Adult Teaching Dynamics

There are two sets of dynamics in most adult teaching situations. The first is task-orientated – learning content and solving problems. The second is relating inter-personally to the rest of the group. This includes listening to others and their ideas, as well as the feelings that are conveyed as well.

There are two sets of forces influencing us individually as adults. Internal forces include our need for identity, intimacy, love, acceptance, security, meaning and purpose in life, need for affiliation, achievement and failure, and our overall mental health. These create forces and pressures relative to each individual that shape his motives and behavior. For some adults there might be a strong desire to satisfy one particular need over another. External forces include our family and marriage, vocation, education background, civic responsibilities, economic system, major social issues and our physical health. These create pressures on adults in varying degrees as well, depending on how we react to them.

These forces have a significant impact on our motivations and behaviors, on our self-image—how we perceive ourselves, and also on how we relate to others. They will effect the ways we participate in a group situation – do we have a reluctance to speak, or a tendency to dominate discussions; shyness or seeking to draw the attention; an agreeable or disagreeable disposition? Are the issues being discussed threatening or too personal for me to open up regarding them, or do I lack enough trust in the rest of the class to be so vulnerable?

The teacher is not immune to these pressures either. My need to feel secure, or in charge, may cause me to dominate, control, talk down to or patronize others; blocking their involvement and participation. A lack of preparation, or of interest, in the material I am presenting may contribute to a lack of enthusiasm by others as well. Some may respond to the class by being silent, apathetic or showing only a minimal interest in it; others struggle for power with the teacher; still others by disruptive behavior – joking around and wise cracks and changing the subject. Some teachers may prefer to lecture – doing most of the talking. Some spend their energies trying to draw people out in discussions.

Factors that may inhibit teaching in an adult situation include:
1. Poor Leadership
   - A lack of sensitivity on the part of the instructor to the personal situations and needs of the various adults
   - Teachers exercising either too much control, or not enough.
   - Teachers that are unprepared, disorganized in presentation
   - A lack of confidence on the part of the teacher, or a sense of intimidation caused by others
2. A bad environment
   - Crowded conditions; or inadequate sound systems
   - A poor room arrangement
   - Noise and disruptions
3. Problems with the material
   - People in the class lack of familiarity with, or confidence in the curriculum resources – for example, neglecting reading assignments in a book being discussed.
   - Material that is either over peoples' heads, or irrelevant to their interests and needs
   - Persistent conflicts between the instructor and certain individuals in the class over content; or an on-going disagreement over certain issues.

Think over the dynamics of your class sessions.
Who does most of the speaking? In class discussions, is it usually the same two or three people making the contributions? Do some people always sit in the back, and never speak up? Are people absorbed in the class, taking notes, maintain eye contact with whoever is speaking or taking notes; or is their attention wandering, avoiding eye contact, doodling or reading things unrelated to the class? During a prolonged discussion, do some gather their things, frequently glancing at the clock or the door – non-verbal clues they are bored and eager for the discussion to end?

Class Arrangements

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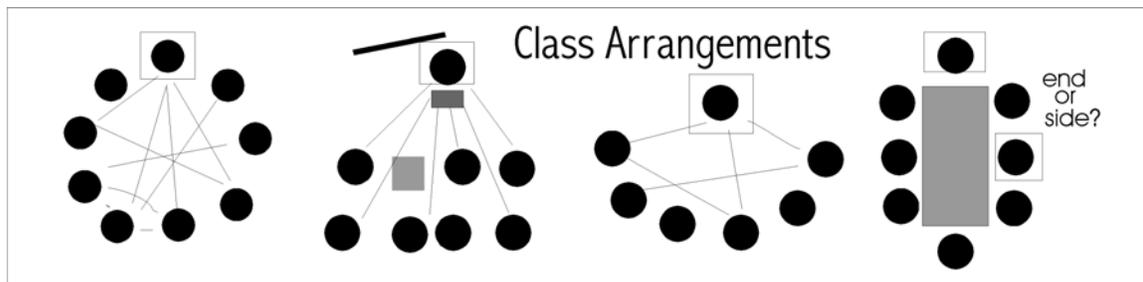
For a class to work, the teacher needs to interact with the class in a way that creates an atmosphere for learning and openness. The seating arrangement is important. Do we sit in a circle or semi-circle, facing each other? Or do we sit in rows facing the teacher? Does the teacher stand behind a lectern or sit behind a desk? Do we want to break up into smaller buzz groups, or engage in neighbor nudging discussions of groups of two or three? Is the seating area large with plenty of empty seats separating people? Are you going to use a blackboard, whiteboard for diagrams or illustrations? Are you using an overhead projector or videos with a DVD or VCR? Or do some class tasks require a table where people can write, draw, etc.?

Other factors can intrude as well. Is the class area a high traffic or noisy area? Are other classes meeting in other corners of the room? Do people tend to straggle in late, or depart early to prepare for worship to follow? The size of the group is a factor. Are there five, ten, fifteen, or fifty?

The same can apply to the material being presented. Is it a lot of information and content, or will the aim of the class be one of applying content to personal needs? Are we presenting the lesson's content in outline form where covering that content comes before dealing with people's needs; or are individual's questions or group discussion encouraged, regardless of whether we progress all the way through the material? Or in other words: will we be Task-orientated, and leader- and content-centered; or are we Person- and group-orientated, and group-centered?

And then there is the important task of creating an environment of inter-personal relationships where people trust one another and feel safe enough to speak openly and honestly with one another. Even before the class begins, new people need to be made to feel welcome and a friendly banter is important. You should open and close with prayer. As class begins a group activity may help to draw people together, and break the ice. Activities that require some working together – such as an exercise in exploring a passage of Scripture are good. It is better to have the class discover a truth together, than for the teacher to just spell it out. During discussions encourage as many as possible to contribute, and try to avoid having one or two people dominate. Discussions may wander off subject, use discretion and be prepared to bring it to the class topic, if necessary. And if it becomes a heated debate, be prepared to calm things down. As the class moves from discovery to understanding to applying the truth to life, they should also be building trust and openness with each other. I have a variety of Adult Teaching methods are on a separate web page.

Some useful links:

- TEACH Resources
- TEACHING METHODS CHART and IMPROVING CLASS DYNAMICS