Teaching Adult Undergraduate Students

by Stacey Margarita Johnson

Adult learners returning to college after military service, parenthood, or other life experiences may approach college in a very different way than their less experienced classmates.

Many college instructors think of their undergraduate students as adults and treat them as such. In this teaching guide, the terms *adult students* and *adult learners* refer to undergraduates who fall outside of the typical 18-24 age range, or who have life experiences and responsibilities beyond those typically expected of a college student. Understanding some of the characteristics and challenges of adult learners at Vanderbilt can enable faculty to support these students in positive ways.

Who is an adult?

Despite being thought of as adults by many of their instructors, undergraduate students themselves do not share the perception that they are adults. Arnett (1994) surveyed 346 college students to learn about their conceptions of their own adulthood. Only 23% of respondents indicated that they considered themselves to be adults. Most, nearly two-thirds, responded that they considered themselves to be adults in some respects but not others. 70% of participants believed the following qualities to be definitive of adulthood: the ability to "accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions", "decide on beliefs and values independently of parents or other influencers", and "establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult."

A 2007 study (Nelson et al.) took this line of research a step further by also interviewing the college students' parents about their conceptions of their children's adulthood, then comparing the child and parent responses. This study revealed that neither college age students nor their parents believed the college students had reached adulthood, although the two groups disagreed on exactly what qualities might constitute an adult.

In the United States, adolescents tend to transition into adulthood through a series of milestones. For students who pursue a college education, the final step towards emancipation might begin when they have their first job and are supporting themselves financially after graduation. This traditional path to adulthood, however, fails to answer important questions about what it means to be an adult or who gets to call themselves an adult. Recent media coverage highlights the increasing practice of young adults returning home to live with their parents after college (Campbell, 2015; Cook, 2015), confounding the traditional, last emancipatory step into adulthood. Is a 17 year old single mom with a GED an adult? Is a 28 year old unemployed part-time student an adult? What particular qualities constitute adulthood?

While there is no consensus on the definition of and path through adulthood, there does seem to be agreement from students and parents that traditional college students are adults in some important respects, but not yet adults in others.

Non-traditional undergraduate students, on the other hand, are generally adults by anyone's definition. This category of undergraduates is defined by most colleges and universities as students who begin or return to college after the typical age of 18-24. These adults have had important life experiences before returning to college, experiences like raising a family, starting their careers, or serving in the military. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), the category of non-traditional undergraduate students includes several categories of adult learners including those who are enrolled full

or part-time while also working 35 hours or more per week, students with dependents -- whether married or single parents, and those who claim financial independence.

At Vanderbilt, in part because of their small numbers, adult students face challenges. These challenges can be difficult to overcome at institutions that heavily favor a residential undergraduate experience. At four-year, private, non-profit institutions, adult learners are 22% less likely to complete their degree than traditional-age students (Shapiro et al., 2012). Kasworm's (2010) study of adult undergraduates at a research university provides some insight as to how adults perceive their position within the institution. In that study, participants articulated their belief that, at a selective institution with an orientation toward traditional students, position matters, and adult students are not members of the dominant group. As the Other in the classroom, adult learners felt the need to be perceived as worthy of their place in the classroom. One participant in Kasworm's study reported, "I also feel like I have to continue to be recognized and valued every time I am in class. It's like I am adult, but I am an alien until I achieve the grades; and with every class, it starts all over again" (p. 149).

This connection between core identity and academic performance was also a theme in in Norton's (2013) work. She researched adult immigrant learners and discovered that identity was a primary factor in the success of their learning. In fact, one learner who felt that her life experiences and previous knowledge were belittled in the classroom preferred to drop her educational pursuits rather continue in an environment where her identity as a knowledgeable professional was not valued.

In the following section, this guide will examine the literature on effectively supporting adult learners through their undergraduate education. Then, concrete classroom strategies will be provided.

Research on What Works for Adult Learners

Adult learners have many of the same learning needs as traditional undergraduate students, yet also face particular challenges. On the whole, adults bring a wealth of life experience into the classroom with them, and tend to have fewer opportunities for extracurricular or social interactions. Instructors can support adult learners better when they understand the challenges and opportunities this population faces.

Collaboration

Unsurprisingly, high impact practices such as active learning and collaborative learning are as important for adult learners as for traditional learners. However, collaborative learning in particular presents obstacles for adult learners who are unlikely to be on campus unless they are in class. While residential undergraduates are making plans to work on projects or socialize on evenings and weekends, adult learners may have little interest in socializing with classmates, or they may require opportunities to complete group assignments in class or through collaborative technology such as Brightspace or Google Docs.

Despite the increased difficulty in engaging in group work, the practice has particular benefits for adults. Lundeberg (2003) analyzed responses to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire from 4,644 undergraduate students from 20 institutions in the 1998-1999 academic years. Similar to their younger counterparts, students age 30 and older reported that their learning was enhanced by peer learning and by forming relationships with others on campus. Unlike younger students, adult learners in this analysis were not hindered by their commitments off-campus. When allowed to contribute when and how best suit their busy lives, adult learners benefit from collaborative learning and perform at comparable levels.

Kasworm (2014) described this kind of collaborative learning experience as a *connected classroom*.

> The connected classroom experience recognized them as adults, allowed discussion and support for them as adults, connected their current adult worlds of work, family, and community to the academic content in the classrooms, and, for some, challenged them to engage in select class-related activities beyond the classroom. Most adult students noted their strong relationship with a faculty member, which was established within the classroom, and mentioned class-related interpersonal interactions. Although some of them valued their student peers, most noted their limited time and interest in participating in activities beyond the classroom and with their peers.

There was noted a subset of adult students who did value class-related service projects, honor societies, and social efforts with adult student and professional organizations, and occasional class-oriented involvements with plays and campus presentations. Unlike the younger college students, these adults did not usually look to the college or university as a primary socializing agent nor did they desire the college experience to incorporate extra- or co-curricular activities (p. 3).

Other studies confirm this notion of the connected classroom. In Tinto's (2012) work, the classroom is positioned as the center of student experiences on campus, and thus the most effective vehicle for student retention. Donaldson et al. (2000) found that adult students engaged in meaningful peer interaction "both before class, in class, during breaks, and after class" (p. 8), while Price and Baker (2012) argued that adults may be able to develop meaningful relationships through the classroom experience alone, without the extended residential experience provided to their younger counterparts. Meaningful classroom interactions are essential for supporting adult undergraduate students.

Self-Direction

Another key component of adult learning is self-directed learning. In much of the literature around adult learning, self-directed learning is referenced as a key element of *andragogy*, a theoretical framework developed by Malcolm Knowles (Knowles et al., 2005). Andragogy as a framework has been widely debated over the years, including the need for adults to be self-directed. Researchers have provided some insight into how self-directed learning works for adult learners.

Merriam (2001) described the concept of self-directed learning to be more concerned with developing individual's capacity to be self-directed than with capitalizing on an innate self-directedness. What this means in practice is that adults want to develop their ability to direct their own work, not that adults come into our classrooms already able to engage in autonomous learning. According to Pilling-Cormick (1997), faculty can provide scaffolded assignments that slowly transfer responsibility for learning outcomes over to students. Feedback and communication are essential components of this progress towards self-directedness.

In her study of self-directedness among adult undergraduate students, Booth (2007) found that being a self-directed learner had a variety of meanings. Some students fell on the end of the spectrum that saw self-directed learning as the need to understand what needed to be done and how to do it. Booth called this "responsible" learning. Other students experienced self-directed learning as an acknowledgement that all experiences are connected accompanied by a heightened sense of oneself as a participant in the world. Booth referred to this end of the spectrum as "mindful" learning.

As with all other groups of students, individual adult learners will find themselves at different points in their development of self-directedness and may require different levels of mentorship from faculty in order to reach their full potential. An adult learner may feel a desire to be self-directed without possessing the confidence that she is able. Positive relationships with faculty can provide mentorship toward a greater level of academic self-direction.

Overall, adult learners benefit from being encouraged to choose their own paths and structure their own experiences, but may require mentorship from faculty along the way.

Integration

Integrating coursework with previous knowledge and life experiences is vital for adult learning. In one study, Kasworm (2003) interviewed 90 adult undergraduates age 30 or older and found the adults in the study to demonstrate five distinct "voices": Entry, Outside, Cynical, Straddling, and Inclusion. The last two categories, Straddling and Inclusion, represent deeper, more integrated learning that connect lived experiences with academic knowledge. In order to move into these final two categories, students who fall into the first three categories- Entry, Outside, and Cynical- will at some point make more meaningful connections between their wealth of life experiences and the course content.

For many adults, the instructor plays a prominent role in making that transition to deeper, more successful learning. In fact, Kasworm (2010) found that the development of special relationships of acceptance and support with faculty

was often reported as a primary element in adult students feeling successful in a research university. Adults who were not able to build respectful relationships with faculty reported frustration and feelings of marginalization.

In order to integrate life and learning, adults must reflect on both. Rossiter (1999) suggested a narrative approach to adult development in which learners are encouraged to write regular, reflective narratives that are autobiographical in nature. Incorporating reflective questions into recurring assignments or classroom assessment techniques can also be effective.

Drawing again on Knowles' (Knowles et al., 2005) theory of andragogy, another aspect of integrating life experience and academic work stems from the ideas that adults achieve their most important learning through experience, and that adults prefer learning that has immediate application in their lives. Therefore, learning that gives adult students the knowledge or skills they need in order to make sense of experience or accomplish more in their careers is higher priority. In order to be fully engaged in the learning process, adult students may even need to understand how their learning will lead to life application. Providing an adult learner with a clear sense of why a course or a reading aligns with his own path can be a key engagement strategy.

Strategies for Connecting with Adult Learners

Here are several key strategies for connecting with adult learners that provide useful pedagogical implications.

Engage with adult learners personally

Connecting with adult learners starts with demonstrating respect for their time, their investment in education, and their identities. In classes where students' previous experience is not valued, learners can become disengaged or cynical. It is possible to both maintain the instructor's authority and expertise while also valuing diverse student populations. Some specific strategies for valuing adult students are:

- Find ways to **draw on the expertise** brought into the classroom by students. Get to know majors, previous work environments, or key interests. Solicit contributions from students when you know there is an opportunity to make a connection.

  Note: drawing on student expertise is not the same as singling out student identities. It would be counterproductive and further marginalizing to ask a student to share specific experiences as a person of color or of mature age. However, getting to know students' experiences and expertise and drawing on those as sources of knowledge can be productive.

- Provide **personalized feedback** on individual submissions and during chats outside of class that position you as an interested mentor and partner in their education. Adult students may feel unsure of their abilities or of their place in the classroom. Providing individual feedback that acknowledges their strengths and provides a sense of acceptance in the classroom can make a difference. For more feedback strategies, consult this teaching guide on grading student work.
- **Be available outside of class** at times and in spaces that are accessible to your adult learners. While most undergraduates may be able to take advantage of 4:00pm office hours, a student who is a parent may be picking up his or her child from school at that time. If in-person office hours are difficult to schedule for adult students, try virtual hours that allow adult learners to connect with you face-to-face via technology such as the Virtual Classroom in Brightspace. For more ideas on using office hours well, consult this teaching guide.

Help adults build on what they already know

Adult learners have a wealth of previous knowledge and life experience to draw on, and will experience deep learning when they are able to forge strong connections between course content and themselves. In the classroom, instructors can help learners connect course content with what they already know through a variety of mechanisms.

- Have students engage in **structured reflection** about course readings and class meetings. Questions like, "Did you find anything from today's class surprising? What and why?" or "How do this week's readings compare and contrast with your own experiences in life?" can be useful for eliciting connections.
- Engage all learners in developing an expertise in a topic of interest or familiarity, and **sharing that expertise with the group**. This might take the form of student presentations or peer teaching. Adults are used to feeling competent in their everyday lives, and the college classroom can be an unsettling place where identities are challenged. Asking learners to develop competence in key concepts or take on other leadership roles in the classroom can help restore that feeling of competence.

Create opportunities for interaction

In some ways, adults benefit even more than younger students from well-structured collaborative work that provides clear objectives, expectations, and group member roles. Yet, adults tend to have minimal contact with other learners outside of class, their home and work lives can feel like a very different world from their on-campus experiences.

- Provide opportunities for group **interaction in-class**. Consult this teaching guide for insights on how to structure effective in-class group activities.
- Include flexible opportunities to **work with classmates outside of class**. This might be a group project or a study group, but should always allow for multiple points of access and contribution. This might also include providing a variety of access points for extra-curricular and co-curricular participation. Can adults participate in virtual events instead of on-campus events? Engage with events in their own communities instead of on-campus events? Instructors who provide that level of flexibility to adult learners are helping to ensure higher levels of participation and reduce feelings of marginalization for adults with different lifestyles than the typical undergraduate.

For more information about adult learners at Vanderbilt, here are some on-campus resources:

- http://registrar.vanderbilt.edu/dus/adult-learners/
- http://as.vanderbilt.edu/mlas/
- http://registrar.vanderbilt.edu/va-benefits/veterans-educational-benefits/
- http://vanderbilt.edu/olli/index.php#

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