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ABSTRACT

Students in a University of New Mexico English extension class at Kirtland Air Force Base differ in age, culture, values, and skills, all of which must be taken into account by the instructor. Most of these students are returning students with past experiences and education which most traditional students do not have, and at least half the class was older than the instructor. Despite a population different from the traditional students on the main campus, some regular strategies were helpful to adult learners, especially in aiming for a student-centered, active, and discussion oriented classroom. Key strategies for teachers to use with adult learners include: (1) asking them to assess their own skills; (2) teaching basic skills early; (3) modeling the skills and thinking you are asking them to learn; (4) providing plenty of opportunities for dialogues; (5) helping them build upon previous knowledge and experience by showing appreciation for it; and (6) emphasizing group work. In discussion, the focus can be on fostering critical thinking and analysis skills while discussing particular issues. The goal becomes helping adult learners examine and analyze their experiences so that they can write about them for others in a meaningful way. (Contains 7 references.) (CR)

Carin Bigrigg

"Mind the Gap": Bridging Cultural, Age, and Value Differences

As an instructor at a racially and economically diverse campus, the University of New Mexico, I am accustomed to working with students from various backgrounds, but most of them are full-time traditional students. Though the average undergraduate age at the University of New Mexico is 27 years old, few of those students enroll in great numbers in the lower division composition course; thus, the majority of students in first year composition courses instructors see have just graduated from high school. Additionally, the campus is diverse: 53% of our students are women, almost one third are Hispanic, and the number of Native American population at the University of New Mexico is one of the largest of any of the major research universities in the country.

However, my experiences did not prepare me to teach at an Air Force installation where the majority of students (even in English 101 and 102 classrooms) do not fit the "traditional" role: mid-thirties, multicultural (beyond Hispanic and Native American), families with children, and full-time careers. Because these students feel more fragmented, as Linden West points out in his essay, "Beyond Fragments: Adults, Motivation and Higher Education," "between private lives (as a parent or partner) and public spheres (as a student in higher education) and between experiential ways of knowing (personal, subjective, emotional) and academic knowledge (objective and abstract)," we need to target these students for special attention and alternative learning strategies (West 133).

STUDENT PROFILE

Each University of New Mexico English extension class at Kirtland Air Force Base (KAFB) takes place over an 8 week period; so in one semester, a student can

take both 101 (Exposition) and 102 (Analysis and Argumentation) with the same instructor. Immediately this time frame sets up additional pressures on the student and changes the student-teacher relationship, for we meet Mondays and Wednesdays from 5:30-8:15; the session proceeds for 8 weeks for English 101, gives students and teacher a week off, and then starts another 8 week course for English 102. On a campus the size of the University of New Mexico, with 70+ teaching assistants, most students take different teachers and spend considerably less time with them.

After 5 years of teaching on the main campus, the first day of class almost always leaves me with the same primary image: most students are seated in the back of the room, most are white with a sprinkling of Hispanic students, arms closed across their bodies, the average age is 18, no texts out, reading the newspaper or staring off into space, and basically aggressive and antagonistic: everything in body and face translates into: "Why do I have to take English 101? I hate English—that's why I'm going to be" and fill in the blank. However, I knew the KAFB students were different as soon as I walked in the door, and that first image continues to show me the major differences between those adult learners and the more traditional main campus students: no one was seated in the back of the room, several different cultural groups were represented, most were in comfortable and neutral body positions, the average age was 35, all had the appropriate books in front of them, and all were watching the door attentively, waiting for the instructor's arrival: everything in body and face translated into: "I'm looking forward to this course, even though English isn't my strongest subject. When are we going to get started?"

So the KAFB students differ in age, culture, values, and skills, all of which must

be taken into account by the instructor. The most crucial differences, I found, however, have been the age and values issues. Unlike the main campus English courses, where most students resent being forced to take English 101 and 102 and have to be pushed to do the minimal amount of work, motivation is rarely an issue at KAFB; these students generally want to learn the skills necessary to effectively communicate, and they want those skills for the future and not for the grade. Though grade conscious, they are not grade-driven; they desire good skills first and foremost. And unlike most of the main campus students, these are part-time students with full-time careers; most of them had families and additional responsibilities most traditional students don't have. This change in lifestyle created value differences which the instructor must credit, work with, and understand in order to teach effectively.

CHALLENGES

Most of these students were returning students, with past experiences and education which most traditional students don't have; at least half the class was older than the instructor. With such experiences and knowledge, the instructor can't teach as if these students were *tabula rasa* to be written upon.

Additionally, with age came a dimming of writing skills. Though these students were experts in their fields and most of them wrote every day, over time they had been writing in a certain style, for a certain audience, and for a different purpose than academic writing. Many experienced a difficult time retraining themselves to this new approach to writing, and several felt discouraged by the differences. Likewise, most needed a review of basic punctuation and rather than focus on the content or organization of the essays, they focused on punctuation rather than the rest of the

essay with the idea that "If I can get my comma-usage correct, this will be a good paper."

Along with a decrease in original writing skills, the basic skills we assume traditional students have are missing: critical thinking, critical reading, and analysis; though the focus of English 101 is on these skills, most students start with at least the foundation of knowledge they gained in high school. The academic approach to these skills, for adult learners, is, unfortunately, different from that which they learn on the job and utilize everyday.

Furthermore, the challenges associated with the differing ages led to differing value and support systems because most of these students were first generation college bound with careers and families. As first generation college bound individuals, these students often lack a home and family support system to help them accomplish their goals; such an absence translates into lack of time management skills and lack of basic study skills. Exacerbating this lack of skills due to being first generation college bound, all of them have full-time careers, and though Air Force pays for and encourages their schooling, they are still required to work 40+ hours a week. With such a further demand for their attention and study time, students find they have less time to accomplish what they need. Add a family competing for attention as well, and the adult students spends most of his or her time juggling responsibilities.

How did they find ways to cope? To gain time to study without shorting her husband, one woman brought donuts to work, and while everyone was eating and socializing, she spent time on the computer doing school work or reading the assignment. One man who was about to lose a surfeit of sick days, used several to

work on his final portfolio; in this way, he was able to avoid two different claims for his time and attention: work and family (his wife was at work and his children were at school). Another man, whose family constantly interrupted his designated study time, began to invite other students over during his study time for group sessions; thus he was able to read and study more effectively since his family showed less inclination to bother him in front of other students. Finally, my favorite story is one woman who, like the man above, couldn't get any work done at home because her very close-knit family refused to allow her quiet time alone at the kitchen table; however, she found that when she did her homework in the bathroom, their calls for her attention diminished rapidly, and she had privacy and quiet.

Despite these coping mechanisms, which they shared with each other throughout the course, most students felt frustrated by the challenges represented above. They were able to cope, but just barely, and in two cases, they couldn't so they dropped the course.

HOW DID I ORIGINALLY HELP THEM COPE?

Because much of this information didn't become apparent until well into the semester, most of my teaching strategies at KAFB had been designed for a different student population: the University of New Mexico main campus. Despite the different population, however, some of my regular strategies were helpful to my adult learners, especially since I have always preferred a student-centered, active, and discussion-oriented classroom.

With my desire for a student-centered classroom, my relationship to the students was already personal. I see myself as a coach in the composition classroom, so I don't

run a strict, lecture-based class; instead, I try to approach them almost as peers. Most of my adult students, because of their ages and previous experience and knowledge, found this choice helpful. They felt comfortable about asking for independent meetings with me, and they called me at home when they were in especial trouble.

Additionally, because I want more students involved and active in their own learning process, I always provide them with a complete syllabus, with detailed assignments, on the first day of course. Though this sometimes decreases my ability to approach student problems immediately, most full-time employed students appreciated it because they were able to work ahead. For example, one of the KAFB composition instructors gives students assignments daily; so their Wednesday response paper is assigned on Monday. However, because of the nature of full-time work, most students get their homework completed over the weekend. Providing them with their assignments at the beginning of course allows them to take responsibility for their own time management, and furnishing them with a wide range of choice helps increase the chance they'll find something they know and understand to write about.

With the personal relationship with my students came a desire to discuss the topics. Though I never run a lecture-only course, I realized early on and with topics like affirmative action, that these students held a lot more hands-on information than I did. Thus the students held many discussions, and in doing so, again demonstrated their breadth of knowledge; they felt like valued members of a community rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

Additionally, I use a lot of group work on the main campus. Originally I used peer groups because traditional students learn different points of view from others and

learn to examine different sides of issues; however, at KAFB, I came to realize that group work in the adult learning environment demonstrates value for the lifetime of experiences and knowledge that adult learners have already mastered. In this way, I tried to combine my personal approach to them as a coach with their work with their direct peers.

This last strategy became the core of my classroom and worked itself into most facets of my students' lives. Groups became support systems full of people going through the same "hell" as the others; they became family. For example, there's the student who used his groups to allow him space and time away from his family without slighting them. But also of interest was the man going through a divorce and subsequent economic problems. The groups he worked with, both inside and outside the classroom, came to understand that the economic burdens he was under sometimes kept him from eating; as a "family," they began bringing "snacks" to class and buying him snacks and meals outside of class.

HOW WILL I FINE TUNE THE COURSE FOR THE FUTURE?

To attempt avoiding some of the early discouragement my students felt over the difference between their own writing skills and those they need to learn, I intend to emphasize what Terry Dean in "Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers" calls a different culture and what Patricia Bizzell in "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?" terms a new world view. I want to punctuate that these students are learning to work in an academic culture and learning differing ways to view the world, each other, and themselves; to do so means learning a whole new realm of skills: as Dean puts it, they have to figure out "what is acceptable evidence, what persuasive

strategies work best, what is taken to be a demonstration of 'truth' in different disciplines" (Dean 24).

I also want to further demonstrate the importance of their previous knowledge and experience, both in the assigned topics and in the way I run discussions. Although Terry Dean's essay focuses on the multicultural but traditional age student, some of his advice and suggested assignments could also work in the adult learner's classroom. For example, he suggests culturally oriented topics to help students explore their own backgrounds and cultures; since the adult learner classroom at an Air Force installation is multicultural, this topic would allow students to use their past experiences and show the value of them. Additionally, most Air Force personnel stand behind the idea of cultural diversity and education; asking them to problematize both education and cultural diversity would allow them to critically analyze something they have probably only examined from one-side until now. Thus, the first assignment would be a personal essay; in this way, I hope to better bridge the gap between their pasts and their academic futures by encouraging them to start with their experiences and then learn how to integrate them into more formal and academic work.

As for discussion, I would like to focus more on fostering critical thinking and analysis skills while discussing particular issues. Rather than feature what people thought, we should also aim at discussing why and how we have come to think this; Bizzell, following the developmental scheme of William Perry, argues that a fundamental element for a contextualization of knowledge is the "willingness 'to think about even his own thoughts, to examine the way he orders his data and the assumptions he is making, and to compare these with other thoughts that other men

might have'" (Bizzell 298). So instead of a discussion where students only demonstrate knowledge of events, society, and argument, they also consider how each came to hold such viewpoints.

"Ignore the woman behind the curtain" will become my motto for these dialogues. Though I have always tried to take part in discussions as mediator and not authority, my new place will be as mediator and model. David O. Justice encourages instructors, in "Facilitating Adult Learning in a Liberal Education Context," to spend more time modeling and less time lecturing, and our roles should also "co-learner, peer, collaborator in inquiry, [and] perhaps coach" (32). Again this will validate their previous experience at the same time as providing them a model for future academic experience. To help adult learners catch up quickly to their more traditional-aged cohorts, I would spend more time and earlier on the basics of critical reading, summarizing, questioning, and critical thinking. Learning to read effectively for a classroom atmosphere could really help students manage their time more efficiently, and since I can't give them more hours in the day for their studies, I can at least provide them with skills they can use to use their time for effectively.

Following a strategy outlined in Justice's article, I would also demonstrate to adult learners the value of self-assessment; while learning how to read and think critically then, they would apply those questions and criteria to their own work in an attempt to gain a greater understanding of academic guidelines, course goals, and further responsibility for their own learning. Such self-assessment allows them an opportunity to "understand and internalize the criteria" by applying it to their own work; this will also build on a skill they have most probably already learned in the workplace:

how to measure accomplishments and abilities" (Justice 33).

So key strategies with adult learners include: asking them to assess their own skills, teaching basic skills early, modeling the skills and thinking you're asking them to learn, providing plenty of opportunities for dialogues, helping them build upon previous knowledge and experience by showing an appreciation for it, and emphasizing group work. And my goal becomes helping adult learners examine and analyze their experiences in order to write about them for others in a meaningful way.

Let me leave you with a quotation from David Justice: "The challenge lies in meeting adult learners first in their own terms with their own goals, knowledge, and histories; it is joining them in their learning and inviting them to join in the experiences of formal and academic learning" (Justice 33).

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