

The College Student As Adult, And Vice Versa

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When I began college teaching I assumed I was to teach adults. After a few rounds of on-the-job training, I complained to a colleague that the students and I were not relating well to each other, and was advised that part of the problem might be my failure to perceive my students for what they were: overgrown children (in the parlance of my field, late adolescents or "youths").

This advice relieved some of the frustration, as I slipped into a quasi-maternal style, which involved both authoritarian ("do as I say because I say so") and nurturant ("let me show you how") elements of the role. I came to assume that the students knew little or nothing outside of the classroom, and began to expect them to do little or nothing beyond what I specifically assigned. The institutional structure and mores supported my approach, and my teaching seemed to improve.

However, even at the time I had doubts about the accuracy of the advice, and when time and increased confidence allowed, I reexamined the situation. It was apparent that many of my students were *not* late adolescents, by virtue of age, maturity, experience, or all three. My new teaching approach involved assumptions that were false for many of my students. I thought about the ways in which adults, including myself, seem to learn best, and found myself again reconsidering my role as professor, and wondering about the model of higher education in general.

The directions of American higher education have seldom been determined by thoughtful philosophical or intellectual considerations. However, a trend which began around the turn of the century has become, almost by chance, a norm — the standard four-year college education is for the young and inexperienced, and certain methodologies, mostly untested, are assumed to be the best ways to teach this group.¹

The prototypic college student was an 18 year old white male, fresh from high school, who had completed a standard college preparatory program,

and who upon entering college was joining for life a relatively privileged world of educated people. His age peers who did not enter that world at that age were channeled into another, lesser, world, also with the high probability of remaining there for life. Although this college student would be a legal adult now in some respects, he differed from most adults in several ways. He had never held a full-time job, never been married or raised children, never owned a house or car. In fact, this student had just left his parents' home for the first time, had been in school almost all his life, and would continue to be a student for a few more years, before finally entering the "real world." In the meantime, this student was learning as a person in his situation would be expected to learn, and more or less in the same way he had been learning up to that time. He received instruction from older authorities on subjects he had only read about; he memorized, recited and demonstrated his learning through formal term papers and examinations. He was subject to restrictions and guidance appropriate to his age and condition — in fact, the college was often considered to be *in locus parentis*, an extension of the child-rearing in his home. College was a preparation for life. Thus, the traditional college student was neither considered nor treated as an adult, and for good reason.

Since this prototype first evolved, certain events and forces have been changing the nature of the college student, almost behind our backs. We have experienced, for example, World War II, the G.I. Bill, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the 1960's. The typical student is now different.

For one thing, chances are almost 50-50 that he is a female, and on some campuses he/she may not be white. Many students of all ages hold jobs, are married, have children, or go to college part-time. Most colleges have ceased to be *in locus parentis*. College is no longer a preparation for life for many people, but rather one part of a complex and

ongoing experience. Perhaps the most impressive recent change is in age. According to the *Digest of Education Statistics*, in this country the number of college students under 25 has *decreased* by five percent since 1972, while the number over 35 have increased by 51 percent.² The fastest growing groups of college students are women in their late 20's (an increase of 133 percent since 1970) and women over 35 (an increase of 67.5 percent). The Census Bureau estimates that by 1985 students over 25 will comprise over 40 percent of the student population.³ Even Humboldt State, whose stock in trade has always been the young high school graduate, is affected by this trend: the average age of HSU students is 25, and in 1977 over ten percent of the student body was over 30. At least three factors seem to contribute to this trend. One is the continuing decline in the number of 18 year olds in the population. A second is the apparent disinclination of some potential students to go directly (if at all) to college from high school. Third, increasing numbers of older adults, particularly women, are making career and life-style changes, many of which require college education.

The problem is that while the student population is changing, the educational model remains essentially the same, so that teaching and learning methodologies, which may not have been optimal even for the traditional student, are undoubtedly questionable for the older, more experienced student. However, good teachers have seldom worried too much about formal methodologies and have found ways to maximize their students' learning. The more malignant problem, in my view, is that we have not accepted older students as a legitimate part of our professorial responsibility, that, in fact, we do not believe they really belong in college.

What do we think of older students? Inaccurate assumptions and stereotypes are widespread. It has been suggested that the most basic and usually covert assumption is that the better students will have gone to college "on time" (as most faculty members have), so that older people who are in college must be less capable.⁴ Older students are often treated as if they were, by reason of age alone, inferior students, intellectually deficient by definition.

Associated assumptions are that older students are slow, narrow-minded, and not serious or motivated in their college work. One stereotyped image is that of a middle-aged housewife with time and extra money on her hands, who is just taking a few classes for fun and who will never show up in a

graduation line. On top of that, she talks too much in class, asks irrelevant questions, and simply wastes everybody's time, including her own.

As with any self-respecting stereotype, this one has a few grains of truth — three, to be exact. Some older students do talk in classes more often than younger students, and sometimes they are slower to complete coursework. It is also true that a majority of older students do not finish a degree.

However, as with other stereotypes, this one contains more error than truth, and even the accuracies are subject to interpretation. The fact is that older students as a group are better students and are more motivated than younger students.⁵ A recent survey of students over 27 on the HSU campus⁶ reflected these facts. For example, 47 percent of these students had GPA's of over 3.6, 76 percent had a "strong commitment to the major" (as compared to 67 percent of younger students), and many expressed a preference for more demanding classes. Perhaps the reason they sometimes talk more in classes is that they are simply more interested.

A second point is that the older student is far from the well-heeled dilettante described above. On the contrary, older students are much worse off financially than younger students, and typically have additional job and family pressures.⁷ It would appear that these pressures, plus a general lack of support from the institution itself, are major causes of the high dropout rate. For example, in the HSU survey, the older students who had left school cited financial, job and family reasons most frequently, with lack of encouragement, insufficient academic information and too few rigorous classes as additional problems. It should be noted that 60 percent of these "dropouts" intended to return to school in the future, so they might be more properly considered as "continuing" students.

An almost universal comment by older students, here and elsewhere, is that they feel "out of place," that they do not feel comfortable in the student role. This, in spite of their general academic success as a group, and their high motivation. At HSU many older students reported that they had made friends on campus, with faculty and staff as well as other students, but still felt uncomfortable in the student role. One possible interpretation of these mixed reactions is that the climate of the campus is young, and that older students, regardless of their ability to get along, are not accepted as a normal component of the student body.

To summarize, older students are a numerically significant and growing segment of the college population, who are good students with high motivation, but who suffer from false stereotyping, outside pressures, and a lack of support from the institution. The next question might be: are these students sufficiently different from the so-called traditional student, in intellectual and learning styles, to warrant new approaches in teaching? I suggest that they are.

It is generally accepted in the field of developmental psychology that children resemble each other more in developmental stages and behaviors than do adults, that in adulthood individual differences proliferate and generalizations are harder to make. Thus, any general description of intellectual patterns and learning styles of adults are even more subject to variation than those of children. By the same token, appropriate methods for adults can and should vary more widely. The general factors that seem most relevant are: cognitive development; amount and variety of life experience; and physiological age changes.

The leading theorist of cognitive development, Jean Piaget, postulates a final stage of development, "formal operations," which begins to appear in early adolescence and is achieved by around the age of 18.⁸ Formal operations include abstract reasoning, the ability to work with several variables at once and control variables systematically, and to understand and use probabilities and hypothetical possibilities. These skills are clearly essential to college-level learning.

Setting the age of 18 for acquisition of formal operations would lead to the assumption that all of our students, including the younger ones, are equally developed cognitively. However, two additional considerations modify the picture. First, in Piaget's model natural interaction with the environment is the key to development at every stage, and the more experience one has with the environment, testing hypotheses and solving problems, the more consolidated the operations. Although Piaget has little to say about adulthood, it is acknowledged that consolidation takes time and experience and that fully functioning formal operations may not be established until some time in the 20's. A problem arises from the data which show that many adults in all age groups do not demonstrate formal operations at all. Thus, though we have no assurance that all adults possess these important skills, we may assume that among those who have reached the stage of formal operations, these operations are more likely to be fully consolidated in older individuals.

The second consideration is the possibility of an additional stage of cognitive development beyond formal operations, which has been proposed tentatively by several writers.⁹ Whereas formal operations are essential to problem-solving, further development may be required for sophisticated "problem-finding." Higher order integration of abstract ideas, divergent creative thought, and tolerance for ambiguity have been suggested as possible concomitants to this higher stage. Although little empirical study has been done in this area, I think it reasonable that this level of functioning is more likely to develop in individuals with greater experience.

Another way of looking at the effects of life experience is in the contrast between "fluid" and "crystallized" intelligence.¹⁰ Fluid intelligence includes elements which are considered to be less affected by cultural influence; it is measured by tests such as digit span memory, paired associates memory, matrices and figural relations. Crystallized intelligence is more dependent on acculturation, and measures include verbal comprehension, general information, vocabulary and experiential evaluation. Fluid intelligence reaches a peak in the early 20's, and tends to decline over the later life span. Crystallized intelligence increases steadily through middle age, and even later for many people. Although all aspects of intelligence are important, I would suggest that crystallized intelligence, which actually increases with age, is extremely valuable in college learning, and can compensate for the decline in fluid intelligence.

But what is lost in this decline? The main elements of fluid intelligence seem to be speed and short-term memory. There is no question that young adults are quicker than older adults, both in reaction time and in certain kinds of problem solving. And loss of memory is a well-known hazard of increasing age, especially the ease of rote memorization and the learning of "nonsense" material. Loss of speed occurs earlier than memory deficits, which typically do not become noticeable until late middle age.

It should be noted that, in spite of the obvious declines in physiological function, such as hearing, eyesight and the general slowing down of the system, there is no evidence that these physiological changes cause poor cognitive functioning. For example, no specific physiological correlates to memory loss with age are known, and it has been suggested that the actual ability is not lost, but rather that the strategies become inefficient with age, perhaps through disuse (how often must a

middle aged person engage in rote memorization?).¹¹ The earlier findings of declines in I.Q. with age, which now have been superseded by findings of no declines using better methodologies, may have gone unchallenged as long as they did because it was assumed that I.Q. was linked causally to physiological change. It appears that maintenance of cognitive functioning is related mostly to cognitive activity (paralleling sexuality — “use it or lose it”).

From this brief overview some generalizations can be made about adult intelligence. On the minus side are loss of speed, some gradual losses in short-term memory and other aspects of fluid intelligence, and declines in non-exercised skills. On the plus side are increases in crystallized intelligence, the possibility of better consolidation of formal operations, and the maintenance of abilities that are kept in use. The key to the positive age trends is experience, which appears to add depth and breadth to our intellectual perspectives, and to compensate for the loss of some of the youthful virtues.

The study of adult development is comparatively new, and although there is a good literature of gerontology, very little study has been made of older adults in active learning situations, especially middle aged adults. However, much excellent research on these topics is in progress. While we await some new enlightenment, I believe there are a number of steps that we college faculty can take to deal more effectively with the fastest growing student group, drawing both on research results and on first-hand experience.

First, we should avoid false stereotyping of older students. Don't allow grey hair or extra wrinkles to lead to negative assumptions about intellectual ability, motivation or ability to learn. The good record of older students as a group, plus some information about individual cases, may lead to acceptance of them as the high-powered if overstressed, group that they are.

Second, new methods in the classroom may prove valuable to dealing with changing student characteristics. For example, students' past experience and knowledge can be used as supplementary class material, rather than as an unwelcome distraction. When students are invited to serve as resources, they are likely to rise to the occasion, and other students can gain valuable new perspectives on the material. The long-standing beliefs and frames of reference of older people, that to us appear as “narrow-mindedness,” may be very broadening for younger students. It seems to me

that we are simply more accustomed to the extraordinary narrow-mindedness of youth, which stems from lack of experience, and could easily learn to adapt to narrow-mindedness which is based on years of experience.

A general model for two kinds of teaching styles has been proposed in the contrast between pedagogy (literally, the leading of children or boys) and andragogy (the leading of men).¹² (The inappropriate usage of generic male forms is discussed elsewhere.)¹³ Whereas pedagogy assumes that the learner is dependent, has limited experience, and requires an authority to determine what is to be learned and when, andragogy assumes that the learner is autonomous, has a background of relevant experience, and can participate in decisions about when and what to learn. Applications of learning are postponed within a pedagogical framework, while an andragogical approach encourages immediate application, and tends to be problem-centered. Clearly, andragogic principles are more appropriate for older students.

I believe that all of us have learned and accepted the pedagogical approach without much analysis, and that when we do adopt andragogic-like methods it is in a rather hit-or-miss fashion. I would argue that these approaches are not methodological, but rather attitudinal; that is, we can learn to perceive our students as responsible adults, as appropriate, but the choice of methods does not follow automatically. For example, surveys of older students show that the lecture form is highly regarded. A good lecture, delivered in andragogic spirit, may suit older students better than a small group activity that depends on youthful exuberance. Furthermore, andragogic principles are often appropriate to younger students as well; e.g., the Cooperative Education program and our many field experience courses are designed to create a close interplay between learning and practical application.

Third, we should be open to programmatic changes which do not affect the broader academic philosophy or curriculum, but which can enhance significantly the success of older and other non-traditional students. For example, the Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) program gives formal recognition to life experience which can be translated into an academic portfolio; the recognition is no more than token (a maximum of ten lower division elective units), but students gain confidence, academic skills, and a greater understanding of the traditional curriculum they are entering.

Other ways to handle past learning, if it is course-related, are the challenge and the waiver, hardly new but rarely used. Consider the advantage of excluding individuals from your classes who have too much knowledge of the subject, who are likely to become bored or even disruptive. Challenges should be tried only in occasional cases, but when they are, the faculty member should not take them as threats to the ego, but rather as a potential benefit to both sides.

In view of the widespread job and family responsibilities of many students, especially older ones, we can serve their needs better without sacrificing our own by creating more flexible scheduling. Not only classes (some faculty members might prefer evening or weekend schedules if they were offered the choice), but also programs might be rescheduled. There are surely arbitrary elements in some of our lock-step sequences which could be eliminated or modified without affecting the learning.

Finally, I strongly suggest that we examine our conceptions of the role of professor. Does the role depend heavily on an age difference between us and our students? Do we rely on a kind of parental authority to maintain the role? If so, is there any real advantage to this orientation, in enhancing the learning process or the academic profession? If we attribute some of our own wisdom to our advanced age and experience, logic requires us to attribute some of the same wisdom to some of our students. More appropriately, perhaps we could limit the role of professor to one of authority in an area of expertise, regardless of age. A useful model to draw on is the consultant, who theoretically accrues authority and status on the basis of knowledge alone. Under this model, we would not feel ill at ease with students as old as our grandmothers. Of course, I believe that being a professor carries a broader connotation of intellectual responsibility and pride, but we can retain the important aspects of our role while eliminating the insignificant and dysfunctional ones.

College faculties are noted for their conservatism when confronted with changes in the student population or the curriculum. At best, this conservatism stems mainly from two legitimate concerns: fear of declining academic standards; and fear of erosion of the professorial role. We all know examples of these fears realized, colleges where degrees can be bought, where faculties are rubber stamps, or where professors indulge themselves and their students with "fun and games" in the name of higher education. These legitimate concerns can,

on the other hand, lead to retreats into the safety of the *status quo*, where the real issues of higher education get obscured by talk of tradition.

I submit that there are choices other than the hidebound or the worthless. Consideration of issues and possible changes such as those I have discussed here can, I believe, strengthen the academic quality of our profession by clarifying our mission and increasing our effectiveness.

¹Fred Harvey Harrington, *The Future of Adult Education*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977).

²W. Vance Grant and C. George Lind, *Digest of Education Statistics, 1977-78*, (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1979).

³Elizabeth Stone, "The New Kid in Class is Your Mother," *Ms.* (September, 1979), pp. 46-50.

⁴Harrington, *op. cit.*

⁵Irma T. Halfter, "The Comparative Academic Achievement of Young and Old," *Journal of the National Association of Women Deans and Counselors*, 25, 2(January, 1962), 60-66. Also, Harrington, *op. cit.*, who quotes James Delaplain, Professor of English, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (in *Milwaukee Journal*, January 24, 1966), about older students: "They are more alert, more interested, more intelligent and more highly motivated... have more common sense... more experience and somehow seem to learn more readily than the younger students."

⁶Re-entry Survey, Hazel Juell for Counseling Center, June, 1978, Humboldt State University.

⁷Harrington, *op. cit.*; Robert J. Pitchell, *Financing Part-Time Students, the New Majority in Postsecondary Education*, (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1974).

⁸Jean Piaget, *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*, (New York: Basic Books, 1958).

⁹P.K. Arlin, "Cognitive Development in Adulthood: A Fifth Stage?" *Developmental Psychology*, 11 (1975), 602-606; Dennis A. Cropper, Donald S. Meek, and Michael J. Ash, "The Relation Between Formal Operations and a Possible Fifth Stage of Cognitive Development," *Developmental Psychology*, 13, 5(1977), 517-518.

¹⁰J.L. Horn, "Psychometric Studies of Aging and Intelligence," in S. Gershon and A. Raskind (eds.), *Aging* (Vol. 2), *Genesis and Treatment of Psychological Disorders in the Elderly*, (New York: Raven Press, 1975).

¹¹Hayne W. Reese, "The Development of Memory: Life Span Perspectives," in *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, Vol. 11, ed. by Hayne W. Reese (New York: Academic Press, 1976), pp. 190-209.

¹²Malcolm Knowles, *The Adult Learner*, (Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1973).

¹³Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women: New Language in New Times*, (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976).