

ADDRESSING AND ENHANCING DIVERSITY: AGE ISSUES

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The concept of diversity embraces many groups, issues, and challenges. If we truly seek to address and enhance diversity in communication sciences and disorders, then we must be willing to tackle the challenges implied in this complex phenomenon. The planners of today's session wisely included "Age Issues" as one of the topics for consideration. Addressing age and aging, however, turns out to be more difficult than expected.

Age and aging issues confront our discipline and our academic programs in many ways. One issue is only too familiar; we are aware of the graying of our faculty, as well as the fact that already acute shortages of Ph.D. level personnel to work in academia will only be exacerbated in the next 10 to 20 years as a major cohort of faculty retire. We must consider the fact that current efforts to attract more individuals to advanced graduate study, whether in upgrading existing master's level practitioners or in meeting the demands of entry-level doctoral degrees in practice in audiology, will undoubtedly result in a need to find ways to appeal to some mid-career professionals. As we recruit new faculty, they will come to us with different needs, philosophies of teaching and learning, and institutional challenges with respect to successful careers. There may indeed be conflicting perceptions of mission and widely varying career goals. In other words, both the students and the faculty that we hope to attract will be different, and some of those differences will be the result of age factors.

A second more obvious issue is the graying of America. We continue to fall a bit "behind the curve" in addressing lifespan content and clinical practice concerns in our academic programs. Given the fact that, by 2030, there will be as many persons over 65 as under 21 years in this country, we cannot afford to ignore the curricular and practicum challenges of these demographics much longer.

A third related aging issue is the growing number of nontraditional students in our academic programs. There exists an extensive body of literature that suggests that recruitment, instructional design, retention, and mentoring of the non-traditional student pose very different types of challenges. This paper will focus primarily on aging as a diversity issue in this context of non-traditional students. Again, this is not a simple topic, in part because of the variety of definitions of non-traditional learners that exist, and in part because it is difficult to decide when age per se is a factor, what part of the lifespan we are addressing, and how far we must go in accommodating lifespan differences. Although lifespan learning differences will be summarized briefly with respect to the truly “older” learner (over age 50), the main focus of the paper will be (a) clarifying definitions and demographics related to non-traditional students, (b) establishing characteristics and needs of adult learners; and (c) exploring institutional, programmatic, and classroom responses to these characteristics and needs.

Defining Non-Traditional Students/Learners

There appears to be virtually no consensus in the literature about what to call and how to define what many of us refer to as non-traditional students. Essentially, there is a line drawn between the 18 to 24 year old student (one who transitions directly from high school to college), and everyone else. In addition to non-traditional, some of the commonly used labels are older learner, returning student, older-than-average student, re-entry student, adult learner/student, mature learner. As noted earlier, there is also an important distinction between the true “older learner” (typically over 50 years) and other adult learners.

Who are these learners demographically? According to the most recent CAPCSD Survey (2002), non-traditional students are those over 30 years of age. Currently, a mean of 12.4% of students in institutions responding to the annual survey fall in this category. However, percentages vary widely from one Federal District to the next. For example, in Federal Region III (DE, MD, PA, VA, WV, and DC), only 5.9% of

the current students are reported to be non-traditional. In contrast, 18.9% of those in Region I (CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, and VT) are non-traditional by CAPCSD definition.

Why such a range of student age distribution across Federal Regions? At this time, we do not know. Some factors that may influence these demographics include (a) access to graduate programs; (b) availability of distance education opportunities; (c) models of academic course delivery (e.g., nights, weekends, summers-only); (d) availability of part-time programs of study; and (e) recruitment targets. As academic programs, we must take time to consider whether or not we intend to appeal to these non-traditional students (at all degree levels), and what factors might make our offerings more attractive.

The CAPCSD definition of non-traditional is not the only one. A cursory review of literature on adult learners revealed at least 10 different definitions. For example, adult or non-traditional students have been described as part-time students over the age of 35, as students married, 25 years or older, a parent, and/or out of school for a few years, or as adults returning to school full or part time while maintaining responsibilities such as family and employment. Similarly, percentages of non-traditional students vary across campuses (in part because of definitions). In the past 20 years, the number of students 35 years and older on college campuses increased more than 400%. Kansas State University reports that 29% of their students are non-traditional, University of Arkansas reports 24%, and nationally, 40% of all enrollments in post-secondary education are described as part-time non-traditional students.

Over 5% of college students are 50 years and older. In a recent AARP study (American Association of Retired Persons, 2000), these older learners reported preference for learning methods with easy access, requiring small investments in time and money, with immediate learning possible. Older learners learn best through direct, hands-on experience. For the truly older learner, academic institutions will have to accommodate actual physical and cognitive aging changes, different motivations and goals for learning, and familiarity/discomfort with classroom learning environments (for more information, see Imel, 1997). These challenges related to the second half of the

lifespan will not be addressed in this paper. Instead, focus will be placed on adult learners in general, beginning with an overview of lifespan issues.

Lifespan Issues for Adult Learners

There are numerous models for stages in adult growth and development, with Erikson's (Erikson & Erikson, 1997) eight stages probably most familiar. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2000) suggests that we must consider the life stage of our mature students from the point of view of (a) critical periods in development; (b) the focus of commitments at any particular stage; and (c) perceptions of time in the life cycles.

Havighurst (1992) suggests that, after childhood, we see the following developmental stages:

1. From 18 to 30 years, there is a focus on life and concern for self-image, with less concern for society; education is an instrument for advancement.
2. From 30 to 40 years, adults are collecting their energies, becoming more stable, less concerned with introspection and self-doubt, and more focused on jobs and/or child rearing.
3. From 40-50 years, adults can be seen as at their peak of involvement in public and civic activities, with increased action orientation and a decline in educational focus.
4. From 50-60 years, adults maintain and consolidate their positions, although role changes occur, and education is seen as serving a more "expressive" role.
5. After 60, Havighurst views the process of considering and engaging in disengagement.

Friedman (cited in Rogers, 1996) has a more career-oriented series of overlapping lifespan developmental stages. At the Entry Level (ages 18-25 years),

adults are seen as oriented towards the future and embracing change. At the Career Development Stage (ages 20-50 years), orientation is to the present, away from interest in promotion to interest in the intrinsic value of work participation. This is a time of achievement in non-work arenas as well. Overlapping with this stage is the period of Plateau, from ages 35 to 55 years, in which the sense of time focus begins to shift from the present to the sense that time is running out. Friedman's stages appear useful in exploring the motivations of adult, non-traditional learners.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

In order to address aging diversity more effectively in our academic programs, we must understand the characteristics of adult learners. Table 1 on the following page provides an overview of four domains that must be considered in defining and addressing these characteristics, based on the work of Knowles. The following sections address motivations, learning styles, and issues and barriers in more detail.

Table 1. Overview of Characteristics of Adult Learners (Knowles).

Characteristic	Description
Self-Concept	Sees self as autonomous and self-directed Wants opportunities for responsibility in planning
Experience	Life-time of experience Defines self and goals in terms of experience Builds learning on experience Enters academic arena with more clearly established values, beliefs, and opinions
Readiness-to-Learn	Begins with need to know, as well as questions about "why" material should be learned Life-centered or problem-centered learning desire
Time Perspective	Learning should be problem-solving oriented Learning occurs in the framework of some life span perspective and/or goal

Motivations

For the adult learner or non-traditional student, it is critical to understand motivations in order to accommodate learning experiences to those motivations. There is an extensive body of literature about adult learners in general, much of it linking motivation to life stage (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Rogers, 1996). Benshoff and Lewis (1992) suggest that primary motivations for non-traditional students include:

1. Self-improvement
2. Self-actualization
3. Vocational advancement
4. Role change
5. Family issues
6. Desire for social interests and relationships
7. Humanitarian impulse
8. Knowledge/cognitive interest (learning for learning)

Houle (1992) simplifies this by suggesting motivations can be subdivided into those that are (a) goal-oriented (specific, external objectives); (b) activity-oriented (enjoyment of the engagement and group process in the learning process); and (c) learning-oriented (learning and knowledge for the sake of knowledge). For most of our non-traditional students in communication sciences and disorders, goal-oriented and learning-oriented motivations dominate.

Why do students enter or return to the academic environment after the traditional post-high school time frame? Benshoff and Lewis (1992) suggest that many have dropped out earlier because of financial considerations, competing responsibilities, lack of focus and/or motivation, and immaturity. The return to school is triggered by changing job requirements or a desire for career change, an increased premium being placed on education (particularly as a means to achieve advancement or higher pay), and family life transitions. These explanations for the exit and re-entry of students work well to explain many returning students in communication sciences and disorders.

Siebert (2000) notes that non-traditional students are often motivated by a perceived use for knowledge. However, other motivations described by Siebert, such as learning to cope with specific life-changing events, are less common within our student groups.

Learning Styles (Brookfield, 1991; Glazer & Stein, 2000; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2000; Rogers, 1996; Siebert, 2000)

Adult learners have a strong need for self-direction, particularly in goal setting, and for opportunities for leadership. They want and need to relate new information and skills to what they already know, to bring their life experience into the classroom. In turn, they need to understand the links between new information and previously learned material. In other words, concepts need to be anchored.

Adult learners want their experiences to be valued and respected. Self-esteem is a major issue, and errors tend to be taken personally, so detailed constructive feedback (extensive formative assessment) is pivotal.

The dominant issue for many adult learners is relevance and practicality. They will question goals and procedures, particularly if they are not clearly laid-out and justified. Style and pace of learning may have changed over time, or may have become set. Many adult learners require more time to process and apply information. Because learning styles have become even more individualized, a variety of techniques for learning must be used, multi-modality approaches must be exploited, and a participatory process is critical. Passive learning opportunities have limited effectiveness.

Rogers (1996) says that the ideal learning episode for the adult learner is one that is (a) episodic, not continuous; (b) problem-centered, not curriculum-oriented; (c) immediate, concrete, and short term; and (d) driven by demands for analogic thinking and trial-and-error (hands-on), rather than memorization. Short focused learning episodes are more effective than prolonged experiences.

Barriers, Challenges, Fears/Concerns

Adult learners bring a variety of issues and concerns to their academic experience (Lieb, 1998; Zemke & Zemke, 1984). Many returning students feel considerable guilt over their responsibilities to others, particularly family, and must constantly struggle to justify compromises between career and family. In some instances, there may be limited family support for the academic goals and aspirations of the non-traditional student, particularly for women. Most of these students are juggling multiple responsibilities, in contrast to their more traditional student colleagues who can focus almost exclusively on school.

Childcare and finances are major concerns and potential barriers. In addition, many universities are oriented to the more traditional student, and the red tape involved with all aspects of university registration, scheduling, and so forth can seem insurmountable to some returning students. Issues of geographical access to education may be particularly problematic to non-traditional students. For example, commuting two hours each way to classes may create much greater challenges for the non-traditional student juggling family responsibilities than for the traditional student. In addition, the returning student does not typically have the flexibility to rent an apartment near school for the duration of their academic program. Life crises may be different at varying stages in lifespan development.

Non-traditional students (mature or adult learners) also face a number of fears or concerns – and faculty and administrators are not always sensitive to these issues. For some, there is a very genuine concern about the lack of a comparable age cohort, along with fears that they will not fit or will be perceived as an outsider because of age and/or family circumstance. Such students are concerned that faculty do not want to deal with older students (contrary to what most faculty value and appreciate about such students). Even a few years away from the academic environment may make non-traditional students anxious about their ability to study, their learning skills, and

specifically their ability to perform in testing situations. For some, previous academic experiences were neither successful nor motivating.

The bottom line is that, at different points in the adult life span development, students have different goals, needs, self-perceptions, points of crisis, and learning styles. For the non-traditional students who are already entering our programs in greater numbers, and whom we wish to recruit (particularly for advanced degrees), we must expect and plan effectively for their differences if we truly desire an age-diverse classroom.

Age Diversity Challenges for CSD Programs

The challenges in achieving age diversity in our student population are threefold: institutional, programmatic, and classroom. From an institutional perspective, we must work to ensure that our universities are responsive to the many needs of non-traditional students – in child care, financial support, special registration, advising and orientation opportunities, greater availability and access to parking, and special assistance with housing. In a recent example, at my own institution, a student who had been admitted to our graduate program for the Fall of 2003 ended up withdrawing her acceptance because she was told by the university that there were no housing opportunities for a single mother with a child. What a poignant example of institutional failure to support a highly motivated and appropriately goal-driven future practitioner. Non-traditional students also need networking opportunities, so they will not feel so isolated. They need to know that there are other students managing multiple responsibilities and sharing similar fears and concerns about academic achievement. They need to be able to communicate with others about their learning experiences, including frustrations with the learning approaches being used in their program of studies.

There are programmatic challenges as well. For example, distance education options may be needed if we are to recruit and retain older, less traditional students. Not all institutions are comfortable or equipped to deal with distance components to the

educational experience. There are no mandates to provide, or not provide, distance education – but consideration of distance learning is imperative. Scheduling of courses must also be reevaluated. Many academic programs have already addressed scheduling needs by providing evening, weekend, and special time-blocked classroom opportunities. Others continue in a more traditional mode of daytime classes and clinic, effectively eliminating participation opportunities for some non-traditional students. Again, our academic programs do not all need to look alike, or meet the needs of all of our potentially diverse student populations, but we must at least consider these scheduling issues. Similarly, non-traditional (mature) learners may not be able to attend school full-time because of other responsibilities. Philosophically, some CSD programs have maintained the stance that the optimum graduate experience is a full-time one. Practically, that stance may eliminate the possibilities of age diversity in the student body.

Finally, the characteristics of adult learners pose many classroom/learning challenges. These challenges are implicit in the earlier discussion of characteristics of adult learners, and only some of the most important are summarized below:

1. Active learning opportunities are essential. Relevance and practical, hands-on learning are the secret to success.
2. New information must constantly be integrated with previously acquired knowledge and life experience. Information conflicting with previous “truths” is integrated more slowly, as is information with little conceptual overlap.
3. We need to find ways to integrate and exploit the life experiences of non-traditional students, not ignore them.
4. Faculty must be sensitive to the fact that non-traditional students have more well established belief and value systems, and must plan for change in those systems, if needed.
5. Instructors must be attentive to the individual learning style of each student, and must provide learning opportunities that exploit the strengths of a diverse group of learners.

6. The learning environment must support views, minimize fears, and provide detailed constructive feedback. The instructor must find ways to serve more as a facilitator, and less as a controller, of the learning experience.
7. More opportunities must be provided for self-direction, and self-defined learning tasks. Non-traditional students perform better when given more responsibility for their learning. Such students also perform better when more time is provided for learning, particularly of complex or unusually challenging material.
8. We need to ensure that the environment is physically supportive of learners with vision, hearing, and/or physical challenges that may be age-related.

Where Are We Now?

Given some of the age diversity issues identified in this paper, the obvious next question is, “How are we doing, and where do we need to grow and change?” The good news is that we are probably moving more successfully in the right direction in this area of diversity than in some of the others. For example, new ASHA standards for both program accreditation and clinical certification emphasize many of the recommendations highlighted in this paper, at least in terms of the learning experience. The focus on formative assessment, active learning, and performance outcomes is consistent with many of the needs of mature learners. Further, issues of geographical access, independent study, distance learning, and alternative models of program delivery are being grappled with by most graduate programs – and particularly by doctoral programs.

CSD programs do need to improve efforts in some areas if age diversity is targeted. Recruitment efforts must be modified to reach a different population and address a different set of concerns from those presented by traditional students proceeding directly from undergraduate into graduate studies. Associated with this

initiative is a need to make our institutions more accessible and adult-learner friendly in terms of support for such students. Further, we need to ensure that our faculty are aware of learning style differences, motivational differences, critical stages in lifespan development and possible crises and stressors associated with various stages, and the need to use the experiences of non-traditional students more effectively. All curriculum content and objectives must be evaluated in the context of learning and other age-related needs of a diverse student population. Finally, although not receiving focus in this paper, we must continue to work to ensure that our course work and clinical experiences address the entire lifespan.

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