MEETING THE NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Garrett Gruwell & Cristie McClendon

Today, increasing numbers of adult learners are attending institutions of higher education. Adult learners often balance full-time jobs, family and community responsibilities, all while attending school. They also bring a wealth of experience and different expectations for their courses than their younger counterparts. Consequently, faculty members are often challenged to meet the unique needs of this population. Additionally, globalization, the changing demographics of the workforce and technology also provide challenges for faculty members as they design instruction for working adults. This article discusses the characteristics of adult learners and their expectations for coursework. Strategies are presented for instructors to consider as they work to meet the needs of this population. The article ends with a discussion of the characteristics that adult learners value in faculty members.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS

Adult learners are a unique population occupying more classrooms in institutions of higher education. Today, almost half of the learners enrolled in colleges across the country are over the age of 25. More than 50% of college students are on their own financially, go to school on a part-time basis, and approximately 40% work full-time (U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2007). As adult learners, they often struggle with balancing work, family, careers, community responsibilities, and school. Additionally, many adult learners handle logistical issues regarding childcare, eldercare, time, money, and transportation (Wynne, 2003). In a weak economy, many adults return to school to get a second degree or to satisfy employment requirements. Having been out of school and academic settings for a period of time often heightens their anxiety level (Wynne, 2003). Adult learners may worry about knowing enough of the topics of class to succeed and contribute in a meaningful way, being able to interact with technology, being the oldest student in class, and meeting the rigors of academic writing (Wynne, 2003). These issues can pose challenges for university leaders and faculty.

The changing demographics of the United States, globalization, and changing technology bring additional opportunities for both the adult learner and faculty members. The population of the United States is getting older, and for the first time ever, there are more adults in the United States than there are people under the age of 18 (Merriam, 2009). By 2020, there will be over 7 million people in our country over the age of 85, and by 2035, Merriam (2009) projects that the median age of a U.S. citizen will be 39. Additionally, our population is more ethnically and culturally diverse than ever before. These trends signal changes for the demographics of universities and colleges. As the popu-

lation ages, institutions of higher education must prepare to meet the needs of an aging workforce and older students. With more immigrants, these institutions must also be prepared for more English-language learners in classrooms.

Globalization has also changed our education system (Merriam, 2009). Our society has shifted away from a focus on industry to a focus on information and instant communication. The attention is on providing services rather than a specific product (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, a focus on increased worker responsibility, teamwork, higher levels of academic and technical knowledge, and strong communication and problem-solving skills have also become prevalent (U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2007). In response, the nature of our work practice has changed. As a matter of fact, it does an adult little good to train for a specific job as approximately half of that knowledge will be outdated within five years (Merriam, 2009). Thus, the need for continuing education has dramatically increased. Additionally, within the work place, the organizational structure is moving away from traditional hierarchies to horizontal networks comprised of teams. The learning organization has become a focus, and the marketplace has become a primary site for learning (Merriam, 2009). These facts will likely require changes in the way faculty present instruction, from a traditional lecture-based framework to one that incorporates more group activities as well as problem-based learning. Since the nature of information and the structure of jobs changes so rapidly, faculty will have to also rethink the nature of the content they present. Chronological, linear facts do not align with the changing nature of the workplace. Instead, faculty must focus on processes and critical thinking. When planning lessons and classes, they should consider the shelf life of the content, how soon it will be outdated, and whether or not technology can be integrated, allowing the student to focus on higher order thinking. Students should be encouraged to be digitally wise and use technology in a smart way as a means to enhance the power of their brains and to extend their abilities (Prensky, 2012).

Institutions of higher education will have to recognize that, in addition to university or college campuses, communities and the workplace are becoming prime sites for adult learning (U.S. De-partment of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2007). Informal learning has become valuable as workers engage in dialogue. The team focus of work has created a socially organized job role. Thus, faculty members have to respond with use of social and authentic learning activities, real-life problem solving, and practitioner-based experiences. Adult learners are savvy and demanding customers. Unlike some of their younger counterparts, they realize the value of the money they are paying for their education and hold institutions accountable for providing them with the experiences and training they need in order to make a difference in their personal and professional lives (Merriam, 2009).

Universities and institutions need to reflect on how they can best meet the needs of the adult learner. First, they need to know what the characteristics of the adult learner are. Most adults have been working for a period of time and come to the learning situation with a variety and range of personal, professional, and academic experiences (Wynne, 2003). They are mature people and want to be treated as such. Since many have met the challenges of the workplace, they are very realistic about what will work and what will not. They have opinions and beliefs as well (Merriam, 2009). These skills and experiences must be recognized, honored, and capitalized upon by the faculty member.

Faculty can begin meeting the needs of adult learners by developing a democratic, participatory, and collaborative classroom environment (Wynne, 2003). Adult learners are usually intrinsically motivated, and they can easily relate new facts to their prior experiences. Using these experiences as a springboard can motivate and also allow the faculty member to cover more information as well (Wynne, 2003). The faculty member can design learning opportunities to allow adult learners to showcase their talents and knowledge. Adults like practical learning activities that allow them to draw on their professional experiences and need to be actively involved in learning (U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2007). Their needs are immediate and concrete, and they want to learn something they can take back and apply on the job.

Since adult learners are savvy consumers, faculty members should also know the attributes that adults value in their instructors. First, adult learners value credibility (Brookfield, 2006). This means

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[1] For example, 27% of SBC pastors were over 56 years of age and only 13% were under 35.

that the instructor has something important to offer in the form of skills, knowledge, insight, wisdom, and worthwhile information. The adult learner likes to know that the faculty member has a wealth of knowledge, a level of insight, and a sophistication of thinking that exceeds that of the learner (Brookfield, 2006). This expertise, or commanding a high level of content knowledge is one thing, but the faculty member also has to be able to convey it in a manner that the learner understands. Additionally, the faculty member should welcome questions and exercise confidence in being challenged (Brookfield, 2006). As such, the faculty member should have considerable experience as a practitioner in the field and as a teacher of the subject. They must be able to draw on that experience and teach in a way that helps students learn.

Adult learners also like collegiality and authenticity (Brookfield, 2006). They prefer instructors who are open and honest with students and who do not keep the criteria for success private. They allow the students to see them as a flesh and blood person, not someone who is hiding behind the title of *professor* (Brookfield, 2006). Making introductions during the first week of class and sharing professional experiences and resources will help the faculty member accomplish this. Additionally, learners like clear expectations for class. The authentic and transparent instructor is one who has a clear plan and a set of reasons that informs that plan. They make their agenda public and can discuss and justify the reasons for the curriculum and assignments, as well as criteria for evaluation (Brookfield, 2006).

The adult learner also values congruence in their instructor (Brookfield, 2006). The faculty member must outline a set of assumptions that guide their practice and behave in ways that model these. For instance, if the faculty member claims to adhere to constructivist learning theory, then they will allow students opportunities for active and participatory learning. The instructor should be passionate about the subject area, and it is vitally important to them that their students understand the content. The instructor explores content and related skills until students understand and master them. This requires individualized attention, feedback, and responsiveness. The faculty member clearly teaches in a way that fosters learning. They also engage in dialogue and feedback regarding how learning and skills

can be improved. Thus, teaching the adult learner requires more advanced instructional skills than teaching younger students or in the traditional lecture format (Brookfield, 2006).

Adult learners have fears and concerns, like their younger counterparts, but these are different, so the faculty member must become aware of these and plan how to proactively help the student navigate these challenges (U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2007). Adults can be impatient with long discussions or presentations on theory (Wynne, 2003). They are more motivated and interested when learning is contextualized and linked to practical situations (U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2007). Finally, like any learner, the adult also has a limited attention span. They can listen with understanding for approximately 90 minutes, but can listen with *retention* for only 20 minutes (Siebert and Karr, 2008). Therefore, after approximately every eight minutes, they need to be actively involved with the content. Lectures should be chunked and interactive with activities such as a think-pair-share or questions scheduled every few minutes to allow the learners to absorb the information. Siebert and Karr (2008) summed up a good approach to teaching the adult learner: the five R's. *Respect* the unique nature of the adult learner. *Research* and understand their needs. Exercise *responsiveness* by developing engaging and relevant lessons and providing targeted feedback. Build *relationships* to allow the adult learner to see the person behind the title of instructor. *Reflect* on and improve one's skill as a faculty member.

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