Is It Time to Teach Traditional Undergrads as Adult Learners?

Stephen D. Holtrop
Director of Graduate Education

Eric Forseth
Provost

Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA
Students vote with their tuition dollars

• 2015 has more non-traditional students than traditional students
• “Adult” students may be...
  • Older
  • Part-time students
  • Working full time while taking full academic load
  • Raising children
  • Recently unemployed, divorced
  • Hitting a glass ceiling without a degree
Some differences between adult and traditional undergraduate students (TUGs)

- Adult students may be more worried about...
  - Family and work obligations
  - Retraining
  - Health

Adults also...
- Want to see immediate relevance of course materials to their personal or professional lives
- Bring a wealth of life and work experiences to the classroom

**Most refreshing characteristics:**
- More developed mental filing system (schemata)
- No need to say “Trust me, you’ll need this some day.”
Similarities between adult learning theory and *middle school* concept

- Minimize lecturing
- Change learning activities every 20 minutes
- Link learning to prior experiences

*High schools* also moving toward innovative formats.
Traditional residential undergraduate institutions also exploring enhancing student learning

- Alternative learning activities
- Earlier and more meaningful field experiences, internships, off-campus experiences
- Attention to learning styles
- Assessing student outputs
- Tracking student behavior in class
Traditional undergrad college are accepting transfer courses ...

• Taken online
• By our students
• During our semesters
• In our residence halls
• Using our networks
We are in danger of losing disengaged students

• If we’re shaking things up for middle-schoolers and adults, maybe we should do the same for traditional undergraduates (TUGs).

• Tax payers, tuition payers, and their elected officials are getting impatient and skeptical of our assurances.
It’s about *academic effectiveness & integrity*

- Attention to *learner’s needs*, differences, and outcomes
  - Results in better retention of knowledge and skills
  - Involves actively involving the students more in every class session
- Inclusion of internships, early field experiences, labs – makes it real.
- Students of all ages benefit from practical applications, timely feedback, and attention to their goals
Faculty, like students, attend to *how they’ll be evaluated*

- New evaluation tool focuses on *student behavior* instead of teacher inputs.
  - Continuous improvement instrument
- Can help us shift our focus toward learning activities that make traditional undergraduate education more *active, relevant, and effective*.
  - Focuses on *student involvement and understanding*
ELEOT\textsuperscript{1} observation tool
Evaluates components of the learning atmosphere:

- Equitable learning environment
- High expectations environment
- Supportive learning environment
- Active learning environment
- Progress monitoring and feedback environment
- Well managed learning environment
- Digital learning environment

\textsuperscript{1}Davison, Matt. AdvancedED Source, 2014.
Pilot project: Student-centric rather than teacher-centric

- Secondary art education course
  - Focus on student behaviors not just teacher inputs
  - Student interaction and teacher-student interaction were dramatically increased compared to previous observations.
  - The quality of the work was exceptional and feedback on student learning progress was positive.
Art Education Course – focus on student learning environment
Art Education Course – focus on student learning environment
Art Education Course – focus on student learning environment
Art Education Course – focus on student learning environment
Art Education Course – focus on student learning environment
Art Education Course – focus on student learning environment
Results of using ELEOT tool to evaluate student learning behaviors

All of the following increased:

- Differentiated learning opportunities
- Classroom activities
- Increased expectations
- Availability of exemplars
- Engagement in rigorous coursework
- Ability to take risks
- Active involvement in the learning activities
- Understanding of the learning objectives
Take a moment here to discuss with a colleague how you can encourage student engagement in the learning atmosphere.
What kinds of emphases resonate with traditional college students?

Survey

• 14 statements from adult learning theory

Participants

• **TUG students:** Two upper level undergraduate classes in Philosophy of Education at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa

• **Adult students:** Several bachelor-level business classes for working adults at Huntington University in Huntington, Indiana

• **Grad students:** One group of graduate students (teachers) completing their action research projects in the Master of Education (online) program at Dordt College in Iowa
## Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Importance items</th>
<th>My Program items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dordt College Grad Students</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finishing Master of Education program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntington University Adults</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.S. programs in business or org. mngmt.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dordt College traditional undergrads</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sr. educ. majors in Philos. of Educ.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*DC*
Survey Results – *Most* important to students

- “My goals and plans”  
  - DC grad stu’s, DC TUGs

- “Freedom to choose focus”  
  - HU BS adults, DC TUGs

- “Draws on life/work experience”  
  - DC grad stu’s, DC TUGs

- “Practical applications”  
  - DC grad stu’s, DC TUGs

- “Support and feedback”  
  - DC grad stu’s, HU adults, DC TUGs

- “Learning that is enjoyable”  
  - HU BS adults, DC TUGs
Survey Results – *Least* important to students

- “Be a model for friends/family members”
- “Focused on a project or solving a problem”

DC grad stu’s, DC TUGs

DC grad stu’s, HU BS adults, DC TUGs
Survey Results – Largest satisfaction gaps

• “My goals and plans”
  HU BS adults, DC TUGs, DC grad
• “Freedom to choose focus”
  HU BS adults, DC TUGs
• “Draws on life/work experience”
  HU BS adults
Survey Results: Traditional undergrads like adult learning theory

For the Dordt College TUGs, all items but one ranked 4 or higher (out of 5).

The highest rated items were:

- *It is important to me that theory is connected to practical applications in my life or future work.* (4.7)

- *It is important to me that support and feedback are available if needed.* (4.6)

- *It is important to me that my courses can address my goals and plans.* (4.5)
Survey Results: We’re already providing adult learning to TUGs (small satisfaction gaps)

• *It is important to me that support and feedback are available if needed.*
  • Desirability: 4.6  In course: 4.5

• *It is important to me that my learning is active and collaborative and that I can participate in constructing useful applications for myself.*
  • Desirability: 4.2  In course: 4.2
Survey Results: And we have a place to start (largest satisfaction gap)

• *It is important to me to take some ownership of what and how I study.*
  
  • Desirability: 4.7  In course: 3.6
The main take-away: What “adult” learning activities can be used with TUGs?

1. Daily applications
2. Writing
3. Class discussions
4. Daily collaboration
5. Constant checking for understanding/feedback
6. Choices among assignments
7. Culminating project (replaces exam)
8. Making new learning relevant
9. Variety
10. Critical thinking – replaces memorization

Contact info: Steve.Holtrop@Dordt.edu  Eric.Forseth@Dordt.edu