

The Non-Traditional Student as Resource

Harold R. Trendell, Assistant Professor, Geography, Political Science & International Affairs, Kennesaw State University

How many times upon dismissing the students on the first day of class, after slogging through the intricacies of our syllabi and pontificating on what the course will do for them, do we find an apprehensive middle-aged student standing before us? The stories are familiar: "This is my first course in 15 years," "I always wanted to go to college, but I had to wait until my kids were grown" or "I'm retired military with 20 years of service." Insecurity and self-doubt fairly exude from them as they reach out for some sort of connection to justify their choice to "get a college degree." We as professors become, at that moment, their bridge to the academic community and to the goal they have set for themselves. Suggesting to these students that they see us during office hours or give us a call is hardly what they are seeking. An opportunity to positively affect the life of another is a gift which should not be taken lightly.

These non-traditional students have just experienced the reality of their "back to school fears," sitting in a room full of strangers, most of whom are young enough to be their children. They erroneously assume their classmates are on the academic cutting edge because of their youth. They have spent the class attempting to comprehend the academic and discipline specific jargon we tossed around as a matter of fact during the introductory lecture. And lastly, our syllabus has obviously outlined a learning rigor that cannot possibly be covered in the allotted term! Frankly, they have been blown away. This accounts for their presence in front of us as the class files out. A smile and a sympathetic ear on our part may yet save the day, but how much better would it be if we could indicate to these students, and the traditional students as well, that they have something to contribute to the class and we value their input?

I do not mean to imply that traditional students have nothing to offer. They simply approach their educational experience from a different perspective than the non-traditional student. Non-traditional students generally have a greater store of life experiences by reason of their age than their traditional counterparts who are less than 25 years old. I am proposing that it is these life experiences of the non-traditional student that should be tapped to welcome and bind them to the community of learners. This is an affirmation that they do indeed fit in and that we have a place for them. Given that the media have bombarded us with images of a "youth-oriented culture," it is critical that we make this connection. This is particularly important on a commuter campus such as Kennesaw State University, where approximately 45 percent of its students fall into the non-traditional category.

In the introductory geography courses I teach, I expand the definition of "non-traditional student" to include all those with extensive travel experiences. This is because on the first day of class I informally survey the students to identify those who have geographic familiarity with places both abroad and here at home. I appoint them "geographic experts" on the various countries or regions of the world as may be represented in that particular class. This strategy immediately establishes points of contact with the well-traveled student, students who are former military, and foreign students. To make this activity more inclusive, I also designate "experts" on regions of the United States, on suburbia, and on the counties, cities and towns in the university's service area. This reaches even the students who have never left Georgia and lets them know that their input is also important.

Before the first geographic concept is even discussed I have asked the questions: "Where have you come from?" "Where have you been?" "Why were you there?" I inform all the "experts" that I will be calling on them for their "help" as the various regions and geographic topics are discussed. To ensure participation during subsequent lectures, I routinely ask the questions: "Where are my experts on this place or that?" and "What were your impressions of what you saw?" These activities not only expand the general knowledge base of the class and stimulate discussion, but more importantly they offer the non-traditional students a vehicle by which they may offer valuable contributions based on their stores of life experiences. They, in essence, become vital resources in a class where the instructor cannot possibly have complete personal knowledge of all places and geographic phenomena.

Admittedly, introductory social science or humanities courses may lend themselves to such activities more so than math and science courses. However, I believe that with some thought each instructor may be able to ferret out ways to build bridges to the non-traditional students and tap their life experiences as learning resources. As professors we often overlook the power we have to influence the lives of our students. Even less often do we receive affirmation of how we may have touched someone who crossed the threshold of our classroom. It seems to me that investing the time to help the non-traditional students see that they have something special to offer the class is time well-spent. Maybe on the next "first day of class" the student who approaches our desk after the lecture does so not out of trepidation, but because we made a connection. •