



Transition to Organic Partnership Program

Guide to Adult Learning Best Practices for Mentorship

Adapted from the SARE Technical Bulletin "[Sustainable Agriculture Through Sustainable Learning: An Educator's Guide to Best Practices for Adult Learning](#)"

This guide introduces four best practices for adult learning you can use to enhance learning in your mentorship, and is applicable to both mentors and mentees in a mentoring relationship. The four best practices include:

1. Make content relatable
2. Engage positive emotions
3. Give learners choice
4. Identify mental models

This guide is intended to complement other resources on adult learning. It provides a basic and introductory understanding to these four best practices and should be used in tandem with other resources. It is tailored for learning in an agricultural mentorship setting and is designed with a mentoring-style of learning in mind.

For this guide, the term "learner" is used to refer to both mentors and mentees. In a mentoring relationship, learning is reciprocal, and although the mentee is most often in the learner position, the mentor may be at times as well. For this reason, this guide is applicable to both mentors and mentees as both may be the educator and the learner at times.

Make Content Relatable

It is important in any educational setting, and especially with adult learners, to **Make Content Relatable**. This means providing opportunities for learners to link the content you are sharing or teaching to their prior experiences and knowledge. One of the most powerful ways to help adult learners retain new information is by making it relatable to their experience or existing knowledge as adult learners can have varied and meaningful connections between previous knowledge and new information.

Because each person has a unique set of prior experiences and knowledge, the connections they make to new information will be unique as well. This is why it is important to spend time getting to know your mentor or mentee, to learn how they acquired their previous knowledge, what they already know, and how their previous knowledge may affect their learning now.



Example: Adults will link their past experiences to anything new and validate new concepts based on prior learning. For this reason, when a mentor is introducing a new concept, idea, topic, or skill to their mentee, the mentor should first familiarize with the mentee's previous knowledge of the topic.

Let's say the mentor in a mentoring pair is planning to share and teach about a tillage practice that meets the organic standards for minimizing erosion and maintaining soil health and is new to the mentee. In introducing this practice to the mentee, the mentor could first ask about the tillage practice the mentee currently uses, as well as if the mentee has learned about or has used any different tillage practices in the past. Then, when introducing the new tillage practice, but before diving into the details, the mentor asks if the mentee has ever heard of this technique, and if so, what do they know about it. The mentor could also follow up with questions about how adopting this new practice makes the mentee feel. Does the mentee have any concerns, are they feeling hesitant, or are they excited? The mentor would take the mentee's answers, opinions, and feelings about the topic into account as they move forward with the topic, focusing more heavily on certain aspects or simplifying some information based on the mentee's opinions and previous knowledge of the topic

Strategies for making content relatable:

- 1** Ask the learner to share their past experiences or current practices related to the topic before introducing new information or a new idea. For example: When a topic or task is introduced: "What's been your experience with this topic? What resources do you use? What have you had the most difficulty with? Have you developed any helpful strategies?"
- 2** When reviewing previous experience with a topic, ask "What worked well and not so well?" Follow with a discussion of the experiences and what contributed to success or failure. Tailor any advice given based off the learner's previous knowledge.
- 3** Encourage the learner to share any connections they made between their own experiences and the new method or technology when they initially start to learn about it. Ask questions about how it may be different, challenging, or beneficial, and consider these connections when introducing new topics in the future.

Adults enter learning with a wide range of experiences, knowledge, and skills. Adult brains are full of long-term memories that serve as scaffolding for new learning. This best practice is about taking advantage of the tendency for learners to compare new content with things they have already experienced and know. When you are aware of the connections your mentor or mentee make between new content and their lives you can make the content more relatable and address gaps in experience and knowledge.



Engage Positive Emotions

Mentoring and teaching should focus on learning that **engages positive emotions**. All people share the same set of core emotions. Positive emotions, joy and surprise, keep adult learners motivated and promote creative thinking, whereas negative emotions, such as fear and anger, can limit learning.

Emotions affect how we learn and how we react to new information. In general, negative emotions tend to fix attention on the things in the environment that triggered the emotion, limit the ability to think through the situation, and lead to impulsive actions. Positive emotions, on the other hand, tend to expand attention, broaden the sense of what is possible under the circumstances, and motivate people to persist when challenged. Studies show that when adults have experiences that trigger joy and surprise they tend to do twice as well thinking of alternate ways to solve problems compared to when they are angry or fearful.

Example: During mentoring sessions, it's important to not get hung up on challenges and negative experiences; it is crucial to bring an emphasis of positivity to the sessions and focus on solutions and ideas for positive change. When in a mentoring session and the mentor and mentee are discussing a challenge (i.e. challenge with weed management, pest outbreak, crop rotation plans, etc.), ask the learner to think about any times they have had success with the topic, even if it was a small success. If they feel they have had no success, then perhaps the learner can think of examples of success that they have heard about the topic. Encourage the learner to think about the positive experiences with the topic, and not just the challenges.

As weed management is often one of the biggest challenges of organic producers, this may be a focus for mentorship. Encourage the learner to think of times or areas of their operation, even if small areas, where they saw success with weed management. Or perhaps there was one part of their weed management strategy that has gone well while other parts have not. It's important to not forsake the challenges and negative emotions, but it is equally important to focus on positive solutions.

Strategies to engage positive emotions:

- 1** Help your mentor or mentee feel comfortable learning with you. The more an adult learner feels comfortable and knows what to expect from a learning interaction, the more likely they are to engage their positive emotions while learning. This is another reason to take time to get to know each other, as well as be open and vulnerable with each other as much as you can to create that safe and comfortable environment.
- 2** Pay attention to nonverbal body language and facial expressions of your mentor or mentee. This will help with remaining aware of their emotional states. If you notice indicators of fear or anger, pause the discussion and invite your mentor or mentee to



express any concerns.

3 Bring laughter, joy, and fun into mentoring sessions. Mentoring is a time of learning as well as a time to connect with a fellow farmer or rancher. Make the time enjoyable, tell stories, share experiences, ask questions, and share in the joys of farming and ranching together. It's important to not just discuss challenges; make sure to also focus on successes, and even share those comical experiences!

The key to this best practice is ensuring that adult learners experience positive emotions during learning. The positive emotions of joy and surprise support learning in myriad ways. They are particularly beneficial in supporting collaborative learning and problem solving. Educators should avoid triggering fear or anger in learners, as these emotions limit learning.

Give Learners Choice

Choice is a powerful motivator in adult learning. In adult education contexts, offering opportunities to make choices as adults learn promotes agency. Agency is the capacity of an individual to act on their own behalf, and therefore choice is essential in developing the drive, or motivation, to learn. In **giving learners choice**, learners will feel more motivated and persistent with their learning, since they will feel ownership and agency over their decisions.

Choice is especially important for the type of learning that is done through mentorship and is a big reason for why it's important for the mentee to set their own goals and come to meetings with the topics and agendas they feel are most important. The mentor's role is to help guide the mentee through their learning, but mentees need to have choice in what they learn and how they utilize the new knowledge the mentor provides.

Example: An easy way to bring in choice into mentoring sessions is by leaving room in the agenda for changes and new topics. When beginning a mentorship session, phone call, or in-person meeting, whatever it may be, the mentor and mentee should both share the topics they wish to discuss and questions that they have for that day. For the mentor, it's most important to remember to ask the mentee what questions they have that day, or what challenges have come up for them recently that would be helpful to talk about to allow for choice of learning. The mentee may come to a mentorship session with different questions or a different agenda than the mentor had planned, and the mentor needs to remain flexible to the topics the mentee finds most useful. It is also important not to lose sight of long term goals, and the mentor can help with relating the questions the mentee has that day back to the mentee's goals.

Adult learners need to feel self-directed in their learning. If the learner feels they did not choose the topic, they could be significantly unmotivated to learn and will retain substantially less from the lesson. The learner needs to feel control over their learning, so as the mentor, ensure to give this control to the mentee and open the option for the mentee to direct the learning at the beginning and throughout every mentoring session.



Strategies to give learners choice:

- 1** For mentorship, since the mentee is the primary learner, the mentee creates the goals for the mentorship and the mentor provides feedback, suggestions, ideas, and support along the way to accomplishing the goal. Mentors should take their mentees goals seriously and try their best to offer mentorship within these goals.
- 2** When starting a mentorship session, begin with reviewing the agenda or topics for the session and ensure the mentee agrees that these are the topics they want to discuss that day. If the mentee has additional questions or ideas, integrate those into the mentoring session as well.
- 3** When providing feedback to the learner on a particular topic or skill, ask the learner if the feedback is useful, and if not, what else is the learner looking for. Leave room for choice as you move through learning about a topic or skill; choice in how the content is delivered, choice in context, as well as choice in changing the topic if something turns out not useful for the mentorship.

Some educators feel their job is done if they have “covered the content” with little regard for learners’ experiences, knowledge, or accomplishments. When you incorporate opportunities for adults to make choices about their learning, even in small ways, you create a learner-centered environment that fosters engagement, motivation, and ownership. This is especially important with mentoring, when the learning happens through a reciprocal relationship between mentor and mentee.

Identify Mental Models

Mental models greatly impact how and what people learn. They are a combination of knowledge and unconscious biases in relation to an aspect of a person’s life. **Identifying mental models** can be a huge asset for mentorship. Since mentorship is an ongoing learning process, and not a one-time class, mentor and mentee have the opportunity to truly understand where the other is coming from, what has formed their opinions, and what affects their decisions. For this reason, we are going to expand on mental models and how they may affect mentorship.

The human brain processes by comparing and organizing based on similarities to things a person already knows or has done. Because of this, all people make assumptions about new situations without taking the time to assess all important characteristics. This is described by the term unconscious bias, when we make unconscious, automatic assumptions about other people or situations, which often leads to stereotypes. We cannot avoid forming unconscious biases, they are an evolutionary adaptation of the human brain. In large part, unconscious biases are a reflection of the types of experiences a person has had. At the same time, people gain knowledge through their experiences. This combination of unconscious biases and knowledge gain related to experience is called a mental model.



Mental models are how we understand the world. They allow people to make assumptions about how things work and unconsciously influence our behavior and decision making. Not only do they shape what we think and how we understand, they also shape the connections and opportunities that we see. Mental models are how we simplify complexity. The world is so complex that we cannot keep track of all the details, so we use mental models to simplify the complex into something we can understand. Mental models help us shape behavior and set an approach to solving problems and doing tasks.

Example: We all have mental models about the important aspects of our lives, and your mentee or mentor will have mental models that relate directly to the topics you discuss in your mentorship. For example, in a discussion you may have with your mentee or mentor about weed management, your mentee or mentor will have an existing mental model already about weed management. Their mental model will be reflected in their knowledge of weed species on their farm and the problems they cause, their values about such things as chemical use, their preferences for prevention or control management strategies, their expectations about the outcome of specific interventions and their assumptions about the ease or difficulty of changing practices. Your mentee or mentor's mental model will be reflected in their past weed management practices, and it will influence how receptive they are to new information presented by you.

Strategies to identify mental models:

When engaged in mentorship, the following open-ended questions may be useful for identifying both your own and your mentor or mentee's mental models, and particularly the aspects of their mental models that relate to their learning needs. You can use these questions to help you get to know your mentor or mentee, and as you move through mentorship and discuss different topics together.

- What problem have you had with _____? How did you go about addressing it? *For example: what problems have you had with pests?*
- Can you tell me what led you to decide _____? What type of things did you consider when you made that decision? *For example: Can you tell me what led you to decide to pursue organic certification?*
- You seem to feel strongly about _____. Can you tell me a bit more about why you feel so strongly? *For example: You seem to feel strongly about your soil cultivation practices...*
- What do you find most rewarding about _____? Why is this so rewarding? *For example: What do you find most rewarding about transitioning to organic?*



- What do you find most challenging about _____? Why does this seem so challenging? *For example: What do you find most challenging about weed management?*
- What do you see as the greatest obstacle for making changes in _____? Why does this seem like a big obstacle? *For example: What do you see as the greatest obstacle for making changes in your nutrient management plan?*
- What is the key factor for your success with _____? Can you tell me more about this factor? *For example: What is the key factor for your success with recordkeeping?*
- What is one thing that might make this new practice, _____, work for you? *For example: What is one thing that might make this new practice, daily recordkeeping, work for you?*

This best practice highlights the importance of identifying the mental models of your mentor or mentee and how their mental models may impact their learning. You can use this knowledge to tailor your discussions in ways that better relate to your mentor or mentee and address knowledge gaps that may underline incorrect assumptions and misconceptions. The questions above will also enable you to become more aware of the assumptions and biases your mentor or mentee have related to the content. This awareness is the foundation for being receptive to trying out new ideas and skills. Because each person's mental model related to the content is unique, based on their own set of knowledge and experiences, those providing new information must ensure that the setting in which the discussion and learning activities occur is respectful, non-judgmental, and engages positive emotions as much as possible.