

MANAGING DIFFICULT PARTICIPANT SITUATIONS: Mature Learners

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Age is a matter of perception. For example, a popular catch phrase of the 1960s was, “Never trust anyone over the age of 30.” Being older than you does not make a person or a learner less valuable, important, or competent. “Mature” is a term often used to describe people over the age of 50. For example, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) offers membership to anyone over the age of 50, AAA refers to older members as Mature Drivers and The Florida Safety Council (and many other safety councils around the country) has a Mature Driving Course for drivers who are 55 years or older. The point is that depending on your age, you may view people who are older than you as “old” or “mature” and should recognize and avoid any such bias or tendencies to do so in the classroom. Failure to do this could cause you to inadvertently single such people or groups out, ignore or negate their contributions, or cause offense through words, actions or inactions. All of these possibilities could have a negative learning impact.

In fact, many mature participants are in excellent physical and mental shape, are still employed, and have more time to actively pursue personal and professional development activities than when they were younger. For example, as the *“baby boomer”* population (people born between 1946 and 1964) ages, there are more older learners than ever joining educational classroom and workplace training sessions. In addition, as the population ages, a greater need will exist for training and educational opportunities to retrain people and allow them to enjoy an extended quality-of-work life. Many people actually try new career opportunities as they become older. This often requires training to acquire new knowledge and skills. There are many examples of people from the pre-baby boom generation who have gone back to school to earn degrees and to learn new skills. To interact effectively with this population, consider the following strategies when training older learners.

Strategy#1 - Be Respectful

As with any learner, you should demonstrate respect. Otherwise, you may risk offending, alienating, or even angering these learners--in fact, it may have a negative impact on all participants. As in any situation, even if the participant seems a bit arrogant, disoriented, off topic, or disrespectful, maintain your professionalism. Recognize that sometimes their behaviors are a response to perceptions based on verbal and nonverbal cues you send or previous learning experiences that they had. When this happens, make a quick evaluation of your behavior and make adjustments, if necessary. If an older participant seems abrupt in his or her response, question whether you or someone else in the class might have nonverbally signaled impatience because of your perception that he or she was slow in acting or responding. Or, perhaps their age has nothing to do with their behavior.

They may simply be acting based on personality or preference. Your role, as a facilitator of knowledge, is to determine what prompted an action and take appropriate steps to respond.

Strategy#2 – Be Patient

Keep in mind that as some people age, their ability to process information and attention spans lessen. Do not assume this is true of all older participants, but be patient when it does occur. Like you should for any learner, allow older participants time to look, think, respond, react, or ask questions related to program material and concepts. Value their decisions. Remember that many older learners view their time as money and have little patience for things that they do not perceive to be value added or from which they can draw immediate benefit. Another reason for their impatience might be that they perceive information being presented as too low level, they already know it, or the pace of delivery is too slow. To avoid problems caused by such perceptions, keep your material and delivery style current, lively, and meaningful. Include specific tips for application of what is learned, use novelty and creativity to present the material, and involve learners by eliciting their needs and current knowledge. Let them be a vehicle for helping others learn as well and for providing resources to one another.

Strategy#3 - Avoid Patronization

If you appear to talk down to older learners, you could lose that participant, as well as others. Learners who are older should not be treated as less competent than any other learner, nor senile! Patronization or a condescending attitude will cause any person, older or otherwise, to turn off or become offended. Such behavior can also reduce your professional image in the eyes of other learners.

Strategy#4 – Maintain a Degree of Formality

Addressing older learners in a disrespectful fashion can cause resentment and create a hostile environment. In many cultures, age and authority are revered. This belief should be recognized and respected.

If your goal is to set an informal environment, express that view at the beginning of the session, stress that learners should call you by your first name instead of Mr., Ms., professor, or whatever. In addition, let learners tell you how they prefer to be addressed. Ask them to write their name on a name tent as they wish to be called or addressed throughout the session. If they put Dr. or Ms, then respect that request and use the title when referring to or addressing the person.

Strategy#5 – Guard Against Biases

Be careful not to let biases about older people interfere with the way you interact with mature learners. Don't ignore or offend older participants by making statements (or allowing others in class to do so) such as, "Hang on, things have changed since you entered the workforce." Also, do not assume that they do not know or have the ability to handle new information, processes, procedures, or technology. Just like any other learner, older ones might simply not grasp a concept the first time. Another possibility is that you may not have been clear in your instructions. Repeat or reiterate in a different manner when misunderstandings or confusion results so that all learners "get it."

Strategy#6 – Recognize Differences in Values

Each generation has concepts that it values or devalues. Do not let the values of your generation interfere with respect for and acknowledgment of differences when dealing with participants from other generations. This is important to the success of the learning experience for all participants and to help you maintain a professional image.

Strategy#7 – Use Their Knowledge

Because of their age, mature learners bring with them ideas, knowledge, skills, and experiences that you and many of your other participants do not possess. Use this as a resource. Incorporate opportunities where the mature learner can add input, offer guidance and coaching, give examples, and act as a co-facilitator, if appropriate. Getting experienced participants actively involved shows that you value what they have to offer and can actually enhance the learning experience for you and others.

Strategy#8 – Communicate Effectively

Even if someone does not exhibit common characteristics of hearing loss (e.g., incorrect responses, asking questions after you just gave similar information, facial expressions indicating she or he is straining to hear or may have missed the message), use the following to help enhance communication with all your learners:

- Face the person directly.
- Talk slowly and enunciate words clearly.
- Keep hands and objects away from your mouth.
- Do not chew gum or eat food when talking.
- Observe the learner's nonverbal cues.
- Rephrase statements or ask questions again, if necessary.
- Be positive, patient, and practice the good listening skills.
- Stand near good lighting and minimal background noise, when possible.
- If there is an impairment involved and an interpreter is with the learner, talk to the participant and not the interpreter. The interpreter will also hear and can react accordingly.

Source: Lucas, R. W., People Strategies for Trainers: 176 Tips and Techniques for Dealing With Difficult Classroom Situations, AMACOM, New York, NY (2005)

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