What I’ve Learned about Teaching Nontraditional Students

What is a nontraditional student? Not me: When I attended community college (the level of learning which I now teach) I was 18 to 20 years old, had no dependents, was supported by a parent, and didn’t have to work to maintain a household. Nontraditional students, on the contrary, are students who I’ve taught throughout my four and a half years of teaching English composition. Normally these students are scattered throughout my sections until last semester’s Tuesday night class, 6:30 p.m. to 9:50 p.m. Most students in this Critical Thinking course were adults (45 years old and up), full time workers, and/or parents, and/or single parents, and/or single parents of more than one child. I also had at least one student who was an adult daughter of a parent who depended on the student financially and emotionally.

Academically, these nontraditional students were adults who had worlds of knowledge and wisdom about life, about the working world, about politics, about education, about America, about money, about the American dream, about traditional education (the students’ views of America being so dismal that they no longer privileged it by capitalizing it).

Consequently, I learned that they know more than I do about some things, and that their knowledge is valuable; sometimes their knowledge can dissolve into rambling, but they face challenges that I could not really know as a former traditional student, as a person of financial means, as someone who only had to look after herself, and as a person who argued that in order for a student to succeed, s/he had to make sacrifices that aren’t easy. I also learned that some considerations or accommodations must be made to achieve equity in my classes for nontraditional students. I don’t condone bending the rules, but I also don’t condone

The author tells a story of how she became acutely aware of nontraditional students’ needs and the questions and unresolved issues that arose through teaching them.
holding up rules that don’t work for everybody. It isn’t impingent upon an instructor to do these things, but I call on instructors to at least consider what these students face—that may be foreign to our own experiences or ideas of what formal education should be. If we don’t, the net result is loss of human potential, ideas, experiences, voices, and perspectives that don’t make it to our classrooms, that aren’t shared with traditional students, and that promote privilege rather than work towards understanding and equity.

Through conversations with one nontraditional student in particular, I learned about the level of dedication and time that is needed to raise one child well and how that mission can conflict with studying. This student is a single mother, head of her household, and hell bent on raising her daughter well. I learned from her about paying attention to your kid; that’s valuable. I learned about providing healthy meals for kids; that takes time. I learned about making kids well-rounded by indulging their interests; that takes money. I learned about playing with your kid, and doing homework together, and taking them to farmers markets and the library and how all of this deducts from the amount of time a nontraditional student has to study. Write an essay. Write the organized and well-supported, well-developed essays that I challenge them to write. What time for school does a student have if she is also raising a child well? Not every sacrifice for school can be made.

I guess one could argue that these nontraditional students should wait. They should go to school when they have time, after the child-rearing is over. But, if poverty, homelessness, or lack of medical care is the other option, it’s audacious and downright rude to suggest that a student wait until time is ripe. In an email, a nontraditional student helped me understand her urgency to finish school despite her challenges when she put it to me like this:

Good Morning Professor,

I just wanted you to know that I enjoyed being a student in your class. As I stated in the final discussion the concepts of critical thinking was all new to me. Your teachings opened my mind up to think objectively. However, I know I struggled with writing an argumentative paper but I did my best.

I don't mean to burden you with my problems or make excuses, but I am over 40 yrs old, work a full time job, and come home to take care of mom which has taken a toll on me financially, mentally and emotionally.
I need to express that I’m trying my best to complete 4 classes a semester so I can move forward. If I don’t pass this class this will delay my schooling and stop my financial aid. If there is anything extra I could do to assure a passing grade please let me know. Thank you for your time and consideration. Happy Holidays!

Lest you think I have equity figured out or have a bleeding heart, please know that this student did not earn a passing grade in our class. If her prediction pans out, meeting her academic goal is yet another semester away (which decreases the likelihood of it being completed), her financial aid will stop (meaning her already stretched pockets will have to pay—community college is no longer all that affordable), and her home life will take longer to improve. I don’t feel good about it, but I relied heavily on the accumulation of the points that she earned to calculate her grade, which fell five percent short of a passing grade. *Five percent.* As I type this, I ask myself if this is a wide enough gap not to pass. Are there other academically noteworthy things this student demonstrated to compensate for those five points? Such as: Is my teaching so on point that I ought not consider my own shortcomings when I grade? (Answer: No.) Are there things I’m not good at teaching (yet), but am grading her for rigorously? (Answer: It’s possible.) Could my shortcomings be a reason why she did not learn well what I was teaching? (Answer: For some things, yes.)

As I mull over *five percent,* I consider that she is demonstrating two primary goals of critical thinking in her email: She states in her message that she is now open to thinking objectively. I love her statement, firstly because she admits to not *automatically* thinking objectively. I love this honesty; her admission is true for all of us. That is, critical thinking—at least the way I teach it, and according to the textbook I use—allows for biases; we all have them. The point is to recognize and try to put them aside when we evaluate texts and do research so that we can be as objective as possible. Secondly, I love her statement because objective thinking is on her mind. It’s an additional task that she is now doing (and hopefully continues to do) when she argues. That’s good! That’s a primary goal of critical thinking, I think! That’s the chief accomplishment of a critical thinking course!

I also wonder if it’s not valuable that this student became aware of what she did not know, and if this awareness compensates for the five percent. She admits her struggle with argumentative writing. Is her admission
not an awareness and opportunity for her to learn and practice more in the future? Is this “failure” not something that she will kick around in her mind—ruminating on what valid evidence is and the need for it, reasons, or how to present a claim in a way that someone listening or reading can follow with facility? Maybe I am projecting, but don’t so-called failures stay on our minds for a time, don’t we wonder where we went wrong or how we’ll fix it? Won’t they urge us to look up a term or concept or replay attempts/efforts/essays in our minds? In the minimum, hasn’t this student learned that it takes a great deal of time for her to craft an effective argument, and won’t that likely prepare her for the next endeavor? As in Gee, I wrote really bad argument papers in English 103, but if I spend more time preparing and planning, maybe I will get a stronger grade.

This scenario might be easy for a traditional student like me to project onto nontraditional students, but it doesn’t have to be as far-fetched as it seems. I don’t know the answers, but one option for instructors to consider is conversing with such a student one-on-one. For this student, if these were my only two concerns, I might ask her to reflect on what she has learned and what her perceived failures are, and I would encourage her to get better at these in the future. I would encourage her to continue, auto-didactically or in a future class. Yes, that means she would go into a future class, possibly taught by one of you, my colleagues. Yes, that means you’d say to yourself, This student is obviously not prepared for English 104; why did her previous instructor pass her? You might make snide remarks about my teaching abilities. But, the flip side is in the student. The natural consequence is that she knows what she has to do to ready herself in your class. She is at a deficit, but because of that one-on-one, she knows what she has to do: see tutors, put in extra effort, do extra credit, go to office hours, form and attend study groups, get more support from family and friends so she can study, find YouTube videos, drink more coffee, reach out to her previous instructors for help, and maybe even attend one those previous instructor’s classes for refreshers and practice. For nontraditional students, some of these strategies may be key.

In doing so, this student has a community, is connected to her school, is empowered, and is more likely to finish her schooling. Hence, more equity for nontraditional students is afforded.

Or, what I’ve written could all just be a pipe dream. I still don’t know. But, I know that even a small army of considerate, informed, and compassionate professors could make that pipe dream a reality for some nontraditional students.
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