

## NON-TRADITIONAL AGE STUDENTS

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Despite a decreasing number of high school graduates in the last decade, there has been a steady increase in higher education enrollment. Eight out of ten two-year institutions reported increased numbers of applications, especially in part-time enrollments. One reason for this trend has been the number of older students (25 and over), which rose 34 percent between 1980 and 1990, while those under age 25 increased by only seven percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

### Characteristics of Non-Traditional Age Students

Those students over age 25 may be returning to education because of home life transition (children leaving, separation or divorce from spouse), mid-life transition (change in career or employment), or workplace transition (skill challenges mandated by technology implementation). Adult students may have rusty basic skills, which need to be reinforced before new technical or academic skills can be acquired. Non-traditional students also need their self-esteem and self-confidence reinforced since the current educational environment may be quite different from their previous education experience.

Traditional assumptions regarding adult learners have been discarded or updated. At one time, it was thought that older learners above the age of twenty-three were no longer capable of in-depth cognitive processing since "brain cells die after the peak 'traditional' years of formal schooling" (Kazmierski, 1989, p. 100).

Another assumption was that any succeeding learning experience would reflect the success or failure of early formal school experience. Kazmierski and his colleagues (1989)

emphasize that 'brain cell erosion' is a misconception as regards adult capacity for learning. Subsequently, it was proven that the success in learning experience in later years generally depends on motivation and access to instruction rather than public school performance in elementary and high school (Kazmierski, 1989). The ability to process information through reorganization, synthesis, and generalization may be utilized throughout the life span.

### Theories Of Adult Learning

Malcolm Knowles (1984) identifies four common components of adult learning: 1) self-direction or autonomy as a characteristic goal of adult learning, 2) breadth and depth of life experiences as content or triggers to learning, 3) reflection or self-conscious monitoring of changes taking place, and 4) action or another expression of the learning that has occurred. Adults bring to any new learning situation a body of knowledge, ideas, concepts, and understanding which they have developed from prior learning and experience. Adults use this prior knowledge as a kind of sense-making mechanism to interpret, comprehend, judge, connect and store new information. Thus, learning is not a passive reception and accumulation of information. Rather, learning is a highly active process in which students act on or manipulate new information to construct personal knowledge.

Knowles (1984) also emphasizes the learning needs of adult students. Adults need:

- to be motivated to learn;
- to participate in setting their own goals;
- to learn in an environment which respects, is related to, and fully utilizes their accumulated wisdom attained through a lifetime of experience;
- to participate actively in the learning process;

- to share responsibility for planning, operating and monitoring the progress of the learning experience;
- to experience a sense of progress toward mastering their goals;
- to benefit from peer support and reinforcement, as well as individual attention;
- to participate in problem solving exercises that simulate real-life situations.

Knowles emphasizes that adults learn differently from young students. They need whole-language skills that process information reflecting the real world. Of necessity, adults functioning in the information age require a curriculum incorporating the effect of mass media and computers as conveyors of learning in a technological age.

While acknowledging that adults bring a wealth of knowledge to the learning experience, it is also true that they have many competing demands in their lives that reduce the time available for education. Even though they participate in programs voluntarily, their motives for learning vary widely. Getting a better job is only one goal; others might include becoming more independent or being able to help one's children. Bergevin (1967) notes that a significant task of adult education is to teach each student how to live a full, productive life in which the ability to make a living and stay well is important, but equally important is the knowledge of what to do culturally and spiritually with one's talents and life.

#### Strategies Needed By Adult Students

Adult non-traditional students may benefit from:

1. Time Management: ability to manage time well will spell success in dealing with the many commitments adults possess.

2. Note-taking: capacity to identify and isolate the main ideas presented in classroom lecture with accompanying supporting material will result in more efficient review sessions.
3. Test-taking skills: knowledge of how to evaluate test items, how to plan answers, and how to delegate time allotment to test sections are vital to success in taking exams.
4. Positive attitude application: confidence in ability to learn and intending to learn are active processes that must be practiced to be developed well.
5. Awareness of learning style: an understanding of how a person processes new material and information from short-term memory to long-term memory. Learning how to learn, discovering how learning styles affect teaching and learning, and understanding reading as a search for meaning may promote the difference between success and failure for the adult student.

## References

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