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Steve Holtrop

Dordt College, steve.holtrop@dordt.edu

Eric Forseth

Dordt College, eric.forseth@dordt.edu

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Is It Time to Teach Traditional Undergrads as Adult Learners?

Abstract

Students vote with their tuition dollars, and over half may now be classified as adult learners. Focusing on the learner's needs and behaviors means integrating relevant life and work experiences into our courses and addressing all students' need for respect, practical applications, and varied learning tasks.

Keywords

adult learners, traditional undergraduate students, Dordt College, student learning, ELEOT observation tool

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Is It Time to Teach Traditional Undergrads as Adult Learners?

Stephen D. Holtrop
Director of Graduate Education
Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA

Eric Forseth
Provost
Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA

Students vote with their tuition dollars, so colleges and universities are monitoring the needs and preferences of all types of students. Since by many definitions (e.g., age, part-time status, working full time while taking a full academic load, or raising children) over half of all American college and university students are now classified as non-traditional or adult learners, addressing the increasingly diverse needs of students means paying more attention to the tenets of adult learning theory. This shift has implications for not only how we teach students but also how we assess learning. Focusing more on the learner's needs and behaviors—instead of the instructor's, for example—means integrating more practical experiences into our courses and addressing all students' need for respect, feedback, support, and varied learning tasks. Similarly, with course evaluations, this paradigm shift means focusing on what the learner is doing in the classroom or online course rather than focusing on what the instructor is doing.

To be sure, real differences exist between traditional and non-traditional students in our colleges and universities. For example, compared to “traditional” students, “adult” students can be more intimidated about the academic environment and more worried about their stamina, family and work obligations, health, and their sense that their cognitive muscles may have atrophied since early adulthood. These students also typically want to see the immediate relevance of course material to their personal or professional lives, bring a wealth of life and work experiences to bear, and like to learn from each other with “real world” examples and applications. Because of all this and sometimes because of embarrassing past performances in higher education, these students can be driven perfectionists. But, for one of the authors (Steve Holtrop), two of the most refreshing traits of adult learners are their more developed mental filing systems (called *schemata*) and their life experiences, which means there is much less need to

say, “trust me, you’ll need this someday,” which sometimes can feel like an unfortunate daily mantra in K-12, undergraduate, and even graduate education, when students have not yet been in “the real world.”

When I (Steve) first starting working with adult learners in a degree completion program about 20 years ago, I was struck with the similarities in the advice for working with adults and for teaching middle school. Adult learning theory and the middle school concept both call for modifications like minimizing lectures, changing learning activities every 20 minutes, and trying to make every learning activity as immediately relevant and linked to prior experiences as possible (e.g., *constructivism*). Innovations in high school formats such as New Tech and Block 4 extended some of these concepts to teaching the high school age group.

That kind of left traditional college students as the only ones we could still lecture at for over 20 minutes and not provide with linkages to the real world! And of course, many of us teaching in traditional undergrad programs were already busy exploring more effective ways to enhance student learning, paying more attention to learning styles and other learner differences, and implementing earlier and more meaningful field experiences, internships, and other off-campus learning experiences.

But we focused on this none too soon, since we were also providing “port-per-pillow” connectivity in the residence halls, which sometimes meant accepting transfer courses taken online during *our* semesters, in *our* dorms, using *our* networks! Tuition dollars for these courses, of course, were not coming to us. A number of considerations go into a student’s decision to vote with their tuition dollars—such as lower tuition costs and convenience—but also the avoidance of hard to schedule, hard to pass, and just plain “boring” on-campus courses.

If students think a course is boring or impossible to master, then the course probably fails to shine in at least some of approaches advocated by adult learning theory (and the middle school concept and the various alternative high school formats). We are in danger of losing the students who are bored or exasperated, especially if they (or their friends) have tasted the cheaper, easier, and/or more applicable alternatives. We can no longer rest in the claim that they should grin and bear it because these challenges build character and the lifelong payoff in perspective and paycheck will be well worth the discomforts.

Our tax payers, our tuition payers, and their elected officials are getting impatient and skeptical of these assurances, even if the data still indicate that we're probably right.

But more crucially, we know (for starters, because of 25-30 years of assessing student learning for the Higher Learning Commission and other accreditors) that attention to *learners'* needs, differences, and outcomes results in better retention of knowledge and skills. And we know from research on all age groups and our own successes as educators that internships, early field experiences, labs, and anything else that can make the classroom more applicable and relevant, lead to not only better retention but better depth of understanding and better problem solving. And we know that providing timely feedback, support for students' goals, and collaborative experiences can also enhance student knowledge construction.

So this isn't about just marketing or recapturing summer tuition dollars. It's about our academic effectiveness and integrity. (Interestingly, these are also long-time HLC themes in the accreditation standards.)

To ascertain the extent to which adult learning theory appeals to traditional college students (18-22 year olds at a small, private, residential campus in northwest Iowa), I compiled a survey of 14 statements gleaned from a variety of common sources on adult learning.¹ Each statement was paired with an item asking about the extent to which this aspect of adult learning theory is actually evident in the student's upper-level philosophy of education course taught in the fall of 2014. Here are the 14 statements:

1. *It is important to me that my courses can address my goals and plans.*
2. *It is important to me to take some ownership of what and how I study.*
3. *It is important to me that my life and/or work experiences are used as resources in my learning.*
4. *It is important to me that theory is connected to practical applications in my life or future work.*
5. *It is important to me that my learning is active and collaborative and that I can participate in constructing useful applications for myself.*
6. *It is important to me that support and feedback are available if needed.*
7. *It is important to me that any specific or personal needs (such as technology needs) are addressed if necessary.*
8. *It is important to me that new learning ties into my previous concepts, experiences, and mental filing system.*
9. *It is important to me that much of my learning can be focused on doing a project or solving a problem.*

10. *It is important to me that my learning is not just something vaguely important that I might need sometime in the distant future.*
11. *It is important to me that my learning has an intrinsic/internal purpose for me.*
12. *It is important to me that learning can be enjoyable.*
13. *It is important to me that learning is challenging and worthwhile.*
14. *It is important to me that my successes in higher education can be a model for my friends or family members.*

These traditional undergraduates apparently liked what they saw in these 14 statements on adult learning, rating their importance on average 4.3 out of 5. This result seems to confirm our hypothesis that much of adult learning theory is also desirable among traditional undergraduate students. 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)

The lowest rated item (and only item rated below a 4.0) was:

- *It is important to me that much of my learning can be focused on doing a project or solving a problem.* (3.6)

For each item we asked whether students perceived that their undergraduate philosophy of education course provided the desired focus. No items were rated higher for presence in the course than for desirability—so there was a bit of a negative satisfaction gap for most items. However, several items were rated equal or almost as high for their presence in the course as for desirability (little or no gap):

- *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
- *It is important to me that any specific or personal needs (such as technology needs) are addressed if necessary.*
 - Desirability: 4.1 In course: 4.1
- *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 new learning ties into my previous concepts, experiences, and mental filing system.*
 - Desirability: 4.2 In course: 4.0

Only one item was rated more than a point lower for presence in the course compared to desirability. This item also showed one of the largest differences between the two sections of the course, which were taught by different instructors and had different student populations.

- *It is important to me to take some ownership of what and how I study.*
 - Desirability: 4.7 In Section 1: 3.9 In Section 2: 3.3

The graduate and adult students we surveyed as our baseline had very similar priorities to our two classes of traditional undergraduates, confirming adult learning theory in general and further supporting our hypothesis that traditional undergrads have many of the same preferences that non-traditional, adult learners have. Here is a snapshot of the average response (out of a possible high score of 5.0) from each of the groups we surveyed:

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| • Dordt College Grad Students (N=7) | Importance items: 4.6 |
| ○ Finishing Master of Education program | My Program items: 4.4 |
| • Huntington University Adults (N=8) | Importance items: 4.5 |
| ○ B.S. programs in business or org. mngmt. | My Program items: 4.3 |
| • Bethel College (Indiana) Adults (N=3) | Importance items: 4.5 |
| ○ TTT or School Admin. Program | My Program items: 4.3 |
| • Dordt College traditional undergrads (N=39) | Importance items: 4.3 |
| ○ Sr. educ. majors in Philos. of Educ. | My Program items: 3.9 |

There was a fair amount of agreement among the different types of students on what was most important to them:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| • “My goals and plans” | DC grad stu’s, Bethel adults, DC TUGs |
| • “Freedom to choose focus” | HU BS adults, Bethel adults, DC TUGs |
| • “Draws on life/work exper.” | DC grad stu’s, Bethel adults, DC TUGs |
| • “Practical applications” | DC grad stu’s, Bethel adults, DC TUGs |
| • “Support and feedback” | DC grad stu’s, HU adults, Bethel adults, DC TUGs |
| • “Learning that is enjoyable” | HU BS adults, DC TUGs |

There was also agreement among the different types of students as to what was least important:

- “Be a model for friends/family members” DC grad stu’s, Bethel adults, DC TUGs
- “Focused on a project or solving a problem” DC grad stu’s, HU BS adults, Bethel adults, DC TUGs

And, finally, there was agreement among the different types of students on the satisfaction gap between importance and actual learning experiences:

- “My goals and plans” HU BS adults, Bethel adults, DC TUGs, DC grad
- “Freedom to choose focus” DC TUGs, HU BS adults, Bethel adults
- “Draws on life/work exper.” HU BS adults, Bethel adults

So we can conclude that there is much similarity between traditional undergraduates and non-traditional students such as graduate students and other adult learners in terms of preferences as expressed by adult learning theory. This seems to indicate a need to look for ways to treat traditional undergrads more like adult learners.

The traditional undergraduate students who responded to our survey had already experienced some “adult” learning activities in their philosophy of education course. These activities included the following for every week of the course: writing, online and in-class discussions, collaboration, “real world” application, checking for understanding, feedback, and expectation of critical thinking. The course also included choices among assignments, a variety of learning activities, making new learning relevant, and a personally and professionally applied culminating project instead of a final exam.

Since students and faculty alike tend to focus most on what they will be evaluated on and less on ideals and goals perceived to be disconnected from the assessment system, it behooves us to examine how we conduct our teaching evaluations—especially if we want to upgrade our undergraduate learning environments. A new tool that focuses on student behavior in the classroom instead of instructor behavior promises to help us in our shift toward providing the variety of learning activities needed to make traditional undergraduate education more active, relevant, and effective.

The ELEOT observation tool is an instrument that was developed by AdvancED to evaluate how conducive an environment is for student learning. The instrument² includes evaluating components of the following aspects of a 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

A pilot project was conducted at a small residential college in the Midwest to encourage junior level faculty members to consider re-focusing their teaching efforts away from teacher-centric behavior by focusing efforts on creating more positive learning environments for students. Faculty members were observed in secondary teacher education training settings. Utilizing this instrument served a purpose to help faculty determine if their classroom activities were optimally engaging students in their specific learning setting.

One art lesson environment was particularly meaningful when the professor attempted to shape a learning atmosphere that shifted student activities from a digital creation of art material to traditional drawing of art material. The faculty member asked students to “hand-draw” their original digital artwork. Thirty seconds were given to view the original digital art work before it was covered during the hand-drawing exercise. During the drawing exercise, student interaction and teacher-student interaction was dramatically increased as compared to previous observations. The quality of the work was exceptional and feedback on student learning progress was positive.

The ELEOT facilitates two primary learning objectives including the observation of individual learners and creatively reflecting upon the overall learning atmosphere.³ The ELEOT has been encouraged for use as a continuous improvement instrument. It has been encouraging to see student motivation patterns when comparing previous observations of teachers who have been focusing on inputs (teacher-centric behavior) to teachers who have been focusing on student learning environments. The

differentiated learning opportunities, classroom activities, increased expectations, availability of exemplars, engagement in rigorous coursework, ability to take risks, active involvement in the learning activities, and understanding of the learning objectives were all increased.

Further consideration should be given for having learning outcomes prioritized within equitable, high expectation, supportive, active, progress monitoring, and well managed learning environments.

¹ Examples of sources for succinct lists of emphases in adult learning theory include:

- Andragogy (Malcolm Knowles): www.instructionaldesign.org/theories/andragogy.html
- Adult Learning Theory: www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/technlgy/te10lk12.htm

² Davison, Matt. Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT). AdvancED Source Research and Standards for Quality Schools, 2014.

³ Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) of the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT). AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools, 2014.