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Diverse Experiences and Perspectives in Today's College Classrooms: Uniting the Traditional and Nontraditional Adult Learner in their Quest for Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper looks at how the face of the college and university classroom has dramatically changed. It highlights how today's postsecondary classroom is strongly characterized by a combination of both "traditional" and "nontraditional" adult learners age 25 and older who are united by the common goal of achieving a high quality higher education. The uniting of these two critical student groups is indeed critical, especially as the nontraditional student population is expected to dramatically increase in the upcoming years. Ultimately, this paper argues that the instructor can eliminate the wall that frequently exists between these two student groups in the classroom by means of three innovative methods which are (a) implementing more "team" oriented assignments and projects into the curriculum, (b) building a strong sense of community through classroom dialogue and listening, and (c) removing him or herself as the consistent "authoritative expert" in the classroom and creating a *participatory* learning environment among instructor and student.

Keywords: Participatory, Transformative, Nontraditional, Unite, Teamwork, Collaborative

1. Introduction

In this modern age of higher education, the face of the freshman college and university classroom has dramatically changed. It is characterized by a combination of both traditional and nontraditional adult learners-age 25 and over who are united by the common goal of achieving a higher education. In regard to the adult learner who is age 25 and over, they typically enter into the college classroom with a broad range of cultural, educational, professional and life perspectives that greatly contrasts with their traditional 18 year old student counterparts (Dirkx, 2005).

For instance, many adults enter into the college or university classroom with extended absences from the formal, structured natured of academic learning, as well as learning challenges and diverse domestic obligations, whereas most of their traditional freshman student peers are recent high school graduates possessing oftentimes few, if any of these challenges or characteristics. Moreover, Connors (1982) states, "Although there are a few special courses and programs for these students, most of them are mainstreamed at once into classes with students of traditional college age" (p. 263). Nevertheless, regardless of the diverse range of differences the traditional and nontraditional freshman student possesses, they must *unite* cohesively, professionally, and collaboratively in an effort to obtain the higher education that they have committed themselves to achieving.

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2. Statement of the Problem

A significant problem that currently exists among the phenomenon of traditional and nontraditional adult learners in the higher education setting is traditional and nontraditional adult learners demonstrating fear, negative attitudes, and feelings of detachment when working together on class assignments or projects. Younger students frequently complain about how older students overly prioritize their life experiences and over talk certain topics in the classroom. Moreover, older students complain of the lack of maturity, lack of a passion for learning, and how disruptive younger traditional students can be to the learning environment (Dirkx, 2005). This type of divide among students within the classroom can severely deter the learning process: The basic premise behind the idea of intergenerational difference is that we are seeing an increased trend towards the mixing of individuals from different generations in social contexts such as the workplace and education. While such a blending of different age cohorts can at times foster amazing surges of creativity, it more often seems to represent fundamental differences of and conflicts around values, ambition, world-views, mind-sets, and ways of working and thinking. (Dirkx, 2005, p. 1)

As Dirkx exhibits in his article, the generational gap between the traditional and nontraditional student, as well as the vast differences in regard to educational views, levels of thinking, and life experiences, the wall between these two student groups is definitely a serious problem that must be addressed in the college classroom. As I reflect upon my professional teaching experiences as a community college English composition instructor, I have witnessed traditional and nontraditional students boldly avoid communication with each other, become disengaged when each other is speaking on a certain topic in class or giving a class presentation, exhibit a lack of respect for each other's ideas and views, and demonstrate an overall failure to build a collaborative sense of classroom community with each other as a result of the vast range of differences that exists between them. Moreover, as English is a course which depends so greatly upon healthy communication, collaboration, listening, and open expression of diverse views and perspectives, the uniting of differences is integral to not only innovative learning, but ultimately the *transformative* learning process.

As an adult educator, I have frequently observed how an unwillingness to unite and overcome differences in educational background, culture, and perspectives ultimately creates a wall between the traditional and nontraditional student. This wall tends to deter the learning process, as well as suppress the imagination and the birth of new ideas, which can foster transformative thinking and action within the classroom, and beyond. Dirkx (2005) states, "Like differences attributed to race, gender, and learning styles, educators are being encouraged to learn to work across and manage differences among learners who represent fundamentally different age cohorts" (p. 2). An effective plan of action to eliminate this wall between traditional and nontraditional students in the classroom is for adult educators to take measures to (a) implement more team oriented assignments and projects in to the curriculum which would provide traditional and nontraditional students the opportunity to learn the value, uniqueness, and transformative nature of teamwork, (b) build community through classroom dialogue and listening, and (c) removing him or herself as the consistent authoritarian expert in the classroom and creating a *participatory* learning environment among teacher and student.

3. Creating a Team Oriented Classroom Environment

Providing traditional and nontraditional students the opportunity to work collaboratively in teams is an ideal method of transforming the negative attitudes and feelings between these two student groups into a positive, goal driven relationship. By the instructor realizing the powerful learning experience that can yield from students participating in teamwork, and focusing on how each student possesses a vast range of talents and abilities to contribute to the collaborative learning process, the instructor becomes a unique facilitator of team-based learning. In reflecting upon student learning experiences within my field of English composition instruction, collaborative activities frequently maximizes the learning process. Classroom activities that involve collaborative learning and peer interaction have a significant impact on student writing and student attitudes toward writing (Callahan, 1999; & Dobie, 1992). In this sense, adult learners, traditional and nontraditional, are given the opportunity to practice openness to diverse ideas, learn new perspectives, and build a strong sense of community with others which can dramatically eliminate feelings of isolation commonly associated with groups of individuals displaying a vast range of differences.

Moreover, collectively framing and reframing ideas, experimenting, crossing boundaries, and integrating perspectives into various tasks strongly characterize teamwork, as well as effective team-learning (Brooks, 1994). Here, Brooks illuminates how evaluating ideas from diverse angles, as well as embracing unfamiliar ideas can dramatically maximize teamwork and team learning on a high level:

"In collaborative learning the instructor values and builds upon the knowledge, personal experiences, language, strategies, and cultures that the learners bring to learning. The instructor models the collaborative learning process by allowing the learner's knowledge to both challenge and reshape their own thinking" (Smith, 2010, p. 149).

Smith highlights how an instructor taking a *qualitative* approach to facilitating a collaborative environment in terms of acknowledging the multiple traits, talents, experiences, and backgrounds that adults bring to a particular environment allows them to heighten their learning experience through critical thinking on multiple, diverse levels. Polkinghorne (2005) states, "Human experience is multilayered and complex . . . Unlike the objects of nature, the layers of experience are not rigidly ordered, nor are its moving contents related according to mathematical patterns" (p. 138). Polkinghorne highlights here how human experience is very much qualitative in nature and moves far beyond a one-dimensional level of analysis.

Teamwork establishes a unique qualitative, multi-dimensional flow of knowledge and experiences among all involved parties. Knowledge and experiences in this light becomes interchangeable, insightful, and is attained across a broad spectrum. Levi (2011) states, "A group brings more resources to a problem than are available to one person . . . Their interaction leads to new ideas that no single member would have developed" (p. 148). Levi is illuminating here how diverse dynamics of group thinking and brainstorming result in a much higher quality of team performance in regard to acquiring maximum success with completing a given task. As life experience, educational, and cultural differences between traditional and nontraditional students often create high levels of anxiety, as well as challenges to the learning process, working collaboratively in teams on various class projects enables diverse creativity and innovative ideas to flow among all parties involved.

This ultimately creates a successful *win-win* learning experience. Beebe and Masterson (2009) state, "When group members work side-by-side rather than jostling for power and supremacy, the result may be a win-win outcome. To collaborate is to have a high concern for both yourself and others" (p. 162). As differences in opinions and perspectives frequently immerge when working in teams, students embracing the unique value and power of collaboration can ultimately *reconcile* differences. This reconciliation of differences enables team members to cohesively, and successfully complete their given task. Kayser (1994) states, "Collaborating addresses differences directly, confronting them with synergistic problem solving. The affected parties join forces to work through their differences; they channel their energies to defeat the differences, rather than defeat each other" (p. 140). Ultimately, providing traditional and nontraditional students the opportunity to participate in frequent team oriented assignments and projects can not only train these two groups to better embrace the unique differences, experiences, and education levels that characterize their lives, it also teaches them that in the most effective, innovative, and creative forms of teamwork, *all* are winners, rather than *one* dominating individual. In teamwork, the priority is on effectively resolving the issue at hand or completing a given task *collaboratively* rather than having relying on one particular individual to prevail over others as the ultimate superior winner.

4. Building Community through Dialogue and Listening

An instructor's implementation of dialogue sessions into the classroom curriculum is another effective method of bridging the gap between traditional and nontraditional college students in the classroom environment. As individuals in a collaborative environment or relationship frequently vary in knowledge, they must engage in dialogue in an effort to negotiate their differences to successfully accomplish tasks (Brooks, 1994). In essence, each student becomes a *Servant Leader* which is a dynamic style of leadership coined by Robert K. Greenleaf. Students separated by differences can become united as one by openly sharing knowledge, exchanging insightful ideas and perspectives, and by effectively listening to the diverse views of others in an effort to gain new perspectives. Greenleaf (2002) states, "Listening as I use it here, is not just keeping still, or even remembering what is said. Listening is an attitude, an attitude toward other people and what they are trying to express . . . It is openness to communicate . . . openness to hear the prophetic voices that are trying to speak to us all the time" (p. 313).

Portraying the role of servant leader through classroom dialogue and effectively listening to each other can bestow a unique, transformative level of knowledge upon each student within both adult age groups. It can also develop new levels of appreciation for each group's culture, knowledge, and life experiences which illuminates transformative learning at its highest: Transformative learning occurs when there is a transformation in one of our beliefs or attitudes (a meaning scheme), or a transformation of our entire perspective (habit of mind) (Mezirow, 2000). Transformative learning, says Mezirow, is "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning schemes, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (2000, p. 8). (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 133).

In this passage, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner vividly illuminate Mezirow's philosophy of transformative learning. They illustrate very clearly how the differences and gaps between individuals or groups can be closed by detaching ourselves from stagnant ways of thinking, discriminating against differences, and refusal to accept change. Classroom dialogue can provide traditional and nontraditional students the necessary tools to detach themselves from limited, discriminatory, and robotic ways of thinking about each other and train them to utilize a more *open*, imaginative approach to communication, as well as collaboration when encountering others possessing a vast range of differences. Moreover, Cammarota and Fine (2008) present a very intriguing discussion in their text entitled *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion* which aligns with the idea of dialogue having a unique transformative effect. In the chapter entitled *Different Eyes/Open Eyes*, Cammarota and Fine provides a deep level of insight into the level of self-actualization and strong sense of identity that materializes when one intimately observes his or her own views, oppositions, and goals as well as verbally expresses them with others: "Conscientization involves the critical reflection upon the contradictions in one's own everyday life and the transformation of oneself as part of this process. Dialogue is a key component conscientization, according to Freire: 'it is in speaking . . . that people, by naming the world, transform it' (Freire, 1997[1970]:69)" (Cammarota and Fine, 2008, pp. 111-112).Cammarota and Fine are challenging us here to acknowledge the *transformative power* of dialogue among peers. Through dialogue, a new level of consciousness is born. The lens through which one views others becomes much more interchangeable, and ultimately transparent.

Dialogue can also be the seed of healthy reflective practice in the sense that it provides thoughts, insights, and ideas that can be contemplated upon by the students long after the dialogue session has ended. Reflection enables students to psychologically engage upon various tones, insightful or controversial comments, anger, body language, and facial expressions that were illustrated during the dialogue. It provides students the opportunity to develop a new manner of thinking and understanding regarding various views and perspectives, as well as evaluate how certain aspects of the dialogue possibly relates to their own life, or aspects of it: Reflection is a key concept in adult education theory and more specifically within experiential learning discourses. It can be understood to refer to the "activity in which people recapture their experiences, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it" (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985c, p. 33). Reflective practice is a pedagogic tool used widely within formal, informal, individual, and organizational learning activities and processes. (Jordi, 2011, p. 182)

Here, Jordi asserts how the reflective process can be both an educating and psychologically transforming experience when utilized in diverse learning activities and environments. Through reflection, we are reminded of the experiences that played an integral role in developing us into our present state of adult learning. Students begin to see each other's differences as an opportunity to learn, become enlightened to new ways of thinking, develop new found levels of appreciation for other's differences which can ultimately transform the intellect, as well as the spirit on multifaceted levels. Moreover, although reflection can yield very creative and innovative ways of thinking, both traditional and nontraditional students are often afraid to embrace new perceptions and ideas of others due to fear of an undesirable outcome. Wheatley (1994) states, "We become so fearful of change because it uses up valuable energy and leaves us only with entropy. Staying put or keeping in balance are our means of defense against the eroding forces of nature" (p. 77).Wheatley is illustrating here how many within society tend to view change as *the other* and are more inclined to choose an established, stationary system or level of action over possibility of failure. Ultimately, embracing new perspectives of others and taking risks leads to a creative level of change, and the most innovative level of transformative growth and development.

Frequently, many insightful answers surround us, but are ignored due to an enlarged ego and a refusal to accept anyone other than ourselves as the vessel of knowledge. Wheatley (2002) states, "New voices revive our energy, and oftentimes help us discover solutions to problems that seem unsolvable . . . Open the gates and bring in new people" (p. 55). The above passages illustrate how Mezirow, Greenleaf, and Wheatley are in rhetorical harmony with each other in regard to the transformative power of open thinking, dialogue, and listening. By traditional and nontraditional students uniting their intellects and embracing each other's perspectives, they will develop a new level of insight into each other's lives, goals, and ultimately realize how each individual is a unique jewel that contributes creative, insightful knowledge into the classroom learning environment. In this instance, a strong sense of community is established among traditional and nontraditional students, ultimately enabling them to be in intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic communion with each other: "Where community doesn't exist, trust, respect, and ethical behavior are difficult for the young to learn and for the old to maintain. Living in community as one's basic involvement will generate an exportable surplus of love that we may carry into our many involvements with institutions that are usually not communities" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 52).

Here, Greenleaf is suggesting how an environment void of community oriented camaraderie, integrity, respect, and acceptance is ultimately a dark abyss in which healthy, innovative growth and development become extinct. This dark abyss void of growth and development is what materializes when traditional and nontraditional students refuse to practice openness in thinking, respect for other's knowledge and perspectives, and refuse to embrace unique differences. Ultimately, transformative learning and community building is only possible through one's willingness to openly connect with others regardless of differences. Only then can a true sense of community be established.

5. Removing the Expert from the Classroom: Utilizing Participatory Action Research (PAR) to Unite Traditional and Nontraditional Students

Taking a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to teaching can also be an effective method of uniting traditional and nontraditional students within the college setting. The instructor's act of removing him or herself as the authoritative expert and designing a class research-based community project relating to a significant social, political, educational, or other controversial issue that impacts and revolves around the lives of *all* involved in some aspect. This project would prioritize the knowledge, experience, and insights of both the instructor and students can ignite a unique awakening within these two student groups. It will illustrate to them how superiority of experience, knowledge, and expert status has no place within a collaborative, interpretive learning environment where the knowledge and insights of diverse individuals come to the forefront.

An educational setting of this nature illuminates the idea of Interpretive-Hermeneutics in the sense that traditional and nontraditional students are able to freely interpret knowledge and ideas through their own lens. Interpretation becomes an artistic vessel that transcends the students to new levels of thinking that had been previously suppressed by the formulaic, positivistic approaches of the authoritative expert teacher. Slattery, Krasny, and O'Malley (2007) state, "Approaching hermeneutics dialogically seeks the process of deconstructing and understanding the multi-faceted layers of our post-modern identities" (p. 539).Ultimately, through interpretive-hermeneutics, we experience multiple conscious and unconscious interactions that reveal the self as complex, emerging, and changing rather than fixed and rational (Slattery et al., 2007). Interpretive is ultimately the force that demolishes the suppressed imagination and the robotically constructed ideas that mainstream western education and society has conditioned us with.

Challenging traditional and nontraditional students to see the power of the "we" rather than the "me" in regard to learning and research, and how the intellect, imagination, and insightful perspectives of the experienced, inexperienced, and the specialist can powerfully unite and produce dynamic results. Slattery et al. (2007) states, "The complexity of understanding aesthetic experiences is difficult for those committed to a modern mechanistic understanding where such experiences do not conform to the logic of positivism, behaviourism, rationalism, and structural analysis" (p. 551). This passage clearly echoes the positivistic notion of how structure, science, and logic tend to prevail as ideal methods of thinking and understanding within a western education system.

Often times in the education field, the instructor's role can be a very dominating role that severely suppresses the imagination of others, ultimately allowing entitled power to upstage transformative pedagogy. Green (1995) states, "We hold in mind that the modern world is an administered world structured by all sorts of official languages.

More often than not, they are the languages of domination, entitlement, and power" (p. 47). As Maxine Green illustrates here, suppression of individual thinking and an authoritative "me" centered environment is a dominant force in modern day society that oppresses transformative growth and development on nay levels. The goal of PAR is to allow the imagination to transcend beyond the positivistic, dominating, entitled entities of power and allow involved parties to experience a collaborative metamorphosis in the imaginative thinking and learning process, ultimately allowing students and instructor to become "one" intellectually. Cammarota and Fine (2008) state, "In most PAR projects, the researcher is not a lone investigator but individuals in a collective. Together, or individually in a group, they are systematically addressing the same problem" (p. 5).

In this sense, traditional and nontraditional students with the instructor work collaboratively as a team enabling creative ideas to interact, develop, and be challenged across a vast range of ages, cultures, and experiences in an effort to construct a collective body of knowledge.

Moreover, this collaborative PAR experience also highlights the phenomenon of *non-formal* learning and how valuable knowledge, as well as insightful perspectives can be created beyond the conventional realm of a teacher-centered classroom lecture. Adults are capable of learning in diverse settings and commonly participate in many types of formal, informal, and non-formal education that help them function effectively in the changing world around them (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Alheit and Dausien (2002) state, "Learning should not only be systematically extended to cover the entire lifespan, but should also take place lifewide. In other words, learning environments should be engendered in which the various types of learning complement each other organically" (p. 4). In a PAR environment, adults of diverse ages, cultures, and experiences allow their formal, non-formal, and informal learning experiences and perspectives to intertwine, ultimately producing a multilayered level of knowledge. Involvement in PAR triggers new levels of consciousness, emancipation, and liberation within participants (Cameron & Gibson, 2005). Transformation of this kind greatly enhances the imagination among diverse learners, as well as the learning process as a whole.

Through this type of PAR learning and interaction between students and instructor, the constructivist paradigm is illuminated. Students are given the opportunity to become the *meaning makers* of their own research experience: The constructivist approach holds that a person constructs his or her own comprehension of the surrounding world through learning and knowledge –which excludes any form of learning approach as a filling process, in which someone, a teacher, for example, transfers knowledge and skills, to others, for example, pupils . . . with his rejection of all that he calls "banking education" (Freire 1970, pp. 58ff). (Illeris, 2007, p. 35)

Here, Illeris's argument on constructivism relates well to a PAR project involving students and the instructor, as well as highlights Freire's concept of liberated, imaginative, and individualized learning. The goal is for diverse learners to be able to interpret knowledge, ideas, and community issues subjectively through their own lens, rather than robotically absorbing information presented by a teacher, or other authoritative expert: The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable, or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the student. His task is to "fill" the student with the contents of his narration-contents, which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. (Freire, 2007, p. 68)

In this passage, Freire highlights the suppression of intellectual growth, imagination, and diversity of thinking that frequently dominates the teacher-student relationship and the education system as a whole. Freire (2007) states, "Education is suffering from a narration sickness . . . Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the student to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into 'containers,' into 'receptacles' to be filled by the teacher" (p. 68). The teacher's duty is to inspire students to challenge knowledge and decide what information best aligns with not only their intellectual development, but also the independent, social, cultural, and educational perspectives that they define themselves with. Robotically filling students with knowledge results in the dehumanization of students which ultimately deadens the imagination and thinking process.

Through a PAR environment, the mechanical *filling* process by the expert teacher becomes extinct and enables a collaborative, multifaceted level of knowledge to be born between teacher and student:

Our intentions for adult learners go beyond mastering behavioral skills or informational content. We focus on what we consider meta-objectives of adult higher education, such as "the understanding that knowledge is neither given nor gotten, but constructed; the ability to take perspective on one's own belief; and the realization that learning and development are worthy lifelong goals" (Taylor and Marienau, 1997, p. 233). (Taylor & Lamoreaux, 2008, p. 52)Taylor and Lamoreaux and Freire cohesively echo each other in the sense that they both assert how true innovative learning surpasses the robotic act of merely absorbing knowledge and information provided by one single expert entity. The idea of liberation is illuminated here. Knowledge is not stagnant, but constantly changing and emerging in an array of contexts. In regard to closing the gap between traditional and nontraditional students with a PAR project, students learn that learning is continuous and unfinished, and materializes from diverse individuals regardless of age, education level, professional status, or life experience:

As unfinished beings, conscious of our unfinishedness, we are capable of options and decisions that may not be ethical. The teacher of geography who truncates the curiosity of the student in the name of efficiency of mechanical memorization hampers both the freedom and the capacity for adventure of the student. There is no education here. Only domestication. (Freire, 1998, p. 57)

Freire illuminates the core aim of utilizing PAR in the classroom to unite and reconcile the differences between traditional and nontraditional students. Through PAR, the students and instructor are collaboratively engaging the imagination and life experiences in an effort to complete a project, which requires embracing a vast range of perspectives, rather than one expert providing a pre-established set of answers to the students. Jacobs (2003) states, "Giving answers is not as good a way of education as asking questions and making people face up and think through things for themselves. When you can get people to think about the process that they are going through, this is the beginning of their education" (p. 53). This enlightening passage from *The Miles Horton Reader* cohesively aligns with Freire's ideas on educational independence and emancipation. Jacobs is suggesting how challenging one's intellect by asking thought provoking questions and allowing them to think freely, as well as allowing them to interpret their own answers to these questions is ultimately the vehicle that transports one toward an authentic level of knowledge. This collaborative, interpretive approach to teaching creates a very raw environment in which students and instructor are engulfed within a unique, spiritual connectedness where each individual is granted access into the intimate realms of another's intellect, soul, and imagination in an ultimate effort to create new knowledge, ask probing questions, and gain new levels of perspective. In this instance, traditional and nontraditional students begin to visualize and respect the unique knowledge that each student group holds, and begin to respect the critical role that each plays within the college classroom.

6. Conclusion

Overall, merging the divide between the traditional and nontraditional college student is a challenge that many postsecondary instructors frequently struggle with. As illustrated in the arguments and literature above, the plan of action to solve this particular problem is to expose these two student groups to (a) increased teamwork, (b) interactive dialogue sessions, and (c) a Participatory Action Research project that integrates the views, experiences, and educational background of all involved. These three teaching approaches aim to help close the gap between the traditional and nontraditional student, ultimately enabling each student group to realize the unique level of knowledge that the other holds, as well as how knowledge, insight, and creativity is born as a result of *collaborative* inquiry. As notable educational theorists and philosophers in the field such as Mezirow, Greenleaf, Jordi, Wheatley, Green, Freire, and many other major authors in the field have highlighted in their literature, marginalizing difference suffocates the imagination and limits intellectual, social, and cultural change. Ultimately, the dominate theme presented throughout the argument above is that when the *we* is prioritized over the *me*, a uniting of intellects, cultures, imaginations, and life experiences emerges to the forefront of the classroom. This union ignites a multifaceted level of adult transformative learning, and enables vast differences to become fuel for a broad range of growth, rather than otherization.

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