



HOW TO TEACH ADULTS

Dan Spalding

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Education & Training Centre

Preface

You've had bad teachers before. You had the teacher who lectured in a monotone the entire class. You had the teacher whose answers to your questions confused instead of clarified. You had teachers who wasted your time with busywork, who tested you on things never covered in class, and who gave you grades that bore no relationship to what you put into the course or got out of it.

Maybe you've been that teacher. Maybe you gave a workshop that put your colleagues to sleep. Maybe you taught a course that left you frustrated at the end of each class period. Maybe, right now, you're going through the motions of being a teacher, making your students happy but not teaching them half as much as they ought to be learning. Maybe your fear of failure is keeping you away from teaching in the first place.

Teaching adults is hard. When I started, I didn't think you needed any special skills to do it. Then, one day about a month into my first semester, every single one of my students went home during the break. An hour in a classroom all by myself gave me a lot of time to think about how there was more to this "teaching adults" thing than I had anticipated.

In my attempts to improve my teaching practice, I've learned that there are few books about how to teach adults, and all of them have their niche: teaching writing, teaching tennis, teaching democracy . . . I have yet to find a good book that shows you how to start teaching adults. So I spent three years writing one.

This book is a distillation of everything I know about the subject. It's the product of reflecting on a decade of my own teaching practice. It's also the result of conferences, professional development workshops, and collaborations with other teachers. It even has the best tips and insights from all those specialized teaching books I read. I believe that *How to Teach Adults* is the first and best book for anyone who cares about the subject. It's a concentrated reference you'll come back to again and again.

If you give workshops, this book will help you prepare and present them better. If you're thinking about making a career in adult education, this book will convince you that it's the best job in the world. If you're a beginning teacher in search of some guidance, this book will give you concrete advice you can use to build your career for the long haul. And if you're a veteran instructor looking for something you can use tomorrow, go directly to Chapter 6, How to Run Your Class and Chapter 7, How to Present Information. You can read this book from beginning to end or skip around to find exactly what you need.

How to Teach Adults was written for athletic coaches, yoga instructors, spiritual leaders, and drill sergeants, in addition to the math professors and English as a Second Language instructors we usually think of as adult educators. Whoever you are, I want to help you become the person you want to be. That's what adult education is all about.

TEACH YOURSELF HOW TO TEACH

You are your own first student.

My name is Dan Spalding, and I'm a teacher. I've taught English as a Second Language (ESL) for over ten years to immigrants in Oakland, and I've facilitated "Know Your Rights" workshops for thousands of activists around the country.

As a student, I've studied in traditional public and private institutions, including earning my BA at a small private liberal arts college and my MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at a big state university. I've also trained at a dojo where I've reached black belt rank in jujitsu and Aikido. I got some of the best instruction of my life there. I started this book with a question. What should I have known when I first started teaching? The first answer is that I should have known how much I'd have to teach myself how to teach. I'm going to help you cheat. You'll still have to teach your[1]self, but I'm going to give you everything you need to get that process started as efficiently and effectively as possible.

TEACHING IS THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD

We help make people free.

In 1880s Poland, Marie Curie was a bright young high school graduate who was excluded from the state universities, which only served male students. She instead attended “the flying university,” an underground coeducational network created by women. Teachers organized small classes in their homes, moving constantly to avoid the authorities. They even had a secret library!

Curie went on to discover radiation with her husband, with whom she shared the 1903 Nobel Prize in Physics; in 1911 she won the Chemistry Nobel on her own.

Curie was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, the first person to win two Nobel Prizes, and is still the only laureate in two different sciences. Forty-four years later, a secretary for the Montgomery NAACP named Rosa Parks traveled to Tennessee to study civil disobedience. She spent two weeks at the Highlander Folk School, a small grassroots institution that trained generations of activists how to organize against the problems facing their communities. It’s where the civil rights movement learned “We Shall Not Be Moved” from the labor movement.

Weeks after leaving Highlander, Rosa Parks launched the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Mainstream history books say she was just tired the day she refused to move to the back of the bus, but in her words, “No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.” The facilitators at Highlander, as well as the other civil rights organizers who were part of that same training, gave her the skills and self-confidence to change history. Highlander continued to train generations of organizers, despite getting branded a Communist training camp, having its property confiscated by the state of Tennessee, and being forced to relocate.

The theme, to me, is that while institutions keep people in line (state-run universities in Poland and Jim Crow in the South), teachers help make people free.

No matter what you teach, when you foster critical thinking, collaboration, and hard work in the classroom, you not only employ best teaching practices, you help make your students - and everyone else - a little more free. So work hard. You may be teaching the next Marie Curie or Rosa Parks right now.

Note: I talk more about the big picture role of teachers in Chapter 10, The Future of Education.

TEACHING GROWNUPS IS MORE FUN THAN TEACHING KIDS I'll get no love from K-12 teachers for saying this.

Besides the inspiration, there's one big reason to choose teaching adults over kids. Adults students are more fun. Adults make better conversation, bring more life experience, and ultimately have more to give to each other and to you.

My students have told me where you can buy a fake Social Security card in Oakland and what life is like in a refugee camp in Thailand. They've told me about underground clubs and high school race riots. My adults students have taught me more about my city and the rest of the world than I could have learned in a hundred lifetimes.

Story: I was teaching my class about the 1912 Bread and Roses Strike when one of my students, an older, handsome Cuban immigrant of African descent, told us about labor protests in Japanese factories after World War II. Rather than strike, workers actually sped up the production line. This generated a surplus of finished goods that was costly to warehouse and embarrassing for plant managers to explain to their superiors. Being of Japanese descent myself, I appreciated how intensely Japanese this mode of protest was. The student mentioned that he learned about this in Moscow, where he trained to be an air force radar technician for the Cuban military.

To recap, a Cuban veteran taught a room full of immigrants in America the Japanese labor history that he studied in Russia. In what K-12 class would this have happened?

Contents

Chapter 1: Foundations of Teaching

- SAFETY FIRST, DISCOMFORT SECOND

Students can't learn when they're comfortable.

- BEING AN EXPERT DOESN'T MAKE YOU A GOOD TEACHER

Struggling with a subject helps you teach it.

- TRY TO SEE FROM THE STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Understand how students don't understand.

- FIND OUT WHERE STUDENTS ARE ON THEIR JOURNEYS

Models of adult development can help you understand your students.

- YOUR JOB IS TO HELP STUDENTS LEARN

I'm putting on my serious face for this one.

- YOU TEACH THE WHOLE STUDENT, TOO

There is no such thing as only teaching information.

- TEACH FOR TRANSFER

Not for tests.

- CULTIVATE INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

- LEARNING IS HARD WORK

That work can be as much emotional as it is intellectual.

- ADULT EDUCATION HAS A POSSE

Which is to say it has a rich intellectual tradition.

- EVERYTHING IN EDUCATION IS CONTESTED

Especially the stuff that is obviously true.

Contents

- THE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT CYCLE

Behold my theory of teacher development!

- TEACHING WILL MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE AN IDIOT Or:
A productive and inspiring way to approach your errors.

- TEACHING IS A TOUGH CAREER THAT KEEPS GETTING WORSE

Today's bad times are tomorrow's good old days.

- YOU WANT TO BE A GREAT TEACHER

It's as important for you as it is for your students.

Chapter 2: How to Get Started Teaching

- READ YOUR TEACHING CONTRACT

Never sign anything you haven't read.

- YOU WORK FOR THE SCHOOL

Don't go rogue.

- YOUR FIRST YEAR'S A WASH

Your second year's not so hot, either

- HAVE A MISSION

Your mission is the story of you.

- YOU CAN'T BE FRIENDS WITH YOUR STUDENT

- UNDERSTAND THE BUREAUCRACY

Master it so that it doesn't master you.

Know Your School Bureaucracy!

- LOVE YOUR JOB

Love everything about it.

Contents

- TEACH THE SAME THING

Repetition is a great teacher.

- TEACH EVERYTHING

And do everything.

- BE OPEN TO OBSERVATION

Only bad teachers don't like to get observed.

Observer Tasks

- LEARN TEACHER JARGON

It's the coin of the realm.

- BE ACTIVE IN YOUR UNION

Unions are the staunchest allies of teachers and students alike.

Chapter 3: How to Design Your Course

- WHAT QUESTION WILL YOU START WITH?

If you don't start with a question, you'll end with one: "Who cares?"

- PLAN YOUR COURSE OBJECTIVES

These are the core concepts your students should walk away with.

Bad Objectives

- FOCUS ON YOUR COURSE OBJECTIVES

Everything else is trivia.

- BREAK IT DOWN

- PLAN WITH THE END IN MIND

End with the plan in mind.

Contents

- MAKE YOUR EXPECTATIONS CLEAR TO STUDENTS

I call this principle “No Surprises.”

- SYLLABUSES ARE CRUCIAL

A syllabus is a contract and a blueprint.

Syllabus Checklist

- TEXTBOOKS PROVIDE COURSE DESIGN TO TEACHERS

Students may buy the books, but it's teachers who choose them.

How to Choose a Textbook

- USE TECHNOLOGY SPARINGLY

Tips for Evaluating Educational Software

- PROGRESS IS UNEVEN; TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS

We often imagine progress as a steady upward path; it's actually all plateaus and ski jumps.

Chapter 4: How to Lesson Plan

- THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT

Establish yourself as teacher and sell the class.

Pre-First Day Checklist

First Day Checklist

- START WITH A SURVEY AND AN ENTRY ASSESSMENT

The survey tells you who your students are; the entry assessment, where they're starting from.

- GIVE 'EM A HOOK

Get students' attention and make them care.

- TEACH THE DISCOMFORT ZONE

Teach it on the first day and refer to it throughout your class.

Contents

- PACE AND MOTIVATE WITHIN EACH LESSON PLAN

Start with an activity that builds energy, and end on a note that reinforces the day's lesson.

What to Include in Each Lesson

- DEVELOP YOUR OWN MATERIALS

Start with Google and modify for your class.

The Handsome Handout

- SHARE YOUR MATERIALS FREELY

It's for the greater good and no one will pay you anyway.

- DON'T GET TOO INVESTED IN WHAT YOU DESIGN.

TELL STORIES

Stories can pique interest and deepen understanding.

- READY, FIRE, AIM

Act on inspiration, but reflect on it, too.

- MULTILEVEL CLASSES ARE HARD . . .

. . . and every class is multilevel.

- MAKE YOUR STUDENTS WRITE

Getting the Most from Student Writing

- HOMEWORK IS CRUCIAL

Review it in every class to bridge the previous lesson to the next one.

- PREPARE A SUB PLAN

Then find a sub.

What to Give Your Sub

- END EACH CLASS ON A STRONG NOTE

Students remember the end of class best.

Contents

Chapter 5: Grading and Assessments

- CHAPTER 5 ASSESSMENTS ARE HARD, FRAUGHT, AND CRUCIAL

It's been said that if you can't measure it, you can't improve it

- THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT

These "five principles" aren't administrators in your school district.

The Five Core Principles of Summative Assessment

- Practicality
- Reliability
- Validity
- Authenticity
- Washback

- VALIDITY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF A TEST

Test what you teach.

- GRADE AND EVALUATE STUDENTS FAIRLY

Fair as in reasonable, fair as in consistent.

- A GRADE DOESN'T MEASURE HOW MUCH YOU LIKE YOUR STUDENTS

"F" stands for "Feedback."

- WRITE RUBRICS

Rubrics are key to quick and consistent grading.

- "CLASS PARTICIPATION" GRADES ARE MOSTLY BS

But class participation is still important.

- HOW TO WRITE A FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

It's like a test with no wrong answers.

Formative Assessment Questions

Contents

- **HOW TO WRITE A SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT**

The only thing worse than taking a test? Writing one.

True/False Questions . . .

Multiple Choice Questions . . .

Short Answer Questions . . .

Essay Questions . . .

Overall Summative Assessment Design Tips

- **HOW TO GIVE A TEST**

My best practices for administering a test.

Before the Test

During the Test

When Students Finish

- **BE CRITICAL WITH THE FACTS**

You are a scientist, not a creationist.

- **BE KIND TO YOURSELF**

Don't make teaching harder than it already is.

Easy Versus Difficult Classes

- **STANDARDS ARE ASSESSMENTS FOR TEACHERS**

How will you measure your success?

Types of Standards

Chapter 6: How to Run Your Class

- **START ON TIME**

As they say in yoga, "Start on time to honor the practice, end on time to honor the student."

- **START AND FINISH EACH CLASS THE SAME WAY**

Rituals are part of every community.

Contents

- BUILD TRUST TO MAXIMIZE LEARNING

A student's trust in the teacher and other students makes it possible to take risks.

Tips for Building Trust

- INTERVENE WITH STUDENTS WHO START (OR FALL) BEHIND

Have a plan and intervene early.

Successful Interventions for Struggling Students

- KNOW EVERY STUDENT'S NAME

Learn them early, learn them all, use them every class.

Tips for Learning Names

- SHOW YOUR AGENDA

Some students need to see the map to get to the destination with you.

- GOOD QUESTIONS ARE SHORT AND CLEAR

Same with instructions.

How to Craft Good Questions

How to Ask Questions

- USE NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

It's perfect for interventions and encouragement.

- COLD CALL

It's a teacher's most powerful tool.

- EFFECTIVELY DEAL WITH DIFFICULT STUDENTS

Do it for your class and for yourself.

How to Deal with Difficult Students

- Never attack the student
- Listen and validate
- Consider the complaint

Contents

- Don't defend the activity
- Encourage different forms of participation
- Allow an opt-out
- Create a pressure valve
- Draw a line

- DO IT AGAIN

Reflect, revise, repeat.

- TAKE BREAKS

Just because you're teaching doesn't mean they're learning.
Break!

- TIME TO LEAN, TIME TO CLEAN

Don't rest by default.

While Students Work . . .

- YOU WILL GET BORED FIRST

Look for Mr. Miyagi moments.

- YOU WILL BIAS FOR THE HIGHEST

Half your students are below average.

- SURPRISE! IT'S A BIG CLASS

Make a few adjustments and you'll be fine.

- SURPRISE! IT'S A SMALL CLASS

Make a few adjustments and you'll be fine.

- ENJOY THE GOOD TIMES

They get you through the bad times.

Contents

Chapter 7: How to Present Information

- USE BLUE AND BLACK MARKERS

Use yellow and white chalk.

Tips for Effective Board Work

- LECTURES ARE BULLETPROOF

But lecturin' ain't easy.

Preparing Your Lecture

Lecture Like a Champion

- SHORTER IS BETTER

The more time you need to explain something, the less you understand it.

- FACILITATE DISCUSSIONS

Because good class discussions don't happen by themselves.

Tips for Facilitating a Good Discussion

- USE THE VOCABULARY OF YOUR FIELD

Vocabulary is the coin of the realm.

- MODELING IS POWERFUL

Even (other) animals do it.

How to Model

- MAKE THE MOST OF GROUP WORK

We are most and least productive in groups.

Tips for Effective Group Work

Tips for Effective Report Backs

- INCORPORATE CURRENT EVENTS

The currenter, the better.

Contents

- DON'T CORRECT EVERY MISTAKE

Knowing what to correct and when is the heart of teaching.

- ALWAYS TELL STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

Put "No Surprises" into practice.

Chapter 8: How to Develop Your Teacher Persona

- THE CLASSROOM IS NOT A DEMOCRACY

But you can help prepare students for democracy.

Which Country Is Your Classroom?

- YOU ARE THE LEADER IN THE CLASSROOM

OWN THE ROOM

Or the room will own you.

- YOU ARE NOT A SOCIAL WORKER

Their job is even harder than ours.

- DISCLOSE THOUGHTFULLY

Tell students about yourself when it serves their learning.

- WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW, SAY "I DON'T KNOW"

But first ask students if they know the answer.

- BE IN CONTROL

A good teacher knows and controls everything.

- BE SPONTANEOUS

Spontaneity is the complement of control.

- WHEN YOU GET UPSET, CHECK YOUR EXPECTATIONS

These are some of your best learning opportunities.

Contents

- DON'T GET PISSED OFF

The class is about your students-not you.

- SOMETIMES, GET PISSED OFF

You might have to get pissed off at your students once.

- ONE TEACHER

Because you're responsible for the class.

- BE DISOBEDIENT

Chapter 9: Growing as a Teacher

- SET YOUR OWN TEACHER OBJECTIVES

"By the end of the year, the teacher will be able to . . ."

- LEARNING TO REFLECT WILL MAKE YOU YOUR OWN BEST TEACHER

Reflection is the most important part of teaching yourself.

Sample Teacher Reflection Questions

- MOST STUDENTS DON'T RECOGNIZE BAD TEACHING

And even if they do, they won't tell you.

- THE WORST TEACHERS THINK THEY'RE AMAZING

How do you know that's not you?

- IT'S HARD TO IMPROVE

Do it anyway.

Opportunities for Improvement

- YOU ARE AN ENTREPRENEUR

Until you get tenure or marry rich, you're in business for yourself.

How to Entrepreneur

Contents

- FOR-PROFIT SCHOOLS HAVE A LOT TO TEACH US
But they will never put academics first.

- ADMINISTRATORS ARE PEOPLE, TOO
They might want our job, but we don't want theirs.

- ADMINISTRATORS ARE EVIL, TOO
This is the section I was most reluctant to write.

- LEAVE YOUR JOB (AND GET A BETTER ONE)
They don't deserve you.

- IT'S A SETUP!
If it's too good to be true, it probably is.

- GET THE MOST FROM A CONFERENCE
You will get out of it what you put into it
Before the Conference
During the Conference
After the Conference

- CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR FIELD
Practice, publish, present, and post.

- TEACH WHERE YOU LIVE
Commute time is inversely proportional to happiness.

- TEACH WHAT YOU LOVE
At least find something you love about what you teach.

- HAVE AMAZING INSTRUCTION IN YOUR LIFE
Be the student for a change.

- REMEMBER THE HORRIBLE INSTRUCTION IN YOUR LIFE
There are lessons only pain can teach you.

Contents

- READ MORE EDUCATION BOOKS

It's like traveling to another country - or another planet.

- READ OUTSIDE YOUR FIELD

You will find unexpected connections to your courses.

- DEVELOP A NETWORK OF PEERS YOU RESPECT

Avoid the haters.

Discussed While Biking Home with Don and Barbara.

- MAKE MEETINGS PRODUCTIVE

Follow these steps to have a good meeting every time.

- Start on time
- Check in
- Make an agenda with times on it
- Assign roles
- Take minutes
- Stick to the agenda
- Step up, step back
- You can't always make everyone happy
- Delegate
- End by scheduling your next meeting
- End on time

- DON'T GO BACK TO SCHOOL UNTIL YOU HAVE TO

Then go back as soon as possible.

- TAKE ADVANTAGE OF BEING UNEMPLOYED

Call it a "surprise sabbatical."

- EVERYTHING I'VE TOLD YOU IS WRONG

Or, at least, only partially true.

Contents

Chapter 10: The Future of Education

- WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT EDUCATION
It's simply too important to leave to the experts.
- WHAT IS EDUCATION?
The short answer.
- WHAT THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION IS NOT
It's not an inability to transmit information.
- ALIENATION IN EDUCATION
What Makes School Suck?
- TEACHERS HUMANIZE EDUCATION
That's not necessarily a good thing.
- HOW TO FIX EDUCATION
In two easy steps.
- TEACHERS IN A LEARNER-CENTERED WORLD
A future case study.
- IT'S TIME TO GO ON THE OFFENSE
The future is unwritten.
My Definition of "Education."

Appendix

Teacher Glossary

References

Further Reading

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THANK YOU FOR READING!

If you enjoyed this book, you may also like these:

- **Planning Programs for Adult Learners**, 3rd ed.
by Rosemary S. Caffarella, Sandra Ratcliff Daffron
- **Tools for Teaching**, 2nd ed. by Barbara Gross
Davis
- **Powerful Techniques for Teaching Adults** by
Stephen D. Brookfield
- **Student Engagement Techniques** by Elizabeth
F. Barkley