

Module 0 Office Hours Summary

Peer Learning Networks & Community Engagement

Section 0.1: Adult Learning and Peer Learning Networks

Core Principles of Adult Learning

Understanding how adults learn is essential to your role as a Master Gardener peer educator. The field of **andragogy** (adult learning) tells us that adult learners are fundamentally different from children in how they approach education.

Key characteristics of adult learners:

- They bring lived experience to every learning situation—they are experts in their own lives
- They are goal-oriented and task-oriented, seeking concrete solutions to real-world problems
- They need to understand WHY they're learning something (relevance is key)
- They want practical, applicable information with immediate results
- They learn best when they are both giving AND receiving information (two-way exchange)

The 85% Rule

Adult learners will already know or can figure out **85% of the information** you plan to share. Your role is not to simply deliver information top-down (the "funnel" approach), but to facilitate a two-way exchange where learners' knowledge and experience are valued and integrated into the learning process.

Creating an Engaged Learning Environment

1. Build Safety, Trust, and Accountability

Without these foundations, learners will not fully participate. Strategies include:

- Establish ground rules (see "Our Ground Rules for Engagement" handout)
- Use think-pair-share and small group discussions before large group sharing
- Integrate icebreakers and name-sharing
- Create opportunities for introverts to feel comfortable

2. Use Facilitated Discussion (Not Lecture)

Your role is to facilitate learning, not to be the sole source of knowledge. When someone asks a question, pose it back to the group. Use open-ended questions that:

- Do NOT have yes/no answers
- Do NOT have right/wrong answers
- DO help participants reflect and make information personally relevant
- Require you to WAIT for responses (embrace the silence!)

Example: Instead of "Do you garden?" ask "What has your experience been with gardening?"

3. Aim for Productive Discomfort

Just as athletes must push themselves to improve, learners grow when they step outside their comfort zone. Your job is to keep participants in that sweet spot between:

- TOO comfortable (not learning anything new)
- TOO challenged (feeling unsafe or overwhelmed)

Experiential Learning Model (David Kolb)

Meaningful learning experiences have three components:

- **DO** – hands-on activity or experience
- **REFLECT** – pause to consider what happened
- **APPLY** – connect to real life and future use

Memory retention increases dramatically with active involvement:

- 30% of what they hear and see
- 50% of a demonstration
- 70% of what they simulate
- **90% when they do the real thing**

The Critical Role of Reflection

As John Dewey said, "We do not learn from experience—we learn from reflecting on experience." Reflection prevents *encapsulation*, where knowledge stays locked in the classroom and never transfers to real life. Always build in reflection time after activities.

What is a Peer Learning Network?

A peer learning network is a form of interdependent, mutual learning involving the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and experience between community members. The Master Gardener program is a peer learning network that:

- Bridges research-based information with local, place-based knowledge
- Makes scientific research relatable and practical for community needs
- Builds trust within communities (peer information is often more trusted than outside experts)
- Supports Cornell Cooperative Extension's mission of economic vitality, ecological sustainability, and social well-being

Trust and Information Evaluation

Research shows that most people do NOT make decisions based on scientific studies or data alone. Instead, they:

- Rely on subjective evaluations of ideas
- Trust other individuals like themselves who have already adopted the idea
- **Base decisions on whom to trust rather than what is objectively true**

This is why your role as a peer educator is so powerful—you are a trusted member of the community who can translate research into practical, relatable guidance.

Evaluating Information: The CRAAP Test

As a Master Gardener, you'll encounter conflicting information. Use the CRAAP Test to evaluate sources before sharing information with the public:

- **Currency** – Is the information up-to-date?
- **Relevance** – Does it relate to your topic and audience?
- **Authority** – Who is the author? What are their credentials?
- **Accuracy** – Is it supported by evidence? Can you verify it?
- **Purpose** – Is it fact, opinion, or propaganda? Are there biases?

Section 0.2: Community Engagement and Action Projects

Qualities of an Effective Peer Learning Network Member

Personal Readiness

Effective peer educators recognize how their own viewpoints and biases impact their work. They:

- Work effectively with people of different backgrounds, races, genders, and abilities
- Understand environmental and personal factors that impact growth and development
- Recognize how resource availability (social, financial, political) affects access to services
- Maintain professionalism and ethics
- Understand deeper issues of food insecurity and poverty
- Identify continued learning opportunities for themselves

Engagement with Community

Effective peer educators build authentic relationships and value community assets. They:

- Identify and build on existing community assets (not just problems)
- Build genuine relationships that take time
- Bring diverse stakeholders together for complex decision-making
- Are genuinely invested in community goals and needs (not imposing outside agendas)
- Appreciate cultural, religious, legal, and other factors that affect people and programs
- Stay flexible and open to different perspectives
- Recognize that relationships take time—you can't rush trust

Four Universal Growth Needs (Circle of Courage)

Peer learning networks support these fundamental human needs:

- **Generosity** – Giving back to community, service learning, developing compassion
- **Power** – Sharing decision-making, including community members in planning, moving toward empowerment and self-governance
- **Mastery** – Hands-on learning, experiential discovery, building skills and confidence
- **Belonging** – Building relationships, creating fun and enjoyable experiences, ensuring everyone can voice opinions

Ground Rules for Engagement

Refer to the "Our Ground Rules for Engagement" handout. Key principles include:

- Be present as fully as possible—minimize distractions
- Respect individual differences—all views are welcome
- Listen for understanding before responding
- Acknowledge challenges respectfully—lean into conflict
- Seek first to understand—ask open questions instead of correcting
- Reflect when things get rough—suspend judgment, assume best intentions
- Develop trust and team—compromise, support group decisions, model collaboration

Questions for Discussion

Come to office hours prepared to discuss:

1. What characteristics of adult learners most resonate with your own learning experiences?
2. How might you integrate facilitated discussion or open-ended questions into your volunteer work?
3. What qualities do you think make someone an effective contributor to a peer learning network?
4. What is one major takeaway from the community engagement materials that will inform how you work with community members?
5. When should you use the CRAAP Test in your role as a Master Gardener?

Key Takeaways

- Adult learners are experts in their own experience—honor that by facilitating, not lecturing
- Learning happens best through DO-REFLECT-APPLY (experiential learning)
- Trust is built on relationships, not just information—people decide whom to trust, not what is true
- As a peer educator, you bridge research-based knowledge with local, place-based wisdom
- Effective community engagement requires genuine investment, cultural humility, and patience