immediate peer and faculty support.

The overwhelming favorite among adult learners we queried for having "an attitude" was Pennsylvania State University. Outreach materials developed by Pennsylvania State University included snapshots of students, including a determined grandmother in tennis shoes, an enrollee in their special "Go 60" degree program. Also included were snapshots from faculty with quotes that promised easy access along with practical approaches to course topics.

Rule #2: Assume that Money Matters

The major complaint adults expressed about outreach materials was that the price of college was often dismissed. Interestingly, seven of the eighty-four colleges we surveyed made *no* mention of the tuition rates or fees for their programs in their outreach materials. Less than a third of the colleges provided direct information on the availability of financial aid. The attitude that money does not matter was evident in the outreach materials and in direct contradiction to the attitude held by the majority of adult learners.

Adult learners are practiced consumers. Many face educating themselves and their children simultaneously.

Vicky Phillips is director of counseling, Electronic University

Network, and president, Career Quest, in Medina, Indiana.

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Missouri. The Call for Papers is out, and the deadline for submissions is February 1, 1995. Why don't you (maybe together with a colleague) submit a proposal for a presentation or workshop highlighting some unique methods or procedures you have developed, special insights you have gained, or practical or action research you have conducted? Becoming involved in an adult education conference as a presenter adds a whole new dimension to your professional growth.

If you have not received a Call for Presentations, write AAACE at 1200 19th Street, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20036, or call (202) 429-5131. You can fax your request to (202) 223-4579. We'll be looking for you! ▲

If you have suggestions for reviews and notices (especially in non-print format), if you wish to inquire about writing a review, or if you want to submit a review, please contact:

Trenton R. Ferro and Gary J. Dean, "Resources" Editors *Adult and Community Education*, 206 Stouffer Hall, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705

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things and I thought it would be a good way to make presents. My friend Joyce tried to help me learn. But no matter how I tried I could never get past a line of stitches. I hated what I was knitting and it took so long. So I gave up.

The tutor should then encourage the student to interview the tutor about the learning process. The questions listed below are only samples of possible questions that the student might develop. Student interview questions:

1. How long did you practice?
2. What were you making that took so long?
3. Do you usually get impatient if something takes too long to learn?
4. What specifically made learning to knit so hard?

Questions for reflection:

1. What qualities do you think we need to learn anything?
2. What qualities do you think the tutor lacked in order to learn how to knit?
3. What problems in learning to read do you think this teacher would have had?

Finally, students and teachers can reflect together on common strengths and weaknesses in learning. They can articulate the qualities that promote learning and those that impede learning. This exercise can be used as a model and reference for other learning experiences. ▲

—by **Robin Millar**
adult educator
Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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Sensitivity is generated among students by a teacher who treats everyone as an equal. There can be no elitist attitude, even among students from widely varying educational backgrounds, if the teacher treats the most illiterate student as her equal.

This is most difficult to achieve in a class where there are students with education equal to the teachers'. Inevitably they will issue a challenge sooner or later. This is a particular problem for me with males from other cultures.

Why is it that people in general expect teachers to know everything? I am an English major and students invariably ask me sooner or later for help with their math.

When I show the students that I am curious and interested in learning about things that I don't already know, they quickly forgive my deficiencies, and our relationship as learning partners is strengthened. I have discovered that I can be successful at helping poor math students, because I am able to relate to their point of view! As I struggle to teach and they struggle to learn, I am reawakened to the difficulties involved in learning something new.

When the students see that my ego is not threatened by admitting I don't know, they realize that ignorance is not anything to be ashamed of; it is simply something to be remedied.

As teachers, we should never stop learning new things ourselves. It makes us aware of what our students are going through. It keeps us humble! We all need to be challenged now and then, otherwise we forget how insecure we were when we were first learning something new.

It is difficult to get an illiterate person writing. I found a book that turned my classes around. All of my classes. I now have physically handicapped students, illiterate students, and ESOL students writing. The concept is so simple: Start with a sentence. In the GED program there is a book called "Easing into Essays." Students begin gradually with half-completed sentences: "I feel happy when—" "I feel sad when—" Eventually, the students achieve a two-hundred-word essay.

We don't use clustering to outline ideas that will be put into the students' essays. Clustering is too complicated and time consuming. We use a simple list of items to cover, in order of importance. I comment on content. Grammar is worked on in separate sessions. I give plenty of feedback to each student. Like dialogue journals, it is effective in getting the students writing.

Once you get the reading and writing process going with adult students, group discussions will spontaneously evolve. We have had spin-off classes held by the students on their own, where they met to discuss things they did not have time to discuss in class.

Most of my students work hard all day. When they look forward to coming to school at night, I know the class is a success. When I see them achieve their goals, I know that together we have made school a real learning place.

But as a teacher, I must believe that success is possible and transmit that feeling of belief to each student. And I must care.

Caring is unmistakable and can even be communicated to a class full of people whose language you do not speak. They learn you, your face, your body language. Sometimes it seems as though they can read your mind.

You will not need to watch videotapes of yourself teaching to know how you present yourself as an educator if you have mentally and physically handicapped students. They are experts at reading people. They will reflect you back to yourself. Whatever personal baggage you may be carrying, you must leave outside their classroom. Otherwise they will know all your ups and downs! They can see beneath the most careful facade. You will develop a professional persona working with them that will become your genuine self in the classroom.

One secret every teacher of at risk students knows is that we are the lucky ones. Our students are the most caring, most loving, most appreciative, and most supportive. All we have to do is to show them a little human respect. ▲

—by **Barbara Owens**
Adult Education Teacher
ABE, ESOL, GED

Distance learning programs inherently recognize that adults have limited time and access opportunities, yet most fail to acknowledge that adults also have limited income.

To help adult learners, outreach materials should include a statement on financial aid and whom to contact to discuss aid, since this is often handled by a different department. Financial aid officers trained to deal with the budgetary concerns of adult learners can help adults understand what to expect from a government financial aid program that was originally designed for dependent, non-working students.

Southwestern Assemblies of God College, of Waxahachie, Texas, was one of the few programs that included a financial brochure, "Making Your Southwestern Education Affordable," in their outreach materials. The tone of the brochure, "We Are Here to Help," was clear, concise, and encouraging. The brochure stressed that college aid was available for the middle class and was written to demystify the financial aid maze for working adults.

Rule #3: Recognize Education As a Career Quest

Adults want more information on how academic majors and degrees translate into specific career goals. "Will this accounting degree qualify me to be a CPA? Can I be a licensed school teacher if I complete this math degree? Will this degree qualify me to take the Engineering exam?"

Half of all programs that provided degree majors tied to post-baccalaureate licensing or certification, such as engineering or accounting, failed to mention whether these degrees would qualify learners for post-graduation needs or if their approvals were state specific.

Adults who return to college are adults in transition. Many seek to change their long-term career situation through educational achievement. Given the correlation between higher education and efforts by adults to change their career situations, we were surprised to learn that only two degree-granting colleges offered a career course in their curriculum. So were our adult learners.

Rule #4: Provide Easy and Responsive Access

After we reviewed the outreach materials of all colleges, we sent letters to sixteen colleges, asking for additional information on items not made clear in their initial materials. Questions

posed ranged from the availability of academic majors to the availability of credit for work experience. We identified ourselves as prospective students in these queries to see what kind of responses an adult learner might expect.

Of the sixteen letters sent asking for specific additional information, only four were answered. Four programs never replied and the other eight resent identical outreach materials and form letters. This raises the alarming question: who, if anyone, is minding the distance learning mailroom?

When adult learners were asked how satisfied they were with the responsiveness of distance learning programs to their questions, a shout of dismay came back. Wrote one business woman, "If I ran my company like this college I'd have been bankrupt years ago."

Rule #5: Provide a Preparatory Academy

Over half the adult learners queried expressed fear about taking a course in higher college math. These learners wanted a course in pre-college math to build their skills and confidence before taking college algebra, which is often required.

Finding a distance degree program that offered college preparatory work in math, English, and study skills was a problem for those who wanted this option. Less than a quarter of the programs we reviewed offered college preparatory courses in any of these areas. Yet the majority of the baccalaureate degree programs required six credits or more of composition, and math at College Algebra level or above with the accompanying sciences.

Practical Implications for Distance Education Outreach

Assessing Current Materials. While colleges debate whether or not they *should* be assessed from a consumer perspective, a clear indication from this study is that adults *do* look at education from a consumer and customer service perspective. They care about price and they care about the responsiveness of colleges to their unique needs and questions.

Many adults will graduate from a distance program either without setting foot on the campus—and therefore in the financial aid office or the counseling office—or after having spent only a week or two on campus. Adult distance learners must rely heavily on the written materials they receive to assess a

prospective college; after that they must rely on the responsiveness of the college to their unique and complex needs. Inadequate written materials or a lack of interpretative access clearly discourages, rather than invites, adults back into the learning process at mid-life.

Adult learners may shop around among the over eighty distance degree colleges open to them. If adults do this, wouldn't it benefit college personnel to do the same? Periodically reviewing the outreach materials of other colleges may help programs remain responsive. How do other colleges welcome adult learners? Could borrowing their ideas and techniques make your program more responsive to the needs of adult learners? Assessing materials on the five rules above should benefit any distance degree college.

Involving Front Line Advisors. Why are adult distance education degree materials seen by adult learners as lacking in so many key areas? Our study was undertaken by a front line academic counselor who continually responds to the gripes and suggestions of potential adult students.

Materials developed by administrative or marketing staff may not reflect the true-life concerns that advisors address each day with prospective adult students. Administrative staff who have worked with campus-only programs may inadvertently carry over ideas and attitudes that work well for traditional campus recruitment but do not respond to the unique needs of adult learners. The concept of a college preparatory academy, for instance, is still a new one for most four-year campus-based colleges, though less so for community colleges.

Colleges have traditionally separated admissions from financial aid. This separation seems particularly unsuited to adult learners whose financial concerns are at a different level than the traditional 18-year-old student. Cross-training academic advisors in academic, career, and financial aid policies may help ease adults back into higher education.

Finally, listening to front line advisors and to what prospective students say by phone and in letters may be the best and most cost-effective method of making an annual review in an effort to design outreach materials and services that speak—not mumble!—to the adult distance learners who use them. ▲