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"NEW" STUDENTS RESULT IN BETTER TEACHING

Kathleen Carl

I began teaching as a Graduate Assistant at Southern Illinois University, teaching required courses such as Business Communication, Freshman Composition, and Public Speaking. I faced the same challenges confronting most of my colleagues—disinterested, unmotivated, underprepared students who attended sporadically and with little or no participation.

The vast majority of the students fit the traditional university student profile—18 years old, education financed by parents and/or financial aid, fresh from 12 years of learning that "education" too often meant "sit still and shut up, and hope that class will get out early." Questions in class were rare and were usually limited to very specific concerns about the required length or due date of a given assignment.

When I began teaching part-time at John A. Logan Community College, however, I met a different kind of student, one that is part of an historical trend that has created a growing number of "returning" or "non-traditional" students both at smaller 2-year colleges and, increasingly, at 4-year schools as well. According to the College Board, nearly half of those enrolled in American college programs are 25 or older. The number of such students jumped over 75% between 1969 and 1987. Since the number of non-trads is expected to increase, teachers are likely to experience the differences between these students and their traditional counterparts quite soon, if they have not done so already. While trying out different teaching techniques to meet the needs of these "new" students, teachers may find themselves, as I did, teaching the "old" ones more effectively as well.

I was completely unprepared for the difference in the kind of students I found at Logan Community College. The student who revealed that he was the first member of his family to attend college surprised me—until I came to find that his story was not unusual. Southern Illinois has more than its share

of declining industries, and therefore has a large population returning to school for retraining or attending college for the first time after several years in the work force. I was a bit uncomfortable being 15-20 years younger than the majority of my students in some classes and wondered frequently if it seemed as odd to them as it did to me. It didn't occur to me at first that because I had switched from teaching classes in the daytime to evening classes, most of my new students worked full-time or had spouses who took over child-care duties in the evenings so they could attend class. These students led different lives *outside* of the classroom than "traditional" college students, and those differences were clearly reflected *in* the classroom. I began making minor adjustments in assignments, etc., to meet their needs, without realizing how much these changes were benefitting my younger students as well.

It was only when I began teaching full-time at the college and returned to daytime classes—populated mainly by traditional students—that I realized with a start that I missed the non-traditional students and that I had quickly come to value their presence in the classroom. I tried to identify how and why the "returning" or "non-traditional" students (read: "over 30") differed from their "traditional" (i.e., 18 year old) colleagues. I also began to appreciate how the changes I had made in response to these differences meant increased success for writing students of all ages.

In terms of motivations and goals, it is quite natural that a 38-year-old would have more specific career goals than an 18 year old. She knows herself better, has had a variety of life experiences, whether as a homemaker or in the work force, and has returned to school with some kind of plan. This difference in goals is quite pronounced in the classroom. When I meet a class for the first time, I often take an initial survey of names, home towns, and expected college majors. This survey will typically lead the first-time or younger student to respond, "I want to transfer to a university and maybe major in psychology or something related," or "something in the nursing field." A typical response from a returning student, on the other hand, is more likely to be, "I want to take the LPN test in March and then begin the RN program in the Fall of 1993."

Because of the difficulties of attending classes while taking care of a family or working full time, returning students approach college quite seriously. There is often a tremendous amount of pressure for them to succeed—an impending lay-off means they will soon have no income, a

sudden divorce or separation means they have new and frightening financial responsibilities. The students who feel the most pressure are usually the ones who put it on themselves by feeling that they have to prove to family or self that they have the ability to "make it." This pressure generally leads the returning student to identify realistic, attainable goals, and to find the most efficient way to reach those goals. There is not much room for trying out different courses and searching for the "perfect major." (Often, too, the idealism which leads a student on that search has necessarily been set aside.) One woman, long convinced by family and ex-husband that she was "not college material," found the challenge and success exhilarating but confided wistfully that her ambitious long-term plan left no room for the additional art and literature courses she thought she would enjoy.

While the highly motivated student is, in many ways, the teacher's dream, a student with very specific career goals may present unique challenges in a "general studies" course such as English composition. They are most comfortable when working on tasks which seem to be related to "real life," or life outside the classroom, and quickly grow impatient and frustrated with assignments which seem frivolous. The biggest change in my teaching methods in response to this characteristic has been a continuing search for assignments which have a real audience (rather than "pretend you are writing a letter to your mother"), which have an actual purpose beyond simply practicing a particular writing technique, and which can easily be translated into the kind of writing people do on the job. By using such assignments in all of my writing courses in recognition of the amount of personal responsibility the returning students carry into the classroom, I have enjoyed the "side-effect" of increasing the level of responsibility expected of the younger students as well.

Some examples of successful assignments have been letters to Congress regarding a timely issue, research papers on subjects students are or will be studying *in their specific fields*, and argument essays based on the success (or failure) of an in-class debate on an issue. Preparing for an oral debate forces students to consider (or at least *hear*) both sides of an issue and to weigh different types of argument strategies based on reactions of opponents and audience members evaluating the debate. Initially designed for returning students, these assignments have worked extremely well with traditional students as well because they are concrete and have definite *advantages* which can be explained clearly to the students. During spring

semester of 1991, for example, the so-called "Brady Bill" related to handgun control was about to be decided in Congress. Many students had strong opinions on the issue, so they wrote to their representatives stating how they wanted them to vote and why. Besides a real hands-on introduction to the political system, the assignment demonstrated the need for students to clearly articulate their *reasons* for their opinions—something communication instructors work on constantly. I also enjoyed the amazement of "trads" and "non-trads" alike when all received responses to their letters!

With a research paper, I strongly encourage students in a nursing program to research (for example) a new medical technique, music or theater students to study a performer, or law enforcement students to examine a particular law. I even tell them that they can use the same research if they have another class requiring a research paper. At first they are delighted at the idea of saving time, but then I press home a point about how a *general* audience is different from a *technical* one; rarely can the criminal justice student use the exact same paper for my class as for his criminal law class. Definitions which are common knowledge *in the field* are not common knowledge to me, and suddenly they begin to realize what "writing for an audience" really means. Other advantages to research papers in their fields include introducing them to professional journals and indexes which they will be using in later major courses (they are not allowed to use more than two articles from general interest periodicals such as *Time* or *Newsweek*); becoming familiar with basic sources in a field; and learning the language and jargon of their future profession early in their training. Even though I began encouraging the cross-disciplinary approach to save the non-trads time and needlessly duplicated effort, it turns out that this approach benefits the traditional student at least as much, if not more, than it does the returning student,

A second characteristic I have noticed in the non-traditional students is classroom style—everything from where they sit to how they ask questions. As stated, these are motivated students, which means they will attend class regularly and will be well prepared. This alone often sets them apart from their younger classmates. They most often sit near the front, as if afraid they will miss something important. They ask for confirmation of the written assignment on the syllabus ("We're supposed to read pages 150 to 200 for Friday, right?") as if to reassure themselves that they are on target. Their initial assessment of their skills is most often negative, a result of being out

of school for an extended period of time. Even after several successful assignments, they will hand in an essay saying, "I don't think this is what you wanted," or "I'm just not happy with how this paper turned out." I encourage my non-traditional students to share these comments because I assume the younger students have many of the same concerns but are less willing to articulate them.

I have also noticed a marked difference in the questioning style of non-traditional vs. traditional students. Students who attend college straight from high school often bring their evasion habits with them—many want class to be over quickly, and they don't want to be singled out for any thing potentially embarrassing, meaning *Don't ask the teacher any questions!!* The non-trads, on the other hand, find themselves enjoying the classroom experience, aren't afraid to join in and risk embarrassment in discussion, and will question *frequently*—a technique they have learned to use in coping with the complexities of everyday life (e.g., insurance policies, mortgages, etc.). Out in the "real world" you have to ask questions to survive, and they carry this habit with them.

Their questions seemed like a blizzard to me at first, and after one particular class, made up almost entirely of returning students, I usually found myself exhausted and frustrated, having covered much less material than I had planned. I gradually realized, however, that the *kinds* of questions asked often reflected a desire for reinforcement or reassurance rather than a lack of comprehension. I noticed a lack of substantive questions during the writing process. Instead of asking basic, general questions such as, "What is a 'narrative,' anyway?" these students were much more likely to tell me *after I'd returned* a less-than-successful assignment that they "just didn't know how to do it." That kind of admission was, and still seems to be, quite difficult to make—a position with which I can certainly empathize.

Gary, a student in his late forties, had enjoyed considerable success in the railroad industry before being laid off. He shared many of the characteristic attitudes of the "new" college student. He was apprehensive about his ability to do the same work as the younger students after many years out of the classroom. He was a bit embarrassed about how he would look (until he looked around and discovered what college officials already know—he is far from unique). He also came in a bit defensive, which is the biggest obstacle I face with many returning students. Gary later admitted that, unlike one younger student in the class, he would never have simply

thrown up his hands in exasperation and asked, "What are we supposed to do?" He felt that he must have missed something, that he should already know how to do a given assignment, or that it was somehow his fault if he didn't understand something. He would, however, ask a question if he thought he already knew the answer.

I have been successful in reducing the number of those questions which simply ask for reassurance by taking some steps which seem simple. My syllabus is extremely thorough, explaining the subject matter to be covered, my expectations regarding attendance, steps to take if the student misses class, and a very precise grading scale. The second page of the syllabus includes the readings or activities scheduled for each day of the semester (I discovered this to be extremely beneficial to me as well). I also distribute a sample of each kind of writing students are required to do; the use of "model essays" proved to be so helpful that I regret each semester I *didn't* use them. All students benefit from seeing what a short student essay looks like. I also distribute some "sample" essays which need to be revised. Recognizing shortcomings in others' work has increased students' confidence in finding their own weak areas and increased the value of their contributions to other students during "workshops." These moves, originally designed to alleviate the anxieties of non-traditional students, have become part of all my writing courses, benefitting the younger students as well as the older ones.

Similarly, because of the large number of non-trads who wanted me to check a rough draft of their work to make sure they were "doing it right," I implemented a workshop system in my freshman composition course, putting students in groups to work on structure, revision, etc. I sit in on each group and provide guidance if needed. Again, what developed out of a desperate attempt to calm the fears of a particular group of students is now an integral part of my teaching. Rough drafts are now a required part of the writing process, and the improvement has been startling. Invariably the non-traditional students are the most productive and helpful in the workshops. I suspect they have taught considerably more students to write well than I have. One very young student approached me after a productive workshop session, pointing out a grey-haired member of his group with awe and saying, "That guy's really *smart*!" I passed the comment along, and both "generations" profitted. Increased pride and self-confidence have been identified repeatedly as reasons for the success of the non-traditional student – and the traditional student as well.

The most striking thing about teaching the non-traditional student for me is how much I value their presence in the classroom. They enhance the cohesiveness of a class, raise the level of participation, motivate others by example, and bring warmth and enthusiasm to a subject many students dread. Once they are put at ease, and some initial fears (usually groundless) regarding their ability to keep up are put to rest, the non-traditional student simply seems to appreciate what the teacher is trying to do. In class they are respectful and thoughtful, and I treasure the compliments on my teaching ability and the end-of-semester thank-you notes (just as often from the "C" student as from the "A"one). When it comes to "classroom style," these students have it.

As the unemployment rate increases, as employers continue to require more education and retraining, and as colleges and universities pursue the "older" students more actively, many teachers will make changes in teaching style to meet the needs of these students. I suspect most of them will find, as I did, that the changes will benefit *all* students. Because of the influence of the non-traditional students, I have more respect for all my students' needs and abilities and more confidence in my teaching ability.

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