

## Teaching in Mixed-Age Classrooms

With a student body of over 40,000, Ryerson University's diversity is one of its greatest strengths. Within this population, there are both traditional learners, usually thought of as students attending university full-time right after high school, and non-traditional learners, usually defined as older students returning to school after having spent time working or raising a family. These non-traditional learners may also be completing coursework on a part-time basis, while remaining in their jobs.

When traditional and non-traditional students share the same classroom, there are some differences to be aware of, as well as strategies that can help reduce any issues that might arise—being aware of the “potential problems and learning some strategies to address them, we as educators can create a dynamic, inclusive environment” (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992). However, it is also important to remember that there is not a “monolithic adult student identity. Rather, in their differentiated conditions, adult students suggest both common and diverse experiences, beliefs, and actions (Kasworm, 2005).

### ***Differences between traditional and non-traditional learners***

When looking at the differences between traditional and non-traditional students. Bishop-Clark and Lynch found that they fell into four categories, which Milheim summarized as follows:

Non-traditional students may:

- feel greater discomfort than younger students,
- have different orientations toward the professor,
- have different learning styles,
- experience a hostility between age groups (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, as cited in Milheim, 2005).

Bishop-Clark and Lynch also state that non-traditional learners:

- *Treat the professor as a peer* – the smaller age difference between themselves and the instructor, as well as their greater life experience, means that non-traditional students “are not as likely to be awed by the person assuming this role” and will thus develop a different type of relationship with the instructor than traditional students (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992).
- *prefer informal learning* - non-traditional learners prefer active, hands-on, and practical examples, and realistic and tangible experiences. Younger students, on the other hand, are “more tolerant of impractical examples” and are “more content in passive mode.” They often prefer lecturing to discussion or hands-on activities, which they see as unimportant
- *are more internally motivated to learn and more goal directed* - older students rank subject matter that they believe will improve their job or life-related skills as being more important than more abstract or general subject areas (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992).

Non-traditional students are also more likely to find the library and more recent developments in education, such as learning management systems, intimidating or unfamiliar, and may require more support than traditional students in accessing them (Milheim, 2005).

Kasworm describes the “three frames of positional identity for adult students” that affect their behavior in the university classroom: belief in age-appropriate social norms, judging academic performance through age-

related influences, and judging themselves in relation to an ideal student image (2005).

1. *Belief of age-appropriate social norms*: non-traditional students may feel anxiety about their older age and the societal expectation of university being a place for younger people. They may feel like they are risking their sense of identity and self-worth in going back to school, but feel that they need to be there for the credential or a guarantee of a better future.
2. *Judging academic performance through age-related influences*: non-traditional students may believe that their academic success is related to a greater commitment to their learning than shown by younger students, and that they are putting more effort and time into their studies in order to succeed.
3. *Judging themselves in relation to an ideal student image*: non-traditional students may measure themselves in relation to criteria that they believe make up the “ideal student.” In this view, the ideal student is:
  - a. *Serious and committed* – adult learners have elected to pursue further education while maintaining jobs or family responsibilities
  - b. *Attending school as a life choice* – adult learners see their presence in the classroom as a purposeful life choice, and may perceive younger students as struggling to define their future life goals.
  - c. *Valued for past life experiences* – adult learners see their past experiences as “supporting and enhancing their success” and judge younger students as “lacking maturity and life resilience.” Adult learners believe these life experiences should be formally valued in the classroom (Kasworm, 2005).

When assessing themselves against this ideal student image, non-traditional learners believed that they were more “dutiful in their attendance in class and also more engaged in learning” than younger students. Older students perceived the younger students as doing just the minimum work to get by, as well as feeling judged by the younger students for being overachievers or too competitive in class (Kasworm, 2005).

Adult students also valued their relationships with faculty, which they saw as positive and respectful. These perceptions were shaped by explicit statements from faculty in class, as well as through “subtle nonverbal cues” from faculty “suggesting favor and value toward adult students, and through faculty seeking or supporting adult students’ engaged questioning or contributing roles in the classroom.” Adult students were more likely to ask and answer questions from faculty, and keep eye contact with them during lectures. They believed that faculty looked to them for nonverbal feedback on the clarity of their lectures, or for an answer to a question they asked when the younger students were unresponsive (Kasworm, 2005).

### ***Issues between traditional and non-traditional learners***

These differences can have several effects on the classroom environment. For example, because older students may feel discomfort amongst younger students, this can affect their self-confidence and their belief in their ability to succeed (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992) or to be accepted as students in the classroom (Kasworm, 2005).

Bishop-Clark and Lynch describe how younger students can be intimidated by older students, seeing it as “unfair that they must compete with someone who is more experienced and who is as grade conscious as an older student appears to be.” Older students, conversely, can see the traditional students as “immature, unmotivated, and unappreciative of the educational environment.” These issues can create a distance between the two groups, which can make it difficult to hold class discussions or have students work together (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992).

Similarly, the different orientations that traditional and non-traditional learners can have toward the professor can cause resentment or outright hostility between student groups. As described by Bishop-Clark and Lynch, “what typically occurs is that the professor is unintentionally interacting and treating the two groups differently” (1992). Kasworm found the same, with faculty reporting that they had a “more respectful, appreciative attitude toward adult students” (2005).

Howard, James and Taylor frame issues surrounding participation in class discussion around the concept of the “consolidation of responsibility,” where a “few students assume the responsibility for the majority of participation in discussion.” They cite studies that found that non-traditional students were more than three times as likely to accept the consolidation of responsibility than traditional students, and were “significantly more likely to identify themselves as talkers than were traditional students” (Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002).

No matter their age, talkers perceived the classroom as a “friendlier, safer, and more interactive environment,” and saw their participation as welcomed, and an opportunity to actively contribute to the learning of the class. Non-talkers, on the other hand, were more likely to describe themselves as shy, or to be intimidated by the large class size. They “lack confidence in their ability to contribute something valuable to the class,” and perceive the classroom environment as “less comfortable, less friendly, and possibly hostile.” However, even talkers, “when they felt a particular group of classmates or a particular instructor was hostile” will remain silent (Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002).

The importance of the classroom environment is key in ensuring student satisfaction, both for traditional and non-traditional learners. As described by Faust, the majority of students’ involvement in school is “within the framework of the classroom where they have an opportunity to enhance their learning by interacting with peers and faculty” (2002). Faust points out four additional issues, not related to age, that can affect the learning of both traditional and non-traditional students. These were as follows:

- The physical structure of the classroom,
- The expectations and teaching style of the instructor,
- The discussion patterns established early in the semester,
- The social climate of the classroom (Faust, 2002).

### ***Strategies for teaching in a mixed-age classroom***

When planning to teach in a mixed-age classroom, it is important to build an inclusive course from the top down. For instance, the curriculum should be “inclusive with regard to students’ cultural backgrounds, including those from marginalized groups.” The course design should create a balance that will satisfy both non-traditional learners’ preference for “learner-centered (flexible and responsive)” instructional activities and traditional learners’ desire for a more “teacher-centered (structured) learning environment” (Ross-Gordon, 2003).

Ross-Gordon also recommends providing opportunities for “adults to exercise self-direction in the identification of personal goals, selection of learning strategies, and modes of assessment.” It is also important to recognize and value the connection between academic learning and the larger world, “creating opportunities within the classroom for students to make linkages between course content and knowledge gained in the contexts of work, family, and community” (Ross-Gordon, 2003).

Bishop-Clark and Lynch list four methods for reducing conflict between traditional and non-traditional learners.

1. *Encourage personal contact* by decreasing “the barriers between groups. Helping the student get to know one another will reduce the biases of each age group.”
2. *Discuss differences* – encourage students to talk about why they are taking the course, their interests, and their expectations.
3. *Approach each group similarly* – “by becoming aware of the differential treatment, we should be able to be more cautious and more fair.” Bishop-Clark and Lynch suggest having a peer reviewer critique your treatment of older and younger students, such as “acknowledging one age group more than another or using examples more likely to appeal to one age group.”
4. *Increase awareness of similarities between groups* – encourage students to see themselves as equals who have come to the course with similar objectives and a common ground. Bishop-Clark and Lynch suggest a “first day strategy of having small groups of students ask whatever three questions they want—about the course, the subject, or the professor” (1992).

Both traditional and non-traditional learners can be overwhelmed by their schoolwork, and non-traditional learners can be at a distinct disadvantage if they have spent many years away from school. Therefore, Ross-Gordon stresses the importance of providing all students with information about services and workshops designed to help students “enhance their self-awareness as learners, improve academic learning strategies, and learn the norms of academic knowledge communities” (Ross-Gordon, 2003).

Milheim suggests making sure librarians are familiar to students, and that there are members of the library that are available to work with non-traditional students. Milheim also suggests

- taking a “step-by-step approach when explaining research strategies”;
- fostering the independence of non-traditional students who typically prefer working at their own pace through the use of guidelines” and clear instructions; and
- offering “frequent tutorials on web-based research strategies, the library website, and other online information that may be pertinent to research and coursework” (2005).

### ***Strategies to encourage participation in a mixed-age classroom***

The most important thing to keep in mind when teaching in a mixed-age classroom, is that the “instructor influences the character of the learning environment more than any other single factor. The climate should be one that results in the learners feeling accepted, respected, and supported” (Faust, 2002).

Both traditional and non-traditional students participated when they perceived the instructor’s teaching style as helpful, reassuring, relaxed, enthusiastic, and easy-going. A “tone of informality and mutual respect” was found to encourage participation. Behaviors that encourage participation include making eye contact with students, giving nods of approval, and adding supportive or encouraging comments. By showing consideration for the feelings of others, modeling inclusive attitudes, and providing students with a language of disagreement, instructors can provide students with a safe learning environment for expressing their opinions or making comments (Faust, 2002).

It is also important for instructors to “humanize the classroom” and reduce the feeling of isolation or anonymity between both students and instructor. By giving students the opportunity to get to know each

other, students will become more comfortable contributing to class discussions (Faust, 2002). Howard, Short, and Clark suggest having students introduce themselves to one another, giving them nametags to wear early in the semester, and putting them into small collaborative learning groups where they can increase their familiarity with each other (1996).

Howard, Short, and Clark found that there is also a need for the instructor to initiate discussion—“by relying on student-initiated discussion, we inhibit participation by females and traditional students.” They suggest creating an environment that is conducive to participation by all students by encouraging cooperation and providing opportunities for questions. Their suggestions include:

- “Convert students’ questions to statements and ask for other opinions;
- Convert students’ opinions to questions for the quiet or withdrawn students;
- Rather than being the authority who answers each question... deflect questions of interpretation to other members of the group;
- In response to students’ assertions... ask for examples from other students;
- Create small groups wherein students can discuss their experiences via provocative questions... these discussions then can be used to introduce lectures and empirical research on the topic” (Howard, Short, & Clark, 1996).

Making class content as interactive as possible will also encourage participation. Students need to know that participation is expected, and to be actively engaged with the course material (Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002). Even the seating arrangement can affect the amount of participation. When possible, arrange seats in a circle or semi-circle. This arrangement “increases face-to-face communication with the instructor and each learner” and gives an “obvious expectation they (learners) will be active contributors to the session” (Faust, 2002).

Howard, James and Taylor provide the following additional suggestions for creating an interactive learning environment:

- begin each class with a review of the previous session, “asking students questions they can answer by referring to their notes,” warming them up for further discussion as well as setting the context for the day’s material;
- use student-generated illustrations of concepts and principles;
- show short video clips to illustrate course concepts and then ask for student comments;
- give “short and relatively easy multiple choice quizzes to illustrate key points in the assigned readings and as a starting point for class discussion”;
- have each student grade their own participation using a rubric. This “forces students to reflect upon both the quality and quantity of their own contributions” (Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002).

Instructors also need to prevent one group of students from taking over all discussions. Instructors “must demonstrate to non-talkers that their participation is desirable, safe, and beneficial to themselves and other students” (Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002). If it seems like there is a small group of talkers dominating the conversation, there are a few steps that instructors can take to prevent a feeling of hostility or discomfort from developing among the non-talkers.

- If the students “doing most of the talking are those sitting close to the instructor, the instructor could

- have students change seats periodically throughout the semester” (Faust, 2002).
- Make students aware of the patterns of participation. Ask students “to describe their own experiences” in past classrooms. “How many students do what percentage of the talking? Who are these students?” (Howard, Short, & Clark, 1996).
  - Model class discussion “during the first class meeting by putting students in small groups and having them critique the syllabus” (Howard, Short, & Clark, 1996).
  - Provide a list of questions for discussion to help give the class more structure, “assist students in identifying key points in the material, and promote critical thinking” (Howard, Short, & Clark, 1996).
  - Break the pattern of discussion by switching the class from large groups to smaller groups engaged in active learning exercises (Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002).
  - Give non-talkers “time to reflect during class in order to formulate their thoughts, ideas, and questions.” Provide students with the opportunity to write their thoughts down in one-minute papers, or have them first discuss their thoughts in small groups before rejoining a large group discussion (Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002).

### **Work Cited**

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