

DSG Part 3: Reading a Room and Teaching Adults

So here we are, picture it: A room of library patrons who have signed up for your new class about computers. It could be as basic as using a mouse, to using a word processor, to using the Internet, to using email. You are the trainer, and you have your computers, notes, and information. You also have your wits.

Ready? Set? GO!

Yes, it really was like that, and looking back, I have to laugh at it all. I have great enthusiasm for that “lightbulb moment” when realization dawns on people; it’s so cool to see their faces brighten in understanding. This continues to be the most satisfying time in training for me, personally, as I consider it a very high compliment that I can actually assist people in grasping a new concept, or help them comprehend something they have been struggling with for a while.

This is the supreme satisfaction of teaching adults: they have an issue, they know what it is, and they want an answer for it. I have found that simple questions generate the best and most concrete answers. Students may come to class flustered, upset, and wondering why they have to “learn computers” and all sorts of big, scary concepts, but *simple questions generate simple answers*.

I learned to focus on those answers. Computers are tools; they are a means to an end. The big, fluffy concept of “computer stuff” is no longer so overwhelming and scary, as long as I can keep *their end goal* in the forefront of their minds as we move along through the workshop. They learn computers in an almost secondary fashion as they move towards their goal(s). In this manner, students usually walk away empowered and ready to learn more.

Fortunately, those simple questions that generate simple answers usually prompt a concrete activity. For example: “I’d like to get pictures of the grandkids and my kids don’t mail paper copies to me any more.” This was a common problem from about 2006 to about 2010 or so. People would come to workshops thinking they need to learn all sorts of new and wacky things, but they walk out with a singular goal: I will do *this* because I want *that*. As long as you can keep your students on *that track*, as long as you can find their “hook,” you can teach them and they will be motivated to get through the boring or difficult parts.

There are many theories on adult learning and teaching adults, and how both differ from children’s learning and teaching children. Brains and physiology are different, of course, but *experience* is the overriding emphasis for adult learners. I have been fortunate in that all of my students are motivated and are generally enthusiastic about learning computers. They see the class, sign up, show up, and many ask questions in class. Many ask questions after class. They also fill out evaluations, either on paper or on the computer.

To give you, the reader, a short overview of my workshops, allow me a moment to digress: I tried to create all of my classes to be standalone. I made handouts, but I only used them as an outline or a guide for the 2-hour class. In this manner, if a patron did not want to continue with further instruction, they could just opt for one topic or another. However, if the interest was there, a library could book my

sessions for two to four weeks in a row. I was, and still can be, swayed by questions to cover a multitude of topics that are tangential to the original class. It's important to cover material that is interesting to the class, but it must be relevant, too. If two people ask similar questions in two different libraries, well, this was a good hint that I needed to make an adjustment to the handout and be sure I covered the question/topic in a better way. In this manner, we might cover computer basics/mouse work, using the Internet for basic searching, signing up for email, and more advanced classes like using social media.

Going back to about 2008 or so, word started getting around, and many students would recommend classes to family and friends. I have found out that my students have brought *their* parents to class! After taking a class themselves, they thought I'd be a good teacher for their parents. That is very gratifying!

I've also had different married couples come in to take classes. I remember one pair quite distinctly. They came to a series that was offered by their local library. They sat together in the same seats for each class and the lady asked pertinent questions. We started with the computer basic class and moved along from there. There were different students in each class, but this pair came every time. As the lady continued to ask different questions, I started to get a better sense of her skill level - she was quite good with the computer in class, but had difficulty at home. In class, she would even assist her husband with the materials and activities.

I found this to be strange, but I *finally thought to ask*, "What kind of computer do you have at home?"

She described her computer as large, and it was on her desk. She called it a "desktop" (it *wasn't* and this is vital). She described what she would see on the screen, and she spoke of "windows."

I asked a very specific question, on purpose. Remember, *simple questions generate simple answers*. "What do you see in the corner? The lower left corner, specifically, and take your time."

She closed her eyes and thought, then said something like, "I don't see anything specific. Just the desktop."

These words are crucial. Vocabulary is utterly essential when trying to understand what people are really saying, *not just what I want to hear*.

"So," I repeated, "You see the desktop? You don't see the little flag, like you see here?" I pointed to it, specifically, so she would look at it. Of course, the "little flag" is the Start button on a Microsoft Windows computer - the same system more than 98% of the world used at that time.

I learned here to shut my mouth and *wait*. People need time to think, I learned here to give it over to her. This was desperately difficult for me, as I am a talker. I'll talk the ears off of a corn field.

She took the time to think for a moment and said, "No. No flag."

“What kind of computer do you have at home? What company made it - like these here are ‘Dell’ computers?” I also rattled off some other manufacturers.

“Oh! Not Dell, no! That one you said... Macintosh?”

OH. MY. GOODNESS.

Well, that explained the issues she was having at home! She was learning on *Microsoft* computers and trying to apply the *same* steps to *Macintosh* computers! Whew! I explained that they are different and she would need specific books about Macs, including how to work with them. Even though they are both computers, they are totally different Operating Systems and therefore require different steps to get to the same things (the word processor, the spreadsheets, the Internet). It might seem obvious *now*, but believe me, it wasn't *then*.

I wish everyone reading this could have seen her face at that moment. *No one* asked her enough questions to get her to say she had a Mac at home. *No one gave her enough time to think*. I learned the power of the pause. I paused myself, my talking and teaching, so I could *listen*. This was a watershed for my own teaching, so I am grateful to her!

As the class wound down, the couple came up to me, almost in tears. This lady went around for *months* thinking that she had some sort of problem, that she just couldn't learn computer skills, when the problem was *never* her. It was simply the different types of computers on the market. She was so happy to have an answer, and even though I told her I was not as familiar with Macs, I could certainly recommend some books from that very library that would assist them both. She couldn't believe the answer was really that simple. Both the lady and her husband walked out extremely happy.

It's not always about having all the answers. It's about listening and pointing people in the right direction. Adults who are motivated will go out from classes with eagerness.