Engaging Adult Learners

The population of students pursuing higher education in Canada is changing. According to an article in *Academic Matters*: "Undergraduates in Canada and the U.S. are studying less, working more, and taking longer to complete their degrees... Just one quarter of university students today follow the path of the traditional, full-time, residential undergraduate" (Steele, 2010).

These "non-traditional" students are usually older, and may have different commitments or priorities than younger students. They may be taking night classes because they work during the day, or they may be trying to enter a new field mid-career. When teaching a course with a population of "non-traditional" students, keep in mind some characteristics unique to adult learners:

1. *Adult learning is selective*. This means that adults learn will learn what is meaningful for them. They are "not very inclined to learn something they are not interested in, or in which they cannot see the meaning and importance" (Rubenson, 2011, p. 49).
2. *Adult learning is self-directed*. Adults take responsibility for their own learning. Malcolm Knowles defined self-directed learning as "a process by which people identify their learning needs, set goals, choose how to learn, gather materials, and evaluate their progress" (Rubenson, 2011, p. 53).
3. Many *adult learners have been away from formal schooling for many years*, and may have had negative experiences with school. These adult learners may be reentering schooling with anxiety and low self-esteem (Rubenson, 2011, p. 53).
4. Conversely, *adult learners also bring years of previous knowledge and experience* to the classroom, as well as an established system of values and beliefs governing their thought (Jarvis, 2004, p. 144). They expect to be treated as adults.
5. *Adults often have a problem-centered approach to learning*, and are interested in content that has a direct application to their lives. They want to see immediately how the course content is relevant to their current problems or situations (Rochester Institute of Technology).

The impact of these characteristics on student learning is not limited to the face-to-face classroom. These characteristics also affect the way that adult learners will approach learning in the online environment as well (Milheim, 2011). For example, in a study of adult learners in the United States, the most highly rated design elements in a blended online learning environment were those that provided "personal relevance in what they learn, participation in setting their learning outcomes based on their real-world needs, self-direction of their learning resources and pathways, and establishment of an active learning community" (Ausburn, 2004, as cited in Cornelius et al., 2011).

Effective Teacher Characteristics

When teaching adult learners, there is a shift in the relationship between faculty member and students, and a shift in the way that learners will perceive the effectiveness of different teaching methods (Karge et al, 2011). Hill has defined three areas where adult learners have identified specific teacher traits that they found beneficial to their learning (2014). These three areas are teaching competencies, relationships with students, and teacher attitudes.

1. Teacher competencies included having relevant practice knowledge—"providing relevant, real time information" and "teaching practice applications as well as theory—and teaching material that is up-to-date and evidence based. Adult learners were appreciative of instructors who were able to structure classroom learning, implement a variety of teaching techniques, and stimulate discussion. They

expected instructors to follow the syllabus, and had very little patience for instructors that were unprepared for class.
2. In forming relationships with their instructors, adult learners valued instructors who were approachable and available, and were flexible both in regard to deadlines and class activities. They found it important that instructor value and validate their experience, as well as be sympathetic to the demands placed on them by jobs and family.
3. With regard to teacher attitude, adult learners appreciated instructors who were "fun and enthusiastic" and who listened to students, viewed "students as having knowledge" and didn't "treat them like blank slates." (Hill, 2014)

Keillor and Littlefield (2012) have developed the following list of best practices for "promoting an adult's readiness to learn."

1. Create a safe, welcoming learning environment
2. Create a culture of empathy, respect, approachability, authenticity
3. Collaborate on the diagnosis of learning needs
4. Collaborate on developing learning objectives and in instructional planning
5. Ensure the practicality of all learning activities

When teaching students who may have had little experience of formal education, or are returning to school after a long break, Lee Bash stresses the importance of creating a "link between the world the adult knows and the academy he or she is about to enter."

1. "Introduce and orient new students to the specific institution and what makes it distinctive for adult learners.
2. Help the students make adjustments to college-level work while preparing them for some of the potential problems they are likely to encounter as adult learners.
3. Prepare the student for the responsibilities they are about to assume and understand what faculty members typically seek in good students" (Bash, 2003, p. 161).

Effective Teaching Methods to Support Adult Learning

Jarvis and Rubenson have identified some over-arching concepts governing good teaching methods for adult learners.

1. *Teachers should facilitate learning*. They should create the environment in which learning occurs, and guide the students through the learning process; however, they should not dictate the outcome of the experience. "They may seek to create an awareness of a specific learning need in the students; to confront students with a problem requiring a solution; to provide the students with an experience and encourage reflection on it" (Jarvis, 2004, p. 153)
2. *Teachers should provide autonomy and independence*. This can mean the freedom of pace, choice, method, content, or assessment. For instance, students "should be free to work at their own speed, choose to study particular aspects of a course, choose to study particular aspects of a course, adopt whatever learning style suits them best, and be free to choose what they learn" (Jarvis, 2004, p. 154).
3. *Teaching should empower learners*. As a corollary to the need to provide autonomy and independence, teachers should share power and decision-making roles with their students. Teachers should "avoid being in the position of providing right answers." They should make sure that there is equal access to all resources, include self-evaluation in graded courses, involve students in managing

the learning environment, and be open and explicit about what is happening and why (Rubenson, 2011, p.57).

There are many specific teaching methods that can be used to support adult learning. These methods can be divided into five categories: self-directed, active, experiential, collaborative, and narrative.

Self-Directed

Self-directed learning is independent—it provides the learner with the ability to make choices, to take responsibility for their own learning, and "the capacity to articulate the norms and limits of learned society, and personal values and beliefs" (Goddu, 2012). In self-directed learning, the instructor shifts from the leader of the learning experience to the "facilitator of learning," becoming "a source to be tapped, as required by the learner" (Robotham 1995, as cited in Goddu 2012). Self-directed learning provides students with the "opportunity and freedom to choose the means of acquiring knowledge that is best suited" to them based on their own self-knowledge (Alex et al., 2007).

In online or blended environments, self-directed learning can be offered through the creation of "dynamic learning environments where students may go beyond content presented by the instructor to explore, interact with, comment on, modify, and apply the set content and additional content they discover or create through the learning process" (LeNoue, 2011).

Active

Active learning provides students with opportunities to enhance skills, improve their critical thinking, and "gain knowledge in an efficient way" (Karge et al., 2011). Active learning provides students with opportunities to apply their own background knowledge or prior experience, and instructors with the opportunity to assess existing student knowledge:

- **Didactic Teaching**
  A didactic approach can be very effective when used to encourage students to analyze the course content rather than just learn it by rote. This can be done by encouraging learners to ask questions, thus initiating the learning process themselves. Further, if a student asks a question to which the teacher doesn't know the answer, Jarvis stresses the importance of asking the class if anyone knows the answer, and then suggesting students go out and find the answer themselves. When a teacher admits to not knowing the answer and trusting the students to be able to figure it out, this demonstrates a respect for the students' knowledge and experience, as well as facilitating their independent learning (Jarvis, 2004, p. 150).
- **Socratic Teaching**
  The Socratic method "introduces questioning into the teaching and learning process; it consists of the teacher directing a logical sequence of questions at the learners, so that they are enabled to respond and to express the knowledge that they have, but which they might never have crystallized in their own mind." The Socratic method is an effective method to employ when teaching adults because it:
  - "utilizes both their store of knowledge and their experience of life"
  - "help the learners create rather than reproduce knowledge"
  - actively engage learners in the learning process (Jarvis, 2004, p. 151).
- **Problem Based Learning**: In PBL, learning is both active and self-directed. Students are provided with a real life situation or problem and some guidelines on how to solve the problem. The distinctive feature of problem-based learning, and the one that makes it so well suited to adult learners, is "the focusing of the learning process on the identification, exploration, and attempted resolution of

realistic problems" (Tight, 2003, p. 105). By presenting "a problem as a simulation of professional practice or a 'real life' situation… getting students to identify their own learning needs and appropriate use of available resources, and reapplying this new knowledge to the original problem and evaluating their learning processes," the instructor has engaged adult learners in relevant problems, given them responsibility over their own learning, and valued their existing knowledge and experience (Tight, 2003, p. 105). The instructor serves as facilitators and the students take a lead in developing the solutions, "it is a curricular approach to learning where students are encouraged to take on the responsibility for their learning; even directing that learning process by utilizing their experience, their research, and their collaboration" (Karge et al., 2011).

- **Tell-Help-Check**: Similar to think-pair-share, the tell-help-check is "excellent strategy that provides adult students opportunities to review and confirm their understanding of critical information." It helps students maintain interest in the course content, as well offering them the opportunity to leverage their existing knowledge or experience.

> Tell-Help-Check: "The instructor numbers the students as 1's and 2's. The instructor poses a question to which the 1's respond. This may be done either in writing or orally. The amount of time allotted to answer the question depends on the depth of the question. Generally one or two minutes are sufficient. Once the question has been answered, 2's provide help with the answer by adding information or editing existing information. Once both team members have given input on the answer, they check the text to determine accuracy" (Karge et al., 2011).

Experiential

Experiential learning allows adult learners to make practical use of their knowledge and apply it in a context similar to the way that knowledge would be used in real life (Goddu, 2012). Experiential techniques, such as discussion, simulation, case method, and problem solving, tap into the experiences of the learner, engaging adult learners (Caminotti & Gray, 2012).

- **Simulation**, for example, is a successful method because it encourages experiential, active, and reflective learning. Students "create knowledge using prior knowledge… it creates an atmosphere where internal and external processes of learning can occur" (Rutherford-Hemming, 2012). Simulations provide students with an environment where they can reflect on their choices, "review what was learned… and contemplate what could have been done in other ways" (Rutherford-Hemming, 2012). Simulations are offered at Ryerson through the Interpersonal Skills Teaching Centre: http://www.ryerson.ca/istc/

Collaborative

Collaborative learning is effective for adult learners because it allows them to use their "shared connections and experiences to explain and build upon concepts from class in ways instructors cannot" (Davis, 2013). Adult learners have reported their appreciation for the "interactive learning environments" created through collaborative learning (Scherling, 2011).

For adult learners who already hold professional positions, "collaborative group work sharpens current skills." Furthermore, it benefits the class by leading to "group affiliation and the development of academic identity" (Davis, 2013). In the online classroom, collaborative projects, like group work, "promote a supportive learning environment," providing the "communication and interaction needed to reduce isolation and build group engagement" (Scherling, 2011).

- **Discussion**: Classroom discussion is a collaborative activity that requires students to actively participate, apply critical thinking to their questions and responses, and "negotiate meaning across texts and in relation to their individual experiences… fulfilling adult learners' need to find relevance in their studies" (Davis, 2013). When planning to integrate a discussion into a classroom activity, it is important to first determine the "overarching purpose and expectations for the discussion" (Davis, 2013). Built into any plan for classroom discussion should be strategies to ensure that all students actively participate.

  Before any discussion can occur, the instructor must generate guidelines, as well as model the specific format and structure for students. This modeling should include "asking questions that help the students access higher-levels of thinking, and then providing opportunities for students to craft similar questions of their own" (Davis, 2013). Effective questions to encourage meaningful classroom discussion include "requests for clarification of student statements, support of claims through disciplinary-supported forms of evidence, and further elaboration of ideas." Responses and feedback should "consistently be directed toward helping students construct their own understanding" (Davis, 2013).

  Opportunities for students to provide "tangible evidence documenting their conversations" should be built into any plan for group discussion. Depending on the structure of the class, groups can report back to the entire class, or individual students can write a short reflection on the discussion at the end of class (Davis, 2013).

Narrative

In narrative learning, adults are given the opportunity to form a link between "lived experience and curricular content. Because adult learning has to do with meaning making, these autobiographical connections are integral to the process" (Clark & Rossiter, 2006). Autobiography encourages learners to identify where their value systems line up or diverge from the new concepts or ideas being presented in the course content (Clark & Rossiter, 2006). Learners are encouraged to see how they are situated within the narratives created by family, organizations, cultures, and societies. Personal stories "serve not only to link the concept to students' life experiences, but also to transcend those experiences and see the larger social and cultural structures that shape their lives and their meaning-making" (Clark & Rossiter, 2006).

- **Storytelling**: One way that narrative learning can be introduced into the classroom is through storytelling. When introducing storytelling into the classroom, keep in mind that the story must always be related to the goals of the class (Caminotti & Gray, 2012). For if "telling one's stories is an act of meaning, an act through which the self is both revealed and created, then the stories we encourage our students to tell will influence the meaning they make" (Clark & Rossiter, 2006).

  Setting ground rules and creating a supportive classroom environment are especially important when asking students to tell their own stories. Students must know that their story will not be a target for disagreement, judgment, or argument. Receptive listening and constant vigilance is required on the part of the instructor. The sharing of personal stories should be "strictly voluntary and not considered in evaluation" (Clark & Rossiter, 2006).

  Storytelling can also be facilitated as part of an online learning environment. Stories can be communicated via a discussion board conversation. Videos can also be uploaded in order to tell visual

stories. Stories in the form of case studies or recommended articles can be uploaded that "will deliver a story that correlates to the current topic of study for a particular week" (Caminotti & Gray, 2012)

The following teaching strategies—learning communities, flexible blended courses, and online discussion—take into account adult learner characteristics, and combine the four key teaching methodologies—self-directed, active, experiential, collaborative, and narrative—to create a learning experience that will be most effective for adult learners.

Learning Communities

In a self-directed learning experience, adult learners are "responsible for constructing their own understanding of the course subject matter by developing a dynamic relationship between new knowledge, previous experience and their current professional context. The new understandings as applied to their practice are personal and unique" (Cornelius et al., 2011). For this learning to become transformative, learners must "broaden their perspectives and come to see that values and beliefs of others, though different from their own are equally valid," and construct "new meaning structures in order to make sense of their changing world." This transformation can be facilitated through the establishment of learning communities (Bohonos, 2014).

> "A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise" (Bohonos, 2014).

Learning communities assist learners to move away from "discussing the concrete examples of their practice to begin to explore wider conceptual issues," collaboratively developing shared meanings, values, and practice (Cornelius et al., 2011). They create a supportive learning environment that promotes collaboration, embraces difference, and allows students to feel they have a voice. They have been shown to be "instrumental in the development of supportive peer groups to assist students in balancing the struggles they face in the higher education context" and to reduce attrition and increase student desire to continue on in their studies (Bohonos, 2014). The same processes used to create learning communities in face-to-face courses can be used to build and maintain learning communities in online environments (LeNoue et al., 2011)

Flexibility

As people age, individual differences increase, therefore "adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, and pace of learning" (LeNoue et al., 2011). Because of this, there is a need for "flexible approaches that can accommodate individual learner characteristics, preferences, motivations and goals" (Cornelius et al., 2011). Being observant of learner traits, including prior knowledge, cultural values, motivation, cognitive ability, skills, and curiosity can help the instructor to mold the learning environment and accommodate learners' needs (Alex et al., 2007).

Adult learners "adapt well to active roles as co-creators of the instructional process." This co-creation includes a "role in selecting content and developing the learning experience" and "building immediate relevance between learning activities and the necessities of their daily lives" (LeNoue et al., 2011)

Cornelius et al. describe an activity-focused model with a transparent course design that allows for the flexible delivery of content to learners (2011). The goals for this model are:

- Providing flexibility in study to meet individual needs
- Encouraging autonomy and independent learning
- Providing variety in format and style
- Support collaborative inquiry

In this model, a set of learning activities—"tasks involving interactions with information to attain a specific learning outcome (Littlejohn, Falconer, & McGill, 2008 as cited in Cornelius, et al., 2011)—are provided to students. Examples of these "chunks" of learning include:

- Research article with associated questions
- Quiz for which learners should compare and discuss their results
- Discussion of a case study scenario and development of a strategy for dealing with a situation
- Collaborative development of a definition for a key term
- Sourcing and sharing resources on a particular topic (Cornelius et al., 2011)

These activities can be undertaken individually, in groups, in collaborative teams, or as a class under the guidance of the instructor. A large number of activities are provided and students are responsible for managing their own workload. There is no set order with which to complete the activities; each learner must plot their own path through the course based on their own knowledge and interests (Cornelius et al., 2011).

The resources included for these activities are diverse—they are authored by a wide variety of contributors, provide multiple perspectives on key ideas, and exist in a range of formats—accommodating different study preferences, improving motivation to explore the course content, and encouraging interaction with the resource material (Cornelius et al., 2011).

To help learners' plan their journey through the activities, instructors encourage comprehensive self-assessment at regular intervals, asking students to reflect on their skills and knowledge and revise their approach as necessary. Learners can select professional issues or challenges to be the focus of collaborative investigations. The learners then use assignments to "build on the work undertaken for collaborative investigations" to "develop their own narrative structure to the resources available" (Cornelius et al., 2011).

This model was run in a flipped-classroom format. In the online portion, learning is self-directed. The results of this independent learning are then brought into the face-to-face portion of the class, where they become a "negotiated contribution to a group product." Thus the face-to-face meetings are used to build a "cohesive and focused learning community" by developing research skills and exploring "common interests in issues surrounding their practice." By "encasing the activities within a framework of collaborative and reflective endeavour," the learning activities form into a cohesive narrative (Cornelius et al., 2011).

Online Learning

According to Ke & Xie, online learning for adults has several distinct characteristics:

- "Social interaction and collaboration with peers
- Connecting new knowledge to past experience

- Immediacy in application
- A climate of self-reflection
- Self-regulated learning" (2009)

The online learning environment is also defined by self-direction, where learners are responsible for setting their own goals and strategies to meet those goals. Critical thinking is encouraged through the development of learning communities, discussions, and interactions between students and the instructor (Milheim, 2011).

In online learning, the method chosen by the instructor as the "main means of contact for the class will play the dominant role in establishing the interactions among all class members" (LeNoue, 2011). For example, open-ended web-based environments "allow for self-direction and individualized adaption/creation of content and instruction," while social software is centered on collaboration (LeNoue, 2011). Using a social networking program will provide learners with a space for formal and informal interactions, creating a virtual community, as well as for creating personal spaces for learners to define themselves. Tools like Google Docs, Wikispaces, or VoiceThread provide learners with the ability to asynchronously or synchronously collaborate on the creation of documents, slides, spreadsheets, or audio/video productions. "Meeting the requirement for providing a diverse set of tools for expression, communication, and content delivery will help ensure a successful experience for adult online learners" (LeNoue, 2011). Being ready with "systems of support and plans for scaffolding that will help all course participants get the maximum benefit from the learning opportunities being presented (LeNoue, 2011).

- **Online Discussion**: For Ke & Xie, a critical part of online course design is the use of discussion to guide student learning. In order to encourage deep learning, which is "highly collaborative, integrative (synthesizing ideas and facts), self-reflective, and application-centered," discussion tasks "should be structured around questions that encourage students to develop different perspectives on and explanations of a topic or scenario" (Ke & Xie, 2009). These discussion tasks can consist of close-ended discussion, where students apply their knowledge from the course content to answer close-ended questions, open-ended discussion, where open-ended questions are used to encourage students to reflect on their learning process or to develop different perspectives, and integrated discussion, that uses a combination of both open and close-ended questions (Ke & Xie, 2009).

  In an online discussion, learning should be allowed to "emerge from a discussion of viewpoints, not a delineation of right and wrong." The instructor must be aware of different perspectives and keep their personal views at bay while fostering discussion. The instructor should also be careful to "question if a particular discussion is ethnocentric, dismissive or offensive to other cultures" and to provide alternative material, such as from popular culture or current events, to serve as a foundation for discussion (Milheim, 2011).

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