

Professional Tips
For Adult and Continuing Educators

Tips on Teaching Women

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[These tips are adapted from *Online*, The Newsletter of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1999. Trainers and teachers of adults can use such useful information to improve their efforts.]

1. **Examine curriculum materials carefully to ensure women are represented equitably and fairly.** Questions to ask in this examination might include: Are women and their issues included throughout the text? Is their inclusion stereotypical? Are there examples of biased or sexist language? Make sure curriculum materials contain a balanced representation of women's issues, contributions and achievements, and if standard texts are inadequate, supplement them with materials that do include women and their concerns. The question "what was left out" can generate debate about whether or not women's accomplishments are marginalized.
2. **Design critical thinking exercises that assist learners to become aware of their unconscious assumptions about gender and the unintended effects of these assumptions.** Our beliefs about gender are one of the first concepts we develop; as early as age two, unreflectively, we pick up signals from our environment about what is appropriate gender behavior and attempt to emulate this behavior. Often, we reach adulthood before we begin to question whether these gender "rules" are really appropriate. Even after we have become more reflective, we are still unconsciously influenced by and act on our earlier beliefs.
3. **Examine your own beliefs about gender and gender appropriate behavior.** Even the best-intentioned educator carries the same cultural baggage as the learner. While self-examination can't totally eliminate our biases, it can make us more aware of our behavior. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways to include journaling, critical incidents, and outside observation. Simply stated, keeping a personal journal for a semester that focuses on your reaction to and awareness of gender issues can provide insight. If you use critical incident feedback from your learners, look for patterns that might reveal bias or a lack of awareness on your part. Unconscious bias reveals itself in our behavior – behavior we don't see- but an outside observer may. Having a colleague observe your classroom behavior could provide a helpful mirror to reflect your practice.
4. **Monitor classroom interactions for patterns of gender bias.** Silence in the classroom is a phenomena that occurs because some women feel too threatened to

- speaking, and because some women feel alienated in the classroom and choose not to speak. Interaction patterns may reveal that men speak more often, interrupt more frequently, or ignore women's contributions. If women aren't participating, an examination as to why through critical incidents or one-on-one conversations with the involved women may be useful.
5. **Use the personal experience of women and tie that experience to classroom learning.** One of the points of agreement among those who study women learners is that a woman's personal experience should be used in her learning. Often women discount their personal experience and fail to see themselves as knowers capable of making meaning. If a woman feels alienated and unvalued in the classroom, valuing her personal knowledge is one step in overcoming this barrier. Examining how her perspective agrees and disagrees with classroom knowledge can be a powerful exercise in critical thinking.
 6. **Provide opportunities for collaborative learning.** Culturally, conflict is a concept that may be uncomfortable for many women. Women may be likely to be concerned with maintaining group and personal relationships, and therefore make an attempt to see or understand another's perspective, rather than to immediately argue or disagree. Collaborative efforts are especially valued by women, according to theorists. Small group work, case studies, or sharing personal stories are all ways in which collaborative learning can be implemented.
 7. **Provide opportunities for women to explore their identities and create a voice.** For many women, identity is tied into relationship, i.e. "I am a mother, wife, daughter:" Education can create a powerful vehicle for growth if the learner is encouraged to self-reflect. Journals provide an ideal method for allowing a learner to examine herself and her learning. Providing a safe atmosphere for self-disclosure can also assist learners in the self-discovery process.
 8. **Include affective experiences as part of the learning process.** Numerous researchers are exploring the connection between emotion, the brain, and learning. Their belief is that emotion and learning are intertwined and can powerfully affect the learning process. Some claim acknowledging feelings in the classroom through self-disclosure, storytelling, role playing, and literature is beneficial.
 9. **Be aware of how race, class, and ethnicity affects women in the classroom.** Cultural expectations of women vary dramatically by race, class, and ethnicity, so it is impossible to make generalizations about women based solely on gender. Black women, for example, may use silence in the classroom as a survival tactic as it seems the safest course of action. Black women also describe negotiating and trying to find a middle ground in their interactions with fellow students and professors. These women describe looking for clues as to who was receptive to interaction. Reaching out to all students and attempting to bring them into the circle should be the responsibility of all adult educators. When these women resist and do speak out in the classroom, it may be after much thought and anguish. Valuing their perspective and encouraging this resistance can assist these women in developing and valuing their voice. Methods should be developed that allow the educator to better understand and serve those learners who are culturally different from the educator.

10. **Provide female success models.** Some note that in terms of "self-fulfilling" prophecies, to convince women who firmly believe that someone like "them" can't learn, it is valuable to provide concrete role models like "them" who have succeeded. If possible, provide a panel of women who have "made it" with backgrounds and aspirations similar to your learners. Find successful women who are willing to serve as mentors to learners. Provide success stories so that learners can begin to believe that they can succeed.
11. **Serve as a mentor.** A mentor is someone who can provide a map of possibilities for the learner. Because many women learners are challenging long-held beliefs about what it means to be a woman, and of who she is as a woman, emotional support is key and essential. This support may not come from her environment. The adult educator may be the only one willing to start where the woman is and stand beside her until she is ready to move ahead.