

Engaging later-life learners through portfolio writing

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ABSTRACT

The ever increasing enrollment of later-life students in institutions of higher learning warrants innovative teaching strategies to promote successful learning outcomes. This article discusses the academic challenges that instructors face and argues in support of an important assessment method, that is, portfolio writing. This novel strategy was adopted as a shift from the traditional essay writing in an undergraduate course in sociology. Scores from students who wrote the portfolio were compared with scores from students who wrote the traditional essay. Analysis revealed increased understanding among portfolio writers. They were better able to conceptualize, acquire and apply knowledge through a wealth of visual aids and real-world experiences. The authors suggest that this assessment method can be successfully adopted across some other disciplines, cultures and countries.

Keywords: andragogy, experiential learning, nontraditional students, portfolio writing, scholarship of teaching and learning

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INTRODUCTION

This study discusses the academic challenges that nontraditional adult learners face and explores the portfolio assessment method as a way to help instructors meet these challenges. The portfolio method is a variant of the andragogical approach developed by Knowles (1980) and Knowles and Associates (1984). The paper argues that if the quest for higher education is sustained among adult students, and if colleges and universities are to maintain their competitive edge in recruitment and retention drives, then the teaching-learning process will require fundamental changes in the ways instructors teach nowadays. Instructors will have to diversify their teaching methods by engaging learners more directly in the pursuit of knowledge. Effective teaching and learning will require that educators take the classroom beyond the goal of training students to acquire skills through standardized tests and credentials. While these skills are important for students who want to function effectively in the real world, effective education must draw out, stimulate, and promote self-reliance and experiential learning. In other words, the teaching and learning process will include also opportunities for the learners to take responsibility for and initiative in their own learning and to move toward independency and self-directedness (Knowles, 1980). Hiemstra and Sisco (1990) believe that when used by a skillful and dedicated instructor as facilitator, this andragogical approach to teaching and learning can make a positive impact on the adult learner. These challenges and instructional response to them have created the impetus for writing this paper.

BACKGROUND

A large proportion of incoming students in the United States lacks writing and comprehension skills consistent with the expected degree of challenge in colleges and universities. According to a Special Report on Schools & Colleges, more than 40 percent of students arrive on college campuses needing remedial work, Chronicle of Higher Education (2006). The problem goes beyond concerns in English to include lack of readiness in Mathematics and the sciences. In fact, deficiency in writing and comprehension skills poses major obstacles to scholarly inquiry in almost all disciplines. The first part of the paper accounts for the challenges instructors face as they create new strategies to achieve realistic learning goals of older nontraditional students. The second part argues that the promotion of critical thinking among adult learners is facilitated by experiential learning opportunities – a method by which instructors will reach more learners more of the time. Here, the article discusses benefits of using real-life, personal experiences of adult learners through portfolio writing. It explores ways by which learners' life course experiences can be an effective instructional approach for motivating them and for enhancing learning outcomes. The portfolio approach is based upon students' reflections of course content and its application to their childhood experiences.

This work promises to contribute to the development and implementation of pedagogical strategies for promoting student learning and engagement. While particular attention is paid to sociology, the analysis should have important implications for teaching and learning outcomes across disciplines.

Social Profiles of Older Nontraditional Students

Since about the 1970s, colleges and universities in North America have been witnessing a noticeable demographic shift among incoming students. The same is true of many institutions of higher learning in other parts of the world, including parts of Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe. Thus, the portfolio method is potentially applicable globally (see Discussion section). In this paper, however, attention is drawn to nontraditional college or university students in the United States of America. Nontraditional learners are defined as new freshmen students who are age 21 or older at the point of admission and who have been away from formal academic studies for three or more years.

Between 1970 and 2009, older students accounted for most freshmen enrollments in colleges in the United States. The percentage increase was even more noticeable for full-time enrollment over the same period as indicated in Table 1 and Table 2 (Appendix).

In addition to increase in enrollment, older students' statuses of employment, marriage, and number of children they have, have witnessed considerable changes during the last forty years. Nontraditional students come from diverse backgrounds that include full-time and part-time employees, individuals working at odd jobs, unemployed persons, parents, single-parents heads of families, and divorcees. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, (October 2010), between 2004 and 2009, 75% of freshmen were raising a family.

Two of the various factors that account for the changes noted above deserve special mention here. In the first case, colleges and universities in the United States (and around the world) have become more responsive to community needs and thus have stepped up recruitment and retention drives by targeting older students. In an effort to keep pace with workplace demands for new skills, academic communities have launched a movement towards lifelong learning. Older individuals are urged to return to the classroom, to seek out the unknown and to keep on learning during their later-life stage. It is clear that enrollment officers are leading the drive to promote continuing education and lifelong learning, but what is less well known is whether they are doing so with a conscious awareness of the unique resources that nontraditional students bring to the classroom.

Challenges to educators are compounded by the diverse backgrounds that nontraditional and their on-time traditional counterparts bring to the same classroom. Different interests, goals and experiences of the learners require new and varying teaching strategies. More than ever before, instructors are required to keep up to date with developments in their respective disciplines. It is the contention of this paper that the growing diversity need not be taken as a weakness of the demographic changes to the classroom. Rather, the diversity offers students and instructors important opportunities for social exchange to enrich the teaching and learning process.

Useful Resources of the Learners

This study is anchored on the premise that nontraditional students bring valuable experiences and resources to the classroom that can empower and motivate them in their quest for higher education. According to Knowles (1980), they accumulate a reservoir of experience that can be used as a basis on which to build learning. They have much to share with younger students and instructors. More specifically, they bring relative maturity, knowledge, work-related experience, disciplined time-management skills, and, oftentimes, clarity about the program of

study they wish to pursue. They bring many challenges to the classroom as well. For example, fearing that they may make mistakes, many are unwilling or slow to take risks. Furthermore, given their relatively low computer literacy skills, many nontraditional students tend to use technology and other technical library resources rather sparingly. Conversely, younger traditional students are much savvier with technology. They use technology to enhance their presentations and learning. Expected learning outcomes may be realized if instructors recognize and address these differences.

Special Needs of Non-traditional Students

Essay writing has been a special feature of the teaching-and-learning process for many instructors in sociology. During the first year of teaching for the first author, (hereafter called “instructor”) students were expected to write papers of ten to twelve pages. Assignments required that students focus on critical thinking. A mere reproduction of prior work or description of the issues at hand would not have sufficed. Instead, written papers were expected to show evidence of “assessment,” “discussion,” “evaluation,” “analysis,” “explanation,” and, where appropriate, “application.”

The first draft of the traditional term paper had not yet been completed when the instructor became acutely aware of students’ special needs in writing and comprehension. Most of the students at all levels—from freshman to seniors, had serious difficulties writing traditional term papers. They griped over writing assignments that required library search and in-depth review of available literature. They approached their writing tasks with little or no critical thinking about the subject at hand. Performance was generally low, showing, on average, poor to fair grades among non-traditional students and generally fair grades among younger traditional students. This problem was well known from the beginning, despite the high SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement test scores. However, the problem seemed to have gotten worse year after year.

After consultation and discussions with students and with some colleagues, it was clear that students generally possessed a wealth of knowledge and ability to perform at a much higher level than their grades indicated. However, given their poor comprehension skills, many were less able to articulate or write effectively. The demographic realities of the classroom called for new and innovative strategies to kindle the potentialities of the learners, not to accommodate a demand and supply model. Effective learning outcomes required that the instructor promote and maintain rigorous scholarship while at the same time keep learning goals realistic. This meant creating strategies to achieve desired goals without compromising academic integrity. In the light of these values, instructional materials, assignments, and tests were constantly altered to reflect classroom heterogeneity and learners’ interests.

METHOD: WHAT WAS DONE

Portfolio Writing

One of the ways by which the instructor pursued realistic goals of critical thinking and effective writing was through the writing of a portfolio in the broad area of socialization. Students were asked the searching question: “Who are you?” The usual response was the name of the student as in “I am Jane,” or “I am John.” Occasionally a stare or hesitation preceded

students' verbal response. The answer was no different when the question was more direct as, "Jane, Who are you?" These questions and answers were a way to introduce the topic of socialization which is usually listed as the third or fourth chapter on the syllabus. By this time, the instructor had become quite familiar with the students, even to the point of being able to link their faces with their names. This familiarity was facilitated by relatively small class size (N=45) and by seating arrangements established at the beginning of the semester. Hence, in asking the question, "Who are you"? the instructor was interested in knowing more about respondents, not just their names. A more elaborate response would include, for example, the student's fairly consistent pattern of thinking, feeling and acting, that is, the student's personality. The question-and-answer exchange created an important starting point for explaining how the patterns of personality come about. It was a way to maximize their learning abilities by drawing upon their own experiences and abilities (Knowles, 1980).

In using the portfolio method, it was important to consider that some students might have had an "ugly past" and might not wish to reveal this to anyone. Experiences with child abuse, parents' divorce, incest are issues that could remind them of society's ugly face of conflict and change. From the very outset, then, students were given the option to build their portfolio upon real or imagined socialization experiences. Pseudonyms were allowed to ensure confidentiality, and most importantly, students were assured that no attempts would be made to verify the information they gave. It was important that students know that, in this case, it was not the truth that mattered. Rather, evaluation would focus on the extent to which their writing demonstrated understanding and competence in discussing and applying relevant sociological concepts to personal life experiences. Paul and Elder (2006) consider such accomplishment as signs of critical thinking. Some older students did not have suitable pictures, so they were encouraged to sketch drawings and report stories or information based on oral history about their early life experiences.

It is generally agreed that both nature and nurture play important parts in personality development. However, sociologists put more emphasis on the role of nurture or socialization – a lifelong process through which individuals learn the values, beliefs, norms, and ways of a particular society. In a word, individuals learn *culture*, and this learning takes place in a social matrix, that is, through social interaction with such agents as family, school, peer-group, the mass media, religion, and work.

The use of the portfolio method of assessment is an effective way to promote understanding of this learning process. Several studies are in support experiential and portfolio method of evaluation. For example, Gronlund and Waugh (2009:180) support this method on the grounds that: it allows students an opportunity to be involved in their own learning; it promotes students' critical thinking skills, reflection, and self-evaluation; it promotes positive learning outcome by focusing on students' best work; and it promotes mutually beneficial teacher-student collaboration. This is a learner-centered approach which Wood (2008) defines as a collaborative model in which the teacher serves as a guide, collaborator or facilitator in the learning process. Further support comes from Clark, Fochs, Rafman & Walker (1997) who found that learning from the knowledge and experience of others was valued by participants in a peer learning model for seniors.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Effective sociological writing was emphasized, requiring that students write in a structured and meaningful way. To do so, they were to situate their writing in one of the three primary theoretical paradigms (Berger 1963; Kuhn 1970) that sociologists use: (1) the structural functional perspective, (2) the social conflict perspective, and (3) the symbolic interactionist perspective.

The structural-functional perspective and the social conflict perspective are different in certain key ways. Yet they share some basic features. For example, they are both macro-theories in that they allow sociologists to analyze whole societies and social institutions from the viewpoint of social structures. Structural-functionalist perspective is built on the basic premise that society is a complex system whose parts work together to promote social order or stability. According to its practitioners, different parts (e.g., social institutions) of society are held together by widespread consensus as to what is desirable. Each part of the system has functional consequences for the operation of the society as a whole. Critical evaluation of the structural-functional perspective has led to the development of a somewhat reactionary approach, the social-conflict framework. The focus of the social conflict perspective is on conflict and change as illustrated in studies about family disorganization, divorce, and social inequality, in general.

Symbolic interactionist perspective is a micro-level orientation that focuses on interpreting symbols by negotiating meanings. The approach follows close-up face-to-face kinds of social interactions in relatively small groups.

DATA SOURCE

Sample

Between 2007 and 2009, undergraduate students in the course “Introduction to Sociology” at a state university in Northeast Ohio were asked if they would like to submit their graded portfolios for analysis in this study. A total of 25 portfolios were voluntarily submitted electronically by nontraditional students – 68% females and 32% males with a mean age of 33 years. The average grade earned by students was 90% or A-.

Ethical Consideration

Students were informed about the conditions under which their portfolios would be used. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted at the proposal level of this research.

Data Analysis

The authors thoroughly read and re-read each portfolio with a strategy to identify general patterns (Schutt, 2012) or central themes (Bryman, 2008). A thematic data analysis was followed (Riessman, 2004), whereby subthemes were placed in cells which were subsumed under the main themes. Matching data from the portfolio were inserted into the respective cells. In searching for themes, the authors looked out for key signals, for example, repetition (i.e., recurring topics); transitions (i.e., the ways in which topics shift); similarities and differences; linguistic connections (i.e., examining the use of words that point to causal connections in the

minds of participants, for example, “because” or “since;”); and theory-related material such as scientific concepts as springboard for themes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Some themes reported in students’ reflections were identified with reference to Bloom’s (1956) hierarchy of cognitive learning levels. Thus, the authors paid special attention to organizational skills, picture illustrations, application of concepts and theories, integration of relevant materials from the literature, and critical thinking. Further assessment was done by crosschecking with students for meanings of texts.

RESULTS

Finding Their Pens

In contrast to the struggles and inhibition students encountered when writing traditional essays, the portfolio writing process created opportunities for them to meet with the instructor on several occasions to share their thoughts and interests. They developed their ideas more fully and wrote in a more focused way. They took pride in preparing the portfolios. The strategy promoted creativity, motivation and free flow of ideas. In a way, the portfolio approach helped students to “find their pens.” It promoted learners’ self-directedness—a way of learning without being taught (Knowles, 1975).

Feedback and Evaluation of Learning Outcomes

When asked to share their reflections of personality development in childhood and adolescence, students willingly offered the typical responses shown in Table 3 (Appendix). These positive comments indicate the effectiveness of the portfolio as a teaching-learning strategy. To a large extent, students developed skills of independent inquiry. After completing the portfolio, they were able to give more thoughtful answers to the question, “Who are you”? Answers are no longer limited to their names. Instead, “I am Mary, an organized, honest, responsible, caring person.” The assignment helped the learners to understand that, to a large extent, these qualities were not given at birth. Rather, they have emerged and developed through social interaction (Mead 1962, orig. 1934).

Other Themes detected in students’ reflections of their childhood development are discussed under the agents of socialization that follow. Pseudonym names are used to insure anonymity of participants.

The Family and Socialization

All twenty five subjects identified family as their first and most dominant agent of socialization. Tom’s account of his childhood development presents a novel case of the role that his family played in his upbringing. It is no wonder that he chose the title:

My Family: My First Window to the Outside World.

His portfolio bears a family portrait on the inside cover page. Two other pictures of his family – one showing members performing different tasks such as cooking, washing dishes, and preparing drinks, and the other with members seated at the dining table are linked with the words: “My family comes together at Thanksgiving.” See Figure 1 (Appendix.)

This statement captures the premise of the structural functional perspective which views society as a complex whole whose parts work together to promote social order or stability. In the case of Ron, his portfolio is titled: "About My Self: Sociologically Speaking." Ron acknowledges that his parents gave him social placement in terms of socioeconomic status, race, religion and ethnicity. In time, all these elements have become part of his self-concept. In a similar vein, Lisa traced her personality development by noting:

I have grown to become a caring and loving person to my own children. I attribute this personality to the emotional and material support of my family, the most dominant agent of socialization through the formative years of my childhood.

This is an application of Mead's (1962; orig. 1934) view that the "self" gradually emerges through social experience.

The School and Socialization

Cindy places the school high up in the order of the agents that influenced her early life. In addition to the carefully selected and illustrative picture of her elementary school, she makes the following claims: "Certainly, I gained more knowledge and academic skills by going to school. I learned how rules and regulations govern work at school and how they apply to other situations and workplaces." Cindy notes also that other valuable lessons were learned through latent functions (Merton 1957) and hidden curriculum. These include values of punctuality and positive work ethics such as task completion. For example, one complimentary message that her teacher sent to her parents reads: "Cindy completed her tasks on time. She followed the teacher's instructions and was very helpful." According to Cindy, such feedback underscores Mead's (1962; orig. 1934) analysis of socialization and his recognition that the social self emerges out of social interaction with others. Thus, Cindy has become aware of herself as others see her. Her teachers and other agents of socializations, discussed below, represent her looking-glass self (Cooley 1902) or a mirror through which she sees herself based on how she imagines others see her.

Positive feedback like those made above made Tom feel happy and motivated to do even better. He said that the messages boosted his feeling of self-worth and helped to set the stage for further academic excellence. Tom's school's principal would paddle students who broke the rules, so Tom made every effort to conform to expected norms. He learned also that:

Hard work pays and that the harder I worked, the more it pleased my teachers. The praise they offered was a great reward to me as a child. I still remember my fourth grade teacher who taught me to be a very hardworking person.

Mary included a picture in which she is seen stepping off the school bus while her mother stands at the curb to greet her. The words below the picture read: "My first day at school."

If one agrees that a picture tells a thousand words, then these five words are sufficient to focus the reader's attention to the importance of the school as an agent of her childhood development.

Bill's portfolio follows the symbolic interactionist approach. Oftentimes he was faced with situations that required him to form judgments and interpretations based on the "definition of the situations" (DeLamater & Myers 2007: 227, 228). All that his teachers had to do when he got out of line was to flick the ruler while holding a stern look in his direction. Bill said, "I would stop dead in my track and return to order, thereby indicating that I had shared my teacher's meaning of nonverbal the gesture (Goffman, 1959).

Religion and Socialization

In emphasizing the role that religion played in her childhood development, Mark includes a picture of his Church with the statement: “My father was a Minister of Religion.” This does well to hold the reader spellbound on the religious values that helped to guide his childhood development. These lessons underscore also his understanding of the concept of self which he views in the following way: “I am firmly rooted in religious principles that promote love for others, self-respect, honesty, hard work, and volunteerism.” See Figure 2 in Appendix.

Peer Groups and Socialization

The opportunity to interact with others of the same age, social class, and interests is a way to build friendship and understanding especially during adolescent years. Here is Tina’s reflection of the influence of peer group:

My friends were the most important source of help during my troubled adolescent stage. I learned a great deal from them that helped me with the transition into womanhood. Further reflections of the influence of peer group are uniquely revealed through pictures. Most portfolios about this agent of socialization show that students were drawn to peer groups mainly because they felt a need for acceptance and belonging.

The Mass Media

See Figure 3 in Appendix.

Reflections about the mass media suggest that the influence was mixed as indicated by these contrasting statements from one student:

It introduced me to the concept of learning and sharing as taught by Big Bird and Cookie Monster, and it gave me a vivid picture of the first man on the moon which reinforced the lessons learned in school that hard work pays. The mass media presented the world as a violent place in shows like Guerilla Warfare and the Three Stooges.

Gender Role Socialization

See Figure 4 in Appendix.

One main theme that emerges from portfolios is differential treatment along gender line. This includes: more restrictive curfews for girls than for boys of the same age, pink clothing and softer types of toys for girls and blue clothing and mechanical types of toys for boy. Students recalled instances when they were reprimanded for crossing the gender lines. This is much like the case of one participant who remarked that after his mother had him wash the dishes, his dad violently smashed the dishes and rebuked his wife for having assigned Mario a feminine domestic chore. In this family, male roles conveyed a sense of strength, authority, and toughness, while feminine roles were perceived to be more expressive, or more concerned with caring and gentleness. Participants have raised question about this apparently conflicting view on the grounds that women’s work is considered complementary work (Parsons and Bales 1953). Yet they are faced with what Hochschild (1990) calls the second shift, that is, their participation in paid employment outside the home and the fact that upon returning home, they are expected to

take care of almost all the domestic chores such as cooking, washing, cleaning, and childcare. These questions indicate critical thinking.

Other Evidence of Learning Outcomes

While the portfolio writing is the main focus of this paper, it should be noted that other methods were used to evaluate learning outcomes for the entire course. Success in portfolio writing was reflected in students' performance in in-class tests and quizzes. Tests and quizzes were developed to assess learning outcomes relative to Bloom's (1956) hierarchy of cognitive learning from knowledge (the most basic level) through to evaluation (the highest level). Level of motivation, interest, confidence, and expanded answers, all indicate positive learning outcomes. Class retention was noticeably higher for students who wrote portfolios than for students who wrote traditional term papers. When asked to state their preference between portfolio and traditional essay for other writing courses, 96% said they prefer to continue using this approach.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This assignment was built upon the premise that the art of teaching offers opportunities for mutual exchange and partnership between the teacher and the student and among the students themselves. It would be a mistake for instructors to approach the teaching and learning process as if they were the only teachers and the students were the only learners. Just as is true that there are significant differences between nontraditional and traditional students, there is great variation among nontraditional students. These differences can offer opportunities for enriched learning experience and intercultural exchange. The large number of foreign-born students who are pursuing studies in higher education in the United States is a case in point. Their diverse cultural backgrounds may create opportunities for applying the portfolio assessment method in courses that address geo-political issues. With careful planning, this teaching-learning strategy can be successfully applied to studies in sociology, social psychology, political studies, geography, gerontology, religious education and human services. With an effective facilitator, adult participants could be encouraged to express their life experiences and become "teachers" to their classmates in these courses.

It is important to recognize that andragogy, the art and discipline of teaching adult learners, applies to all adult learners, not only later-life learners. Andragogical and the portfolio approaches can be used together when classroom heterogeneity favors their combined use. The portfolio method may be better suited for older students who are drawn to colleges or universities with open admission access. Many of these incoming students lack the preparation to tackle traditional writing, at least initially.

The portfolio assessment method has potential for application to classrooms globally. Global educational innovations such as nontraditional programs, weekend classes, open universities and online programs require that learners assume a heavy responsibility and initiative in their own learning (Knowles, 1980). Herein lies the potential for adopting the portfolio method abroad. Developing societies generally have large student-instructor ratio. In some cases, then, instruction is heavily teacher-centered. The portfolio method may shift the focus to a learner-centered approach which moves learners toward self-directedness, immediacy

of application and performance-centeredness (Knowles, 1890). This way, it benefits both the learner and the instructor.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The portfolio method of assessment can be an effective teaching and learning strategy if the following recommendations are considered.

1. Students tend to feel pride in giving copies of their work and permission to share with others. Hence, give them the option to “show and tell” their accomplishments. This may motivate them toward further inquiries. Do not worry about plagiarizing because it is highly unlikely that two portfolios will be the same.
2. Be on the alert for glitches along the way. Some older students may have no pictures. Give options to include drawings/sketches.
3. Students may be concerned that their childhood experiences are too ugly to tell/write about. Give option to prepare real or imagined account of childhood experience and assure them that there will be no verification of report. Social conflict theory may be useful for guiding the writer. The goal is to promote understanding of the sociological concepts and ability to apply theoretical perspectives to practical life experiences.
4. Initially, expect students to say that they do not know how to prepare the portfolio. This feeling may persist even after they have started the project. This may be a sign that they are beginning to seriously think about the problem but are not quite sure about the total picture. They can take it step by step. For example, they can: collect pictures, sketch drawings, and gather other illustrative materials. The task may seem less daunting thereafter. Their concerns may lead them to the office for consultation. This gives opportunities for mentoring, advising, and useful feedback about the entire course.

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APPENDIX

Enrollment in degree-granting institutions by age and attendance status: Selected years

Table 1: Proportion of Enrollment Population of All Students (*in thousands)

Age and attendance status	1970	2000	2009	2019 (Projected)
All students	8,581*	15,312*	20,428*	23,448*
14 to 19 years old	33.32%	23.60%	20.79%	21.11%
20 years old and over	66.67%	76.40%	79.21%	78.89%

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, October, 2010.

Enrollment in degree-granting institutions by age and attendance status: Selected years

Table 2: Proportion of Enrollment Population of Full-time Students (*in thousands)

Age and attendance status	1970	2000	2009	2019 (Projected)
Full-time	5,816*	9,010*	11,748*	14,427*
14 to 19 years old	45.53%	33.11%	29.54%	29.03%
20 years old and over	54.49%	66.89%	70.46%	70.96%

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, October, 2010.