

TEACHING ADULTS — THE ESSENTIAL FE TOOLKIT SERIES

Amanda Hayes. Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2006, 139 pages.

Teaching Adults is a strong overview of the central issues and tensions in adult education. The author, Amanda Hayes, provides a solid resource for adult educators, especially for those working in a continuing studies or further education (FE) context. While the majority of the book is geared toward teaching adults in formal classroom-based learning environments, portions of the book could also be relevant to informal learning contexts.

Hayes provides an accessible and helpful discussion of a wide range of issues that educators face when teaching adults. There are many helpful lists for the adult educator, including “Lecturer’s survival checklist for the first session” (p. 68) and “Ways we can help students with disabilities in the classroom” (p. 41). As a result of the range of issues covered, the book is, understandably, lacking a deeper theoretical analysis that may interest some readers. However, Hayes includes many references to other texts that provide more in-depth analyses of some of the theoretical underpinnings and issues that are only briefly touched on in this book.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is what Hayes describes as “a holistic approach to supporting learners” (p. 100). This approach is based on the understanding that adult students lead complex lives in which classroom learning is only one aspect. Hayes suggests that educators working in continuing education will provide an enhanced learning environment and become better teachers if they can become more aware of, and account for, the multiple pressures that students experience, both inside and outside the classroom. Students do not leave behind their emotional and psychological selves that are formed outside of the classroom. But Hayes goes further and claims that it is essential for lecturers to help students “make connections between what they already know and what they are currently learning in [their] class” (p. 5).

Hayes’ respectful approach to teaching adult students is evident throughout the book. Adult students are to be consulted about their learning needs and preferences, and Hayes is most explicit about this when students have learning challenges. Students are the “experts on the effects of their learning difficulty or disability” (p. 41). Hayes also encourages educators to be aware of their own strengths, limitations, and power relationships with students. This sensitivity to the context from which educators and students emerge is part of the larger project of promoting equality and diversity. Offering the same curriculum to all students will not result in an equivalent outcome because “men and women of different ages, classes and race do not receive teaching in the same set of circumstances” (p. 30). Being attentive to students’ lives and contexts is also part of the goal of widening participation in further education of non-traditional learners. This is currently one of the central priorities for the continuing studies and further education sectors, with pressure coming from governments as well as educational institutions.

In an elaboration of widening participation, Hayes' chapter on "Punctuality and Attendance" (p. 73–99) is filled with insightful analyses on how an instructor's seeing the whole student can increase student participation and completion rates. This chapter is the longest, the most eclectic, and, perhaps, the most ill-named; readers might be misled and overlook the importance of Hayes' thoughtful examination of the way in which promoting learning, in its broadest sense, is sometimes about understanding the unique pressures and context of a student's life. As such, some of the content of this chapter would be more appropriately located in Chapter 7, "Supporting Adult Learners" (p. 100–109). Interspersed, however, is a sometimes strong adherence to traditional approaches to attendance. This adherence should be counterbalanced with the respect that Hayes advocates for when working with adult students.

In Chapter 7, Hayes elaborates on the importance of seeing each student as a whole person, and provides a helpful study of the way institutional resources are often underutilized by adult learners. Hayes suggests that adult educators should draw institutional and other resources more directly into their courses in a way that provides "practical and emotional support to help [students] adjust to the changes that will undoubtedly take place over the duration of their studies" (p. 101).

Thankfully, *Teaching Adults* includes an appendix of abbreviations and acronyms, which Hayes uses in abundance. There are also numerous references to British government programs and reports, and some readers may choose to overlook entire sections and paragraphs because of the context-dependent information and issues. While this book contains helpful suggestions for anyone working in adult education, it is clearly intended for a British audience.

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