

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

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The expression “non-traditional student” is quite vague. Usually the expression, “traditional student” indicates someone between the ages of 14 and 24 who is a native-born American without any special circumstances. This indicates that any other type of student could be considered, “non-traditional”. “Nontraditional” can mean many things: it can refer to an ethnic minority group, a person from the lower socioeconomic strata, a senior citizen, someone who does not have English as their first language, a gay student, a recent immigrant, an international student, or a student in some way contextually disadvantaged. On our campus I believe that there are four different

populations that are “non-traditional” students: 1) the senior citizens who are in our RISE program, 2) the first generation students from low income families, 3) the international students and 4) the adult learners. These populations frequently overlap and we may find individuals from each group in the same classes. These students are unlike “typical students” and may have unique needs. Individuals in these non-traditional populations may vary dramatically in their learning styles. Their understandings and familiarity with technology may be very different from the traditional student, and they may have very different educational experiences and expectations.

I am going to focus in this presentation on one type of non-trad; the adult learner. The adult learners as non-traditional students are a growing population. One obvious reason for the growth in this population is demographic. The sheer number of people in the United States over the age of 24 is a significant factor in this discussion. As the “baby boomer” generation aged, the size of the adult population enrolling in college grew much faster than that of the traditional college aged population (Jacobs & Stoner-Eby, 2007). Seventy seven million people were born between 1946 and 1964 (“Baby Boomers”) with an average of 4.2 million births per year, while those born between 1965 and 1978 (sometimes referred to as Generation X) average 3.4 million births per year.

We do need to be careful of generalizations with this population. While many adult learners over 25 may not have grown up with the internet it is possible that an individual in this group is comfortable sitting at the computer. However, it is likely that the adult learner is less technologically savvy than younger students. While avoiding overgeneralizations, there are concerns and issues that are common to the adult learners and to non-traditional students that have been identified. First, many have full time jobs and families. Some may have children of their own who are students. Some may have care-taking responsibilities for parents as well as children.

Often the non-traditional student brings an abundance of lifetime experiences into the classroom. The adult learners are anxious to share their knowledge and experiences. Sometimes in a class that has both non-trads and traditional students this can be problematic. The traditional student may not appreciate the “stories” and “insights” of their non-trad classmates. Many non-trads are goal oriented

and pursue a college education to improve their own career. They are motivated to learn skills that will enhance their careers and professional positions. They want training or re-training for jobs. They may not be patient with learning that is perceived as ephemeral.

Other non-trads may enroll in college in order to pursue just that sort of learning.

Self-enhancement and self-enrichment may be the goals for them. Boredom and dissatisfaction with their current life positions may motivate non-traditional students to return to the classroom. Some non-trads return to college to finish a degree or to pursue interests that were interrupted years earlier by raising a family. For many women returning to college is the result of life changes. Divorce, job loss and empty nests may motivate some women to return to classes. A desire to improve themselves, their communities and their world may be the main motivation behind returning to the classroom. Clearly the reasons for returning to school vary within the non-traditional student population and these varied reasons need to be considered by the professor.

Specific strategies that I find useful in the classroom with non-traditional students include: 1) Using a feminist pedagogy rather than a traditional pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy stresses co-operation and collaboration. The professor is a mentor and a guide but not the final authority on the topic. 2) Being more flexible in regard to time and the timing of assignments. Flexibility is favorable with adult learners' busy schedules, whose availability can be limited to late afternoons, early evenings and Saturday mornings. Adaptability and accessibility enables the nontraditional student to fully benefit from interactions with the professor. 3) Term Paper assignments with traditional students may be given at the beginning of the semester and then the student is left to work on their papers throughout the semester with little interaction from the professor. When the paper is assigned early and then not mentioned until it is due it can be frustrating for the adult learner. The adult learner who has been out of school for years may not have the same confidence in their ability as the traditional age student. Fear is something that we may not think about when entering the classroom; however the non-traditional student may be afraid of the prospect of returning to school. Shiber (1999) discusses how math and science classes can “strike fear” into the hearts of non-traditional students even more so than those of traditional age. With the non-traditional student more structure and more interaction is built into the assignment. Sections of the research process will be evaluated and the student is given more feedback on each section. Sections are due every couple of weeks and this is stated on the syllabus. Establishing achievable goals frequent, smaller sections allows an older student to adjust to being back in the classroom and also to feel more confidence in their academic ability. 4) Research (Keller, JW. et al, 1991) indicates that nontraditional students view personality and interactive behaviors as effective teaching while traditional students focused on behaviors that enhance grades (giving out study guide, etc.). 5) Grading rubrics and grading styles also may differ for the non-traditional students (Walwood & Anderson, 1998). A criterion-based grading system, which examines traits, indicative of progress toward the course goals rather than specific graded assignments might be used. I like to use peer reviews of student work, where each student in the class evaluates and assigns a grade to their peer's efforts. This is done anonymously and the professor assigns the final grade. Each student is given a packet containing all their peers comments and grades. Studies (Lundberg, 2003) indicate that collaborative learning outside the classroom works very well with the non-traditional student. Active learning as both a teacher and student in collaborative rather than competitive settings is very useful with the non-traditional student.

The seven general principles of good teaching practice as discussed by Chickering and Gamson (1987) still hold true for me in the classroom. Encourage student contact with the professor, encourage reciprocity and co-operation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time management that benefits the student, high expectations and respect for all students. The trend towards more and more

non-traditional students is growing and colleges and professors need to account for this population in their designs and offerings.

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