HHILS Teaching Principles

Ideally, effective life skills teaching takes place on several levels. On the more concrete, instructors are trying to help students master specific skills, learn important information, and develop new ways of thinking about common life challenges. Underpinning this, however, is the personal growth students may achieve through their experience in the classes. With that in mind, we have pulled together this list of core teaching principles. Let us know what you think, especially as you develop new ideas.

1. Make it relevant. Help the women to connect the goals of the class with their own personal goals at Sojourner House. (For example, a quilting class might help women develop constructive ways of spending time that can help them stay clean and sober.) Make these connections explicit at the beginning and at the end of each course.

2. Focus on the positive. These women have been judged and criticized enough! They learn best through encouragement and positive reinforcement.
   
   a. Use positive frameworks. Phrase principles in terms of “Do this,” rather than “Don’t do that.”
   b. Constantly notice and name progress in both concrete and subtle skills. “Jill, look how much more patience you have now than when you started the class!” Even small steps can be a chance to offer reinforcement. Try pointing out these qualities when you see them:
      Perseverance, patience, attentiveness, creativity, helpfulness, openness, enthusiasm, good attitude...
   c. Make self-confidence your goal. “You can do this!” “I have faith in you.” Confront negativity and support self-esteem: “Don’t put yourself down, you’re doing great!”

3. Encourage mutual aid. We won’t always be there to help these women, but they will always have their peers. Learning to trust others and to be able to ask for and offer help are the most sustaining skills anyone can develop!
   
   a. Encourage students to help each other with tasks.
   b. Create pairs and teams whenever possible.
   c. Notice those who gain early mastery and make them your “assistants” in the class.
d. As the women hear you offering compliments and support, they will begin to do the same for each other. Encourage this!

4. **Present materials in multiple formats.** Adult learners have many different learning styles, and it’s important to accommodate them. Also, many women have poor reading and writing skills.
   - Use pictures and other visual teaching materials, recordings, and experiential techniques.
   - When you do use written material, keep the language simple, the text clear and large, and always either read the material aloud or be ready to offer reading assistance.
   - Break ideas and tasks down into manageable chunks.

5. **Offer appropriate choices, without overwhelming students.** Having choices can feel really empowering, but having too many options just feels confusing. When starting a new subject or task, start everyone at the same place. Later, as they gain mastery, increase the choices available.

6. **Bring in and validate their life experiences.** These women have an incredible array of life experiences that are relevant to what you are teaching. Help them to see those connections. Life on the street or in prison may have been hard, but they can take some of what they have learned in those negative settings and use it in a positive way in their lives. In the process, you can help change shame about their past into a sense of pride in what they have made out of that experience. Example: “Who has been in a situation when they had to stay calm in a crisis? What did you do that worked well?” Notice and name the ways that you are learning from them.

7. **Make connections with recovery principles.** Whenever appropriate, bring in these ways of approaching the world. There is nothing in the lives of SH residents more important than maintaining recovery, and a key piece of that is coming to understand recovery thinking and to integrate it into every aspect of their lives. “Easy Does It.” “One Day at a Time.” “First Things First.” “Progress Not Perfection.” If you’re not familiar with addiction/recovery issues, this is a great chance to learn.