Adult Students in Mixed-Age Postsecondary Classrooms: Implications for Instructional Approaches

Adam G. Panacci

Abstract

This article will explore instructional approaches that enhance the classroom learning experience of adult students in light of recurring patterns of differences in classroom instructional needs and expectations of effective instructional approaches between adult students and traditional students in research of mixed-age undergraduate and non-degree (e.g., certificate and

ADAM G. PANACCI

Adam G. Panacci graduated from the Certificate in Leadership in Higher Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He can be reached at

diploma) courses in varied postsecondary institutional types, contexts, and fields of study. It will focus on patterns of instructional needs and expectations that are more likely emphasized by adult students with major work responsibilities and experiences who are participating in higher education primarily for career-related reasons than by traditional students who enroll immediately after high school.

adam.panacci@utoronto.ca

Introduction

A substantial and increasing number of postsecondary students in Canada are adult students (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC], 2011, p. 24; Campbell, 1984; Dale, 2010; Gower, 1997; Kerr, 2011; Myers & de Broucker, 2006, pp. 33-38). In 2010, 60 percent of part-time and 13 percent of full-time undergraduate students in Canada were 25 years old or older (AUCC, 2011, p. 7). In 2005, almost 27 percent of college students in Canada were over 25 years old (Myers & de Broucker, 2006, p. 34). In Ontario, approximately 12 percent of university baccalaureate degree students in 2008-2009 were aged 25 years or older and 23 percent of first-year college students in 2009 were 26 years old and older (Kerr, 2011).

The participation of adult students in higher education is in part driven by both the career-related needs of adults (e.g., to meet the credential requirements of a job, gain career-related knowledge and skills to maintain, change, and advance in their career, and/or increase income) (Gower, 1997; Kinser & Deitchman, 2007; Myers & de Broucker, 2006; Palameta & Zhang, 2006) and the adult-focused programs and services offered by postsecondary institutions to support the participation and success of

adults in higher education. In response to the needs and barriers to participation in higher education experienced by adults (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2007; Kilgore & Rice, 2003; Knighton, Hujaleh, Iacampo, & Werkneh, 2009, p. 55; MacKeracher, Suart, & Potter, 2006; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002), institutions have offered a wide range of programs and services, including adult-focused courses and programs (e.g., pathway, preparatory, and upgrading programs, non-formal learning programs, continuing education, distance education, evening, and accelerated courses and programs, and part-time programs), orientation, academic advising, learning support, credit for life and work experience, financial aid, and on-campus childcare (Campbell, 1984; Canadian Virtual University, 2012; Conrad, 2008; Friendly & Macdonald, 2014; Gorman, Tieu, & Cook, 2013; Kerr, 2011; McLean, 2007; Kirby, Curran, & Hollett, 2009; Pappas & Jerman, 2004; Sweet, 2000; van Rhijn, Lero, Dawczyk, de Guzman, Pericak, Fritz, Closs, & Osborne, 2015). While institutions offer programs and services to support the participation and success of adults, adult students are often underserved in higher education and many postsecondary institutions continue to be predominantly geared toward younger, full-time, and residential students (Bourland, 2009; CCL, 2007; Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2010; Kasworm, 2014; MacFadgen, 2007; van Rhijn, Lero, Bridge, & Fritz, 2016).

An important consideration when supporting the participation and success of adult students is their classroom instructional needs and expectations of effective instructional approaches. For a substantial and increasing number of adult students—including adult

students who have limited involvement in on-campus interactions, activities, and services outside of the classroom because they commute, have major life and work roles and responsibilities, and/or attend part-time —consideration of their classroom instructional needs and expectations of effective instructional approaches is essential for promoting their development because the classroom has a central role in their on-campus experience and learning (Panacci, 2015).

In research of mixed-age postsecondary classrooms instructors commonly indicate that they teach adult students in the same way that they teach traditional students or that they do not teach differently in response to adult students in their classes (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1995; Bourland, 2009; Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Chandler & Galerstein, 1982; Donavant, Daniel, & MacKewn, 2013; Galerstein & Chandler, 1982; Preis, 2000). It will be argued that this is often problematic because in research of mixed-age postsecondary classes adult students not only consistently emphasize different classroom instructional needs and expectations of effective instructional approaches than traditional students, but are also more likely than traditional students to indicate that the predominantly used traditional classroom instructional approach does not closely align with their needs and expectations. Instructional approaches that enhance the classroom learning experience of adult students will be explored in light of recurring patterns of differences in classroom instructional needs and expectations between adult students and traditional students in research of mixed-age undergraduate and non-degree (e.g., certificate and diploma) courses in varied postsecondary institutional types, contexts, and fields of study. It will focus on

patterns of instructional needs and expectations of effective instructional approaches that are more likely emphasized by adult students with major work responsibilities and experiences who are participating in higher education primarily for career-related reasons than by traditional students who enroll immediately after high school. The classroom instructional needs and expectations of adult students that will be focused on do not reflect a lack of preparation for postsecondary studies, but are connected to their career-related experiences, needs, and goals.

The Adult Student and Traditional Student Categories

The adult student and traditional student categories do not represent homogeneous groups, but consist of students with highly diverse characteristics, needs, experiences, and goals. The adult student designation is frequently used in a general way to refer to students 25 years old or older who did not enroll immediately after high school, are not in their first cycle of postsecondary education, have other major roles and responsibilities that compete with their studies (e.g., parenting, caregiving, and employment), attend part-time, and/or are financially independent (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Kasworm, 2003; Kerr, 2011). Some use adult student interchangeably with nontraditional student and mature student, while others use adult student, nontraditional student, and mature student not as synonyms but each to refer to different subgroups of adult students (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; MacFadgen, 2008)

The traditional student designation is often used in a

general way to refer to full-time students who are recent high school graduates, between 18 and 22 years old, live on campus, and who do not have other major roles and responsibilities (e.g., parenting, caregiving, and employment) that compete with their studies (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The adult student and traditional student designations are often assigned to students primarily on the basis of age. This is problematic, however, in light of the growing participation of adult students and the diversity of both student populations. Not only are traditionally aged students adults, but an increasing number of traditionally aged students have characteristics that have been conventionally considered nontraditional (e.g., they attend part-time, are financially independent, and have other major life and work roles and responsibilities that compete with their studies). A growing number of nontraditionally aged students also share characteristics that have been conventionally considered traditional. Given the increasing number of traditionally aged students who have characteristics that have been typically considered nontraditional and nontraditionally aged students with characteristics that have been typically considered traditional, it will be important for further research to explore and compare the classroom experiences and needs of these students.

In this article, I will focus on adult students with major work responsibilities and experiences who are participating in higher education primarily for career-related reasons. While adult students pursue postsecondary education for a wide variety of other reasons (e.g., personal development, personal fulfillment, and personal interest), a substantial and

increasing number of adult students participate in higher education to meet the credential requirements of a job, gain career-related knowledge and skills to maintain, change, and advance in their career, and increase income (Gower, 1997; Kinser & Deitchman, 2007; Myers & de Broucker, 2006; Palameta & Zhang, 2006). Some of the research I will cite refer to these adult students in particular as nontraditional students or mature students.

Patterns of Differences between Adult Students and Traditional Students

While adult students and traditional students are highly diverse populations, there are recurring patterns of differences in classroom instructional needs and expectations of effective instructional approaches between adult students and traditional students in research of mixed-age undergraduate and non-degree (e.g., certificate and diploma) courses in varied postsecondary institutional types, contexts, and fields of study (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1995; Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1998; Bourland, 2009; Donaldson, Flannery & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1998; Preis, 2000; Robison, 2012).

In research that explores adult students' classroom instructional needs and expectations of effective instructional approaches, adult students are consistently more likely than traditional students to emphasize the importance of a variety of classroom instructional approaches in addition to the lecture for enhancing their classroom learning experience, including active, collaborative, and interactive approaches. Adult students are more likely to indicate that the traditional lecture-focused approach, which relies largely on the experience and knowledge of the instructor, gives little attention to

drawing on the life and work experiences of students in class, and expects students to take a mainly passive role in the classroom does not closely align with their classroom learning needs and goals (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Houser, 2004; Kasworm, 2010; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; MacFadgen, 2007). In Houser's (2004) research adult students "described their best learning as occurring during open class discussions" (p. 16). Research not only suggests that active, collaborative, and interactive approaches increases learning over traditional lecture-based approaches (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), but also that these approaches often have a more positive affect on the classroom learning experience of adult students than for traditional students. For example, some research has found that educationally meaningful faculty interaction was a stronger predictor of learning or development gains for adult students than it was for traditionally-aged students (Broschard, 2005; Lundberg, 2001).

Adult students consistently demonstrate significantly higher levels of engagement in classwork and interaction with students and faculty in the classroom than traditional students (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1995; Bourland, 2009; Fritschner, 2000; Howard & Henney, 1998; Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002; Preis, 2000; Rose, Smith, Ross-Gordon, Schwartz, & Hitchcock, 2013). In Howard, James, and Taylor's (2002) study, for example, the percentage of adult students who participated in classroom discussion was more than twice of traditional students. The overwhelming majority of students (87%) who were actively involved in class discussion indicated that they learn more when they participate in class discussion (p. 225). Instructors

frequently indicate that the participation of adult students in mixed-age classes results in more sophisticated class discussions and an improved intellectual environment (Bourland, 2009; Donavant, Daniel, & MacKewn, 2013; Preis, 2000; Robison, 2012).

In addition to emphasizing the importance of a variety of classroom approaches in addition to the lecture for enhancing their classroom learning experience, including active, collaborative, and interactive approaches, adult students are consistently more likely than traditional students to emphasize the need for classroom instructional approaches to support the practical application of classroom learning and to relate classroom learning to their life and work experiences, roles, and goals (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Houser, 2004; Keller, Mattie, Vodanovich, & Piotrowski, 1991; Landrum, McAdams, & Hood, 2000). In Kasworm's (2005) research adult students thought that "their life experiences and life roles made them different learners from the younger students. They were learners who could use their experiences for supporting and enhancing their success in the college setting" (p. 11). Adult students are more likely than traditional students to emphasize the need for instructors to learn about their experiences and to connect learning to their experiences and goals. Houser (2002) states that "perhaps the most startling difference between the two groups was the nontraditional students' view that teachers should also be willing to learn from them. They wanted to be understood, recognized as individuals, and respected" (p. 81). Houser's (2004) research also highlighted that "comparatively, traditional students expect less recognition of who they are as students and place a

greater focus on instructor presentation of material" (p. 20). This recurring difference is consistent with Knowles' andragogical model. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2015) state that "in contrast to children's and youths' subject-centered orientation to learning (at least in school), adults are life-centered (or task-centered or problem-centered) in their orientation to learning" (p. 46). They (2015) note that adult students "learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations" (p. 46).

In considering the differences between adult students and traditional students in the classroom, Bourland (2009) notes that "the strongest disparity [between traditionally aged and nontraditionally aged students] in the mixed-age classroom may be in the motivation to learn brought on as a result of differences in age, maturity, and the individual's purpose for being involved in higher education" (p. 23, parenthetical added). Kasworm (2003) observes that the needs and goals of adult students are "somewhat different from their younger colleagues' because they are in a different place in life and view the world and their future differently" (p. 9). Kasworm (2003) notes that adult students not only represent "the status of age" but also "the status of maturity and developmental complexity acquired through life responsibilities, perspectives, and financial independence" and "the status of responsible and often-competing sets of adult roles reflecting work, family, community, and college student commitments" (p. 3, emphasis original).

Implications for Classroom Instructional Approaches

In response to differences between adult students and traditional students in the classroom, some instructors and institutions have offered or proposed age-segregated rather than mixed-age classes (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 1990). However, while adult students may initially express concern about their presence and acceptance in the classroom and relating to traditional students in class (Clemente, 2010; Kasworm, 2005; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994), in research of mixed-age classes both adult students and traditional students consistently indicate that they value, prefer, and learn more in mixed-age classes than age-segregated classes and that mixed-age classes help them see different perspectives (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1998; Bourland, 2009; Kasworm, 2005; Kasworm, 2010; Lynch & Bishop-Clark; 1994; Robison, 2012).

It was noted that in research of mixed-age classes most instructors indicate that they teach adult students in the same way they teach traditional students or that they do not teach differently in classes that include adult students (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1995; Bourland, 2009; Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Chandler & Galerstein, 1982; Donavant, Daniel, & MacKewn, 2013; Galerstein & Chandler, 1982; Preis, 2000). In Preis' (2000) study, 75% of faculty stated that they do not change their teaching methods in a mixed-age class and only 7% change the types of work they assign (pp. 70, 79). In Bourland's (2009) research the overwhelming majority of instructors (85%) also did not change the types of assignments they give in mixed-age classes (p. 97). Only 3% of faculty said that they would change their teaching methods for a mixed-age class (p. 142). Similarly, in Donavant, Daniel, and MacKewn's (2013) research the overwhelming majority of instructors (82%) said that

they do not change instructional approaches in mixed-age classes. They note that instructors commonly used a "didactic approach" (p. 138). Instructors may not use nontraditional classroom instructional approaches or change how they teach in mixed-age classes because it is thought that traditional classroom approaches are generally most effective, there is an assumption that adult students and traditional students generally do not have different instructional needs or expectations, or because of uncertainty of how to utilize nontraditional classroom instructional approaches that recognize and respond to adult students.

Given the diverse characteristics, needs, experiences, and goals of both traditional students and adult students, there is not a one-size-fits all classroom instructional approach. The recurring patterns of differences between adult students and traditional students that were highlighted demonstrate the importance of utilizing diverse classroom instructional approaches that recognize and respond to the diverse needs of students. However, many of the instructional assumptions and approaches of higher education are historically rooted in, and are predominantly characterized by, a subject-centered pedagogical approach that is mainly lecture-focused, relies largely on the experience and knowledge of the instructor, gives little attention in class to drawing on the life and work experiences of students, and expects students to take a mainly passive role in the classroom (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015, p. 41; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 645).

While there is often a mismatch between the predominantly used traditional lecture-focused pedagogical approach and the instructional needs and

expectations emphasized by adult students, Knowles (1980) states that the pedagogical and andragogical models "are probably most useful when seen not as dichotomous but rather as two ends of a spectrum, with a realistic assumption in a given situation falling in between the two ends" (p. 43). Knowles (1980) notes that the pedagogical and andragogical models provide "two alternative models for testing out the assumptions as to their 'fit' with particular situations" (p. 43). For example, while adult students commonly emphasize the importance of relating classroom learning to their work-related experiences, the appropriateness of this approach is situational. Donavant, Daniel, and MacKewn (2013) state, for example, that "the experiences of the learner in a freshman chemistry class are much less crucial to understanding requisite formulas and the fact that if X is mixed with Y, the results could be catastrophic" (p. 139). However, utilizing active, collaborative, and interactive classroom approaches in addition to the lecture can enhance learning in a chemistry class (Hodges, 1999; Paulson, 1999; Shadle, 2010).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) observe based on their review of research that the traditional lecture-focused approach is, for example, often effective for supporting knowledge acquisition and cognitive skill development (p. 646). On the other hand, they (2005) note that "lecturing is not a particularly effective approach for exploiting the potential efficacy of the learning that occurs when students are actively engaged in processing information in new and personally relevant ways" (p. 101). They (2005) state that "with striking consistency, studies show that innovative, active, collaborative, cooperative, and constructivist instructional approaches shape learning more powerfully, in some forms by

substantial margins, than do conventional lecture-discussion and text-based approaches" (p. 646).

The research reviewed in this article suggests that drawing on—and connecting classroom learning to—the career-related experiences, roles, and goals of adult students and utilizing active, collaborative, and interactive approaches in addition to the lecture can enhance the learning experience of both adult students and traditional students in mixed-age classrooms. Resources for integrating active, collaborative, and interactive approaches in the postsecondary classroom include:

- Amador, J. A., Miles, L., & Peters, C. B. (2006). The practice of problem-based learning: *A guide to implementing PBL in the college classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Baepler, P., Brooks, D. C., & Walker, J. D. (Eds.). (2014). *Active learning spaces*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, No. 137. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., & Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bonwell, C. C., & Eison, J. A. (1991). Active learning: *Creating excitement in the classroom*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1. Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.
- McManus, D. A. (2005). *Leaving the lectern: Cooperative learning and the critical first days of students working in groups*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Anker.

- Meyers, C., & Jones, T. B. (1993). *Promoting active learning: Strategies for the college classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Michaelsen, L. K., Knight, A. B., & Fink, L. D. (Eds.). (2004). *Team-based learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Millis, B. J. (Ed.). (2010). Cooperative learning in higher education: *Across the disciplines, across the academy*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

The research reviewed in this article also suggests that while adult students and traditional students frequently emphasize different classroom instructional needs and expectations they also share instructional needs and expectations that can inform the use of classroom approaches that enhance the learning experience of both adult students and traditional students in mixed-age classes. For example, both adult students and traditional students expressed high expectations of instructor clarity and feedback in the classroom (Houser, 2002; Houser, 2006), considered personal organization and availability positive instructor characteristics (Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993), and appreciated hearing the perspectives and insights of their classmates (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1998; Kasworm, 2005; Kasworm, 2010; Robison, 2012).

Clarke and Gabert (2004) state that "within academic culture, the transition from teaching traditional learners to adults is unlikely to produce such a transformation in and of itself. The practice of critical reflection must be learned and adopted into the professional value system of faculty" (p. 33). In light of recurring patterns of differences in instructional needs and expectations of

effective instructional approaches between adult students and traditional students in research of mixed-age classes in varied postsecondary institutional types, contexts, and fields of study it is important for institutions and instructors to not only learn about the experiences, needs, and goals of their students, but to also evaluate whether classroom instructional approaches recognize and effectively respond to the diverse needs of their students.

Directions for Future Research

This article explored instructional approaches that enhance the classroom learning experience of adult students in light of recurring patterns of differences in classroom instructional needs and expectations of effective instructional approaches between adult students and traditional students in research of mixed-age undergraduate and non-degree (e.g., certificate and diploma) courses in varied postsecondary institutional types, contexts, and fields of study. It focused on patterns of instructional needs and expectations that are more likely emphasized by adult students with major work responsibilities and experiences who are participating in higher education primarily for career-related reasons than by traditional students who enroll immediately after high school. Further research that explores and compares the classroom instructional needs and expectations of adult students and traditional students is needed to determine whether—and to what extent—these or other patterns appear in other institutions and mixed-age classes.

Furthermore, in light of the diversity of the adult student population, there is a need for further research to explore classroom instructional needs and expectations of adult

students that may be related to other factors, such as institutional type and setting (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1998), field of study, enrollment status (part-time or full-time), length of time in higher education, level of preparation for postsecondary studies (Miglietti & Strange, 1998), educational background (e.g., internationally-educated recent immigrant) (Lum & Grabke, 2012), other reasons for participating in higher education (e.g., personal development, personal fulfillment, and personal interest), learning styles and personality types (Anderson, 2007; Gallagher, 1998; Sun, 1997), adult age range (young, middle-aged, and older adults) (Clemente, 2010; Newberry, 2013; Pernal, 2009; Smith, 1999), cultural backgrounds and values (Carleton University, 2011; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Kasworm, 2002; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000; Walker, 2007), generational cohort (Bourland, 2009; Hast, 2013), and learning disabilities (Boyko & Chaplin, 2012).

Lastly, given the increasing number of traditionally aged students who have characteristics that have been typically considered nontraditional and nontraditionally aged students with characteristics that have been typically considered traditional, it will be important for further research to explore and compare the classroom experiences and needs of these students.

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