

What WPAs Need to Know to Prepare New Teachers to Work with Adult Students

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Most graduate students and new faculty have little, if any, preparation for teaching the approximately 40% of college composition students who are 25 years or older (United States).¹ Thus, it falls to WPAs to prepare new teachers to work with adult students. To assist WPAs, this article addresses common misconceptions about adult students, reviews scholarship on the differences between older and younger students as well as between different populations of adult students, and discusses ways to leverage the strengths and address the needs of adult students. The “Teaching Writing to Adults: A Handbook for New Composition Teachers” on CompFAQs supplements this article with sample assignments, recommended readings, cases for discussion and other support for those new to teaching adult students.

The lack of published research in our field, and the resulting lack of attention to older students, can be understood when one considers that adult students are concentrated in community colleges. In 2003–2004, 53% of community colleges students were 24 years old or older, while only 29% of public four-year and 33% of private non-profit four-year college and university students were 24 years old or older (Provasnik and Planty 12). Community college faculty, who regularly teach 100 or more students a term, have little time to prepare research for publication. While they have nevertheless contributed to the scholarship on adult students, most of their research remains local, being used for programmatic review or shared at regional conferences. The limited research on adult students is one symptom of a larger problem: community college faculty teach “an estimated 50% of all college-level composition” courses (Millward 8), but their expertise is under-represented in our literature.

Adult students are less common in the universities where many WPAs work and train teachers than in community colleges. New teachers, how-

ever, will go where the jobs are. As a result, many will be staffing those 50% of composition courses at community colleges where adult students are often the majority. By preparing teachers to work with adult students, WPAs meet both their obligations to the adult students at their own institutions and to the teachers they are training.

WPAs' responsibility to educate faculty about adult students is all the more important because the lack of research in our field means that many assumptions about adult students are based upon misconceptions. At a WPA conference, I was told that adult students seemed to have mastered the "rhetoric of complaint," asked if we do not lower standards for adults in the name of access and accommodation, heard speculation that many have learning disabilities and was told that they are too diverse to consider as a group. At a school catering to returning students, the English department chair told me not to worry too much about my teaching since most of the students suffered from lead poisoning. While her advice was outrageous, adult students are frequently labeled as overly consumerist, manipulative, excessively demanding, intellectually lazy, or just not very bright.

Adult students are diverse, bringing a range of prior educational, cultural, life and writing experience to the classroom. Some left school before completing college because they lacked money, support from family and friends, academic preparation, focus, motivation or maturity. Others left school because they had the opportunity to pursue a nonacademic passion or because they needed to fulfill family responsibilities. My adult students have included former professional ballet dancers and chefs; workers tired of manual labor; women who dropped out of school to care for relatives; men trying to turn their lives around after getting out of prison; police officers ready to get off the streets; veterans returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan; and those too busy working in health care, real estate, banking or IT to complete their schooling. When I taught at a community college, these students were squeezed into desks next to eighteen-year-olds just out of high school and twenty-year-olds back home after having had too much fun or not enough money at a university.

The diversity of their backgrounds and current life situations means any generalizations about adult students may be even less reliable than those about "traditional" undergraduates. Nevertheless, the research we do have indicates that adults from a variety of backgrounds tend to be more anxious, motivated, busy and experienced than younger students. These characteristics result in some of the behaviors that lead to misconceptions about adult students. They also present opportunities for their teachers.

ANXIOUS

Research on adult students has repeatedly demonstrated that they are more anxious about their academic abilities than younger students (Brookfield, *Understanding* 27; Taylor, Marienau, Fiddler 6; Wiant 11–21, 41–45). While some adult students, particularly those who write regularly, are confident or even over-confident about their writing abilities, most are not. Even veteran teachers of adult students routinely underestimate this anxiety. In one case, researchers who started out understanding that adults are “often terrified about returning to school” were surprised to discover the degree of anxiety revealed in student journals (Bask, Lighty and Tebrock 209, 212). In addition to writing anxiety, three fears feed much adult student anxiety: fear of brain rot, fear of the unknown, and fear of being a failure.

Fear of Brain Rot

When they first return to school, some adults are not sure if, as many students have said to me, “my brain still works.” They fear that they will not be able to keep up with younger students. A student who had worked on the assembly line at Ford for twelve years wrote about doing crossword puzzles to fight “the numbing of” his brain. A construction worker, who towered over the other students, trembled as he read his essay to the class. A flight attendant got a migraine when confronted with a writing task on the first night of class. These three students turned out to be award-winning writers. However, each started out terrified his brain had atrophied beyond repair. While anxiously waiting to see if their brains “turn on,” the more outgoing students may seem clingy and ask an excessive number of questions about assignments. The less extroverted will be very quiet. In each case, their behavior can be mistakenly interpreted as lack of initiative or intelligence.

Most adult students quickly discover that they can keep up with “the kids,” if not outpace them. Discussions of writing anxiety, while not the same as fear of lost mental capacity, help alleviate both fears by providing a forum in which older and younger students can share their concerns. Invariably, students feel less anxious when they realize that they are not alone in their concerns. Mary Miritello describes how this realization helped one student: “what kept her from giving up was the discovery that other students in her class felt as nervous and apprehensive as she did about the paper assignment” (7). Watching anxiety about rusty brains be replaced with reveling in the joy of learning is one of the rewards of working with adult students. Unfortunately, other, less easily assuaged, fears can drive some adults to continue to be overly dependent upon the teacher for guidance and approval.

Fear of the Unknown

David Bartholomae pointed out that new college writers struggle with enculturation and must learn how to write themselves into the academic discourse community (623). For adult students, who may not have been in school for years, this struggle can be particularly difficult. Anxiety about how school works is intensified in writing classes for those adult students who discover that what they remember about academic writing has lost currency. Alice Gillam quotes one student as saying, "They hadn't heard of revision when I was last in school" (13). Writing process methods, kinds of assignments, citation methods and the nature of sources have all changed since many adults were in school. As a result, writing classes can be sites of extreme, potentially paralyzing anxiety for them (Fredericksen; Gillam 5–6; Miritello 6–7; Sommer 16–31; Wiant 15).

Anxiety about the unknowns of academic writing contributes to behaviors like repeated questions about assignments and excessive concern with grading. This anxiety can be kept to a minimum by providing rationales for and explanations of assignments and assessment criteria and by giving plenty of low-stakes opportunities for students to practice what they are learning, allowing "students the freedom to err without guilt and anxiety, and especially, without penalty of grades" (Horning 74). Engaging students in the process of generating criteria, providing formative feedback, and giving students options, such as being able to choose the papers that will be included in a final portfolio, can further reduce anxiety (Gillam 14). For example, my students do first drafts of two different papers before picking one to revise for a second and then a final draft. They get feedback on each draft from their peers and from me, but only the final draft counts for a significant portion of their grade. Clarity, understanding and choice all give students a sense of control over their fates that helps dispel anxiety about the unknown.

Adult educator Malcolm Knowles claims that adults "need to know how the learning will be conducted, what will be learned, and why it will be valuable" (201). In other words, teachers should answer the same questions at the start of a lesson as they expect students to answer at the start of an essay. If they do not, they risk losing their audience:

While it is important to explain reasons for learning to any student group, adults quickly lose interest and question the value of what they are learning without some rationale. Particularly important for the writing classroom is information

about how writing instruction has changed—e.g., current lack of grammar drill—and justification for new strategies—e.g., collaborative work. (Uehling 65)

When adult students do not get this information, some are confused by, suspicious of, or resistant to our “new fangled” methods. Using interviews with students in a GED program, Alisa Belzer shows how students perceive current instruction through the lens of their prior learning experiences, resulting in skepticism about and resistance to new teaching methods. To address this resistance, Belzer recommends explicit discussion of the students’ prior learning, their current expectations and the teacher’s rationale for his or her practices.

First-generation and working-class students come to college with less knowledge of higher education than classmates who have more contact with college graduates. For these students, the norms, values and language of college writing can be alien and alienating. Linda Adler-Kassner points out that the academic essay embeds the values of the middle class so that, “the disjuncture between students’ values and the values implicit in the essay can pose a difficulty for some in composition classrooms” (92). Like Adler-Kassner, Anne Aronson’s analysis of essays from working-class students in an intermediate composition class led her to conclude that “apparent problems with logic and coherence in student writing about class may have as much to do with ideological tension as they do with poor writing skills” (52). In addition, working-class students can be ambivalent about the language of academic writing when they see it as distancing themselves from friends, family and their sense of themselves (Clark and Ivanic 134). Theresa Lillis demonstrates that student decisions about word choice and tone are fraught with concerns about personal authenticity and class identity (78–106). Understanding the freight these decisions carry can help writing teachers make sense of papers that bounce between overly formal and informal language.

While the writing of these students may baffle teachers, Lillis shows that students find the language of their teachers equally confusing (53–77). Teachers are often oblivious of the extent to which they rely upon jargon when talking to students about writing. “Parenthetical citation,” “thesis,” “split infinitive” and even the parts of speech are jargon to adults who have been away from the language of writing classes for years. I once overheard a middle-aged student whisper to another, “remind me, what are quotes again?” at the end of a lesson on quote sandwiches. Besides failing to communicate the intended meaning, jargon signals to those who do not understand that they do not belong. While observing a class, I watched a thirty-something student go rigid when the teacher told the class to use

“MLA citation” in their papers. Normally not one to hesitate to talk, this student waited until the teacher was out of the room to ask her peers what this MLA stuff was all about. Her tone and language revealed that she was both anxious that she did not know and angry with the teacher for throwing such words around so carelessly.

Elaine Fredericksen warns that adults’ sense of authority in the rest of their lives and lack of authority in the classroom can breed anger and resentment that leads to resistance. If not addressed, this resistance can slowly poison or explode in a class. Fredericksen recommends teaching process, providing lots of low-stakes writing and feedback, discussing potentially intimidating professional models, occasionally letting students work in homogenous groups, and explicitly addressing difference. Meeting individually with students once or twice a term, as the teacher who raised hackles with “MLA citation” did, also works to defuse anxiety-fueled resistance.

The authority some students claim by virtue of their age and experience means that a few will be reluctant to accept the authority of a teacher who appears quite young. As a small woman who looked younger than I was when I started teaching at 28, I quickly learned that simple things like standing at the head of the classroom, dressing more formally than I might otherwise, presenting credentials, and explaining the rationale for my course design all helped establish my authority. Once students see that the teacher knows what he or she is doing, questions of authority usually disappear well before most new teachers exhaust their professional wardrobes.

Fear of Being a Failure

While adult students have often been understood to be more self-directed than younger students, fear of being a failure can combine with fear of the unknown to produce behaviors that seem far from self-directed. Robert Sommer theorizes that adults “are often more inclined than younger students to defer to the direction and judgment of the teacher” because, having failed once in school, they blame their earlier failure on not doing what they were told (85). As Karen Uehling puts it, “if instruction did not take the first time then study more and more seriously and make it take this time” (66). Not only has what these adults learned about writing changed, but also how to be a successful student has changed. Sommer continues: “In a sense, we seem to be changing the rules on these students. They believe that they now fully appreciate the opportunities to get ahead through education, and perhaps they understand what they should have done differently. Yet now we prepare our classes and conduct our teaching in a manner that is

not at all in keeping with the rules they may recall” (85–86). While one might think that those who struggled previously would embrace new teaching methods, the opposite is often true. The weaker their prior schooling, the more likely my students have been to blame themselves for their academic failures.

Praise and process can be effective antidotes to anxiety about being a failure. Telling students, who have very often been told what they do wrong as writers, specifically what they do well helps them see how to use their strengths and cultivates the confidence they will need to persevere. An adult student once asked me to, “Please pass on to other instructors the power of positive comments on students writing, because it can have a very powerful impact and give a great boost of confidence.”

As important as praising the strengths in student writing is helping students to see the opportunities in their writing processes. In “Reducing Anxiety in the Adult Writer,” Timothy Pies recommends teaching process to alleviate anxiety (15). Like many novice writers, adults frequently see writing as the transcribing of fully formed ideas from their head onto paper. As a result, they get easily frustrated when what they come up with on paper does not capture what they had in their head. Adults tend to be more aware than younger students of the disparity between what they want to say and what they actually get down on paper. And, many adult students are all too quick to come to the conclusion that this gap is due to their intellectual failings as opposed to a problem with their writing process. These students need coaching and sometimes extra hand-holding, but they should not be regarded as too fragile for honest feedback on their writing.

MOTIVATED

Most adults are highly motivated students (Cross 19; Knowles 68, 199–201; Quinnan 94–95; Spitzer 95; Taylor, Marienau, Fiddler 5–6), having made a deliberate decision to return to school, which they are often financing on their own. This motivation is why, despite their anxieties, they want, seek out and appreciate frank, constructive criticism. It is also why they frequently return the favor.

Teachers who refrain from providing critical feedback out of fear of weakening the confidence of adult students may be surprised when these students respond with frustration. Adults usually know they need to improve and are eager for concrete, actionable advice on how to do so. When they do not get it, they feel that the instructor is not doing his or her job, and they are more likely than younger students to express their displea-

sure (Quinnan 76). While we lament the passivity of some adult students, we are not always prepared when they voice critiques of our teaching.

Adult students' motivation can create tension in their relations with younger students as well as with their teachers. Adults frequently become role models for and even mentors to younger students. However, some adults resent the lack of work from younger, less motivated students (Quinnan 75). Conversely, some younger students see adults "as monopolizing class and instructor time, are combative about philosophical points in class discussions, and are preoccupied with recounting life experiences as learning examples" (Quinnan 75–76). To address this tension, Timothy Quinnan stresses the need for teachers to "create a climate of mutual respect and trust" and recommends class discussions of age and ageism (76).

Adults are usually motivated because of *both* practical considerations (they need a degree to get a job, to get promoted or to change careers) and personal desire (they want new challenges, are thirsty for knowledge, want to set a good example for their kids, and want the sense of accomplishment that comes with finally finishing their degree). The following quote from a student is typical in her meshing of personal development and career goals as well as in her desire for excellence:

The goal I have for my writing is to use each assignment as an opportunity to exercise my brain and work on thinking clearly, staying focused, and trying to articulate my ideas clearly. Writing may play only a small role in my career, but speaking clearly and articulately will be of the utmost importance. Writing will prove to be great cross-training for this, I am sure. . . . Continuing to improve my skills is of the utmost importance to me. Not only for the sake of getting good grades, but so that I can continue to challenge myself. . . . Even if a piece of writing was good enough to get high marks, there would still be opportunities to learn and improve. Or, a chance to see what worked well and keep that for next time.

Even adult students who see themselves primarily as employees report that they attend school as much for personal as for career-related reasons: "85 percent reported that they were attending postsecondary education to gain skills to advance in their current job, 80 percent to complete a degree or certificate program, 36 percent to obtain education required by their job, and 89 percent to increase their personal enrichment or pursue an interest in the subject" (Berker and Horn 24). Although adults 55 and older are more likely than younger adults to be motivated by the pleasure of learning and desire for community, they also return to school for work-related

reasons, sometimes preparing to transition to a new post-retirement career (American 14–16). While the desire to develop both personally and professionally motivates them, adults are often focused on the immediate and practical: “adults want to learn things that seem relevant and applicable to their current lives, including work and family matters” (Taylor, Marineau, Fiddler 4).

Sometimes, teachers interpret adult students’ concern with how their learning can transfer to the workplace as a reductive focus on the monetary rather than the more abstract benefits of higher education. The reality is that a focus on income for shelter and food is a necessity for some students. Like many community college teachers, I have taught students who were trying to move out of public housing, temporary shelters, or off the streets. Where I teach now, most students are comfortably middle class. However, because they are ambitious and because they have found success in their careers, they wish to use their education to further their career ambitions as well as for personal growth.

Teachers who embrace the practical motivations driving adult students can work with, rather than against, these motivations. One of my weaker writers used a persuasive essay to argue for a change in the way her company scheduled hours. She revised her essay continuously until the final due date. After the essay convinced her boss to change company policy so that she no longer had to work weekends, I had a life-long convert to the value of revision and the power of writing. When students see how they can bring their workplace knowledge into the classroom and their classroom learning into the workplace, they feel more confident and are more engaged in their learning.

BUSY

Despite their motivation, adults are often barely balancing school, work and families: “lack of time is one of the most commonly cited barriers to education among older adults” (American 18). One of my students took four classes, spent 10 hours a week in church, and worked 65 hours a week. He managed to pass his classes. More commonly students who are trying to work and go to school full-time, not to mention raise a family, find they cannot do it all. Some realize they need to take fewer classes, but too many decide school is an all or nothing choice. When I see apparently capable students falling behind, I always ask them how many hours they work and how many classes they are taking. Then, I remind them of the story of the tortoise and the hare.

A detailed syllabus gives students an understanding of the goals and structure of the class, defined assessment criteria and enough information

about assignments and due dates so that students can plan their time to avoid conflicts between the demands of their school, work and personal lives. When unanticipated conflicts do occur, some adults disappear, but most make requests to miss class or make up work. Sometimes, these requests for flexibility come off as attempts to work the system or to lower standards. Certainly, some adults are looking to slide through school. Most are not. Given their investment in returning to school, adults usually want to make the most of the experience. However, they expect teachers to understand that bosses sometimes demand overtime and that children get sick. In his research, Quinnan found "numerous instances where [adult student] respondents recalled conflicts with faculty over assignment deadlines and how intractable teachers were in granting extensions and resolving problems" (77). Flexibility does not mean letting students off the hook. It does mean giving them a couple extra days to complete an assignment, meeting with a student who missed a class, or setting up study groups or other methods for students to support each other.

Because of their motivation and their hectic lives, adult students can become quite unhappy when they feel their time is being wasted. If you have ever sat through a two-hour training session on a new technology that you figured out in the first five minutes, if you have become impatient at a meandering conference presentation, or if you wanted an expert to spend less time asking questions and more time answering them, then you know the frustration of an adult student whose time is being wasted. Adults can be more impatient than younger students. This does not mean they do not want to engage in deep thinking, it does mean they want the instructor to teach efficiently as well as effectively.

In our busy lives, we survive by triaging. We hand in grades at the last minute, write a conference presentation the night before, and skip talks we should attend. We know which deadlines we have to respect, which we can push and which we can ignore. Adult students are no different. If they do not see a compelling purpose for an assignment, they are likely to skip it. I have a very bright student who works at least fifty hours a week as a computer systems engineer, has a new child and is trying to finish his BA. He earned a C in a computer class despite getting As on all of the tests because he made the choice not to do the homework sets. Imagining both the frustration of his teacher and of his exhausted wife, I have to agree with this student's decision to skip practice he did not need.

EXPERIENCED

Just as this student brought programming knowledge he had learned on the job to his computer class, adults return to school with a variety of

prior writing experiences and current writing practices that affect how they approach college writing assignments and how teachers perceive their abilities. Alice Gillam shows that students who are used to journaling produce long, richly detailed, but unfocused essays, while students used to business writing tend to write in short, well organized but underdeveloped paragraphs. Gillam also shows that teachers sometimes perceive these writing practices as indicating a lack of ability rather than “context related, attributable to prior experience, and potentially beneficial” (7).

While Gillam asserts that the strengths her students have developed in their prior writing experiences “often result in rapid writing growth” (8), Randall Popken argues that, because adults are familiar with more genres of writing than younger students, the process of learning academic genres can be more complicated. In particular, Popken shows how some adults struggle with the academic move of making a claim and then supporting it because they have little experience with this type of writing.

One of the students on whom Popken focuses, Aletha, echoes the comments about academic writing that I hear regularly from adult students. Aletha is used to including details in her business writing, but not for the purposes of supporting a claim, which seems redundant or “unnecessarily drawn out to her” (Popken). She is confused by what teachers mean when they say “be more explicit” and ask for “concrete evidence” because “it’s not really facts or numbers or dates like I was used to writing. It can be a lot of different things. Sometimes it’s facts, but it’s more often kind of an interpretation of what somebody meant” (qtd. in Popken). Similarly, Miritello recounts the case of a graduate student who, while quite successful in her workplace writing, is paralyzed by her academic writing assignment because it calls for interpretation. The student explains, “In my job, the materials I work with are clear-cut. There are not grey areas. But in this class, I was told that my paper had to develop an opinion. I had to have my own point of view. . . . This seemed to be such a grey area” (qtd. in Miritello 7).

Like Miritello’s student, Aletha is not used to advancing her own point of view. Aletha writes letters for an insurance company to families mourning a recent death in which she writes in the voice of her boss and needs to be “indirect and non-authoritative” (Popken). At school, the demands to write in her own voice and to use sources leaves her confused: “she asks how it can be ‘her’ writing if these other people’s ideas are in it” (Popken). Aletha’s discomfort with claiming authority is a common concern of adult students. Gillam cautions that adult students, because they know what it means to speak with the voice of authority, are less inclined to feel comfortable assuming it in cases where they are novices, producing a hedging,

mixed voice and a tendency to discount personal experience as not being adequately objective for the academy (8–9).

While Aletha and Miritello's student describe the confusion of some adults as they move between their workplace and academic writing, other adults feel liberated by the opportunities to express themselves and to experiment with the different writing styles that they find in school. One of my students recently wrote: "When I started this class, one of my largest problems with writing had to do with my work. In my work as a police officer, I cannot add any of my own thoughts or opinions. My reports are dry and straightforward. In short, I was overjoyed to . . . learn the option of mixing [writing] styles." Whether it left them confused, anxious or excited, each of these students understood academic writing through the lens of their workplace writing experiences.

Asking students about their writing experiences helps teachers build upon this experience. It can also be enlightening. In a class I observed, a student reported that she had been taught to never use just one exclamation mark. Gillam has students create "experience portfolios" in which they document their areas of expertise, review their writing experiences, and provide samples of the kinds of writing they are currently doing whether it is journaling, e-mails, business letters or something else (11–14). She shows how these portfolios can be used to dispel anxiety, create classroom community, generate ideas for future papers, diagnose writing issues and strengths, and discuss rhetorical strategies and decisions (11–14).

Adult educators have long stressed the importance of experience and experiential learning for adult students (Knowles 65–67, 201–2; Kolb 6; Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 159–86; Quinnan 38, 92; Taylor, Marienau, Fiddler 7–8). While some adult students may lack confidence in their writing, they often have confidence in other areas of their lives, whether that be raising children, building a business or running a marathon. When teachers find out in what areas students consider themselves experts, they can show students how to leverage that knowledge. For example, I had a student who did not get the idea of revision until she saw the parallels to the trial and error process she used to improve recipes.

Students' life experiences also constitute a wealth of raw material for their writing. While younger students sometimes struggle to find something to say, adults often have a surplus of material. They may need help focusing and organizing, but their papers are almost always fresh and engaging. Kathleen Cassity shows that adult students proactively draw upon their life experiences when writing for school to deal with anxiety and negotiate their emerging academic identities (290–293). Similarly, Mary Kay Jackman found that adults "draw on their lived experience to address

writing tasks, to fulfill writing assignments, and to function effectively as writers and students” (65).

However, having adult students bring their experience into the classroom does not come without risk. Sommer invokes Dewey to remind us that experience can be mis-educative: “Experience . . . does not have intrinsic value, and it is clearly not synonymous with education” (104). Inviting adults to write about their experiences brings with it the need to teach them how and why to write reflectively and analytically about these experiences. A few students get this right away, many need coaching.

Adults sometimes respond with anxiety, defensiveness and even hostility when asked to analyze their experiences. Their exposure to different perspectives and developing critical thinking skills can challenge long-held beliefs and lead to “ruptures in learners’ home lives, estrangement from their communities, and alienation in their workplace” (Taylor, Marienau, Fiddler 327). Brookfield calls this “cultural suicide” when first-generation, working-class and adult students find that their learning alienates them from friends, family and coworkers who are threatened by their development (*The Skillful Teacher* 84–85). It is part of the college experience to have to articulate and question one’s own beliefs. However, for some adults, because their beliefs may be long held and because their belief systems may be underrepresented in the academy, analyzing their own experiences and interrogating their beliefs can produce more tension than for younger students. Despite this tension, teachers ignore adult experience at their loss and possibly peril: losing the chance to make allies in the classroom, address misconceptions, dispel anxiety, validate students’ identities, understand students’ writing decisions and leverage their life experiences.

In training new teachers, WPAs are themselves educating adult students. These adults come with expertise in rhetoric and composition, but they sometimes need to be reminded to apply that knowledge to how as well as what they teach. After all, it is a rhetorical failure to not respond to the anxieties, motivations, and experiences of one’s audience. When new teachers approach their classes as they teach students to approach essays, they find that they know quite a lot about how to be effective teachers. They understand, for example, the need to engage their audience and the value of metacommentary.

Because adult students remind us to attend to rhetorical concerns, paying attention to them improves the learning experience for all students. A final study, underscores this point. Researchers at Oklahoma City Community College found that adult students were less satisfied than younger students with the school’s community-based learning program (Largent

and Horinek 40). When the school changed the program to address the adults' desire for "clearly meaningful" assignments that let students draw upon their prior experience, they found that all of the students in the program, younger as well as older, were more satisfied (Largent and Horinek 40–46). Like constructing meaningful assignments, many of the recommendations for teaching adults mentioned in this essay are familiar best practices. WPAs regularly preach the value of practices such as assigning low-stakes writing, giving formative feedback and teaching writing process. WPAs also know that a teacher will have a much better chance of helping students with their writing process if the teacher knows one student starts with templates to draft memos at work, another student learned that to revise means to run spell check, a third believes any revision is self-censorship and a fourth never revised a paper but has been adjusting her breaststroke for years to cut out extra motion. Adult students help WPAs demonstrate that even best practices are not one-size-fits-all solutions. Rather, they are effective to the extent that they are tailored to the needs and strengths of the individual students in our classes. Thus, in preparing new teachers to work with adult students, WPAs help these teachers more effectively teach all of their students.

NOTE

1. Most of the research cited in this essay identifies adults by age, usually as 25 or older. However, many younger students who have returned to school after stopping out, who work full time, or who have children can be more similar to older students than to peers their own age.

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