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The Needs of Teachers of Adult Community Education: Six Narratives

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Abstract

The current study described the experiences, challenges, and needs of first time adult community education teachers in the USA. Although the adult education literature often emphasizes the context of learners and their instructional settings, less is known and has been studied about how first-time teachers prepare to teach. Engaging six adult community education first-time teachers who ranged in age from 39 to 74, reflective journaling was used to identify their experiences before, during, and after their teaching experience. Using open-coding, five consistent themes were identified: initial self-doubt, recognition of adult learners' experiences, the importance of flexibility, reliance on interactive and hands-on strategies, and the mutual growth between teachers and their students. The teachers also noted that their credibility came less from their expertise and more from their adaptability, humility, and classroom management that fostered respect and engagement. Implications from these findings include the possibility of improving the experience for teachers by strengthening the onboarding process and providing professional development opportunities for adult community education teachers.

Introduction

A great deal has been written on the education of adults, including best practices of how to teach learners throughout their lifetimes. This literature base includes young adults through to mature adult learners, and much of this literature includes references to the situations of instruction, meaning where and why the instruction takes place. For example, studies have included professional continuing education (Friedman, 2023), naturally occurring communities of practice (Soubhi, et. al, 2010), and adult basic literacy (Einarson, et. al, 2021). This body of

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scholarship, which spans decades, includes relatively little, however, on the capacity, skills, and training of those teaching adults.

One area within the discipline of adult education that has received a growing amount of attention in recent years is that of adult community education (Miller & Grover, 2025). This sub-discipline includes the formal and informal environments within a community in which education is targeted to adults, including such areas as leisure education coordinated by formal and informal groups, formalized programs offered by primarily non-profit organizations (NGOs) such as the local library or Red Cross, and even those sponsored by public agencies such as regional historical societies. Although some of these programs result in some form of credential, such as a CPR license, adult community education has specifically been noted as a domain that may be able to improve societal capital in tolerating disagreement and encouraging open, civil discourse (Reynard, 2024; Ohmer, et al., 2016; Suneki, et al., 2025). Therefore, it is important to merge the question of how adult educators are trained and how they best teach adults in community education environments.

Effective adult community education has been studied recently in regard to community capital development, both in terms of improving civil discourse in addition to relating to workforce development. The question of civil discourse refers to the current global trends that question tolerance of ideas and thinking that has become manifest in practices that result in open hostility and rage. If adult community education can be effective in improving behaviors that result in a greater acceptance of others, then the idea of these programs has tremendous societal importance. Similarly, programs that are targeted at refining workplace skills, either through teaching soft skills or even software skills, these programs can play an important role in regional and national policy formation. Through these types of programs, adults can learn not only to talk to each other in a civil manner, but they can learn emerging skills that can lead to greater employment opportunities.

Considering the importance of adult community education and the need to understand how those who teach these courses and programs are trained to effectively work with adults, the purpose for conducting the study was to develop a baseline understanding of adult community education teacher needs.

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There is a broad range of research, scholarship, and literature on the topic of community education. These studies frame ‘community education’ as comprised of multiple perspectives, including where such instruction occurs (Baldridge, et. al., 2017), its ability to mediate differences in thinking and beliefs (Li & Huo, 2025; Suneki,et. al, 2025), quality of life (Kumar, 2025), and policy (Baharuddin, et. al, 2024; Kyle, 2024). Throughout all of this research, there is a consistent belief that community education can be a powerful source that can impact not only the learner, but the community in which the learner resides. Villani and Atkins (2000) wrote “Community-based education fosters interdependence and leads toward educational and community practices that have the potential to impact people on a global scale” (p. 121-122). The success and power of this transformational role of community education subsequently lies in the ability of teachers to be effective in their classes.

As many community education programs are highly decentralized in their control, there are inconsistent and highly diverse strategies for identifying teachers and preparing them to teach their classes. In some instances no training is provided while in others there are formal certification programs to teach (such in as in selected health care classes). Additionally, there are few attempts to diagnose what constitutes "good" or "effective" instruction.

In some communities organized educational programs are offered through a combination of public entities, such as the local school system, library, and even through parks and recreation programming. There has been considerable discussion and study into how adults are best taught, and these are often framed around what has been considered the foundation of adult education, andragogy (Livingston, 2023). Subsequently, there is a strong need for organizations to identify the needs of the teachers whom they hire or who volunteer so that they can be both successful in the classroom and to serve as an incentive for others to take their, or similar community education classes.

Research Methods

The study was framed within the context of qualitative research design, specifically seeking to describe the practices and challenges that adult educators participating in community education encountered as they taught.

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Subjects

Six first time adult educators were identified for participation in the study. These individuals were nominated by their supervisors to participate. A list of community-based organizations in a mid-southern metropolitan area was identified. These organizations were then studied online to determine the extent of their community-based educational programs, and if they offered such programs, the director was emailed with the details of the study. These emails resulted in a listing of ten possible organizations to nominate a participant, and through communication with the organization, six new adult community education teachers were identified to participate in the study. The participants included:

Teacher 1: A 53-year old female former public school teacher. She taught a 6-class

gardening class for a local non-profit. Although she had taught elementary school, she had never taught adults.

Teacher 2: A 70-year old male, retired logistics manager, who taught a 3-class military history class for a local museum. He had been a docent at the museum but had non prior teaching experience.

Teacher 3: A 74-year old male, retired local businessman, who taught a 4-class fundamentals of wine program for a local senior-centered leisure education provider (non-profit). Although he had taken multiple classes for the organization, this was his first time teaching.

Teacher 4: A 62-year old female, former police officer, who taught a 6-class course on art appreciation for a local museum. She had taken multiple similar classes and recently retired and taught the class as a way to become more involved in her community.

Teacher 5: A 69-year old female still-employed social services professional working for a public entity. She taught a 5-class course on healthy eating and diets for a local non-profit entity. The course was related to, but outside of, her professional role.

Teacher 6: A 39-year old male private sector research analyst who taught a 4-class course on pickleball for the local community parks and recreation office. He was a frequent league player who volunteered to teach.

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Data Collection

As a qualitative study, data collection focused on describing the practices, challenges, and needs of these adult community educators. As such, data collection focused on having participants write their own narrative accounts to tell their stories of teaching for the first time. To structure these comments and create a parallelism between how they told their stories, each participant was given a prompt at certain times in their teaching experience. The prompts are presented in Table 1, and include instructions for journalling before, during, and after teaching their classes, followed by a final reflection. In each of these instances, participating teachers had the option of writing their comments by hand in a notebook provided or typing their comments and reflections using a Google document.

The dates for each participant's teaching were monitored and electronic prompts and/or phone calls were made to each teacher regarding reminders of their journaling. Two of the participants preferred a phone call reminder while others relied on email prompts.

Personal journaling has been identified as an effective process for collecting individual qualitative data, particularly because it allows for self-directed reflection of a particular question, idea, or prompt (Tuckett & Stewart, 2003). Hayman, Wilkes, and Jackson (2012) similarly stressed the importance of reflection and having the time for the participant to consider different options and the extent of personal exposure of their reflection. They did note, however, that the method, while valid, is often prone to uneven participation, remaining directed at the prompt or question asked, and the feeling of exposure that might limit how much the participant shares. One effective tool to help combat these limitations is the use of writing prompts and word limits to keep the individual focused on a particular topic.

Data Analysis

All data were collected from the study participants and held until the last journal was submitted. Once all journals were submitted to the researchers, a manual, open-coding approach was used to understand each participant's reflection. Each journal was read in its entirety without any coding to gain an overall insight and impression of the reflection. Each was then read a second time attempting to identify themes and to highlight words or word groups that reflected the overarching idea. Once each individual journal was coded, the overarching themes were noted

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and then compared to those identified in other journals. In this manner, the repetition of themes emerged and were used to address the purpose for conducting the study.

Findings

All classes taught by the six community adult educators began and ended in the summer of 2025, lasting on average five sessions long. These classes ranged from two-to-four weeks in length and courses were offered in a variety of settings and at different times of the day. One class, for example, was offered during a noon lunch hour while another was offered during the middle of the afternoon. Only one of the classes were offered on a weekend.

Classes covered by the study participants had a range of 5 to 22 adult students, with an average class size of 12. Those enrolled had an average age of 63, with approximately half of the students being male and the other half female. No racially identifying information was reported by the organizations that offered the classes.

Overarching Themes

There were multiple perspectives identified throughout the journal entries. The text from each was reviewed individually by each researcher and then both met to review each other's comments and findings. Through a process of consensus building, the following five themes were identified across all text as the most prominent: initial concern and self-doubt, adult learners experiences and engagement, the importance of flexibility, the effective strategies of interaction, hands-on learning, and discussion, and mutual learning and personal growth.

1. ***Initial Concerns and Self-Doubt***
   Almost every participant begins by describing nervousness, fear of not being knowledgeable enough, or hesitation about transitioning from learner/professional to "teacher." They worry about credibility, answering tough questions, or striking the right balance in their teaching.

2. ***Adult Learners' Rich Experiences and Engagement***
   All participants are struck by how much adult students bring to the classroom: personal stories, professional knowledge, curiosity, and eagerness to participate. This often exceeds the instructors' expectations and turns classes into shared learning spaces.

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3. ***Importance of Flexibility and Adaptability***
   Teachers learn that rigid lesson plans don't always work. The best moments come when they adapt to student questions, discussions, or unexpected directions. They discover that tailoring content to varied backgrounds, learning styles, and motivations is essential.

4. ***Effective Strategies: Interaction, Hands-On Learning, and Discussion***
   Across subjects—gardening, military history, wine, art, healthy diets, pickleball—successful engagement comes through interactive methods: hands-on activities, storytelling, group discussions, peer sharing, and personalized feedback. Adults learn best when they actively contribute.

5. ***Mutual Learning and Personal Growth***
   Every participant highlights that teaching adults is not a one-way transfer of knowledge. Instead, it becomes a reciprocal process where instructors also learn, grow, and gain joy, inspiration, or renewed passion from their students' insights and energy.

These themes provide an important first look into what the teachers of adult community education experience, and the study was specifically designed to look more deeply into what they identified as their needs to learn about how to teach. Multiple comments were identified on this topic and were grouped into the following categories: confidence and role transition, understanding the diversity of adult learners, being flexible with teaching, use of practical and interactive teaching strategies, creating a positive, respectful teaching and learning environment, and recognizing the role of the teacher as a co-learner.

An example of each includes:

Confidence and Role Transition: "When a student asked me a detailed question about soil pH that I didn't know, instead of panicking, I said, 'That's a great question—let's look it up together and share findings next week.' It showed students I didn't need to have all the answers to still guide their learning."

Understanding Adult Learners' Diversity: "In my pickleball class, I had one student who had never played a sport and another who competed in tournaments. I paired them together for drills—one got to teach, the other got to learn slowly. Both stayed engaged at their own level."

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Flexibility in Teaching Methods: "My wine-tasting lesson plan had six wines to sample, but students' questions about wine labels took longer than expected. I cut down to four wines and shifted more time to label-reading because that was clearly what the group needed."

Interactive and Practical Strategies: "In my healthy diets session, instead of lecturing about nutrition labels, I gave students real food packages. They worked in pairs to find the sugar, salt, and fat content. The hands-on task sparked laughter, debate, and better retention than slides alone."

Creating a Respectful, Supportive Environment: "In my art appreciation class, one student was shy and hesitant to speak. I began asking open-ended questions like, 'What do you see here that others might not have noticed?' The student's confidence grew, and soon others listened attentively to her insights."

Recognizing Teaching as Mutual Learning: "During a military history discussion, a veteran in the class shared his firsthand experiences that added context far beyond my lecture notes. I realized my role was not just to teach history but to create space where lived experiences became part of the learning."

Discussion and Conclusion

The study has importance in how it can inform those with oversight for community adult education programs and how they onboard and orient new teachers. These findings also have importance in how they can provide professional development training for their teachers with the ultimate intention of providing high quality and effective adult education experiences.

Although there were multiple individual findings that can be drawn from the journaling, there were several overarching conclusions that can be drawn from these self-reports. First, teaching adults requires more than just subject matter expertise in any given area, including wine, art history, and pickleball. Good instruction requires that teachers have the confidence to be successful in the classroom and that they have enough confidence that they can be adaptable in their classroom. These first-time instructors frequently entered with self-doubt and anxiety about their knowledge or authority, but they learned that credibility came from openness, humility, and flexibility rather than "having all the answers."

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Second, teachers found that they relied upon and were surprised at the interaction of prior life experiences in the classroom. These first-time teachers reported that the adult learners brought rich life experiences, professional knowledge, and diverse learning styles into the classroom, and that this made instruction both more complicated (due to adaptation) but also more effective when they were able to draw on learners' backgrounds and encourage dialogue.

And third, the classes thrived through interaction, peer respect, and recognizing that, in adult education, teaching is a two-way street. Hands-on activities, storytelling, discussion, and peer-to-peer engagement were consistently identified as the most effective teaching strategies. Teachers discovered that learning is mutual: they grew personally and professionally alongside their students, while also fostering community connections, civil discourse, and practical skill development.

From a technical perspective the interviews identified several key teaching needs. These included understanding flexibility and adaptability in the classroom, how to listen actively and facilitate discussions, the necessity for clear communication, using various methods for creating engagement, how to build supportive, respectful environments, and the need to spend time before the class begins on content and class design preparation. From these findings, further research into how to effectively onboard new adult community education teachers is an important area for further study as in identifying what are the characteristics of good teachers and how to identify them. This is particularly true in instances where community education organizations have limited budgets for staffing their classes and their options for whom they can hire might be limited.

These findings are consistent with much of the literature on adult education in general, meaning that much of the effective practice of adult education has been linked to understanding the history and context of the learning and in an active manner, making content relevant to real-world scenarios. Each of these instructors found it necessary to consider the situation of the learner, with some thinking ahead of the class and finding a way to consider these pre-class characteristics while others had to get into the class before they realized just how complex some of these learner needs actually were.

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Overall, these findings are important to community education administrators and policy makers as they employ these types of programs to help improve the quality of life of those in their communities.

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Table 1.

Question Prompts for Journaling

Pre-Teaching

Reflect on your role as a teacher for this upcoming class. Write at least 250 words about your impressions of what you are about to begin, and consider these questions to guide your thinking. There is no maximum for your comments:

What are your biggest concerns, fears, or hesitations as you prepare to teach?

What have you done to prepare to teach this class for the first time?

How are you planning on engaging your students in the class?

How will you reflect on each session to improve on the next?

What are you most excited about as you prepare to teach?

Teaching

Now that you have taught at least two class sessions, reflect on how it is going and again, please write at least 250 words (no maximum limitations!). Consider the following questions to help guide your thinking:

What has surprised you the most about teaching adult students?

Has your design of the class been working? Why or why not?

How are you modifying your instruction as the course progresses?

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Post-Teaching

Now that your class has finished, reflect back on the entire experience, from before you began to your conclusion of the class. Again, please write at least 250 words (again, no maximum). Consider the following:

What was your biggest surprise in teaching the class?

What were the most effective strategies you found in engaging your adult learners?

If you were to teach this class again, what would you do differently?

Final Reflection

P*lease write 250 (or more) words about what you wish you would have known as you began planning for and teaching your class?*

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