



# Class Acts: A+ Educational Activities for the Elderly in Healthcare Facilities

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“Get over the idea that only children should spend their time in study. Be a student so long as you still have something to learn, and this will mean all your life.” ~Henry L. Doherty

## Introduction

Whoever said “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” certainly wasn’t referring to the elderly of today. Many elderly individuals demonstrate great interest and ability to learn new information. Aging should not be seen as purely a time of decreased abilities but rather as an opportunity for growth, increased wisdom, and the attainment of new skills.

Recreation programs in healthcare facilities offer a diverse program of activities and that should include educational opportunities. Educational programs can range from out-of-facility classes, to less formal learning activities and may be beneficial to residents and patients regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, physical abilities, and even, cognitive status.

## Benefits and Purpose

Mortimer Adler said, “The purpose of learning is growth, and our minds, unlike our bodies, can continue growing as we continue to live.” Educational programs are designed to offer residents an opportunity to learn something new whether it is a fact, an idea, information, or a skill. These types of programs greatly enhance self-esteem, motivation, and independence, as well as offer opportunity for cognitive stimulation and socialization.

Many individuals that enter a long term care or other healthcare facility have not been exposed to a vast array of ideas, cultures, beliefs, technology, etc. and may feel alienated. Offering classes to increase their knowledge or learn new skills can be enlightening and rewarding for the student and the teacher as well!

## Learning Environment

Educational opportunities may occur in numerous ways and in various places. Sessions may be offered on a one to one basis or in a group setting. They may be formal and planned or provided spontaneously. Educational opportunities may also be provided in an out-of-facility classroom such as at a county or state school/university, or in a community center. In any case, it is important to create or provide an environment that is conducive to learning. The Aguirre Institute, November, 2000 suggests the following classroom characteristics:

- Good acoustics (easy to hear conversation)
- Sufficient table space for writing
- Sufficient space for wheelchairs, canes, and walkers
- Adequate heating and cooling system
- Non-slip stairs and floors
- Chairs that provide needed back support and that students of different physical sizes can sit in comfortably
- Short distance to accessible bathrooms

## Learning Barriers and Adaptations

There are many barriers recreation professionals, “teachers”, may have to overcome before an elderly person has a successful learning experience. Many of the adaptations utilized for traditional recreational programming can be utilized for the elderly learner as well.

The most obvious of these barriers are the physical changes that often occur as we age. Individuals with hearing or vision loss, decreased mobility, motor coordination, and so on, will need their learning experience adapted. For those with visual impairments, utilize large print materials with appropriate thickness, simple styles, and contrasting colors such as black on white; speak slowly, repeat main points and paraphrase; utilize verbal and physical cues; provide bright, non-glare lighting; and utilize other forms of sensory such as touch, sound and smell.

For individuals with hearing impairments it is important to maintain an environment that has the least amount of outside noise and distractions as possible. The facilitator or “teacher” should speak slowly and clearly, facing the learner; speak normally and be cautious not to shout; and use gestures, facial expressions and physical cues. The use of microphones, pictures and props, flip charts and other audio/visual aids are also vital adaptations for the hearing impaired.

Cognitive impairments and short term memory loss are also common learning barriers for the elderly. It may be difficult for an elderly learner to understand the educational content or to even remember what was learned. Sandra Cornett, RN. Ph.D, from the Ohio State University Medical Center recommends the following:

- Use consistent vocabulary (i.e. use the word “recreation” rather than similar words such as “leisure”, “activities”, “therapeutic recreation” etc.
- Make no more than 3-5 points during a session
- Use clues such as underlining words, arrows depicting sequence, bold letters, etc.
- Repeat concepts. (i.e. topic: the benefits of recreation-show a video, provide printed materials, do a word puzzle and engage learner in a hands-on exercise)
- Utilize vocabulary that is familiar with the learner
- Devise ways to reinforce learned material such as lists, pictures, summaries, charts, etc.
- Give cues ahead of time such as a summary or introduction to what will be taught

Desire, interest and/or attitude are also potential barriers to learning. It is not uncommon for elderly people to feel threatened by the idea of learning new information, especially technology. In this situation, the recreation professional may hear, “I’m too old to learn or “I’ve learned enough”. It is crucial to identify the reasons for such reluctance and then try to break down those barriers. The facilitator must have a positive, enthusiastic demeanor, give choices, and encourage active participation. It important to set goals that are realistic and start off slow, if needed. Offer informal educational sessions on a one to one basis to establish a rapport and to spark an interest. Make the learning experience fun and interactive and provide extensive praise and encouragement.

Some additional adaptations and tips for teaching the elderly include:

- Use mnemonics. Mnemonics is a formula or rhyme used as an aid in remembering information (i.e. “I before E except after C” is a great spelling trick and for history, “In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue”.) For a large variety of mnemonics in many subjects, visit [www.netnaut.com/mnemonics.html](http://www.netnaut.com/mnemonics.html)
- Provide sufficient time for recall
- Use of multiple choice or true false to help with retrieval of information
- Offer morning classes
- Make it fun!

For more tips on teaching the elderly visit: “Tips on Teaching Seniors” by Joel May at [www.ewingsnet.com/documents/Presentations/TipsonTeachingSeniors.pdf](http://www.ewingsnet.com/documents/Presentations/TipsonTeachingSeniors.pdf) and “Teaching the Elderly” by Sandra Cornett, RN. Ph.D.at [www.medicalcenter.osu.edu/pdfs/PatientEd/Materials/PDFDocs/employee/elderly.pdf](http://www.medicalcenter.osu.edu/pdfs/PatientEd/Materials/PDFDocs/employee/elderly.pdf).

### **Educational Activity Ideas**

The following is a variety of educational-type activities that may be offered to residents and patients in healthcare facilities. Think outside the box, take advantage of all the potential resources and let the learning begin.

### **College Courses**

Offer opportunity for residents to enroll in a college courses at a county school, or state college/university. These courses may be taken on-line, home study, or on the school campus. It is important to remember that residents, especially younger residents, may wish to continue their education regardless of their current health status. The Social Service department should be able to coordinate such educational opportunities through the state, county or town.

### **Speakers and Specialists**

Residents in healthcare facilities benefit from educational sessions provided by a vast array of experts. JCAHO emphasizes resident education and requires documentation of these services. Utilize all the resources available in your facility. For example:

- Staff Educator/Nursing: flu shots, infection control, aging, Alzheimer's, cancer, smoking, medications, various diagnosis/critical pathways such as stroke, heart disease, pain management, and other health education
- Social Worker: Resident Rights, Advanced Directives Living Wills, PNA, dealing with difficult residents, adjustment to facility life, cultural diversity, getting along with a roommate, coping with loss and grief, etc.
- Hospice: death and dying
- Clergy: religious/spiritual support and education
- Food and Nutrition: cooking demos or cooking tips, nutrition, various types of diets, diabetes, etc.
- Rehabilitation Department: physical fitness and exercise
- Maintenance staff: fire and safety
- Ombudsman: Resident Rights

### **Language and Culture**

There are so many traditions, languages, cultural information, etc. that can be shared with your residents. Teach your residents how to say "hello" and "good-bye" in twenty languages or basic words in various languages. For example, if you have a large percent of Spanish speaking residents, offer the residents the opportunity to learn some basic words. In reverse, offer the Spanish speaking residents the opportunity to learn some words in English. For a great article on teaching ESL to the elderly, visit Bright Ideas: Tips for teaching ESL to the elderly coalition of limited English speaking elderly, Aguirre Institute, Nov 2000 at [www.clese.org/Products/Tips%20for%20Teaching.doc](http://www.clese.org/Products/Tips%20for%20Teaching.doc).

Offer classes on culture and traditions as well. Contact community culture clubs and invite them to do presentations and travel clubs. Utilize a variety of pictures, props, clothing, and food to make the experience unforgettable. For an extensive list of community and volunteer contacts visit [www.recreativeresources.com/linkscommunity.htm](http://www.recreativeresources.com/linkscommunity.htm)

### **Technology Classes**

It is important to provide the residents with the opportunity to keep up with today's evolution of technology. Web TV, internet access, and computer use are great ways in which the elderly can maintain contact with friends and family, enable them to have greater access to current events, as well as a chance to expand their leisure skills. More and more facilities are creating computer labs to meet this need. IN2L has developed a revolutionary program for the elderly which accommodates their special needs. For more information, visit [www.in2l.com](http://www.in2l.com). To create an intergenerational program, contact the local schools for volunteers. There are many high school and college students that would be interested in teaching the elderly how to use computers and the internet.

Another unique idea is to contact your local Senior Net program. Senior Net provides adults 50+ access to and education about computer technology and the Internet. It is an international non-profit

organization for Seniors, taught by Seniors, for a low-cost, in small classes, at a speed and in language that Seniors can understand and follow. For more information visit: SeniorNet at [www.seniornet.org](http://www.seniornet.org).

### Leisure Education

Leisure Education is a service that is often overlooked in health care facilities. Peterson and Gunn, 1984, define Leisure Education as, “A broad category of services that focuses on the development and acquisition of various leisure-related skills, attitudes, and knowledge.” The primary purpose of Leisure Education is to “enable individuals to enhance their quality of life through leisure.” Many elderly individuals would greatly benefit from this type of programming, especially sub-acute patients, those with a new disability, those who are having adjustment problems and individuals who have little interest in leisure pursuits. Peterson and Gunn’s Leisure Education Content Model is as follows:

<p><b><u>Leisure Awareness</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of leisure</li> <li>• Self awareness</li> <li>• Leisure/play attitudes</li> <li>• Decision making skills</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Leisure Resources</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activity opportunity</li> <li>• Resources: personal, family, home, community, state, national</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Social Interaction Skills</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dual</li> <li>• Small Group</li> <li>• Large Group</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Leisure Activity Skills</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional</li> <li>• Non-traditional</li> </ul>

Many traditional activities can be transformed into a Leisure Education session. For example: Leisure Bingo, Activity A-Z (name an activity that begins with each letter of the alphabet), Leisure Word Scramble, and so on. Stumbo and Thompson’s book, *Leisure Education A Manual of Activities and Resources*, has a large variety of great Leisure Education ideas.

### More A+ Ideas

- Music Appreciation: Introduce various genres of music as well as singers and musicians. Those old record jacks are full of music information!
- Art Appreciation: Discuss a variety of artists, paintings, sculptures, styles, and techniques.
- Portrait in History: Chose a famous person in entertainment, history, politics, etc. and discuss their life and contribution to society.
- Historic events: Remember important events such as wars, technology, space, inventions, etc.
- Documentary movies: The library is filled with movies and videos of historic events and educational topics.
- Book Clubs: Meet weekly to discuss a certain book or article.
- Resident Council: Offer educational opportunities such as nutrition, health-related issues, safety, etc. at Resident Council Meetings. This will help to make the meetings more positive and productive.
- FYI Group: Be creative and offer a wide variety of interesting topics!

### Conclusion

Henry Ford once said, “Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty.” The benefits of educating the elderly are endless. Recreation professionals continue to face the challenge of providing a variety of stimulating activities to such a diverse population. Re-developing and transforming some of the traditional word games, trivia sessions and discussion groups is a great way to introduce education into the program of activities.

Once the barriers to learning have been identified and removed, the elderly will have the opportunity for continued wisdom and knowledge. In a study by Rodriguez and Barbeito, an elderly learner exclaimed, “Who could have told me that at this age I would still be able to learn so much! “

## References

- Aguirre Institute. (November, 2000) Bright ideas: Tips for teaching ESL to the elderly coalition of limited English speaking elderly. Retrieved July 21, 2007 from [www.clese.org/Products/Tips%20for%20Teaching.doc](http://www.clese.org/Products/Tips%20for%20Teaching.doc)
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- Stumbo, N. & Thompson, S. (1986) *Leisure education: A manual of activities and resources*. Peoria, Illinois: Central Illinois Center for Independent Living and Easter Seal Center, Inc.

## Suggested Reading and Resources

- AARP-Lifelong Learning and Education  
[www.aarp.org/learntech/lifelong/?sicontent=0&sicreative=742708561&siclientid=112&sitrackingid=356599&HBX\\_OU=50&HBX\\_PK=elderly\\_learning](http://www.aarp.org/learntech/lifelong/?sicontent=0&sicreative=742708561&siclientid=112&sitrackingid=356599&HBX_OU=50&HBX_PK=elderly_learning)
- Cornell University Food and Brand Lab-Fun food psychology articles, studies, tips, cartoons, etc.  
[www.foodpsychology.cornell.edu](http://www.foodpsychology.cornell.edu)
- How to Do Things.com-Great articles on how to do many things like health, nutrition, exercise, gardening, recreation, etc.  
[www.howtothings.com](http://www.howtothings.com)
- Mundy, J. (1998). *Leisure education: Theory and practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Champaign, Illinois: Sagamore.
- Ohio State University Medical Center-Summary of Age-Specific Teaching Approaches  
[www.medicalcenter.osu.edu/pdfs/PatientEd/Materials/PDFDocs/general/agespecific-1.pdf](http://www.medicalcenter.osu.edu/pdfs/PatientEd/Materials/PDFDocs/general/agespecific-1.pdf)
- Senior Fitness Association-Fitness facts, tips and handouts  
[www.seniorfitness.net/sfagit.htm](http://www.seniorfitness.net/sfagit.htm)
- Teaching Elderly Adults to Use the Internet to Access Health Care Information: Before-After Study  
[www.jmir.org/2005/2/e19](http://www.jmir.org/2005/2/e19)
- U.S. Department of Health and Senior Services- Variety of health conditions and topics  
[www.os.dhhs.gov/aging/#care](http://www.os.dhhs.gov/aging/#care)

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