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# **Faculty in Adult Degree Programs As Teachers of Adults and as Adult Learners**

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Keywords: adult degree programs, adult undergraduates, faculty, teaching adults

**Abstract:** In this study we sought to discover how faculty working in the context of adult degree programs make sense of teaching adult learners. Research questions focused on how they perceived adult learners as well as how teaching in an adult-oriented degree program has influenced their teaching beliefs and practices.

## **Introduction and Purpose**

Adult learners currently comprise a relatively large proportion of the population of college students, with students 24 and older constituting 40% of the undergraduate student population in 2007 (Snyder & Dillow, 2011, p. 341). Moreover, enrollments by students age 25 and over are expected to rise at 2.5 times the rate of students younger than 25 between 2010 and 2019 (Snyder & Dillow, 2011, p. 281). A large body of literature has evolved focusing on adult students, including research on their varying characteristics, their motivations for enrolling, multiple role stresses, academic engagement and achievement, and the various types of academic program formats and delivery models aimed at meeting their needs (Giancola, Grawitch & Borchert, 2009; Kasworm, Polson & Fishback, 2002; Klein-Collins, 2011; Mancuso, 2001; Sandman, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). Yet, there is very little literature that focuses on faculty perceptions of adult students or how these students impact their teaching beliefs and practices (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1998; Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Woodson, Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of faculty perceptions of these students and the impact of this student population on their teaching beliefs and practices. Faculty in what have been termed “adult degree programs” were selected as the focus of this study, given they are more likely to have extensive interaction with adult learners and many of these programs have a long tradition of serving adult students (Maehl, 2000). Such research is seen as having the potential to inform practice for faculty in the growing number of programs oriented toward adult learners, as well as possibly for faculty in mixed-age environments.

## **Theoretical Framework**

For the purpose of this study, faculty working in adult degree programs were viewed both as teachers of adults and as adult learners. Thus, the interest of the project was a dual one, aimed first at understanding the perceptions held by these faculty of the adult students they teach and the degrees to which these understandings align with the literature on adult learners with higher education, and secondarily at discovering how these faculty have acquired their knowledge about teaching adult learners. Two bodies of literature were reviewed in relation to research questions one and two, one focusing on adult learners in higher education, the other focusing on teaching of adults in higher education (selected citations for each listed above). Given the second component of this study focused on faculty participants *as* adult learners, literature relating to

experiential adult learning, tacit knowledge, and situated learning was also reviewed (Fenwick, 2001; Lave & Wegner, 1991; Polanyi, 1967/2009).

### **Research Design**

The study was conducted within an interpretivist framework, drawing on a constructionist epistemology. (Crotty, 1998). Because the perspectives and voices of faculty have rarely been represented in the literature on adult college students, we sought to discover how faculty working in adult degree programs make meaning of teaching adult learners. Several research questions guided the study: 1) How do faculty working in adult degree programs perceive teaching adult learners? 2) How has teaching adult students in an adult-oriented degree program influenced their teaching beliefs and practices? and 3) How have they come to know what they know about teaching adult students? The first research question included two sub-questions: (a) How do they describe adult students in comparison to “traditional” age students? and (b) What do they see as the rewards and challenges of teaching adult students?

Faculty employed full-time in three long-standing adult degree programs cited by Maehl in *Lifelong Learning At Its Best: Innovative Programs In Adult Credit Programs* were invited to participate, based on the assumption that faculty in such programs would serve as information-rich cases for understanding faculty learning about adults. One program served adult students beginning in the early 1960s, the other two originated during the 1970s; each operates as a college within a larger university. Participants included five males and five females. Of the ten participants, three were from Program A, housed in a private non-profit institution of about 10,000 students; five were from Program B, housed in a private non-profit liberal arts institution of about 5,000 students; and two were from Program C, housed in a public research university of about 30,000 students.

Criteria for participant selection included (a) three years of teaching experience in the undergraduate adult degree program context in formats including face-to-face, (b) experience teaching “traditional” aged or mixed-age students, and (c) academic degrees in fields other than adult education. With maximum variation sampling as a goal, faculty representing a diverse array of academic backgrounds and teaching fields participated in the study. Participants’ teaching fields included business, communications, criminology, English, history, philosophy, and psychology. Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data source, along with descriptions of artifacts faculty identified as representing their teaching of adult learners.

In order to increase the trustworthiness of the study data were coded collaboratively, through alternating periods of separate and joint coding. Data were analyzed using the five step process described by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003), including: (a) getting to know your data, (b) focusing the analysis, (c) categorizing information into themes or patterns, (d) identifying patterns and connections within and between categories, and (e) interpreting the data to attach meaning and significance to the analysis.

### **Findings**

Several key themes emerged relating to the study’s research questions. Each is presented here along with selected sub-themes.

#### **Adult Learners Bring Many Assets--Although The Picture is Not Entirely Rosy**

Adult Degree Program (ADP) faculty noted that adult students bring rich *experience* to the classroom, and value opportunities to share that experience. Their *maturity* is evidenced by clear goals and strong motivation—in part attached to their financial stake in their education. They

come to class ready to learn and expecting to actively participate, and they are sometimes amazingly *resilient* in the face of obstacles. *Like younger students* they are excited about learning, prefer clear expectations, and bring some insecurities to the classroom.

- It's a *maturity* that comes with being out in the working world and having responsibilities, so in many ways they're much easier to deal with in just the basic teaching, and you're not trying to jump through a number of hoops just to get them to do their assignments. (Patrick—Criminology—Program A)

In agreement with the literature, participants saw adult learners as bringing a number of challenges, including *multiple roles* and the associated *time demands*, sometimes creating high levels of *stress* (et al., 2009). Like younger students, some lack adequate academic preparation. Not commonly reflected in the literature are perceptions that adult students are sometimes *not open to other viewpoints*, don't care to repeat what they feel they already know, and are *focused on receiving good grades*—deserved or not.

- ....so this is what they call the sandwich generation. They have young children at home and at the same time they have aging parents. So, I think family obligations are typically one, you know that could be children, spouses, they get married, they get divorced, they get pregnant, they join the army, they get new jobs, and you know they're trying to balance all of these at once and I think that's really the big challenge for adult students. (Rebecca—Philosophy—Program C)
- I have students come to me more often in this population...they just expect that if they do all of the work they're going to get an A, and it's not always the case. So, I have students come up to me, or email me, or call me on the phone and say I need to get an A in this class...it's just a different mindset. (Rosalind—Philosophy—Program A)

### **Teaching Adult Students Brings Many Rewards and a Few Headaches**

ADP faculty found teaching adults to be very stimulating as they contribute to a *dynamic classroom*. Participants also greatly valued *seeing student growth* and being a part of their journey. The teaching challenges mentioned mirrored the negative perceptions of adult learners—dealing with students who are offended when challenged, dealing with grade appeals, and avoiding redundancy with prior knowledge. Some teaching headaches, however, appear to be a function of teaching formats (accelerated and online), or interactions of learner characteristics with these formats (e.g. teaching very busy adults in an accelerated format).

- The most rewarding part of it is the interaction in the classroom. You don't have to be as focused on motivational tactics. They come ready to participate, and willing to participate, and that is different measurably from what I've experienced with traditional students who you have to think motivationally about how to teach. (Thomas—English—Program B)
- ...I'm very happy to be able to be a part of that journey. It makes me very happy when they show up to graduation with their babies, and their spouses, and their parents. It makes me want to cry. I haven't gotten used to it. (Rebecca—Philosophy—Program C)

- ...changing how I teach has been challenging because I don't see these students. I don't know how they work, I don't know what they're thinking, I don't see their facial expressions. That's definitely a challenge. (Rebecca—Philosophy—Program B)

- I myself have taught 8-day courses which is just absurd, but it's a bigger problem for the adult learners because they aren't doing this full-time. This is one of many hats they put on during the day and because of this they don't have time to sit and think about what they're learning, what it actually means, and I think that's a major problem. (Patrick—Criminology—Program C)

### **Teaching Adults Requires Flexibility and Stretches One's Teaching Repertoire**

Changes in beliefs about teaching included becoming more aware of individual student needs, and becoming more adaptable to student challenges. Some participants also described changing their model of the “good teacher” from the “sage on the stage” to one of a facilitator fostering active learning and welcoming students as co-contributors. Changes were attributed to learner's expectations and critical moments when teaching. A few did not feel their teaching had changed much in response to adult learners, given they already fostered active learning.

- I think the only thing is adaptability to your student challenges. I think the only thing is like we got to be... a part of our job is really to kind of be nurturing and understanding of what's going on in these students lives (Rebecca--Philosophy—Program A)

- ... they're not into memorizing because they are more critically thinking about what they're doing, and what they're saying, and then they take a part in the teaching process, the teaching dynamics, they're involved in teaching. So it just isn't up to me to fill their heads and hope that they remember it. ...(David—Criminology—Program A)

- I have seen myself more and more as a facilitator of adult students. ... You know it took a while, but just to learn to rely on them...to allow the group itself to respond and to move forward from that rather than feeling that I as a teacher need to address this; which way should I address this x, y, or z? (Patricia—History—Program B)

- I don't know why we have to act like they are different. I think good teaching is good teaching. (Heather—Business—Program B)

### **Teaching Adults Comes Easily for Some—or You Learn Along the Way**

Only one participant had ever taken a course on adult learning and teaching. One held a secondary teaching certificate. Others had no formal study of teaching. A few benefitted from TA or faculty development programs focused on active learning, or even including a session on adult learning. A couple felt that teaching adults came naturally to them. But most learning about teaching adults was informal in nature, via direct experience, relying on student feedback, reading, observation of colleagues, or participation in a community of practice.

- Trial and error. I usually take some time during week four and I say okay this is your class, what's going right, what's going wrong? What do I need to be doing to improve your experience? Less lectures, more activities? (George—Business—Program A)

- I'm a theory kinda person, so most of the reading I did, at least early on, was more, I guess, theoretical in nature, not so much how-to kinds of courses, but it bore itself out in the classroom enough. And someone like Stephen Brookfield I think was probably the greatest influence on me, because he very nicely, I thought, was able to combine a nice, theoretical approach with a nice, practical approach (Donald—Philosophy—Program B)
- The fact that all of the adult teachers, for the adults, we had the same school, we had a dean that was focused on that; we met; we did things together. It gave me a community of learning that I would not have gotten at a traditional place, even if I was teaching in the evening with adults, I would not have that kind of exposure. I feel that it was because of my colleagues that I became a good teacher. (Virginia—Communications—Program B)
- Engaging in workshops where we sort of trouble shoot it you know different scenarios...what would you do if this happened, and then trying that out and coming back and getting feedback, so that kind of iterative process. (Rosalind—Psychology-Program A)

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The study findings suggest that faculty immersed in an environment where they and colleagues recognize many positive characteristics of adult learners that have been reported in the literature (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002), generally find it very rewarding to teach adult learners, who also help them become more flexible and creative teachers. At the same time they also recognize many of the challenges faced by adult learners that are reported in the literature (Giancola et al. 2009; Kazis et al, 2007), and identify some negative characteristics of adult learners not typically discussed in the literature. Some negative aspects of teaching adults mentioned seem more a function of delivery systems selected by programs to appeal to or accommodate adult students—including online and accelerated formats (Singh & Martin, 2004).

Findings also indicate that although a few faculty had participated in professional development programs related to teaching adult learners or college students more generally, their learning was primarily of an experiential and informal nature (Fenwick, 2001). The degree to which that learning was tacit in nature (Polanyi, 2009) may be indicated by the fact that some faculty replied they did not think adult students require distinct teaching strategies when asked to speak specifically about how they thought their instructional practices differed with adults, although they described making adaptations in teaching adults in other portions of the interview. A few, all from the same institution, described their learning as linked to a community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). But participant learning about adults was more often described as occurring individually, as an outgrowth of interactions with adult learners. An implication of the study is that faculty development programs that also take into account the needs of faculty as adult learners could potentially expedite this learning.

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