Tips for Teaching Adult Learners

There has been much research in the field of education on the subject of what makes an effective teacher, and how learning can best be structured to benefit the student, in particular the specialized needs of adult learners. Many Beadmaking Instructors, however, have little or no background in teaching, per se, and may be trying to teach in a way that makes the most sense to them, based on their own preferred learning style, how they themselves were taught, or on a schedule that is convenient to the time and place, but perhaps not geared to the needs of the students.

Here is some information which may be helpful to you as a Beadmaking Instructor, to review as you plan your classes and curriculums, keeping in mind that not only content, but also these effective elements of teaching, will make the important information you have to convey easier to learn and retain for you students, and provide a more comfortable and satisfactory experience for all.

What We Know About Adult Learners:

**Motivation to Learn**
- The individual experiencing a change process, such as a new learning situation, is likely to feel stress and confusion. Some anxiety often increases motivation to learn, but too much anxiety may cause fatigue, inability to concentrate, resentments, and other barriers to learning.
- Mastery of the fundamental ideas of the field of glass beadmaking involves not only the grasping of general principles, but also the development of a attitude toward leaning and inquiry, toward experimentation and innovation, toward the possibility of solving problems on one's own, which will eventually help the new beadmaker to discover their own voice in working with hot glass.
- Somewhere between apathy and wild excitement, there is an optimum level of *aroused attention* that is ideal for classroom activity. Your job as an instructor is to help foster a classroom setting that supports, engages and encourages students to try something new.

**Curriculum Design**
- Adults need to be able to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep - and use - the new information. Information that has little "conceptual overlap" with what is already known is acquired more slowly. Much of the information that needs to be learned in beginning beadmaking will be foreign to your students, and requires the instructor to go slowly and find ways to repeat the key information.
- Unless detail is placed into a structured pattern, it is rapidly forgotten. Your students need a carefully planned framework to build on. Plan to teach skills in an order that build on, and reinforce, the skills taught just previously. Don’t be afraid to repeat key concepts, such as the process of annealing, the importance of compatibility, and safety risks in beadmaking, throughout your teaching. Every time the information is repeated in context, it becomes better integrated into your student’s understanding of the subject of beadmaking.
- Adults tend to compensate for being slower in some psychomotor learning tasks by being more accurate and making fewer trial-and-error ventures. Reframe mistakes as a method of learning.
- Adults tend to take errors personally and are more likely to let them affect self-esteem. Therefore, they tend to apply tried-and-true solutions and take fewer risks. Encourage creativity.
- Adults often desire to control pace and start/stop time in the learning arena; The more control the adult learner can exercise over their environment while struggling with acquiring new skills, the more comfortable they will be. As much as possible, take your cues from your students.
In the Classroom

- The learning environment must be physically and psychologically comfortable; some students will need to make modifications to how they hold a mandrel or the angle at which they work, based on their own physical limitations or needs. Adult learners usually know their own strengths and interests, weaknesses and limitations. Listen to your students and encourage them to talk about any discomfort. Reassure them that some initial discomfort is a normal part of the process of learning the new motor skills and eye/hand coordination necessary to beadmaking.

- Long lectures, periods of interminable sitting and the absence of practice opportunities are very irritating to adult learners. Adults are people with bodies influenced by gravity. Plan frequent breaks, even if they are 2-minute “stretch” breaks. During a lecture, a short break every 45-60 minutes is sufficient. In more interactive teaching situations, breaks can be spaced further apart.

- Adults have expectations, and it is critical to take time early on to clarify and articulate all expectations before getting into content. Assess the specific learning needs of your audience before your class or at the beginning of the class.

- Building rapport with your class and getting to know a little about each of them as individuals will go a long way towards establishing a bond which can facilitate learning.

- Adults are proud, and may feel they have something very real to lose in a classroom situation with other students. Self-esteem and ego are on the line when they are asked to risk trying a new behavior in front of peers. Adult learners do better when they perceive the classroom environment as safe and supportive. People will not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of being put down or ridiculed. Allow students to admit confusion, ignorance, fears, biases and different opinions. Acknowledge or thank students for their responses and questions. Treat all questions and comments with respect. Avoid showing annoyance or impatience when someone asks a repetitive question. Remember, the only foolish question is the unasked question.

- Adults have a deep need to be self-directing. Engage the students in a process of mutual exploration of working the glass. Avoid merely transmitting knowledge or expecting total obedience to your way of working with tools or glass. Offer information on beadmaking technique, tools, tips and application, rather than teaching a specific bead “design”. Encourage exploration, within a framework of safety.

- When teaching a class with students of mixed skill levels, the trick is to devise materials that will challenge the advanced/gifted student while not destroying the confidence and the will-to-learn of those who are less advanced. Although this is difficult, and takes more effort on the part of the teacher, it is important to honor the diversity of talents we must educate.

- Summarize frequently to increase retention and recall. Material outside of the context of participants' experiences and knowledge becomes meaningless. Adult students must actively participate in the learning experience.

- Adults generally want to immediately apply new information or skills to current problems or situations. Integration of new knowledge and skill requires transition time, however, and focused effort on hands-on application.

- The learner is dependent on the instructor for confirming feedback on skill practice; the instructor is dependent on the learner for feedback about curriculum and in-class performance.

- The key to the instructor role is control. The instructor must balance the presentation of new material, demonstration, lecture and discussion, sharing of relevant student experiences, and the clock. Ironically, it seems that instructors are best able to establish control when they risk giving it up. When they shelve egos and stifle the tendency to be threatened by challenge to plans and methods, they gain the kind of facilitative control needed to effect adult learning.
Individual differences among people increase with age. Take into account differences in learning styles, time, types and pace of learning. Use a variety of auditory, visual, tactile and participatory teaching methods whenever possible. This can include teaching from handouts, lecture, demonstration of techniques, student discussion of style and color preferences, incorporating a time for showing off student’s work.

Taken from (with modifications and specific applications for beadmaking instructors):

30 THINGS WE KNOW FOR SURE ABOUT ADULT LEARNING
By Ron and Susan Zemke, Innovation Abstracts Vol VI, No 8, March 9, 1984

What We Know About Learning Styles
Learning results from stimulation of the senses. In some people, one sense is used more than others to learn or recall information. Instructors should present materials that stimulate as many senses as possible in order to increase their chances of teaching success for all their students.

Visual Learners: Learn through seeing
These learners need to see the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson. They tend to prefer sitting at the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions (e.g. people’s heads). They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays including: diagrams, illustrated textbooks, handouts and demonstrations. During a lecture or classroom discussion, visual learners often prefer to take detailed notes to absorb the information.

Auditory Learners: Learn through listening
They learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed and other nuances. Written information may have little meaning until it is heard. These learners often benefit from hearing explanations and reading text aloud.

Tactile/Kinesthetic Learners: Learn through moving, doing and touching
Tactile/Kinesthetic persons learn best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted by their need for activity and exploration.

SIX WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR NONVERBAL COMMUNICATIONS
It is not only what you say, but also how you say it that can make the difference to students. Teachers should be aware of nonverbal behavior for three major reasons:

- An awareness of nonverbal behavior will allow you to become better receivers of students' messages, spoken and nonspoken.
- You will become a better sender of signals that reinforce learning.
- This mode of communication increases the degree of the perceived psychological closeness between teacher and student, making learning more effective.

Some areas to think about, as you teach:
1.) Eye contact, an important channel of interpersonal communication, helps regulate the flow of communication. It also signals interest in others and increases the speaker's credibility.
2.) **Facial expressions**: Smiling is a powerful cue that transmits happiness, friendliness, warmth, liking, and affiliation; Teachers who smile while teaching are perceived as more approachable. Smiling is often contagious, and students will react favorably and learn more.

3.) **Gestures**: A lively and animated teaching style captures students’ attention, makes the material more interesting, facilitates learning and provides a bit of entertainment. Head nods, a form of gestures, communicate positive reinforcement to students and indicate that you are listening.

4.) **Proximity**: Cultural norms dictate a comfortable distance for interaction with students. While teaching beadmaking, sometimes it is necessary to breach a student’s “personal space” in order to demonstrate hand position or for safety reasons. Even if you are comfortable with being in close proximity to your students when you teach, be sure to look for signals of discomfort caused by invading students’ space, and make necessary accomodations. Some of these are: Rocking, leg swinging, tapping, gaze aversion. When you are teaching a group class, but not demonstrating at the torch, be sure to move around the classroom to increase interaction with your students. Increasing proximity enables you to make better eye contact and provides more opportunities for students to speak.

5.) **Para linguistics**: This facet of nonverbal communication includes such vocal elements as: Tone, Pitch, Rhythm, Timbre, Loudness, and Inflection. For maximum teaching effectiveness, learn to vary these six elements of your voice. One of the major criticisms is of instructors who speak in a monotone. Listeners perceive these instructors as boring and dull. Students report that they learn less and lose interest more quickly when listening to teachers who have not learned to modulate their voices.

6.) **Humor**: Humor is often overlooked as a teaching tool, and may seem inappropriate to include in a lecture on compatibility or annealing. However, laughter releases stress and tension for both instructor and student. You should develop the ability to laugh at yourself and encourage students to do the same. It fosters a friendly classroom environment that facilitates learning.

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