

SKILLS & DRILLS > BY KARYN SILENZI

How to Be a Better Adult Learner

Update your teaching
résumé with new skills
that keep you relevant.

You can spot a beginner from a mile away during class. If you're a skilled, compassionate group fitness instructor, you'll likely encourage new participants and try to boost their confidence. You wouldn't expect them to be able to keep up with the rest of class, and you'd do your best not to draw attention to them so that they can feel safe in this new learning environment, otherwise known as your boot camp class. Trying something new can be scary, and the same principles apply to you, the veteran fitness professional, when you're learning something new and you are in someone else's classroom. >>



Whether you're getting your continuing education credits, obtaining a new certification or teaching an unfamiliar format, you must practice new skills and, yes, you'll probably stumble along the way. You may find it hard to step into a role that requires doing something unfamiliar; after all, haven't you seen and experienced it all? However, research drives updated knowledge and techniques, existing talents do not always transfer, competencies might not easily develop, and if you're doing something you've never done before, you *will* make mistakes.

While there's comfort in doing what you've always done, the safety zone can be boring and static. If you want to be successful and remain relevant, you can't avoid new opportunities to learn and grow. Understanding how to overcome the discomfort of doing something new as an adult learner will not only make you a more competent instructor and advance your career, but it will also help you better relate to *everyone* in your classes.

A Growth Mindset

Do you grumble about having to keep your continuing education credits current? Or are you the instructor who wants to learn everything under the sun? Certified fitness professionals are required to update their skills on an ongoing basis, which helps ensure the industry adheres to elevated standards of safety and efficacy. This is how we all stay relevant! As the fitness industry continues to expand, it adds dimensions of health and wellness, which produces opportunities. Fitness

instructors who attune to these changes and pursue new formats will rise to the top as leaders.

When you approach situations with a growth mindset, you welcome adaptability and innovation. The industry is flourishing with trends and novel ways to approach movement, which translates to a wide range of possibilities. As you commit to learning and accepting challenges, more opportunities float to the surface.

Overcoming Learning Challenges

The common struggles fitness professionals experience while pursuing education and new certifications include lack of time, outdated study skills, poor data delivery formats and self-doubt. Aging affects learning. While the speed of

learning tends to decrease with age, the depth of understanding increases (Young 2020). Learning takes time and effort; therefore, it is normal to feel overwhelmed. The point is, like with the new exerciser in class, don't give up. Success comes easier when you focus on a few key areas and break down these barriers one by one. Let's explore some of these challenges for adult learners.

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TECHNOLOGICAL HURDLES

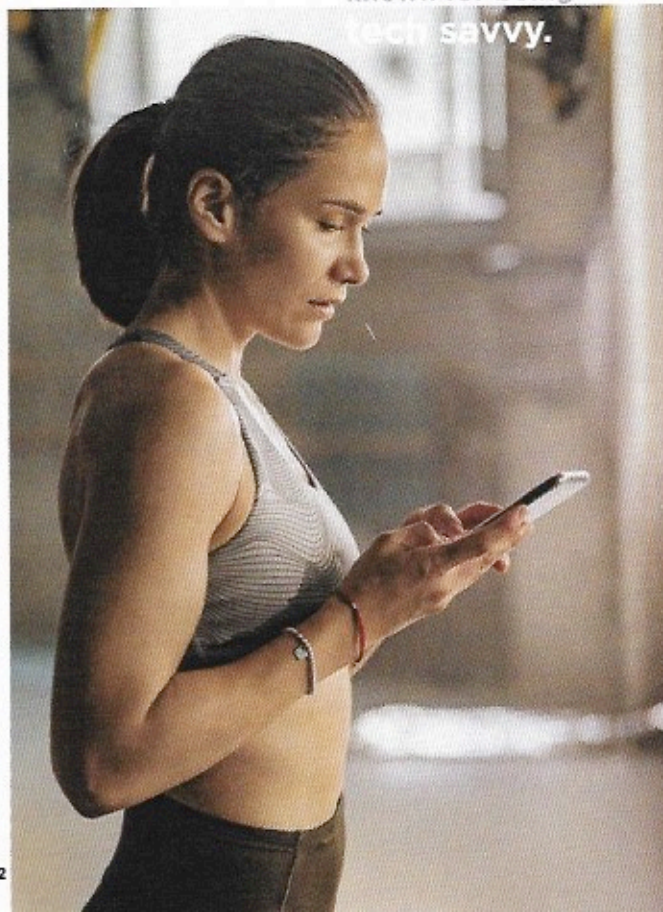
Technology, like everything, has its pros and cons. On one hand it may make life easier in numerous ways, but on the other, it tends to scatter attention. Even if you're a fit-tech master, it can be exhausting to learn new user design interfaces on a constant basis, especially if your generation isn't known for being tech savvy. However, technology is a proven platform for teaching and learning, and it will serve you to understand the different ways you can use technology to advance your skills.

Lawrence Biscontini, MA, CEO of FG2000, #stayVention™, and a mindful movement specialist based in Puerto Rico and Mykonos, Greece, says that learning is most effective when done in brief time blocks. He suggests using technology to your advantage and breaking the information or concepts into bite-sized chunks. "Use Siri or Alexa to give you short, concentrated study bouts," Biscontini says. "Say 'Hey, Siri, set a 20-minute alarm,' and then study intently for that time."

Just studying is not enough, however; comprehension is crucial for success.

Each of us has preferred ways of learning, so take advantage of alternative methods of data delivery. Consider using online videos, podcasts and interactive websites to support your learning process. Record yourself reading and then play back complex material to see if it increases your comprehension.

"When the alarm finishes, take summary steps to repeat what you've learned, including



exploring how you might be tested on that material," suggests Biscontini. Take advantage of online self-assessments and practice exams. Once you've tested yourself on the material, layer your learning on top of concepts you're already familiar with, and then apply it to real-world situations. For example, if you're learning about a new piece of equipment, explore how you could use it in different movement formats and how it might complement a favorite choreography block or pattern.

PRACTICE TO PERFECT

Movement enhances comprehension. Fred Hoffman, MEd, international author, speaker and owner of Fitness Resources Consulting Services in Paris, suggests that group fitness instructors take an active role when learning a new skill or format. "People learn best what they actually perform," he says.

It's fairly safe to presume that many fitness instructors are kinesthetic learners and learn best by doing. That may be one reason why you moved to the front of the class when you first started taking classes yourself! When in a new learning environment, experience how each new skill should feel and improve upon it by trial and error. "If an experienced instructor is learning a new activity, they may be tempted to just watch during the practical section of the course, and not actually perform the activity," he observes. However, "doing it leads to *understanding* it."

Repetition reinforces the learning process and allows for the pupil to improve and succeed. But success doesn't occur without some level of

Motivating Adult Learners

THERE'S NO AGE BARRIER TO EDUCATION

Andragogy refers to the methods and principles used in adult learning that lead to successful outcomes. Whether the adult learner is you or you find yourself teaching a continuing education course—or a group fitness class with adult learners—the motivational approach is different. Try one of the following tips to motivate yourself or others:

- o **Encourage exploration.** Kids aren't the only ones who are curious; adult learners also like to build knowledge in a meaningful way.
- o **Create community** and integrate social media, which is a powerful tool for collaboration, commenting and sharing.
- o **Gamify your approach.** Come up with different problem-solving exercises and case studies. Encourage your learners to look for and find solutions.
- o **"Chunk" information.** Breaking down data and facts is essential, as it helps people remember and assimilate information. Bite-size bits are easier to process.
- o **Accommodate individual interests.** Empower learners to work on their goals and customize the training to suit their needs.

Source: Pappas 2013.

failure, according to Hoffman. "It's okay if they don't do well or if they actually fail—it will help them be more compassionate and understanding when they see others experiencing the same thing."

In the same way the neuromuscular system learns best by trial and error, when you make errors while learning something new, whether it be a concept or a movement pattern, use it to your advantage. Every time something goes wrong, it's a chance to think of better

ways to cue or describe how it should feel.

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY

A gateway to information and connection, social media can be a powerful way to share and gain knowledge. It has the potential to build community and create learning continuity. When you join a Facebook group, for example, and are vulnerable enough to share what you don't know, it makes others excited to

share their experiences and help you. Social media and education go hand in hand, connecting individual learners and directing them along a similar journey. It also allows adult learners the freedom to connect and collaborate beyond physical borders.

When you participate in forums and discussions with peers, you learn directly from each other, and you learn from

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the "real deal": people who are in the trenches day to day, just like you. This isn't theory; it's reality. Not only are these connections supportive as you learn new material, but you never know when you might uncover different markets and find fresh opportunities.

Many educators are aware of the advantages that come with connecting adult learners and have created private groups to support continued growth. These typically safe and nonjudgmental settings, whether in person or online, allow fitness professionals to spread their wings and try new things with less fear.

GROWING AND GLOWING

Motivational speaker Denis Waitley said, "Failure should be our teacher, not our undertaker.

inspire

Failure is delay, not defeat." Achieving greatness doesn't happen without failure. It doesn't really matter how often you fail; what matters is that you learn from it and try again. Biscontinini recommends a technique to keep track of wins and near-wins. "After you do anything new for the first time, and always thereafter, make a list with two columns, and call them 'glows' and 'grows,'" he says. "Under the glow column, state what you did well that you want to keep doing, and under the grow column, write what you want to tackle and evolve the next time."

Remind yourself how it feels to be a "novice, to make mis-

takes and to leave ego outside the door, even when corrected." Learning how to be vulnerable empowers progression. You can deal with any challenge, criticism or failure if you have the right frame of mind.

Being a beginner has more to do with mentality than lack of experience. Biscontinini suggests that "the more you stay a part of the learning process, the less you need to fight with ego and be defensive or fearful about learning. The learner's mind is paramount to being able to grow into success with new concepts and connections."

Embrace Letting Go

Fitness instructors are used to being leaders, so becoming

a follower can feel strange. However, these experiences are opportunities to improve, and can even innovate how you approach leading others.

It's good for all instructors to "experience what it feels like to be a beginner," Hoffman believes. "Just like our new participants, we may not always be successful while performing or understanding something

at the first go." This inevitably puts fitness professionals in a better position to understand what it means to be a beginner again and how beginners might want to be treated and guided. Hoffman believes "these types of experiences humble us, and force us to take a new, fresh look at how we teach beginners, which, in the long term, helps us to be better instructors."

When you're already accomplished in your field, it is uncomfortable to learn things and make mistakes. Those who consider themselves experts are often closed off to new perspectives and get in the way of their own progress. Embracing the role of a lifelong learner means endless opportunities for growth, recognition and new experiences that you may have never considered.

"Use Siri or Alexa to give you short, concentrated study bouts. Say 'Hey, Siri, set a 20-minute alarm,' and then study intently for that time."

— Lawrence Biscontinini, MA

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