

Chapter 5

The New Normal: Adult Online Learners

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ABSTRACT

Adult learners are different from younger learners. Many have taken Knowles' ideas to work with adult learners as if they all are the same. Knowles described adult learners as more self-directed, willing to be responsible for what they do, unwilling to have teachers impose arbitrary information on them, ready to learn, task oriented, and experienced. Prather adds many adults have more immediate goals for their lives and careers. Kenner and Weinerman find adults want more collaborative relationships with professors. Adult students are unique and come to classes from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances, with different needs, wants, and learning preferences. Many students are prepared for college, while others are petrified. In this chapter, the authors argue that instructors should understand their students in order to help them be successful. Students are not alternative students; they are normal, intelligent people who can and will learn. Thus, the goal should be student-centered online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Neurodiversity (Armstrong, 2012) is a term that people in the field of special education are beginning to use when discussing their students. For teachers of students with special education needs, this is a shift in thinking, a paradigm shift, from looking at children with special needs as dysfunctional students to looking at these students as assets to their classes and schools. According to Armstrong (2012) diversity of development and how people learn is normal development. Armstrong writes, “A Strength-based school that practices positive niche construction with neurodiverse students is one that essentially supports inclusion” (Chapter 7, p. 2). In other words, if we look at student diversity in any way, shape, or form as being normal and advantageous for the school and its students (as we do, for example, with biodiversity in nature), then we can create different images in our brains about our students. We know that when we have positive attitudes about our students they perform better (Sousa, 2017). When we have high expectations and support for our students, they achieve more (Caine & Caine, 2011). If we set an environment in which students understand that they need each other to learn and mature, we know they work harder, and thus, learn more, develop more social skills, and become stronger emotionally (Johnson and Johnson, 2015). Working from strength seems to make much more sense than working from weaknesses for any student. It also makes sense to actually believe that diversity is the normal state of life, including in the online classroom. Instead of assigning a negative label to students who are diverse, we should seek to understand the normal diversity of our students.

In his book, *The Blind Advantage: How Going Blind Made Me a Stronger Principal and How Including Children with Disabilities Made Our School Better for Everyone*, Henderson (2011) describes how teachers in his school try to find the uniqueness of every student in order to have every student add to the richness of the school. One of the main goals of the school is to help students get, feel, and act smarter. The idea is to set the school environment so that the conditions are right for every student to succeed. Ken Robinson (2017) believes that we should look at education like farmers where they believe that if they create the right conditions then their plants (the students) will flourish. That begins, according to Armstrong (2012) from the mentality of neurodiversity that seeks to find and acknowledge the complexity and richness of humankind. Sousa (2017) tells us that every human brain is unique, and if teachers nurture and nourish each brain all students will bloom.

Caine and Caine (2011) believe that if we can appeal to student interest and gradually turn over more and more of the authority and responsibility for their learning to the students, then more students will learn more. That means a different role must be accepted by teachers. Instead of dispensing knowledge to students, educators become facilitators of skills and knowledge where students more often lead the process. Armstrong (2012) believes that a critical role of teachers is to develop an understanding of the unique wants and needs of their students in order to develop differentiated ways for students to successfully engage in their learning careers.

Armstrong (2012) discusses the idea of a positive niche construction of education for all students. He explains how in biology a niche construction occurs whenever a species directly and actively does something to have a positive effect on its environment to make life better for the species. Examples are when beavers build a dam, a bird builds a nest, or bees create a hive. In other words, they do not simply adapt to their environments, they also adapt their environments to their needs. In education we too can adapt the environment for the survival of all of our students. Armstrong has created seven elements for positive niche construction in schools: 1. Strength awareness, 2. Positive role models, 3. Universal design for learning (UDL) and adaptive technologies, 4. Strength-based learning strategies, 5. Human resources,

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