

# Tips on Teaching Seniors

Prepared by Joel May

## I. The Fundamentals of Teaching

### A. Tell them why you're going to tell them

1. What the process will accomplish
2. Why they will value, use, or appreciate the result

### B. Tell them what you're going to tell them

1. Give examples from the real world
2. Make the examples relevant to their interests/needs

### C. Tell them how to do it

1. Provide a step by step description
2. Describe what will happen/what they will see at each step

### D. Show them how to do it

1. Demonstrate the process (Netmeeting/chalkboard/verbal description?) or
2. Step them through it

### E. Have them do it

1. Give them a task to accomplish using the steps described
2. As they are working on it, comment on the nature and meaning of each step

### F. Review what they've done

1. Describe what they have just accomplished
2. Ask them for examples of how they would use process in other circumstances

### G. Have them do it again

1. Repeat Step E above with a different task
2. If you want to introduce alternative ways of accomplishing the same task, this is the time to do it

### H. Tell them what they've done

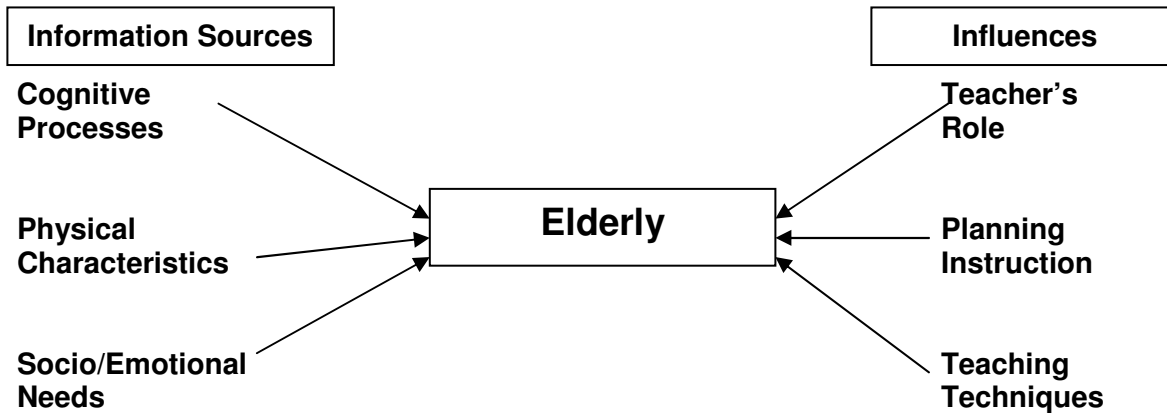
1. Briefly review the process they have learned and the results they have achieved

### I. Tell them why they've done it

1. Give additional examples from the real world of how this process is used

2. If possible, relate it to the specific interests on at least one person in the group

## II. A Model for Teaching Senior Citizens



## III. Rationale for Teaching Senior Citizens

- A. To Maximize Contributions to Society
- B. To Improve Quality of Life
- C. To Meet Self-Fulfillment Needs
- D. To Improve Mental and Physical Health
- E. To Reduce Economic Problems
- F. To Provide Society with Creative Products

## IV. Cognitive Processes

### A. Motivation

1. Reaction to novelty does not diminish
2. Intelligence does not diminish
  - a. But information processing slows down
3. Ability to deal with multiple stimuli diminishes
4. Goals for the Senior Citizen
  - a. To be independent
  - b. To be safe and have physiological needs met
  - c. To be useful and productive
  - d. To learn and satisfy curiosity
  - e. To receive warmth and approval

## **B. Logical Thinking (Problem Solving)**

1. Concept Formation skills do not diminish
  - a. Differentiation of properties/elements of objects or activities
  - b. Grouping or collecting specific elements appropriately
  - c. Naming, labeling or categorizing the elements
2. Concept Attainment
  - a. Sensory/Motor state (how?)
  - b. Preoperational stage (why?)
  - c. Concrete operational stage (because!)
  - d. Formal operational stage (application/product)
3. Behavioral Implications: Senior citizens ...
  - a. Can assimilate new information that required cognitive formation and attainment, but sufficient time must be given for learning
  - b. Need to be given a range of experiences either directly or in some mediated way
  - c. Profit from clear examples presented without irrelevancies. Such examples should be reinforced a number of times in different contextual settings
  - d. Demonstrate a knowledge of new information best when a strong, central focus is presented and distractions are kept to a minimum
  - e. Function best on cognitive tasks when the tasks have meaning for them

## **C. Creativity**

1. Everyone knows a great deal about something
2. In order for a creative product to emerge, one must be enabled to match the unfamiliar – new experiences or information – with previously attained knowledge areas
3. Planned “brainstorming” sessions might well produce the stimulation needed to make this connection
4. Behavioral implications: Senior citizens ...
  - a. Profit by the review of specific skills that would allow them to create in an area of their choice
  - b. Will be more productive if they are allowed to come back to a concept or idea again and again

## **D. Intelligence**

1. Crystallized intelligence involves skills, abilities and understandings gained through instruction, observation and experience
2. Fluid intelligence involves the adaptability and capacity to perceive things and integrate them mentally
3. Reliable decline in intellectual ability does not occur until in the late eighties for most people
4. There is a decline of speed of response, however
5. Some decline in intellectual ability is likely to be found in people with physical problems and in people from socially deprived environments

## **E. Memory (Retention and Forgetting)**

1. There are several theories that attempt to explain “forgetting”
  - a. Response is lost from the repertoire of the individual due to lack of use
  - b. Forgetting is due to interference with learning that has previously taken place
    - (1) Retroactive interference: the lesson that is learned is interfered with by a follow-up lesson prior to testing
    - (2) Proactive interference: the lesson that is learned is contradicted by previous experience
  - c. Forgetting is due to lack of organization/integration with previous learning
2. Behavioral implications: Senior citizens ...
  - a. Profit from a review of information that may have been learned previously
  - b. Respond best to well-organized information
  - c. Respond better to tasks that require short-term memory
  - d. Need additional time to retrieve previously learned information, benefit greatly from reviews
  - e. Comprehend the content best when the topic is presented using media, and some variety in teaching strategies is used, i.e. lecture, demonstration, hands-on

## **V. Physical Characteristics**

### **A. General Behavioral Slowing**

1. Physical changes do not prevent learning, but there is a relationship between physical condition, speed of intellectual response, and the degree of active thinking a person can accomplish
2. Behavioral implications: Senior citizens
  - a. Respond best to a learning environment in which adequate time for input, decision making, and output of information is planned

### **B. Special Areas of Need**

1. Diminished muscle control and arthritis
  - a. With aging comes an inevitable decrease in muscle control
  - b. This decrease in muscle control, often accompanied by arthritis, makes both mouse control and keyboard use more difficult
2. Vision difficulties
  - a. Presbyopia, the inability of the eye to adapt and provide for clear vision, affects many people at middle age and beyond
  - b. Both screen resolution and glare will greatly influence the ability of the student to assimilate information from the computer screen
3. Auditory difficulties
  - a. Presbycusis, the lessening of hearing acuity, can affect performance in intellectual functioning
  - b. There is a significant relationship between auditory impairment and reduced intellectual functioning
  - c. High frequency sounds (like computer “beeps”) are sometimes difficult to hear
  - d. Background noise greatly lessens the ability of a student to sort out and assimilate the appropriate sounds. Two voices talking simultaneously tend, for example, to cancel out each other

4. Circulatory inefficiency
  - a. A little-noted aspect of learning for senior citizen is the fact that, almost universally, circulatory inefficiency increases with age.
  - b. Thus, the ability to sit for extended periods of time or to sit and stand repeatedly and/or suddenly is greatly diminished
5. "Handicaps"
  - a. Diminished mobility due to a variety of causes, and necessitating the use of a cane, crutches or walker is not uncommon among senior citizens.
  - b. The presence of such a disability can make sitting at a desk difficult and reduce the ability to concentrate for extended periods of time.
  - c. Behavioral implications: Senior citizens:
  - d. May experience some difficulty in receiving messages from the outside world due to a physical disability
  - e. Learn best when written information is presented in readable type or font size
  - f. Respond best to spoken messages in a noncluttered (i.e. quiet) setting

## **VI. Socioemotional Needs**

### **A. Individual Differences**

1. Education and Experience
  - a. The level of education (both formal and informal) that a person has reached as well as the amount of use made of that education affects ones ability to learn
  - b. In planning instructional sessions, it is beneficial to build on the rich experiential base that the students bring to the learning situation
2. Personality
  - a. Age changes the view of their role in life for both men and women with both sexes responding to liberation from the norms society has set up for them
    - (1) Men become somewhat more passive. After a lifetime of responsibility, bread-winning, and decision-making, they feel more free to shrug off responsibilities
    - (2) Women, on the other hand, become more aggressive, instrumental, and domineering.
3. Friends
  - a. As people age in society, they often have fewer family members to depend on for emotional and financial assistance
  - b. Friendships with adults who are not relatives may serve as a replacement for the warmth, companionships and nurturance traditionally provided by family members
4. Behavior implications: Senior citizens:
  - a. Can provide useful information for instructional planning by describing their backgrounds and education
  - b. Are able to contribute much to a lesson when their varied life-experiences are incorporated into the instructional planning
  - c. Demonstrate personality traits that are somewhat "age unique"
  - d. Profit from work in which "friends" assist one another

### **B. Social Learning**

1. Socialization is a lifelong process
2. For many, the educational level of the younger people—computers, electronic gadgets, etc--fascinates and frustrates and is a source of latent longing.

3. Because of the aging process discussed above, senior citizens may need a refresher course in
  - a. Sharing in a discussion intelligently
  - b. Maintaining an open-minded attitude during discussion
  - c. Cooperating with others
4. For some, the skills involved in formal learning tasks have not been used for a long time. They are apprehensive about learning and are particularly anxious about their own ability to learn
5. Using a positive approach and avoiding any type of labeling can help involve the curious but insecure student.
6. One should be careful not to imply that lack of knowledge in any way indicates stupidity, weakness or inadequacy
7. Behavioral implications: Senior citizens:
  - a. Profit from a review of the skills needed for effective participation
  - b. Respond positively to immediate reinforcement
  - c. Respond to alternative physical means of accomplishing a task or obtaining information so that a particular physical impairment does not seriously threaten their self-concept
  - d. Demonstrate vital interest in topics that help them communicate with the younger members of their families

## **VII. The Teachers' Role**

- A. Base the instruction on the experiential and interest base of the people being instructed (use an Interest Inventory)**
- B. Provide for participation for individuals who have a range of capabilities to respond**
- C. Clearly show how the various topics considered are relevant to the learner's interests**
- D. Help seniors grow in their ability to understand the basic concepts underlying the content they study**
- E. Give students an opportunity to extend the study of a topic on their own, at their own preferred rate. More emphasis should be given to reasoning and understanding, rather than a step-by-step demonstration**
- F. Allow for interaction, warmth, and friendships to develop in the learning situation**
- G. Use a multi-media approach to provide variety and stimulation in the classroom**
- H. Provide instructional materials which can be useful and adaptable for other teachers and senior citizen groups**
- I. Provide some form of evaluation in order to establish the extent to which the primary goal and specific objectives have been met**

## **VIII. Planning Instruction**

### **A. The Opener**

1. The opening of each lesson should hold a bit of excitement, a touch of enthusiasm, a promise of something new
2. If possible, all students should start from the same experiential and understanding base. If not, the slowest participant should receive the most attention

### **B. Developmental Activities**

1. Plan short-range tasks with built-in successes
2. When focusing on new concepts, allow time for thinking
3. Vary input and output – provide information, then seek feedback
4. Build in reinforcement – warmth, positive teacher comments, and approval
5. Provide for different types of learners – some prefer to work alone, others prefer to work in groups (both followers and leaders)
6. Provide opportunities (before and after class) where teacher/participant trust can grow
7. Review new concepts immediately after introducing them and again at a later time

### **C. The Closing**

1. Assign homework for the purpose of review and reinforcement
2. Build enthusiasm for and interest in the next lesson

## **IX. Teaching Techniques**

### **A. Teaching is more than planning and transmitting information**

### **B. Begin on a positive note**

1. Greet people
2. Provide support and assurance

### **C. Present the lesson theme clearly**

### **D. Start with the easiest task—one that can surely be carried out by everyone**

### **E. Review new/strange/little used vocabulary**

### **F. Help the slowest participant through to completion**

### **G. Provide verbal encouragement generously**

- H. Arrange for formal feedback so that the individual can see that s/he is progressing toward a goal**
  - 1. Allow adequate time for feedback
  - 2. Provide reinforcement throughout
- I. Build on experiences and needs**
- J. Content should be immediately pertinent to the needs and interests of the population, presented without irrelevancies**
- K. Material should be highly organized with a central focus**
- L. Provide follow-up that encourages creative application of the concepts presented (repetition and reinforcement is important)**

## **X. Some Additional Suggestions**

- A. Spend an hour or so before class reviewing the content to be covered that day either by studying the course outline or simply running through the subject matter in your head**
- B. Know your students' interests, capabilities, and needs. Obtain this information during the first class session. Fine tune your presentation to take these factors into account**
- C. Be patient and adjust your pace to the students needs and abilities! It is more important that everyone in the class understands and appreciates the subject matter covered than that you cover everything you planned to. Reassure the fast learners that everything not covered in class is in the lecture notes (remember that in many cases they're not really learning as fast as they would like you to believe)**