

Strategies for and Benefits of Building a Comfortable Adult Classroom Environment
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Abstract

A literature review was conducted to determine the importance and the best strategies for the creation of a comfortable classroom for adult learners. Issues that might cause adult students to feel uncomfortable were identified. Strategies to build comfortable classroom environments such as intentional decision-making about the physical space, understanding adult learners before they enter the classroom, and interacting with students outside of class time were examined.

Instructional strategies such as the incorporation of a student-centered focus, group activities that include social interaction among learners, the use of humor and community-building activities in instruction, the importance of multi-cultural competence and self-awareness, and the value of providing positive feedback were explored.

Keywords: adult education, classroom environment, learning environment, andragogy, instructor-student relationship

Negative educational experiences, whether in childhood or in adulthood, can change an individual's view toward lifelong learning. Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) wrote that each individual holds a template in their own head of learning environments based on prior classroom experiences- both negative and positive. Past educational experiences can vary from individual to individual. When learners have a history of negative classroom experiences, they may not want to continue with future learning. Adults may be required to participate in work training or other types of professional development even though they had never planned to continue any formal higher education as adults. How can supportive trainers of adult education build comfortable classroom environments where students feel safe to make mistakes and where students are motivated to learn more? What are ways that trainers can effectively build relationships with their trainees and help learners to feel part of a positive and encouraging classroom community?

Statement of the Problem

Imagine yourself in a job that required you to take a course and pass an exam to keep your job. This is a realistic scenario that many adults face in today's workplace. Walmart Academies completed 1.1 million associate trainings in the fiscal year of 2020 (Walmart Annual Report, 2020). Pew Trusts found that 54% of adults currently in the workforce said that future training would be vital to keep up with workplace changes (Parker and Ranie, 2020). For adult learners to be successful in the classroom, they must feel comfortable and enjoy their experiences. Anxieties or concerns over understanding the materials can lead to unfortunate classroom experiences and fear of future learning. Learners must navigate the classroom environment as mature, independent adults with outside influences that compete for their time

and energy. This is significantly different from their prior educational experiences in their youth. How can trainers of adults create comfortable classroom environments to maximize learning for trainees who might have had previous negative education experiences?

Significance of the Study

Perceptions of “school” can bring up anxiety for adults, many of whom may not have been to “class” in decades. Instructors who create comfortable classroom environments can reduce those learner anxieties so adults can have beneficial learning experiences. Spagnola & Yagos (2021) wrote that facilitators must address adult student fear and help students limit their fear-based responses to the classroom experience. If not, colleges might continue to have low graduation rates for nontraditional students (typically those who are 24 years old or older). Spagnola & Yagos (2021) discovered that 70% of nontraditional students dropped out because of fear about their success in the classroom and a lack of self-confidence. Adult education is something that is experienced by many adults whether it is at home, at work, or at other places where trainings are offered. The 2018 Training Industry report indicated that organizations in the United States spent almost 90 billion dollars in 2018 alone on training expenditures (Freifeld, 2019). Spagnola & Yagos (2021) predicted that upwards of 13.3 million adults will participate in college as nontraditional students by the year 2026. O’Neill (2013) wrote that the average age of students on college campuses was 29 in 2013. The American workforce can expect to participate in work-related learning experiences for ongoing, employee professional development. Thirty-five percent of trainings were conducted in face-to-face in-classroom learning experiences (Freifeld, 2019). It is vital that facilitators of learning experiences create comfortable environments in which adults can learn effectively and comfortably. Lifelong learning is crucial

to many career paths and progression in one's career. Gorges et. al. (2016) wrote that one must continually learn to keep up with peers and maintain competencies.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study was to provide facilitators of adult education (professors, corporate trainers, etc.) with the strategies to build a comfortable classroom environment that will help adult learners have successful learning experiences. Specific techniques and strategies for the development of a comfortable adult classroom environment were identified and examined. The goal was to identify ways that facilitators can make the adult learning environments more comfortable for all adult learners, including those who are reluctant. The adult learners who might be uncomfortable or reluctant in the classroom can focus more on the content of the learning opportunity and less on any discomfort they might feel.

There are a number of potential sources for anxiety related to participation in educational offerings for adult learners and these sources are identified in this paper along with strategies to reduce those anxieties. Learning in both formal and informal learning environments are considered. This paper will conclude with an outline of strategies to use to create a comfortable learning environment for adult learners. Topics related to instruction will be examined, as well as elements within the physical space of the classroom, the need to understand the adult learner before they enter the classroom, the development of the student-instructor relationship, and the utilization of interactions outside of class time to connect with learners. Strategies that can be used during instruction to assist adult learners include the use of humor and community-building, the importance of providing positive feedback, and the importance of multi-cultural competence and self-awareness by the instructor.

Definition of Terms

Andragogy was defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d) as “the art or science of teaching adults.”

Pedagogy was defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d) as “the art, science, or profession of teaching.”

Chacko (2018) wrote that pedagogy is used to outline teaching methods for children. That definition will be used throughout this paper.

Rapport was defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d) as “a friendly, harmonious relationship.”

Delimitations of Research

The research for this seminar paper was limited to online government/professional organization sites, textbooks on relevant topics, and peer reviewed articles found in the search engine of the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin- Platteville. Resources were limited to those published between 2014 and 2021. One older, seminal work was also used in this study.

Method of Approach

A review of literature was conducted to identify common traits of adult learners. Also identified were strategies that facilitators might use to help adult learners become more comfortable in formal education settings. Most of the literature related to research, studies, and anecdotal evidence of classroom environments in higher education or corporate settings. Another review of literature regarding general andragogy strategies was also conducted.

Search terms first included “adult education” and “classroom environment.” The literature search also included “corporate training” and “rapport.” Finally, the search became

more generalized with terms such as “andragogy”, “learning environment”, “higher education”, and “humor”. These terms were searched in the Karmann Library search engine at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville between September, 2020 and April, 2021.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Introduction

Whether adults want to find new careers, continue to develop themselves personally, or to bolster their professional skills through professional development, adults are constantly learning. Spagnola & Yagos (2021) defined adult learners as being at least 25 years of age. These adults might participate in courses at higher education institutions, complete trainings through their employers, or take advantage of community and online offerings. Merriam and Bierema (2014) wrote that participation in adult education that was practical and skill-oriented doubled from 1965 to 2005. O'Neill (2013) noted that the number of students enrolled in institutions of higher education has doubled from a generation ago. University campuses welcomed adult learners who might have been laid-off workers or parents who looked to retool their current skills. The comfort level of adult learners during these experiences might have had a major impact on their successes.

In a classroom of adults, an individual's ego could be at risk. Spagnola and Yagos (2021) wrote that fear can start from a lack of self-confidence. Adult learners might feel like they compete with their peers of various ages and life stages and could become self-conscious if they feel they are not up to par. Learners might compare themselves to other students and feel that they lag behind when they are unable to replicate the success of those around them. The reason why an adult learner attends a learning experience might drive anxiety because their successes in the classroom might have a direct impact on the success of other aspects of their lives. Mamatelashvili et al. (2020) wrote that many employers required increasing competence in their workplaces. Without these competencies, the employer and employee might have begun to lag behind the competition which could have led to negative consequences for both. This could

cause more stress for the trainee to be successful in their classroom experience or for a corporation which might deliver the training.

Bledsoe and Baskin wrote that fear could become debilitating for students. Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) wrote about fear: “It impacts our cognitive processes- how we perceive our environment, how we remember things, whether we can focus and pay attention, how well we plan then execute that plan, and how well we problem solve” (p. 33). Spagnola and Yagos (2021) described the science behind fear in adult learners. The nervous system can unconsciously respond to fear through bodily functions such as an increased heart rate, respiratory rate, and urination. This bodily response can lead to a negative student response in the classroom: excessive talking, no responsiveness, complaints of feeling ill, blushing, confusion toward assignments, and lack of eye contact (Bledsoe and Baskin, 2014).

Many organizations used continuous learning to stay competitive in their respective fields. Mamatelashvili et al. (2020) wrote about four reasons that a company or individual continued to learn: to keep up with competition, to adapt to changes in existing technology, to learn completely new technologies, and to increase employee job satisfaction. Personnel needed to be able to adapt to constantly changing work conditions and processes. For companies to stay competitive, companies developed training programs that focused on their industries and solved complex problems. In their study, they reported that organizations found it better to invest in current employees through continuous learning rather than recruit new employees.

To illustrate how the concepts in this paper might apply in real-world situations, a fictional, but realistic, adult student named “Tyler” will be described in the following sections of Chapter 2. Fictional “Tyler” is a 45-year-old man who is married with three kids. “Tyler” works as an IT analyst and his company just adopted a new software package. This new software could

be very different from what “Tyler” used previously during his twenty-year career. “Tyler” was required to travel to a state he’s never been to for training about the new software. “Tyler” is currently regarded as an expert at his workplace with the previous software. He is anxious that his status at work will change if he cannot learn the new software quickly. “Tyler’s” background and story unfolds throughout Chapter 2 of this paper as he progresses through his learning experience.

Challenges of the Adult Learner

Why do trainees feel uncomfortable? Zemke and Zemke (1984) put it best in their writing about adults and their feelings as they entered a classroom, “Bad experiences in traditional education, feelings about authority and the preoccupation with events outside the classroom affect in-class experience” (p.2). So many internal and external factors can prevent a classroom from feeling comfortable. Adult students may feel uncomfortable based on their pre-conceived notions, self-worth & ego, motivation, outside influences, and event logistics.

Pre-conceived Notions

Adult students enter the classroom with pre-conceived notions of how the educator may facilitate the learning experience. When writing about measuring adult motivation, Gorges et al. (2016) discussed that adults have had a variety of past learning experiences. If adult students had had negative learning experiences in the past, this could have caused anxiety for them as they entered the adult education classroom in subsequent experiences. This could have been especially likely if it had been a significant amount of time since they had been in a classroom. Throughout their youth, adults might have experienced classroom environments that were more teacher-centered. Historically, pedagogy, the education of children, employed methods of teaching that were more teacher-centered (Chacko, 2018). Adult students might have had the

expectation that they would be passive learners in the transfer of learning process because of the teaching methods used when they were children. However, when adult learners were required to work in groups or actively participate in educational activities as adults, this might have been different from what they expected might happen in the classroom and might have caused stress for the adult learner. Lawson (2015) wrote of the traditional pedagogical approach being an information dump of knowledge from the teacher, who is regarded as the expert, to students. This traditional approach might not be considered the best approach for adult education programs.

“Tyler” graduated from college over twenty years ago and has not attended any classroom-based education courses since then. While in college, in a majority of the classes “Tyler” took, he sat in a large lecture hall with rows of desks as the professor, who was solely regarded as the expert, simply lectured through all of the content, and “Tyler” was required to memorize as much as possible. “Tyler” heard about group exercises and discussions that these new software classes included and had anxiety about how he would work together with his peers and how active he would have to be throughout class. “Tyler” was also worried about how much older he might be than the other participants in the class. He was concerned that he might stand out as different and be viewed negatively by the other participants.

Self-worth & ego

Hesitations about classroom participation could hinder comfortability. Fears that participation in adult learning activities might damage an individual’s ego and self-worth could also be an issue. Adult learners may begin to feel insecure when comparing themselves against their peers. When students participate in the classroom, it may increase one’s exposure. If a

learner is insecure about their skills, that learner may feel exposed and uncomfortable with the experience. Public embarrassment can become detrimental to a learner's experience (Decelle, 2016). Adult education can be a very intimidating environment, as students do not want to feel embarrassed in front of their peers. They might want to feel that they are regarded as an asset within the classroom to feel comfortable to actively participate. Lockhard and Hargis (2017) wrote of the importance for instructors to establish a classroom environment that encouraged student risk-taking. If a student did not feel comfortable to take risks, this may have limited the amount of participation for the student.

Students with the ambition to be part of the active learning process may feel left out if they are not given the opportunity to have input into the learning experience. Adults want to have some input regarding their educational experiences (Lawson, 2015). Merriam and Bierema (2014) wrote that students might feel helpless if they do not have a voice in their learning experiences which can lead to resentment of the instructor. Adults need to be recognized as able to care for and make decision for themselves. Adults make decisions in their everyday lives, and in a classroom setting, they may feel as if they have no voice or autonomy (Berriam and Merriam, 2014). O'Neill (2013), in his work about limitless learning, wrote that learning spaces should allow an individual to learn whether that individual sits, stands, or lounges. A facilitator should encourage the individual to use the space in a way that gives them freedom to move and to be in control of their own experiences.

As a former medical student, Rogers (2015) wrote about his experiences and reflected on the importance of students having the opportunity to choose which optional content they explored in depth. He wrote that, with choice, students excelled when given some choice in related materials and this helped with core concepts taught in the medical school curricula. If

learners did not feel involved in their learning experiences, they might become detached. Adult learners must also be able to connect to the materials and understand why they need to know the content covered in a course, or the instructor needs to help learners make the connections between what the learner needs to know and the material presented in a course.

“Tyler” has been the subject matter expert in the prior software his organization used throughout the entirety of his career. “Tyler” has never seen the new software that this training experience will introduce and will have to start at the beginning in his understanding. “Tyler” was concerned that he might answer a question incorrectly and that this would cause his classmates to doubt his intelligence or expertise. “Tyler” had a work meeting with his boss on the second day of class and hoped he would have a choice about when the lunch break would be so he could step out at that time for his meeting with his boss. He decided not to bring it up and hoped that the lunchtime the instructor selected would align with his boss’s availability.

“Tyler” was a subject matter expert with the previous software and understood how processes at work needed to be arranged to work well with the software. He hoped to learn more about how those processes would be impacted with the new software. The instructor did not provide an opportunity for participants to ask about specific content that would be helpful, nor did the instructor invite participants with expertise in various software programs to serve as resources that could have been helpful to others in the course.

Motivation

The reason why learners participate in learning opportunities can have a significant impact on the learners’ stress levels or attitudes. Adults may enter the classroom because they want to be there or because they are required to be there. Paul Hogseth, a trainer at an independent electronic health record company, talked about the negative attitudes with which his

adult trainees entered the classroom (P. Hogseth, Personal Communication, February 10, 2021). Hogseth mentioned that many of his students were experts in the industry and with the prior technologies they had used. The new software they needed to learn created a “domino effect” with other work processes that were in place. The new system created a significant change in their daily work lives, and those required to implement the new software and associated systems might not have been ready to accept the changes yet. The new system required lots of extra work and created frustration for the other employees who were required to learn new processes. Participants might have been experts at their organizations and now they were required to learn something that might put their expert reputations at risk. These learners might have had an intense loyalty to the prior software, and learners might have had some resistance (or significant resistance) to the adoption of the new software. These students may have even become combative in class. Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) wrote that early intervention could help diminish the fear or resistance of these students and help increase academic success. At the beginning of the training, the facilitator could help learners identify these fears or hesitations (and the behaviors that result because of it) to assist learners in readiness for the information to follow. Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) suggested that a facilitator could teach techniques such as breathing exercises, guided imagery, journals, positive self-talk, or relaxation methods that might be helpful.

“Tyler” had incredible loyalty to the software he had been using for twenty years. He knew that this change would make a significant difference in the comfortability and ease of this work. He had enjoyed his time with the old software, and he had established personal, friendly relationships with the representatives of the former software company. “Tyler” felt that he had no voice in this significant change and held resentment toward his organization and the new

software company even before he had seen the new software. “Tyler” was not excited about the new training that he was required to complete. He had avoided the completion of some of the pre-requisites for class out of spite.

Outside Influences

Not only can one’s internal motivation affect the classroom experience, but also life outside the classroom can disrupt the learning experience and environment. Events outside the classroom can have a significant impact on the ability to focus on course content for adult students and can hinder their success in any adult education environment. Adults might need to address the many every-day life challenges that might occupy their minds. According to Pollock et al. (2015), adult learners do not enter the classroom as blank sheets of paper and totally clean slates. A student may have a newborn child at home and have concerns over how things are going at home. This might serve as a significant distractor while the learner is in class. Another adult learner might have a learning disability they are desperately trying to hide from their co-workers and peers. This adult learner might be concerned that he/she will be asked to do something in the course that will expose their disability. These concerns can create significant levels of stress and lead to debilitating anxiety for these students.

In order to attend class, “Tyler” had to fly across the country. He left on a Sunday and missed his oldest son’s baseball game in which his son was the starting pitcher. This weighed heavily on “Tyler” as he sat in his hotel room the night before the first day of class. “Tyler” was uncomfortable in hotels, so he did not sleep well for most of the training week. While away at the training program, “Tyler” constantly worried about his family’s wellbeing back at home. He got his children ready for school every day when he was at home, and he relied on his oldest

child to assume these duties while he was gone at training. “Tyler” spent time each morning of training calling his oldest child to make sure that he took care of all the details.

Event Logistics

As previously noted, adult students’ lives outside the classroom can have significant impact on their classroom experiences. The students’ interactions with the physical space and class logistics can also have a significant impact. Often, adult students may take classes in buildings or even cities they have never been to before. If a student cannot find the classroom or does not know where to find basic comforts such as a cup of coffee or a restroom, this could start their experiences off poorly. The logistics of making it to the classroom on time could have a significant impact on the start of the learning experience. In her book about adult classroom strategies, Lawson (2015) wrote that the success of a class experience was usually determined even before the student entered the classroom. According to Paul Hogseth, small inconveniences such as difficulty finding a classroom or hesitation about where to sit in the classroom can cause a significant amount of emotional stress before class begins (P. Hogseth, Personal Communication, February 10, 2021). The stress of the smallest inconveniences before the class starts can linger throughout the classroom experience and cause a distraction away from course content.

“Tyler” flew to a city that he had never been to before. The airline delayed “Tyler’s” flight over two hours, and he barely made it to the hotel before 10 PM the night before the first day of class. “Tyler” had an address for the training facility, but he was unsure about the amount of traffic he might encounter the next morning. He disliked driving in new places in a rental car he was not familiar with, so anxiety caused him to wake up repeatedly throughout the night. “Tyler” also preferred to sit in the front of the classroom because he was deaf in one ear and had

worries about if there would be assigned seats. He wondered if he would have the opportunity to sit in the front of the classroom or if he would be required to sit somewhere else.

Importance of Adult Education

Why does it matter that adults have the most beneficial learning experiences possible? Why should one care about “Tyler’s” emotions heading into the first day of class? Why should adult learners care how their classroom experiences go? Lifelong learning is essential to navigate the challenges of adulthood. Gorges et. al (2016), wrote that continuous learning can be essential to career growth and job retention. According to Paul Hogseth (Personal Communication, February 10, 2021), learners may have lost their jobs if they were unable to pass his organization’s assessments. While many adults might participate in self-directed learning for their own personal reasons, some adults might need education to retain their employment or to stay competitive on the job. In these cases, it is important that adults learn effectively.

“Tyler” attended a corporate training course required by his employer. While the course was not taken for college credit or for a college grade, “Tyler” needed to have a successful training experience to pass the assessments offered by the company that hosted his training. If he had been unable to learn the material and pass the exams, he might not have been able to keep his job.

There are many challenges that can limit the effectiveness of adult learning. Fortunately, there are effective strategies instructors can use to make the learning environments comfortable for trainees in formal and nonformal classrooms.

Non-instructional Strategies

Since adult education is so valuable, how does one create a comfortable environment for learners to get the best experience? While excellent instruction that is appropriate for adult learners is important, there are non-instructional elements that are important as well. For classrooms to be comfortable for adult learners, the instructor must use the physical space in a beneficial way. Instructors must also understand the experiences of their students before they enter the classroom and do what is possible to help learners navigate the unfamiliar. Additionally, instructors can interact with their students during breaks in instructional time to help build relationships. An instructor should use every interaction with their learners to set a positive tone, encourage a comfortable learning environment, and build rapport. The casual gathering areas near the classroom can serve as comfortable places for spontaneous and informal interactions (O'Neill, 2013).

Physical Space

When developing a comfortable learning environment, the physical space can have a large impact on the trainee experience. Considerations could include lighting levels, room temperature, types of furniture, and classroom expectations such as where students will sit. If the trainer has the opportunity, they should consider the furniture placement and practice using the technology in the room prior to when trainings will be offered. Facilitators should make sure all of the technology works and should have the contact information for those who can provide technology support if there are issues (Biech, 2015). When technology does not work, the demeanor of the class can change, the instructor can quickly lose credibility, and students begin to doubt that the environment was properly prepared for the training event.

It can be valuable to have the room and materials set up when students arrive on the first day of class. Lawson (2015) wrote that materials, such as tent cards, notepads, pencils, and instructional materials should be available in the classroom when students arrive. Instructors may set out these materials on the individuals' desks or near the entrance to the classroom to create a learning environment conducive to learning and help the instructor appear organized and feel prepared. On the first day of class, students should arrive to an instructional space that was planned to maximize learning.

The first impression students have of the instructor is important. As students enter the classroom, a trainer can greet them at the door with a smile and share genuine enthusiasm. Paul Hogseth recommended that as students arrive, instructors should introduce themselves, shake the students' hands, and spend a few minutes getting to know each student (P. Hogseth, Personal Communication, February 10, 2021). Through conversation and genuine openness, Hogseth was able to get to know his trainees and help them feel more at home. This also opened up opportunities to point out the small details like where the student could find breakfast, coffee, or restrooms. Biech (2015) suggested that instructors could play music as students enter the classroom each day. Soft music could also be played during breaks or at the end of the day so participants could relax and comfortably converse in the room.

There should be careful planning of the seating arrangement in the classroom as it can have an impact on the group dynamics (Lawson, 2015). The seating configuration could have an impact on the formality of the atmosphere and how comfortably the learners are able to work with their peers. The facilitator can choose the layout of the room for the desired outcome if furniture is movable. Lawson (2015) wrote that the facilitator should keep all students in mind,

including those who may have physical disabilities, when decisions are made about furniture types, spacing, proximity to audio equipment, and location and quality of visual displays.

Modern technology has removed many of the traditional physical requirements that made up traditional learning environments as students can now learn from anywhere. While virtual, asynchronous offerings make learning from a distance possible, physical classroom spaces are being designed now with flexibility in mind as well. O'Neill (2013) wrote that traditional lecture halls might be less common in the future with new classrooms designed to be more flexible with generalized spaces that promote interaction between learners. Learning can take place in varied environments as new facilities have been created with wide-open spaces to create new hubs for learning. All areas of the training facility should support learning and collaborations as new technology allows learners to easily move from place to place and be more portable (O'Neill, 2013).

Upon entering the classroom, the trainer shook “Tyler’s” hand and welcomed him to find any seat in which he felt most comfortable. Since “Tyler” received a video outlining where to park (to be detailed later in this paper), he was easily able to find a parking spot and was the first person to the room. He found a spot in the front of the classroom where he knew he would be able to hear well. “Tyler” shared his prior experience and the instructor pointed to an upcoming lesson that sparked “Tyler’s” interest. “Tyler” sat in his seat looking forward to the rest of class with his breakfast and coffee.

Understanding Learners Before They Enter the Classroom

It is important to understand the learners in a course before a facilitator begins instruction. The instructor should allow for flexibility in the classroom experience. If a student feels comfortable, they are more likely to open up to the instructor about any individual concerns

they might have. This communication keeps the instructor informed in ways that they can help when a learner needs an accommodation. When surveying non-traditional students in Scotland, Rocks and Lavender (2018), noted that the students surveyed were older than traditional students and had experienced a long break since their last formal learning experience. Their interview study focused on 12 non-traditional students and how new educational experiences positively affected their social and emotional wellbeing. The authors found that each student experienced some amount of change in their independence, confidence, and how willing they were to try new things. Each of these students experienced at least a small amount of change in their self-identity, so while participating in educational opportunities might be intimidating for some adults, there are positive personal benefits that might come from participation.

Instructors of formal or nonformal environments might assume that non-traditional students are not prepared for academic rigor. While older adults might need to reacclimate to the learning experience, these students come into the classroom with a variety of prior experiences, and the prior knowledge of students should be considered a valuable part of the educational experience (Chacko, 2018). Merriam and Bierema (2014) wrote about using the learners' prior experience as a starting point of instruction. These prior experiences may be built upon to help the learners connect their prior life experiences with new concepts being taught.

The trainees may feel valued and celebrated if they are invited to contribute to the information students receive in a course. Merriam and Bierema (2014) wrote that an adult's experience can be a valuable resource for learning. If the instructor knows the background, roles, or jobs of course participants, the instructor could point out specific course content that would be especially relevant to participants. Instructors can invite participants to provide examples and

share experiences throughout instruction. Merriam and Bierema (2014) warned that when this prior experience is ignored, learners might feel as though they are being ignored.

The student demographic may be diverse in adult education, and it is important to assess any presumptions, biases, or stereotypes an instructor might have about or toward a particular group of individuals. To be effective when working with a diverse audience, the trainer must look internally and examine their own attitudes and beliefs toward others (Lawson, 2015). Merriam and Bierema (2014) agreed that an instructor's educational integrity relied on questioning one's biases. Students notice instructor biases, whether the biases are conscious or not, and biases can cause a negative impression to be formed of the instructor and the course. The instructor may unintentionally offend a student and not realize they have. This experience can create an environment that is harmful to an individual's learning. Spagnola and Yagos (2021) wrote that the depth of personal experiences in the classroom were not only a powerful learning tool for the students, but also for the facilitator. All facilitators should examine their practices for sensitivity to a diverse learning population and have a goal to learn from others whose life experiences might be different from their own.

A facilitator who seeks to understand other cultures can create a welcoming and comfortable environment for all. Cultures have different customs that vary with regards to physical interpersonal distance, preferred methods of greeting (use of handshakes and other gestures), dietary restrictions, and specific body language (Lawson, 2015). An instructor should make an effort to remember and correctly pronounce the names of class participants. Zunker (2016) wrote about interaction with individuals from different cultures. Cultural groups are not necessarily homogenous, and instructors should understand that there can be significant differences within cultural groups.

The amount of eye contact may cause a learner to be intimidated or offended. This might be due to cultural norms, or it might be an element unique to one individual. Zunker (2016) wrote about Native American and Latino cultural groups who might consider direct eye contact, especially by those who are younger, to be disrespectful. There are guidelines for touching in many societies. In some Middle East cultures, women may not touch or shake hands with men with whom they are not related. Some cultures may consider probing questions that ask for more information to be intrusive and rude. A facilitator should be aware of how close they stand physically to their learners and that a student's comfort with this distance might vary by culture. Individuals from some European countries might prefer farther interpersonal distances while Latino groups and those from the Middle East might prefer shorter distances. Other cultural differences might include how adult learners express their needs in educational settings. Individuals from some Asian cultures may be sensitive about verbalizing problems they are having. They may not demonstrate it if they struggle in class.

Paul Hogseth (Personal Communication, February 10, 2021) talked about meeting dietary needs of different cultural groups during his trainings. Students were encouraged to reach out to the culinary team before they arrived on-site at Hogseth's training facility to communicate any specific dietary preferences or requirements. Hogseth also remembered that when a large group of individuals who were scheduled to attend class were fasting, a communication went out to the training division staff to ensure that everyone was considerate of that. Hogseth mentioned that awareness of dietary differences helped him to be more sensitive to the experiences of others.

Ultimately, the instructor should understand the learner as an individual adult. When writing about engagement in high school students, Cooper (2014) wrote, "instruction honors who

the students are- acknowledges that they are particular people with particular interests, points of views, personalities, and experiences” (p. 367). The same could be said for adult students in adult education environments.

The instructor understood that “Tyler” had a life outside the classroom. The trainer noticed the picture of “Tyler’s” kids hanging from his keychain. The trainer asked and “Tyler” told him the ages of his three children. “Tyler” recognized the instructor’s interest in him as an individual and welcomed these questions from the instructor. The instructor also remembered “Tyler” mentioning that he was an expert in a certain area. The instructor asked if, during a certain lesson later in class, “Tyler” would be willing to share his expert knowledge in that area of the industry. “Tyler” welcomed the opportunity to share his experience with the other participants.

Develop Student-Instructor Relationship

One of the most important relationship dynamics in an adult education environment is that between the instructor and the students. The instructor should genuinely care about the adult students taking part in the course and be concerned for their well-being while attending the course. When adult learners enter an educational setting, they may become fearful of facilitator expectations and feel rejected or inadequate (Spagnola and Yagos, 2021). Spagnola and Yagos (2021) wrote that the most efficient way to approach this fear is to build trust with the adult learner. When the facilitator shows authentic concern for the learner, the learner’s brain chemistry can change and the individual might become calm so they can regain any lost composure. Rock and Lavender (2018) added that it was important for a facilitator to view the learning experience from the perspective of the student. Alsharif and Qi (2014) noted that when the instructor understood the student as an individual, the rapport between the instructor and the

learner was enhanced. Students who had an effective relationship with the instructor felt comfortable enough to approach the instructor for assistance (Alsharif & Qi, 2014). It was important for the student-instructor relationship to be fostered for the student to feel comfortable. Those learners who were comfortable asked questions or approached the instructor when there was a need.

One of the easiest ways to build a relationship with students is for the instructor to be authentic (Biech, 2015). Biech wrote that students knew when the instructor was not genuine and did not have a genuine interest in the learners as individuals. Lawson (2015) recommended sharing stories from the instructor's life to build rapport with learners. Through personal stories, the instructor might be able to show that the enthusiasm about the trainees and classroom material is authentic. Students can see the instructor as an individual just as the instructor can see the students as individuals. The instructor could participate during introductions (like students do) or even share personal anecdotes that relate to the content during instruction. For example, the stories could include personal stories, in which the instructor first failed at something related to the content and then was able to overcome a challenge to be successful (Biech, 2015). Students may have had similar experiences of failed attempts and then be able to relate to similar experiences of the instructor.

From the moment "Tyler" walked into class, he felt a sincere relationship with the instructor, because the instructor made an effort to connect individually with him and the other students. After lunch, "Tyler" had a question about dinner recommendations in the city and the best place to go after class. Because the instructor was approachable, "Tyler" felt comfortable enough to ask where a good place to get dinner that night would be. The trainer was enthusiastic to share that one of his favorite restaurants happened to be right next to "Tyler's" hotel. Because

of this enthusiasm, “Tyler” was excited to visit the new restaurant and this excitement carried over to his classroom experience as well.

Interactions Around the Training Facility

A facilitator has opportunities to build relationships with adult learners not only within the physical space of the classroom, but they can also interact with trainees outside of the four walls of the classroom. There are many professional environments where a facilitator may interact with their learners outside of the classroom. These environments could include dining areas, hallways, or other spaces within the learning center or classroom building. Pollock et al. (2015) wrote that “what happens before and after instruction is as important as the learning itself” (p. 80). Lawson (2015) wrote that pre-class communications could have a positive impact on the expectations a student came in with the first day of class. In their decades of research, Spagnola and Yagos (2021) discovered that facilitators cannot over-communicate with their adult learners. It can be helpful to send quick emails to clarify assignments or offer words of encouragement (Bledsoe & Baskin, 2014).

In her book, Karen Lawson (2015) wrote about communication strategies she found to be helpful. Pre-class and post-class communications helped to build a complete experience for the trainee. Pre-class communications from instructors were helpful as well as communications trainees might have received from others who were familiar with the training experience, the layout of the facility, travel arrangements, lodging nearby, and appropriate attire for the training experience (Lawson, 2015). Students who had information prior to the start of the training might have experienced less anxiety on the first day of class. Paul Hogseth’s company sent a pre-class video that welcomed students to the campus (P. Hogseth, Personal Communication, February 10, 2021). This video outlined details such as where to park and how to find the classroom. The pre-

class video also included contact information for individuals to reach out for accommodations that may have included dietary options or assistance for those with disabilities. Since this was mentioned to the students prior to the first day of class, the students may have felt more comfortable sharing their individual concerns. The video may have also helped to pique the interest of the students and get them excited for the learning opportunity. Hogseth thought that a student who was excited for a learning opportunity might have been much more enthused for the learning opportunity than someone who dreaded being there.

It is important to give attention to every part of an educational program and not just focus on the instruction, itself. Instructors could make themselves available outside of the instruction during breaks and other times such as during the lunch break (Biech, 2015). If a student asked where to find coffee and the instructor was going in that direction, the instructor could walk and talk with that student. Spagnola and Yagos (2021) wrote about the occurrences in which they personally introduced campus resources to their nontraditional students that helped these learners with future academic and professional success. In his interactions, Paul Hogseth liked to talk with the learners and he showed them where to find resources rather than simply giving out instructions (P. Hogseth, personal communication, February 10, 2021). He also liked to eat lunch with his learners. If the students wanted to talk about course content during lunch, he was happy to talk about that or other topics with them. O'Neill (2013) wrote about using the café as a place for individuals and groups to socialize. The comfort of these types of environments can be much different than the classroom, and time together in these spaces could be used to build rapport, talk in more depth about the course content, or encourage networking among participants.

“Tyler” received a video before class welcoming him to the facility for his upcoming class. He emailed the culinary team and informed them that he was allergic to shellfish. They

responded with the alternative meal options for him, and he looked forward to and appreciated these other food options. “Tyler” was unsure where to find his alternative meal, so the instructor (heading to lunch anyway) showed “Tyler” where to find his meal. Then the instructor joined “Tyler” and other students for lunch where conversation topics varied from course concepts to other topics of interest to those in attendance.

Strategies for Developing Comfortable Learning Environments- Instruction

Instructional Techniques

Instructors must carefully consider the instructional methods they use to foster a comfortable classroom environment for adult learners. Student-centered learning and group activities can help contribute to a positive learning environment and a comfortable classroom.

Student-Centered Learning. When instructors design curriculum, it is helpful to consider student-centered instructional techniques. Merriam and Bierema (2014) wrote about the importance of student-centered, self-directed learning. In student-centered instruction, students were invited to plan, control, and evaluate their own learning experiences. When students were able to make their own decisions, they might have been more internally motivated to learn. Students could be invited to make positive contributions to the learning environment based on their individual learning. While the content of what the learner needed to know might have been pre-defined, learners might have explored or practiced concepts they needed additional practice with or that they found most interesting. When instructors gave control to the learners, adult learners were more invested in their learning and took more responsibility for their own learning (Blumberg, 2012).

If an instructor learns about their students, the instructor can connect the content with the previous experiences and current interests of learners. Examples provided in class can be related

to the individuals in attendance. Paul Hogseth (Personal Communication, February 10, 2021) mentioned his company's "Choose Your Own Adventure" activities in which students were provided a variety of different scenarios or activity options to practice course concepts.

Trainees can play an active role in selection of the content they practice or learn more deeply and they can be invited to enrich the learning environment. Spagnola and Yagos (2021) wrote that activities such as think-pair-share and debates could help build self-confidence in adult learners. When learners and facilitators co-created the classroom discussion, individuals became better communicators and may have motivated other students to be more involved in discussions (Spagnola & Yagos, 2021). The involvement of students in determination of the direction of discussions may have reduced early tensions and anxieties. If students have had negative experiences in prior learning experiences, it is important to create an environment where risk taking is safe so learners can confidently participate.

During self-guided activities, Hogseth used a plastic cup system for students to communicate with their instructor about their needs during independent work time (P. Hogseth, personal communication, February 10, 2021). Students were given three cups. One cup was yellow, one was green, and one was red. Students stacked the cups and put the yellow cup on the top of the stack when they began a self-guided exercise. The stacked cups were placed on the table near the student. When the student completed the activity, they moved the green cup to the top of the stack. When Hogseth saw the entire room with green cups on top, he knew he was able to move on with further content. If a student changed the cup to red, this quietly indicated the student had a question or needed assistance with an activity. The student had the choice to raise their hand or verbally communicate as well. Hogseth pointed out that when students were given

choices, including how they asked for help during instructional activities, a more comfortable learning environment was created.

During a “Choose Your Own Adventure” activity, “Tyler” was able to investigate how to complete a specific workflow and realized that this software really was not too different from the software his company had used for the last 20 years. Since “Tyler” had become comfortable in the classroom, he simply raised his hand when he had a question. The facilitator’s response helped clarify “Tyler’s” understanding of the materials.

Group Activities. Group activities that are well-planned can also be used to foster a comfortable learning environment for adult learners. Group exercises might help students learn from their peers and build self-esteem. In their study of college students, Rock and Lavender (2018) wrote,

Groups are more effective than individuals in bringing about change; individual change is facilitated by the support of the group; feedback works more effectively in collaborative groups; learning is deeper when the group shares perspectives and experiences; learners respond to learning more favourably when there is a positive group culture; learning in a group leads to feelings of social identity and belonging (Rock & Lavender, 2018, para. 20).

Learning in a group dynamic helped students feel that they belonged, enhanced the classroom experience, and deepened the level of learning. Merriam & Bierema (2014) wrote that critical thinking was best learned through a social process. Lockhard and Hargis (2017) added that allowing students to choose their own teams might have caused a slight delay in the beginning of an instructional activity, but this might have also prevented interpersonal conflicts later. The facilitator could encourage learners to group with those nearby as an alternative.

Theobald et al. (2017), in their studies of group dynamics in STEM classes of learners of all ages, wrote that the emphasis on group work increased learning for the students and promoted how students identified themselves as scientists. When not actively competing with each other, students learned more and positively associated themselves with the materials they were learning.

During a partner activity, “Tyler” paired up with the person sitting next to him. “Tyler” was able to help his peer define some important terminology, as that peer did not have the industry background that “Tyler” had. This sparked more conversation and “Tyler” and his classmate realized they were staying at the same hotel. “Tyler” and other classmates met for dinner that evening at the restaurant the instructor had recommended.

Humor

When an instructor uses humor appropriately and conveys a positive attitude in the classroom, there can be a positive effect on the classroom environment. It is important to set a positive and comfortable tone from the beginning of class. If an instructor has genuine enthusiasm toward a topic, then this enthusiasm may be adopted by the students as well. Merriam & Bierma (2014) recommended applying humor regularly during instruction. This helped to evoke interest and maintain attention of the learners. It also helped the instructor to be viewed as approachable and comfortable to be around. Spagnola and Yagos (2021) wrote about the science of laughter and that laughter may increase dopamine and endorphin levels in the brain. While studying humor in higher education classrooms, Pretorius et al. (2020), wrote, “Humour is a psychological tool that enhances intellectual health by lessening tension and stress in the classroom” (p. 147). Lessening tension and stress in the classroom is crucial to maintaining a comfortable classroom environment. Pretorius et al. (2020) concluded that humor

helped students that came from different cultural backgrounds better connect with the rest of the members of the class. Even self-deprecating humor can be helpful (Biech, 2015). Effective use of humor can help learners to relax and take themselves less seriously. Merriam & Bierema (2014) also suggested the regular use of humor to help maintain student engagement.

There are concerns about the use of humor in the classroom as well. Pretorious et al. (2020) found qualitative concerns from the students they studied. The students were concerned about the type of humor used by instructors. They were concerned that attention of the learner could lose focus during their moments of laughter. Some students felt humor in this formal setting was inappropriate. Facilitators should use humor thoughtfully and with sensitivity.

Build a Community Within the Classroom

Merriam and Bierema (2014) wrote about constructivism and how students learned by making sense of their experiences. The goal of the constructivist was to make the educational experience authentic. Interactions with the instructor, with peers, and with the content should be as authentic as possible. Learning can take place through observing others, modeling for others, and mentoring others. Spagnola and Yagos (2021) wrote that nontraditional students commonly lacked the social or academic group connections to help them be successful. When facilitators helped create peer support groups, these groups served as a resource for adult learners to help them achieve educational success (Spagnola and Yagos, 2021).

Each set of students is unique, and it is important to develop a sense of community within that group of individuals. Students should get to know each other early in the learning process through icebreakers. Biech (2015) defined an icebreaker as “a structured activity usually used at the beginning of a training session to initiate participation and introductions” (p. 9). During icebreaker exercises, students were able to introduce themselves and share their interests in the

material. Merriam and Bierema (2014) recommended students share information about their personal interests like their favorite television programs or sporting events to help create connections with their peers. Lawson (2015) wrote that scavenger hunt games like those that required students to move around the room and find other students with particular characteristics might have been helpful. Activities like this required students to interact with other students they may not have met otherwise. The learning environment included the other learners that make up the class. When learners were able to feel comfortable with the learners around them, this could contribute to the goal to create a comfortable classroom environment.

During outdoor science education events, Remenick and Goralnick (2019) discovered that students appreciated the ability to network with their peers. The students identified learning forestry-related content as their favorite aspect of the experience. The adult participants noted that the ability to network and meet new individuals was their second favorite part of the event. The forestry-related content was the main objective of the experience and the part of the experience that the participants enjoyed the most. However, the participants also enjoyed the opportunities and were grateful to connect with peers between sessions and during lunch. This networking might have built positive relationships that could have extended beyond the time in the class. Instructors can encourage interaction with others in the class during breaks or lunch. Building individual relationships peer-to-peer can help the overall group dynamic in a course.

Individual relationships can contribute to positive learning as well. Merriam and Bierema (2014) recommended those with prior experience to team up with those without prior experience. Those who needed help received assistance and those who helped others might have gained a positive feeling of satisfaction for the assistance they provided. Lawson (2015) wrote that when students came from different backgrounds, group activities served as a valuable tool within the

classroom experience. The differences included age gaps, gender differences, race differences, cultural differences, and ability differences. When learners had the opportunity to interact with and learn from others, this enriched the training experience for everyone.

“Tyler” shared his contact information with his peer that he was sitting next to. His peer was appreciative of “Tyler’s” assistance in the prior activity. They were from the same geographical area so he hoped to reach out when he encountered problems that “Tyler” had already seen. “Tyler” was excited to assist and thought that this would be a symbiotic relationship and a source of support when implementation of the new software at work began.

Non-Verbal Techniques

What an instructor might say verbally or nonverbally can have an impact on the learning environment. Lawson (2015) noted that even the way an instructor dressed conveyed a message. Lawson recommended that the instructor dress in a way that is professional, appropriate, and comfortable. The teacher’s attitude toward content could help or hinder student motivation (Alsharif & Qi, 2014). Lawson (2015) mentioned that as the instructor, “you are the medium through which the message is communicated” (2015, p. 168). If the instructor did not convey positivity through facial expressions and body language, students might have detected negativity. In her book *The Trainer’s Handbook*, Lawson (2015) noted that simple things like the use of warm eye contact, avoidance of defensive postures, and use of friendly facial expressions (smiles) helped to relax the classroom atmosphere. Hogseth (personal communication, February 10, 2021) noted that while taking questions, he especially liked to be aware of his facial expressions when students asked questions. He wanted to address each student’s question with respect and gratitude. At the end of a long training day, some questions might have been difficult to answer, but all questions were received graciously. Negative facial reactions might

have given the impression that the instructor had unfairly judged the trainee based on their question. Hogseth also liked to walk toward the trainee as they asked the question to make a personal connection and to ask follow-up questions efficiently. Any negative facial reaction would easily be seen in close proximity, so Hogseth was careful about his facial expressions. Simple facial expressions and body language can have a significant impact on how a student interprets the instructor's attitude toward the learners in the class.

From the moment "Tyler" watched the pre-class video to when he walked into the classroom, he knew the instructor was excited for students to be there. This helped calm some of the pre-class jitters. Because of the positive experience "Tyler" had at the training, his feelings about implementing the new software when he got back to his workplace had softened and he felt confident and ready to begin that process when he returned to work.

Recognize Accomplishments

When students accomplish benchmarks in class, the instructor should recognize accomplishments. Merriam and Bierema (2014) suggested that facilitators should "effectively praise and reward learning" (p. 161). Instructor words can both hinder and promote student engagement (Lawson, 2015). It is important to reflect as a trainer on how the students perceive phrases the trainer uses. Positive, authentic words of encouragement can increase engagement in the classroom and increase learner confidence.

Nonverbal communication can also be a valuable tool to show appreciation for student participation. Simple smiles, nods, or words of gratitude resonate with students and students might appreciate the recognition (Biech, 2015). Alsahrif & Qi (2014) wrote that simply smiling after a student added their thoughts encouraged more students to participate as well. Students might come into class with extensive prior experience in the field. The authors wrote that

facilitators should recognize members of the class by encouraging them to share their knowledge with the rest of the class. It is important to avoid negative statements that may deter students from feeling comfortable in the learning environment. Questions such as “Are you with me?” or “Does this make sense?” may catch students off guard and have a negative effect on future class participation.

The instructor noticed how much “Tyler” was assisting his peer sitting next to him. At the end of class, the instructor acknowledged “Tyler’s” assistance and “Tyler” felt great about his contribution to the overall classroom environment.

While there are challenges for adults as they enter learning environments, there are efforts that facilitators can make to help learners feel more comfortable. Facilitators can configure the physical space in a way that is conducive to learning. Instructors should understand that their learners have complicated lives outside the classroom and instructors should greet students warmly on the first and every day of class. During classroom instruction, facilitators can use group activities to help instill a feeling of community within the classroom. Finally, the instructor can use humor, be aware of nonverbal cues, and provide learners with positive reinforcement for their accomplishments and contributions to help build a comfortable classroom environment.

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, it is vital to the learner's experience for instructors to create a comfortable classroom environment. Adult education is valuable to success in the workplace and for individuals in the pursuit of lifelong learning. Adults may walk into classrooms with the expectation that their classroom experience will mirror their childhood classroom experience of the teacher being the authoritarian in the room. This experience and perception must change for the creation of a comfortable classroom environment in today's higher education and corporate classrooms.

Based on the existing literature, the following strategies for creating a classroom culture were identified:

- Develop a comfortable physical space that allows students to work in groups and provides for flexible arrangements.
- Understand learners as adults with their own experiences and lives outside of the classroom.
- Make efforts to establish a warm, welcoming environment and to build rapport with adult learners.
- Use the time outside of the class instruction to professionally connect with the adult learners on an individual basis.
- Utilize instructional activities that are student-centered and encourage students to work with their peers in groups.
- Use an appropriate amount of humor.
- Build a community among the students in the classroom to encourage them to support each other.

- Be respectful of cultural differences and be mindful of non-verbal gestures or mannerisms that may cause students to be uncomfortable.
- Recognize student accomplishments and contributions- big or small.

Recommendations for further study include the following topics for which little research was found:

1. effective teaching methods for teaching technology to older adults,
2. asynchronous distance learning approaches and how to make that experience more comfortable for adult learners, and
3. Virtual Reality (VR) and how that technology could be incorporated into adult learning experiences.

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