

Computer Skills for Senior Citizens by Adam S

My aunt Blanche was an original Rosy-the-Riveter during World War II. I always enjoyed spending time with her and listening to her stories of those times. My aunt had an old Apple computer and often during my visits, she would ask me to show her how to use the computer. I found myself really wanting to work with senior citizens and so I asked myself, "What am I good at and what can I do to make their lives a little better?" With some research I realized that there are many resources available to senior citizens on the web, and even more importantly, computers could help them remain vital and connected to a broader community. It appeared the obvious answer to my question would be to teach computer skills, but I was somewhat skeptical that this would be a popular pastime for seniors.

I know that many people from earlier generations are not as comfortable with technology as is mine. My mother is still learning how to use a computer and my grandparents did not even own a computer until we gave them one of our old laptops. For my generation knowing how to use a computer is an essential part daily of life. We are a techno-generation. However, I expected many seniors would have limited exposure to computers and that learning how to use them could be very daunting. Nevertheless, I decided to take on the challenge and visited several local assisted living communities to solicit interest in a computer class. I finally decided to set up shop at a local assisted living facility, which up until that point did not have any computer instruction for residents.

Initially, only a few people attended my weekly Saturday class, however, they were eager to learn. After a few weeks, when word of my class had spread, more and more people joined. I began to realize my preconceptions about my students' ability and willingness to learn were wrong. The people in my class were eager to move into the computer age and become internet literate. We started with the basics such as what is a mouse and how is it used; how to use Explorer to get to the internet; and explaining what are Google, Yahoo and email. One of the early lessons was to sign up the whole class for Gmail accounts.

I now have a fairly large class. While some residents only stayed long enough to learn the basics, others have continued to attend to learn more advanced skills, such as Microsoft Word and Excel. The internet is always a popular subject and we have covered everything from YouTube to Wikipedia. We explored websites specifically oriented or helpful to senior citizens such as the AARP site and WebMD. We also covered video chatting, and most recently, Twittering. I know many of the residents love using email to communicate with their friends and families. One of my students uses Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to keep track of her prescriptions, medications, and bills.

I have had a very rich and full experience teaching this class. I have had the pleasure of meeting a variety of people and have found that they each bring to the class their own distinct personalities and experiences. I have gotten to know several of them fairly well. One gentleman asked for my help contacting a publisher by email. I helped

him set up an email account and during the process he started telling me about himself. It turns out that he is a successful author. I learned that when he was in the army, he was almost court marshaled for verbally assaulting a superior officer who made a racial slur against Jews and how later in life he was personal friends with President Nixon. It turned out his latest book was an autobiography. We have spoken often since our first conversation and I have learned many amazing things about his life.

There are other residents whom I have gotten to know rather well over time. One who had been in the class from the beginning recently had to stop coming due to the continued deterioration of her hearing. Two others have become so proficient that I find it hard to teach them many new things and so I have asked them to help the other residents during the week when I'm not around. This is a testament to the fact that it is never too late to learn new skills.

The older generation is often seen as having little in common with my generation; separated by barriers of pop culture, mannerisms, values, and technology. My experience has shown me that the gap is really not as enormous as it first appears. I have been able to form a connection with my students; one that has overcome perceived obstacles and has evolved into true friendships. Sometimes we simply talk about the impact of new technology and other times we discuss how the world has changed during their lifetime. They just want to talk to a young person and I like to listen to what they have to say.

They have helped me appreciate that teachers learn from students, as well as the other way around. I started my class with the idea of wanting to help senior citizens, but have learned as much about life from my 'students' as I have taught them about computers. We have come together to share common interests, bridge our differences and develop a deep mutual respect. For me, this experience is what community service should be all about.