

**No Adult Left Behind –
Ensuring Meaningful Academic Experiences for Nontraditional Students
in Distributed Learning Settings**

Michael E. Scheuermann
Drexel University
Philadelphia, PA
mes27@drexel.edu
<http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~mes27/>

Abstract

The number of undergraduates working full time has increased in recent decades. Concurrently, American workplaces have experienced tremendous change. Companies eliminated management layers and pressed decision-making and accountability into every job description. Nontraditional students who work full time have to meet these challenges, adapt to dynamic environments, and perform in expanding roles. They expect their roles in distributed learning settings to expand also. This paper focuses on strategies to expand the student role and close the gap between what students expect in academic settings and what they receive. Myriad technologies, courseware features, and strategies for using them can assist educators here. A thought-provoking model will illustrate past and current workplace and classroom paradigms. Educators of nontraditional students need to understand how pedagogical constructs can be optimized to leverage the experiences of nontraditional students and minimize any expectation gap.

Introduction

In the 1999 academic year, 80% of all undergraduates worked, including 39% who worked full time (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Between 1990 and 2000, undergraduate enrollments of students working full time rose 7% (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). And while working students have grown in importance to universities, the American workplace has experienced tremendous changes driven by technology, corporate downsizing, reengineering, and other initiatives. It is easy to understand then why Kasworm (2003) argued that working students bring an ever-changing set of expectations to the classroom. With the elimination of “millions of jobs in the 1980s and 1990s, many in middle management” (Uchitelle & Kleinfeld, 1996; Pennar, 1996) the average worker’s day-to-day job experience has changed dramatically, requiring increased flexibility and empowerment. “New models of organizing work are being called for and have contributed to the rise of the learning organizations, virtual organizations, free agents, contingent workforces, knowledge management, and global business” (Bierema, 2000, p. 280). “The new global economic competition, and the accompanying restructuring of the U.S. economy, has changed the nature of work, employment, and educational requirements with bewildering rapidity” (Maehl, 2000, p.19).

According to Rachal (1989) the changing workplace represents the most significant challenge to educators of adults. Working students “bring the world of adult motivations and life engagements into the classroom” (Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000, p. 450). Most educators do not have a conscious plan to include the effects of these changes, both positive and negative, into pedagogical constructs. Indeed, according to Conti (1978) many educators are not conscious of their teaching style and if they are aware, their perceptions often differ greatly from those of their students. Moreover, Bierema (2000) warned us that, “The dilemma of preparing a workforce in the face of rapid change, learning organizations, global competition, diversity, and the Information Age is *everyone’s* responsibility” (p. 291).

Nontraditional Students, Changing Demographics, and the Undergraduate Classroom

Brookfield (1986) cautioned that to ignore demographic changes in postsecondary education is both conceptually and empirically naïve for institutions looking to bolster enrollments or retain students through graduation. In response to changing demographics, the U.S. Department of Education (2002) uses a seven-point system to categorize undergraduate students developed by Horn (1996). The concept of adult learner, traditionally determined only by the age factor, is expanded to comprehensively describe the nontraditional student.

Horn (1996) placed these students on a continuum from highly nontraditional (i.e., having four or more of these characteristics), to moderately nontraditional (i.e., having two or three of the characteristics), to minimally nontraditional (i.e., having only one of the characteristics). According to a U.S. Department of Education (2000) study, there were slightly more highly-nontraditional (i.e., having four or more of the above characteristics) undergraduates (28%) as there were traditional undergraduates (27%) enrolled in the 1999 academic year. Three-quarters of that undergraduate population had at least one of the seven characteristics listed by Horn, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2000). Since six of the above seven characteristics have a clear implication of extended work experience, it is fair to assume that a majority of undergraduate students have some exposure to the changing workplace.

Nontraditional students have deeper and broader experience and knowledge to bring to the classroom than their traditional counterparts, and their needs are different (Kasworm, 2003; Pearson & Chatterjee, 2000). Further, they need to then apply their learning and relate its concepts to their day-to-day lives in order to retain them in long term memory (Ratey, 2001). Mezirow (2000) advised that learner-centered methods of instruction are critical in adult education. Educators of adults need to develop a facilitative role. Brookfield (1986) described as “poor practice” (p. 9) instruction that does not involve the adult learners in discussion, encourage different points of view, or relate the learning to real-life experiences. According to Husson & Kennedy (2003), “Adults need more interactive and participatory components with fewer lectures” (p. 52). Nontraditional students bring their experiences and expectations to undergraduate classrooms, and they perceive what is taking place there in unique ways. They need an education that is meaningful for their careers as well as for their lives (Brancato, 2003).

Academic and Workplace Settings – and a New Model

It is helpful to characterize workplace and academic settings in the following way:

- Academic settings are characterized as being “teacher-centered” in the traditional paradigm, and as “student-centered” in the modern paradigm.
- Workplace settings can be similarly characterized as being “manager-centered” in the traditional paradigm, and as “employee-centered” in the modern paradigm (Sikula, Olmosk, Kim, & Cupps, 2001).

Pearson and Chatterjee (2000) argued that if student expectations are not met in higher education settings, expectation gaps are created. It is theorized that when nontraditional students leave a workplace that is employee-centered (modern paradigm) and enter an educational setting that is teacher-centered (traditional paradigm), there is incongruence between the two environments and an expectation gap is created. Incongruence also exists when nontraditional students leave a workplace that is manager-centered (traditional paradigm) and enter an academic setting that is student-centered (modern paradigm). Nontraditional students experience tension when they perceive that the two environments are incongruent (i.e., when they leave one paradigm and enter the other).

While there is no data on the current or historical degree of congruency between these two paradigms, according to Kuhn (1996) it is rare that two incongruent paradigms can coexist cohesively. In order to meet the learning needs and expectations of nontraditional students, congruence must exist between workplace settings and educational settings. This is because “innovation in adult programs and the new forms and processes with which adult educators have experimented have broken the constraints of older systems that prevented change” and “The mold of old forms has been broken” (Maehl, 2000, p. 282). Moreover, educators and institutions will optimize learning and meet student expectations when congruent situations exist. Students will naturally struggle and face dissonance when they are expected to perform in disparate or dissonant paradigms. Figure 1 illustrates congruence and incongruence between the paradigms.

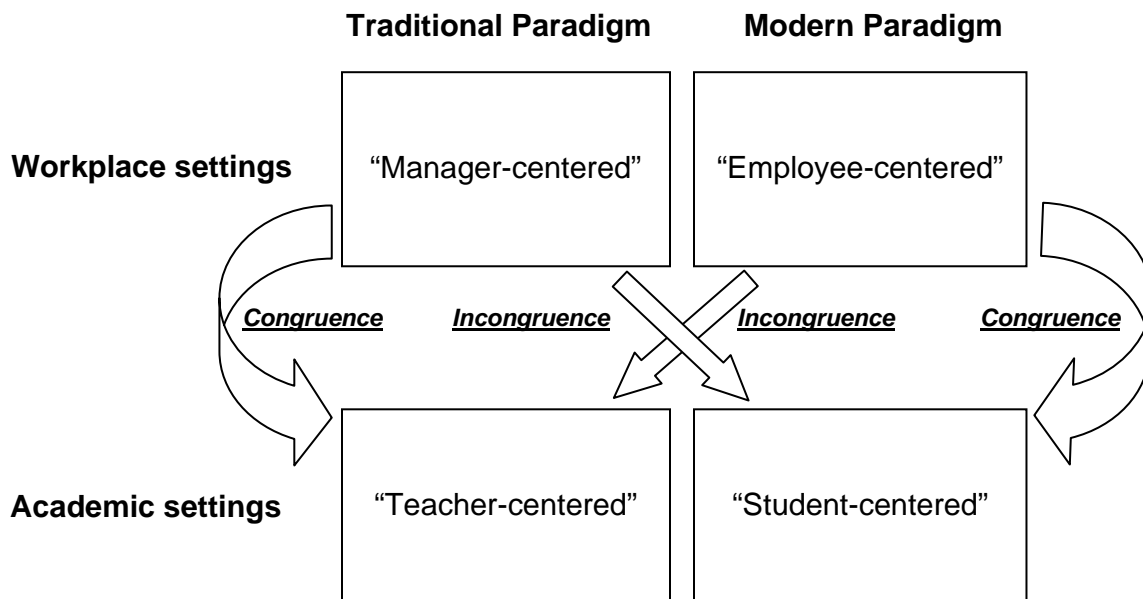


Figure 1: Traditional and Modern Workplace and Academic Paradigms

Workplace settings in the traditional paradigm were manager-centered where:

- (a) employees' roles were predetermined
- (b) employees had little input into workplace processes
- (c) employees were micro-managed
- (d) decisions were made for the employees
- (e) job scope was fixed
- (f) fundamentally, employees' roles were narrow and passive.

Today, workplace settings in the modern paradigm are becoming employee-centered where:

- (a) employees' roles are dynamic and evolving
- (b) employees have increased input into workplace processes
- (c) employees work more autonomously
- (d) they make more decisions
- (e) their job scope is expanding
- (f) fundamentally, employees' workplace roles are active ones.

Historically, academic settings in the traditional paradigm were teacher-centered where:

- (a) students had predetermined roles
- (b) students had little input into their classroom processes
- (c) instructors lectured and students listened
- (d) instructors possessed the knowledge (while students possessed none)
- (e) fundamentally, students' classroom roles were ones that were passive.

Today, academic settings in the modern paradigm are student-centered where:

- (a) student roles are flexible and adaptive
- (b) they have input into their classroom processes
- (c) instructors and students share experiences about the material
- (d) instructors and students both bring knowledge to the classroom (and co-learn)
- (e) fundamentally, students' classroom roles are ones that are active.

“As educators begin to reflect on what they say they believe, and compare it with how they *actually* engage in instruction, with students, they develop a new awareness of what creates an effective learning and teaching environment” (Marceau, 2003, p. 72). Alfred (2002) argued that “instructors cannot transform their practice unless they have transformed themselves” (p. 89) and they cannot know how to do that effectively without understanding the needs and expectations of their nontraditional students.

Because student demographics are changing markedly, there is a need to examine what is offered to these students in their undergraduate classes, on an ongoing basis (Alfred, 2002). Hence, as the students themselves change, educators need to consider additional factors in designing and delivering their courses in order to respond to these changes. Houle (1961) determined that nontraditional students may have myriad reasons for enrolling in courses to continue their education. Further, they may have varying expectations while participating in them. According to Maehl (2000), “Adult learning program design indicates that numerous choices can serve students' varying goals. Highly individualized, or learner-centered, models can accommodate rich resources for learning and the self-determining initiative of many learners of the future” (p. 282). Similarly, Eppler and Harju (1997) found that nontraditional students exhibit a stronger learning goal orientation than their traditional counterparts. Nontraditional students often continue their education in order to advance their career or increase levels of job security. These students usually are professionals with full-time jobs who take college courses after work.

The Changing Culture of the Workplace

As noted earlier, the U.S. Department of Education (2000) reported that 39% of all undergraduates enrolled in the 1999-2000 academic year worked full time. In the organizations where these students are employed, they are actively involved in planning and decision making functions. Malone (2004) found that “By delegating decision making and engaging people's values, loose hierarchies can take advantage of a much greater amount of creativity and energy from a much larger pool of people than would ever be possible in most traditional companies” (p. 43). Hence, nontraditional students who work see their workplace roles evolving today and they have increased levels of responsibility and accountability where they work (Hunter, 2004). Bolman and Deal (1997) noted that “Skill requirements have been changing so fast that individuals are hard pressed to keep up” (p. 113).

Changing environments define new employee roles that include increased self-direction, initiative, and risk-taking (Manville & Ober, 2003). For instance, employees participate in self-directed work teams where they “are responsible for a ‘whole’ work process or segment that delivers a product or service to an internal or external customer” (Wellins, Byham, & Wilson, 1991, p. 3). Managers have higher expectations of their employees; they expect that employees will assume roles

formerly reserved for managers and supervisors, such as organizing and decision making functions (Campbell, 2000). Decision-making is frequently pushed down to the level of employees at the front line (Bridges, 1994).

Average performance is no longer sufficient when supervisors evaluate their employees. As Fenwick (2000) put it, "This month's restructuring requires last month's managers and employees to be retooled" (p. 295). As restructuring and corporate reconfiguration continues, supervisors have changing expectations of the roles that employees will play. Workers have been forced to continually change and take on more responsibility, which can be stressful, but they often influence workplace decisions with remarkable results (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Goleman (1995) described the core of modern organizations having the "human touchpoints" of "electronic networks, email, teleconferences, workteams, and informal networks" (p. 160).

When workplace supervisors encourage and expect employees to be active participants in making decisions and taking initiative, this socializes employees into the role of "active participant". Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2000) argued that educators must understand that many nontraditional students assume new workplace roles and form power relationships there that "cannot possibly be checked at the classroom door" (p. 157). This creates individuals who expect to be active participants in classroom settings as well as in the workplaces. Pearson and Chatterjee (2000) explained that because the context of the external environment is changing, different expectations result and universities must respond to and deal with new and varying student expectations. Educators need to consider all of these developments when examining their pedagogical constructs, and "better understand the influences and responses between workplace culture and paths of human development" (Fenwick, 2000, p. 298).

How Socialized Expectations Occur

Today's white collar workers are affected by developments both internal and external to their organizations. These, in turn, affect what they do and what they want from their workplaces (Fenwick, 2001). These individuals are often involved in self-managed teams, having both the responsibility and the authority to control their own projects and work groups (Lencioni, 2002; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Bridges, 1994). Other initiatives, like increased participation and empowerment, alter the expectations of employees as well (Campbell, 2000). Further, empowerment brings evolving employee expectations (Kinni, 1994). As such, these individuals develop certain "socialized expectations" at work.

Paul, Niehoff, and Turnley (2000) reported that in some workplace settings, the expectations that employees form may, in fact, exceed what the workplace is able to provide. This is due to the fact that the internal and external pressures and forces affecting organizations today are dynamic and significant. Organizational survival depends upon the adaptability of employees. As they meet these myriad challenges, employees see their roles changing and come to have higher expectations of themselves. Employees who are also nontraditional students bring these expectations into the classroom. Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel (2000) called them "the world of adult motivations and life engagements" (p. 450). It is necessary to determine what these expectations might be in order for educators to meet them, because, according to Levine (1993), "Perhaps the most profound change in higher education today is in the expectations students have of their schools" (p. 4). Moreover, because of the dynamic workplace setting and the fact that these are older individuals, their experience base is expanding and deepening. These experiences, in large part, form their expectations.

Today's students bring expectations to the classroom that vary greatly from those of their predecessors; the range is broader and the values are different (Akerlind & Jenkins, 1998). Increasingly, there is a relationship between work and education where each is affecting the other; curricula are being transformed as are workplace experiences (Poynter, 2002). Curricula need to be transformed to include the experiences and expectations of nontraditional students. Educators are required to respond to the different motivations and learning processes brought forth by their nontraditional students (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Educators may not be aware of the socialized expectations, perceptions, and needs of their nontraditional students. Brookfield (2000) called for educators to be "constantly soliciting learners' perceptions, and of negotiating and reframing what we do on the basis of these" (p. 47). If educators are not aware of student expectations, perceptions, and needs, they cannot act on them. This implies that, for participants in this new environment, students may need to take the initiative, examine their needs, and determine how to approach and evaluate their own learning (Pearson & Chatterjee, 2000).

Brookfield (1986) observed that it is naïve to assume that simply because students are under the direction of a teacher that learning is being facilitated, implying that educators must determine how to fully engage them. Changes to the traditional model of teaching and learning are needed in order to engage these working men and women in an effective way during their college courses and to thereby optimize their learning. As Brookfield (2000) advised, "Negotiating what and how we study on the basis of learners' experiences and opinions is an approach that embodies the tone of respect for, and responsiveness to, people's lives and voices that lies at the heart of adult education" (p. 48). Students and educators can use the "collaborative teaching and learning" model to codetermine what the learning will involve and how it will be conducted. That model will now be examined.

Collaborative Teaching and Learning

In order to succeed in academia, nontraditional students might expect to participate in their educational settings in a manner similar to how they did at work. When students assume this additional responsibility, the dynamic between educator and student changes; authority no longer follows the familiar pattern (Poynter, 2002). Collaborative teaching and learning provides a means for these students to participate in the educational process. “As students become codesigners of instruction with the teacher, they become more engaged in their learning” (Askov, 2000, p. 256). Further, according to Maehl (2000) “older adults offer a rich pool of experience and talent that practitioners can draw on to enhance adult learning resources” (p. 19).

Collaborative teaching and learning, in this sense, does not mean that students collaborate with each other or with their instructor in classroom activities, such as group work. Rather, it means that teachers and learners collaborate on course planning and delivery, what will be learned, and how it will be learned. “Many adults have come to expect that instructors will take into account their individual needs and desires and may leave programs when these are ignored” (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000, p. 57). Because collaborative teaching and learning encourages greater student involvement (Conti, 1978), it is a model that may be particularly effective with the nontraditional undergraduate. As Miller (2000) observed, “the boundaries between adult educators and adult learners have become blurred” (p. 71) while some instructors have “gone further to reorganize content and structure to allow individual learners more initiative in what, how, and where they learn. Many connect learning to the workplace” and “blend learning and work activities” (Maehl, 2000, p. 29).

The new paradigm of modern educational practice concentrates on enabling students to avoid traditional pedagogies centered on teaching rather than learning (Inglis, 1997). Pedagogical design for nontraditional students is critical. These students, empowered and self-directed throughout their workdays, might expect (or prefer) to remain equally influential in their classrooms. Students who were more involved in college enjoyed greater levels of learning and personal development (Astin, 1996). Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm, and Dirkx (2000) interpreted this to mean that as students invest more time and energy, they experience enhanced learning along with significant growth. Rogers (1969) believed that *teaching* needs to give way to this self-directed *learning*. Accomplishments are high when self-directed learners are recognized and appreciated as such and when educators facilitate and incorporate that self-directedness into their teaching style (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

In undergraduate programs and courses, there is a need to be responsive and sensitive to emerging nontraditional student expectations and needs. “Theorists and practitioners have called for mutual respect between learner and teacher, flexibility, and learner involvement in the learning situation (Maehl, 2000, p.77). These students are continuously learning, within and through a variety of their life roles (Brookfield, 1986). In particular, they are expected to participate actively and assume new roles at work; they are expected to be engaged.

Recommendations

Active role: Nontraditional students need to take a more active role in their courses and distributed learning provides many ways that this need can be accommodated. Most content management systems (CMSs) have asynchronous Discussions capability. Instructors can not only post their own list of salient topics in the Discussions area but require students to add to that list. This enables students to play a more active than passive role in the course. Most CMS environments also have some sort of a synchronous Chat component. A revolving role of Chat moderator can be assigned to students in the course. Again, they become more active and engaged participants. Using a product such as *Waypoint* can facilitate peer-review of papers in a rubric-based manner.

Incorporating lived experiences: In addition to bringing out students’ experiences in Chat and Discussions (which is clearly a good approach), we can incorporate them into Assignments. This serves to link the course material to the real world with the student being the conduit. Do not assign paper topics, for example; encourage students to select topics that demonstrate their learning by linking content to life – from their perspective. If they have difficulty selecting a topic, encourage them to contact colleagues in the course to submit group assignments or papers.

Applying what is learned: Along the same lines, encourage students, through Assignments, Discussion, Chat, etc. to relate how they intend to apply what they are learning, discussing, and discovering in your courses to their real-world settings. Ask them this as a direct question, and ask it often. Responses might be career-related, but could also be related to personal, civic, volunteer, or church organizations, etc.

Educator as facilitator: Monitor the Discussions area – do not direct it. Ask open-ended questions; avoid “one correct answer” questions. Current literature indicates that increased instructor posts correlates to decreased student posts. Further, consider having students lead online Chat sessions. Provide multiple ways for students to get into the material. Use recorded lectures, printed lectures, and slide galleries. *Adobe Photoshop, MediaSiteLive, Impatica, Camtasia, EduCast, and RoboDemo* can assist here. Try voice-enabled Chat, Discussions, and Content. The *Wimba* product can help you handle all of that. Include video components as appropriate. Provide links to helpful sites such as writing resources, sample papers, and the like. One key to facilitate effectively is to provide multiple pathways to the learning, the real content of the course and its interactions.

Interactive: Be “in the course” and active as much as possible – depending upon how you sense that students seek your participation. Being available and “waiting in the wings” may work well. Set student expectations for the level of your availability. This will avoid frustration on their part and serve to lighten your online workload. Approach the threshold of maximum participation and interaction without going into the over-participating (directing) realm.

Participatory: Through course rubrics, define expectations for student participation in Chat, Discussions, group work, Assignments, etc. Never discourage appropriate student participation, and encourage participation by everyone. In Chat, include rubric components that encourage participants to draw out contributions from the reticent members.

Student expectations: Solicit student expectations for the course, early on. Consider making it one of the first Discussions topics, perhaps even requiring posts from all students. Check these expectations at periodic times across the course and at the end. Determine whether you are on track or need to make adjustments to style, components, etc.

Congruence between work and academics: This will be challenging depending upon what type of workplace environment the individual students are experiencing. This is an opportunity to perform in a learner-centered manner or in a teacher-centered one, depending upon (at least in part) what student needs and expectations exist – on a course-by-course basis.

Learning goal orientation: It is likely that there will be myriad goals, particularly when it comes to nontraditional students. Many are taking our courses voluntarily and thus have specific things that they are looking for during the academic experience. Use Discussions, Mail, and office hours in a Chatroom to learn how you can assist students in meeting their individual learning objectives.

What will be learned: Similarly, determining what content areas of the course or the text, for example, are going to be most meaningful for the students will enable the learning experience to be the best that it can be, again, from the students’ perspectives. Concentrate more time, effort, interaction, and grade weight on those that they prioritize.

How it will be learned: If this issue is important to you, it is a clear opportunity to perform as a constructivist educator. As the course proceeds, attempt to modify your approach (i.e., the mix of CMS features and functions that you employ) to interact most effectively with your students. Ask them which features they find most valuable for learning – and why. Redirection in the mid-course timeframe, at least, should be a consideration. Try using the Survey tool to solicit and document student assessment of how meaningful the course has been for them, thus far. Assure them that their contributions are anonymous and will be acted upon in some manner. You need that input.

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