THE TOOLBOX

A Teaching and Learning Resource for Instructors

ACKNOWLEDGING THE NEEDS AND PRIORITIES OF ADULT LEARNERS

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In recent years, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of adult learners enrolled in higher education. Comprising roughly 35% of the total student body, this percentage is expected to rise in the coming years (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). Choy (2002) says adult learners are often classified as being "nontraditional students" who are typically over the age of 24 and meet one or more of the following criteria:

» Delay enrollment (i.e., do not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that they finished high school);

» Attend part time (i.e., less than 75% of a full-time course load) for at least part of the academic year;

» Work full time (i.e., 35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;

» Considered financially independent for purposes of determining financial aid eligibility;

» Have dependents other than a spouse (i.e., usually children, but sometimes others);

» Single parent (i.e., either unmarried or married but separated and with dependents);

» Do not have a high school diploma (i.e., earned a GED certificate or equivalent, or did not finish high school).

As this list illustrates, adults who enroll in higher education often have a unique set of circumstances that distinguish them from many of their classmates. It is important for faculty to remember these differences and respond to the needs of their adult students in a proactive fashion.

Pedagogy vs. Andragogy

Teaching and learning strategies are often categorized under a general rubric of pedagogy and andragogy. Pedagogy literally refers to the general practice of instructing children, whereas andragogy refers to specific strategies and techniques for teaching adults. German educator Alexander Kapp first coined the term *andragogy* in 1833,

> "Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at 20 or 80. Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young.
> — Henry Ford, American industrialist"

but it was Malcolm Knowles, beginning in 1950, who refined and defined best practices for teaching adults. In Knowles's classic text, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (1984), he identified five key principles of adult learning:

» Adults have a sense of self-direction and autonomy related to learning.

» Adults bring a variety of life experiences to their engagement with learning.

» Adults come to learning with a personalized sense of motivation.

» Adults strive to find ways they can apply what they are learning.

» Adults have their own personalized reasons for pursuing further education (e.g., new job or career, promotion, example to other family members).

As conversations regarding the learning needs of adults gained momentum, practitioners also began to apply experiential learning (Kolb & Fry, 1975), self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1985), and learner-centered principles (American Psychological Association, 1995) to the learning needs of adults.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Instructors can purposefully acknowledge the learning needs and priorities of adult students as they design and deliver instruction for them in higher education. Here are some ideas for instructional planning (which will benefit all learners):

» **Create a supportive learning environment —** Participating in higher education can be an intimidating and bewildering situation for many adults. Being sensitive to their realities and having ongoing communication with adult learners will be of immense value in their success.

» **Provide opportunities for reflection on what is being learned —** College courses often move at a rapid pace, but instructors should allocate time in class (or online) to engage their students in reflecting on what they are learning and how the pieces fit together (and are relevant to the overall structure of the academic discipline).

» **Value the experiences of adult learners —** Adult learners typically come to class with a wealth of practical experiences related to the topics being studied. One example could be an individual who has worked in retail sales for the past 20 years and is now enrolled in an Introduction to Business class. Granted, the adult learner will be mastering new content knowledge and gaining a theoretical background on many concepts in the field of business, but they may also be connecting the dots between their own practical experiences and the concepts being discussed in class. Creating opportunities for that student to connect those dots, and even share their experiences with classmates, adds value to the learning process.

» **Make definitive connections between course content and real-world applications —** Students engaged in undergraduate and graduate programs often have their own reasons for pursuing a chosen academic major, and this reality is particularly keen for adult learners. As a way of enhancing the relevance quotient of a discipline-specific academic course, it is helpful to make "destination references" that connect content with what will become post-evaluation realities for

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students entering the work force (Garner, 2012). These connections can be made by the instructor, based upon their own experiences, or through guest speakers who either come to class or connect through a campus web-conferencing tool.

» **Provide options for learning —** Although it is common knowledge that students have their own preferences and strengths in learning, typical course design follows one path to the accomplishments of selected learning outcomes. When possible, it is helpful to provide adult learners with choices in relation to completing assigned tasks (e.g., write a paper, make a movie, do a class presentation). In each of these examples, students are showing their understanding of designated content. At the same time, they are exercising a level of control over how their knowledge is communicated.

» **Provide opportunities for adult learners to express their point of view and also engage with others who may think differently —** One strategy that can be integrated across all academic disciplines is giving students the opportunity to engage in civil dialogue on topics that generally invite different opinions. While adult learners may have firsthand experiences or strong opinions on these topics, they should also be required to support their positions with scholarly research. This is part of the academic process. Contrast that approach with other students in the class who know the topic from an academic perspective (e.g., what they read in their textbooks) without any knowledge of the practical, real life examples or consequences related to that topic. Blending these two vantage points can result in a rich, multidimensional conversation that benefits all learners.

Will these recommended practices, designed to align with the learning needs of adult learners, be equally beneficial for all learners? The answer to this question is, "Yes." So, as instructors welcome adults into their courses, it is posited that their participation in the class, and their interactions with "traditional" students, can be a win for all.

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