Chapter 65

Facilitating Learning with Adult Students in the Transcultural Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the "new" college classroom, looking at the profile of an adult student, what is meant by transculturalism, and the implications of the combination of the two. A series of guidelines are offered for facilitating learning for this diverse group of students. While offering a review of some previous empirical research on the issues of adult students, multiculturalism, and transculturalism, this chapter primarily reflects the author's experiences in working with this population. Also offered are recommendations for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Today's college classroom, especially in smaller colleges and universities, is likely to be more diverse than ever, in every sense of the word. Adult students have rapidly grown in numbers, and facilitating learning for this population can, and should be, strikingly different from that for the more traditional, 18-22 year old newly arrived from high school. Unfortunately, however, while much research has been devoted to profiling these adult

(nontraditional) students, examining their motives for returning to higher education, considering their learning styles, and looking at their barriers and supports to success. Less energy has been devoted to examining the implications of multiculturalism, let alone transculturalism, on facilitating learning for this group in the classroom.

My first reaction when asked to contribute a chapter to this book was to ask myself the question, "I'm white, male, and over 60, what do I know about transculturalism"? On reflection, however, I realized that based on my experiences perhaps I do have something to offer on the topic. One

comment I found that most directly addressed the concern I felt was made by Epstein (2009) who stated that "we can adequately understand and describe a certain culture only if we distance ourselves from it, that is, transcend its boundaries" (p. 331). Going on, he comments that "the essence of a given culture may be penetrated from the viewpoint of another foreign culture better than from its own inner perspective. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly" (p. 331). This is not to imply that I "fully and profoundly" understand or 'know' another culture; such an implication would be misleading. Rather, perhaps it is my outsider perspective that allows me to appreciate the richness and diversity of our adult, transcultural students, and be able to share my experiences and lessons learned.

This chapter is aimed primarily towards the faculty facing, perhaps for the first time, a classroom filled primarily with adult students, frequently first-time-in-college, who bring different experiences and expectations with them than students who are of traditional age and with less experience. One of our challenges in teaching in higher education is that, unlike the K-12 teacher, we are not required to take any courses in instructional methodology, nor serve any internship or practicum. Rather, we often learn "on the fly," making mistakes and learning from them, and hopefully having a mentor who is able to guide us through this new, exciting, and challenging period. As Rodriquez and Nash (2004) observe, "there is very little said about whether they [faculty] have received any instruction in how to be effective teachers; in fact, it is assumed that their educational process included a kind of apprenticeship that prepared them to teach" (p. 74)

I was an adult student, have primarily taught adult students, including abroad, have lived and traveled extensively abroad, and have lived in and experienced many different cultural settings in the United States. What I have discovered, if it may be called a discovery, is that there is really no such thing as an "expert" in this field; everyone brings their own experiences to the topic, all filtered through the lens of the sum of their life experiences.

In this chapter, based on personal experiences interspersed with previous research, I hope to bring some fresh insights into this topic, while considering what we already know (or presume we know) from previous studies. I want to examine what we mean by an "adult" (or nontraditional) student, what we need to understand about transculturalism and how it differs from multiculturalism, why the topic is important to adult student learning, and my perspectives for facilitating learning in the adult, transcultural classroom.

WHAT IS AN ADULT STUDENT?

During the 1999-2000 academic year, it was estimated that as many as 43 percent of all enrolled undergraduates were 24 years or older (representing around 7.1 million students), and among this number, 40 percent were between 24-30, 32 percent were in the 30-39 age range, and 28 percent were 40 or older. Within this group, the large percentage, estimated at 82 percent, were working adults (Berker, Horn, & Carroll, 2003).

Adult, or nontraditional, students are increasing in numbers in colleges and universities, at both the graduate and undergraduate level. This increase in adult students also represents a broad, transcultural group. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2009) estimates a growth rate of 25 percent for students between the ages of 25 through 34, and a 12 percent increase for those who are 35 and over. Of these, a growth rate of 16 percent is projected for women and, for different ethnic groups, 26 percent for Black students, 38 percent for Hispanics, 29 percent for those who are classified as Asian or Pacific Islander, and a 32 percent increase for those who are Native American, with only a four percent increase in adult students who are White.

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