DESIGNING FOR ADULT LEARNERS
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Introduction

Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity (BranchED) is the only nonprofit organization in the country that prioritizes strengthening, growing, and amplifying the impact of educator preparation programs at minority serving institutions (MSIs), with the broader goals of both diversifying the teaching profession and intentionally championing educational equity for all students.

BranchED’s stance is that “Quality is Diversity,” meaning that high-quality educator preparation embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion as fundamental (not tangential) to the preparation of all educators. We believe that race-blind, culture-blind, language-blind, and economics-blind teacher preparation is obsolete. It does not adequately prepare teachers to engage with the diversity of the schoolchildren in their classrooms; diversity is as an asset and lever to enhance learning and the academic achievement of all students.

BranchED seeks to support individual educator preparation providers (EPPs) and the field at large in reimaging and redefining “quality” preparation programs such that attention to issues of diversity and equity are explicit, embedded, and inextricably linked to high-quality performance. One way we do this is by developing professional development and instructional resources that model inclusive instruction for learners in higher education learning spaces as well as PK-12.

Purpose

BranchED provides professional development offerings for teacher educators to apply with and model for teacher candidates. Included in this support are instructional strategies. While we recognize that teacher educators are experts in teaching and learning, we acknowledge differences between teaching children and adults. We offer Designing for adult learners as a friendly guide for the facilitation of learning with candidates and faculty colleagues.

How to Use This Tool

This tool offers guidance when designing instructional or professional development activities. Just as one would refer to a recipe before and during the cooking of a meal, this guide can be used much in the same way. We recommend reading the following eight tips before designing a learning opportunity and then referring to it while designing to make sure the adult learning concepts are being applied. One might also use this tool as a reflection guide, looking back over the tips after the learning event is complete to guide a debrief of what revisions might be made the next time it is offered.
Designing for Adult Learners

Adults are busy. To prevent participants from texting each other “This could have been an email,” facilitators should explicitly state the outcomes for each event and connect those outcomes to learning activities.¹

Adults have a wealth of knowledge. Honor it by activating prior knowledge. Activating participants’ prior knowledge about the topic at hand helps to create cognitive networks between new knowledge and existing knowledge.²

To model inclusion and the decentering of authority, design learning opportunities that center participants. Some ways to approach this is to acknowledge power, design events that invite participants to co-construct knowledge, and offer choices and multiple ways to access a learning activity.³
Existing thinking patterns and behavior are likely to be transformed through compelling, evidence-based research and data.\textsuperscript{4}

This is often called networking or community-building. Relationships create a foundation for social learning. Prioritizing the building and strengthening of relationships also reminds us to center humanization.\textsuperscript{5}

Adult learners expect to authentically apply what they learn to their work. Application can take place during the learning event or afterward. This may be in the form of a plan or design session. It could also be a tool or strategy to take away and apply later.\textsuperscript{6}
New content should be well-organized and introduced simply. Images and graphics work well to introduce new concepts. After a concept is introduced, the complexity of instruction can be gradually increased.\textsuperscript{vii}

Adult learners need feedback to cognitively process and improve performance. Feedback should be specific, timely, and objective.\textsuperscript{viii}

\textsuperscript{ii} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{v} Op. cit.
\textsuperscript{vi} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{vii} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{viii} Ibid.