Chapter 6
How a Culturally Responsive Curriculum Impacts Adult Learners:
We're Going to Do This Together

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the significance of culturally responsive curriculum (CRC) in addressing the unique needs of adult learners in higher education, recognizing them as a critical yet often overlooked demographic. Adult learners, typically characterized as non-traditional, encompass individuals who are generally older, work full-time, are enrolled part-time, have dependent children, and are financially independent. Given their distinctive educational and personal backgrounds, we advocate for CRC as a means to leverage the diverse experiences and knowledge these learners bring to educational settings. Through qualitative analysis of interviews and artifacts from both instructors and adult learners at a career and technical community college, we identify key themes related to effective teaching and learning practices that are responsive to adult learners' cultural contexts. We argue that adopting CRC not only enhances student engagement and success but also enriches learning environments for all participants by valuing and incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

The adult learner holds a distinct identity and an undeniable presence within the landscape of higher education, yet for too long, this population has been categorized under vague and insufficient labels—"non-traditional students" (Chen & Hu, 2021; NCES, n.d.; Saxena, 2022), "post-traditional learners" (PNPI, 2023), "mature students" (Zeit, 2014), or even "academic professionals" (Robinson, 2021). While attempting to acknowledge difference, these terms often fail to capture the full depth, diversity, and significance of adult learners as a vital and growing segment of the academic community. This study asserts that adult learners are not marginal exceptions to the traditional student archetype; they are a population of strategic importance, unique strength, and urgent institutional concern in today's higher education ecosystem.

Adult learners typically do not follow the expected linear path from high school to a four-year university. Instead, their educational journeys are often marked by detours, delays, and deeply personal decisions influenced by financial limitations, family responsibilities, career obligations, and systemic barriers such as race, class, and access to quality education. These students re-enter the classroom with a purpose that is often more focused, mature, and goal-oriented than that of their traditional-aged counterparts. However, their presence challenges institutions to rethink outdated models of instruction, scheduling, advising, and student engagement.

According to research (Chen, 2021; Kim, 2022; PNPI, 2023; Peet, 2019; Robinson, 2021; Zeit, 2014), adult learners are most commonly defined as individuals aged 24 or older who are financially independent, often employed full-time, frequently responsible for dependent children, and typically enrolled in school part-time. These learners bring a wealth of professional experience, cultural knowledge, and personal motivation, but they also face considerable challenges, ranging from time poverty and financial insecurity to feelings of isolation and institutional neglect.

Yet despite their challenges, adult learners are not liabilities to manage; they are untapped assets in higher education. Their life experiences serve as a wellspring of insight and resilience. They offer perspectives that enrich classroom discussions, enhance peer learning, and connect academic theory to real-world practice in ways that purely traditional pedagogies cannot achieve. Adult learners embody the essence of lifelong learning, and their success has broader implications for social mobility, workforce development, and community transformation.

Reducing adult learners to generalized categories overlooks their complexity and misses a powerful opportunity to reshape education for the 21st century. They are learners of need, often lacking access to the same institutional resources or tailored supports afforded to younger students. They are learners of importance, contributing economically, socially, and intellectually to the fabric of campus and

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