

CATERING TO LEARNERS' DIVERSE NEEDS

By Richard Ng

Most learners have left school for more than five years before entering OUM. So, they have a different level of readiness towards the open and distance learning mode.

For example, there are learners who have computers and Internet access but many go online at their office or at a cybercafé. Most learners have jobs and families to take care of. Some have a poor command of English while others are financially unstable. Quite a number commute long distance for tutorials. Thus, tutors should consider the profile of their learners so as to play an effective role.

Tutors are normally hired because they have the necessary qualifications and knowledge. However, some are ineffective because they fail to understand how adults learn. Adults have years of experience and a wealth of information. So, we must focus on the strengths they bring to class and tap into their experience. We must also respect their beliefs, religions, value systems and lifestyles.

It is vital for tutors to understand the profile of their learners and adjust their teaching strategies to suit them. Tutors must consider that in a class there are different types of learners and they need to use different approaches and styles to help them enjoy learning.

Adults have different learning styles and pace. Therefore, they require different teaching strategies such as small-group problem solving and discussion. The use of auditory, visual, tactile and participatory teaching methods may help. Though their reaction time and speed of learning may be slow, their ability to learn may not be impaired by age.

As adult learners usually relate new knowledge and information to previously learned information and experiences, tutors should present single concepts and focus on applying these to practical situations.

Tutors should strive to make adult learners comfortable. Learners will not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of ridicule. So tutors need to treat all questions and comments with respect.



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Adult learners have a deep need to be self-directing, so tutors must engage them in mutual inquiry. Avoid having one-way communication, merely transmitting knowledge or expecting total agreement. Adult learners like to have their say and share their experiences in class.

Tutors must also be mindful of the challenges faced by learners such as distance and family and work commitments. They could make full use of technology such as short message services or the Learning Management System to engage learners. Engaged learners are mostly satisfied learners and this will result in a better retention rate for the university.

Tutors are OUM's front-liners who need to help solve the problems faced by their learners. Therefore, OUM needs committed and dedicated tutors who could play their role effectively. TCX