

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS: WHO ARE THEY?

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Past research has indicated that different students learn differently. If we could identify into which group(s) students were more closely aligned, then we could help students learn more effectively. One such classification has been whether students were considered to be traditional or nontraditional, where traditional students were frequently considered to be those less than 24 years of age, and nontraditional students were frequently considered to be those 24 years of age or older.

The composite opinion of 30 faculty indicated that age may not properly identify whether students are traditional or nontraditional, but that a life changing event does. While some students might possess the characteristics of a traditional student all of their lives, others may exhibit nontraditional characteristics early in life.

Traditional may need more motivation (e.g. grade credit for homework and class attendance), whereas with nontraditional students faculty perhaps could concentrate more on the subject matter of the class.

Why do we care if the students are traditional or nontraditional?

Over the years, I, as well as many of my associates, have come to believe that nontraditional students were older students and traditional students were younger students. My definition of a traditional student is those with the mindset of someone just out of high school who goes to college just because it is the next thing to do (as opposed to going to work or something else), while nontraditional students have a different mindset. Here mindset refers to how students perceive education: its value, what is and is not important, and the general approach of what to learn and how to learn it. Traditional students are more focused on getting high grades so they can take the next class and/or be recognized for having earned high grades, while nontraditional students, although desirous to obtain high grades, are more

concerned with what they can do with the knowledge they can get from a class. Although it is true that younger students are usually those with the mindset of someone just continuing on to college after high school and older students usually do not have such a mindset, age is not necessarily the differentiating factor. Attributes other than age may differentiate traditional from nontraditional students. (It is quite possible for older students to be traditional, and younger students to be nontraditional.) *Life changing events* may also differentiate traditional students from nontraditional students – not age.

If students learn differently, we need to adjust our teaching styles to conform to diverse learning styles in order for the learning process to be more effective. However, we can not appropriately adjust our teaching styles to conform to the different students' learning styles if we can not

accurately identify the type of student. If traditional and nontraditional students learn differently, and if students could be grouped according to some predetermined alignment (traditional or nontraditional) we could better adjust how and what we teach to make the learning process more effective and meaningful. The focus of this paper is on accounting students, but the findings should be generalizable to other subjects.

The research question becomes, "What determines whether a student is traditional or nontraditional?" (The question of how traditional students learn differently from nontraditional students and the associated teaching methods that should be used with each was addressed in another paper by this author.)

This research uses an inductive qualitative study based on the opinions of 30 accounting faculty. Accordingly, the results of the study depend upon how closely the sample faculty represent the population of all faculty.

Current Thoughts about Traditional and Nontraditional Students

Much research presumes that whether a student is traditional or nontraditional corresponds with the student's age:

- Billson and Tiberus (1998, p. 564) found,
For older adults, highly authoritarian classes can be an instant turnoff – they do not want to be treated like “children” ... Conducting the class as a cooperative learning group ... lessens the teacher’s authority and strengthens peer relationships, [and] supports ...

growth.

- Bowden and Meritt (1995, p. 426) suggested,
When most colleges and universities begin to recruit adult learners, they often overlook the fact that adults have different needs, desires, and goals than their 18 to 24 year old counterparts. ... [To make] higher education attractive to the adult learners, [educators should] ... consider four things about them: age, needs, desires, and goals. Instructionally [this] means incorporating a participative style of information sharing. Administratively, it requires flexible scheduling, integrative technology to help with administrative functions, and significant preparation to face resistance from [traditionally] minded colleagues. Colleges and universities can successfully educate adults if they can recognize these unique aspects of the adult learner environment.
- Boyer (1992, p. 90)
[There is a shift in accounting education from passive to active learning and this shift requires a wealth of knowledge, and this requires scholarship, and fortunately], *professional schools — from architecture, to medicine, to journalism, to education, and accounting — increasingly are linking scholarship to real life. They are demonstrating that not only can knowledge be applied, but theory can in fact emerge from practice, and scholarship can occur [in and out of school].* (This implies that lifelong learning is associated normally

with older students.)

- Candy (1991) noted that another teaching style for adult accounting students would be self-directed learning. Self-directed learning or education includes learner-controlled education which has certain advantages. These advantages include: more flexibility in adapting to social and technological change, recognition of different learning styles, and the accommodation of those styles to provide more motivation and self-initiated inquiry for the learner. However, the advantages are not universal. They are limited in application. For example, the condition of being educated for 12 years in a different pedagogical approach, may limit an adult student's acceptance of the self-directed learning style.
- Conti (1985, p. 7) noted, *Despite the existence of divergent teaching styles, a significantly large portion of adult education literature supports the collaborative mode as the most effective and appropriate style for teaching adults.*
- Cummings (1995) emphasizes the importance of life-long learning with adult education, and that adult learners prefer less lecture and more student involvement.
- Knowles (1990) notes that older students want to know why they must learn things.
- Svinicki and Dixon (1998, p. 578) noted that based upon studies making use of the Kolb (1998) learning styles suggest that the education of older accounting students should begin with lecture, followed by homework, followed by problem set, followed by thought questions; whereas younger students should begin with thought questions, followed by lecture, followed by homework, followed by problem sets. That is, the older students should begin their study with lecture, and the younger students should begin with thought questions.
- Wooten (1998) stated that effort can overcome a student's belief of poor self-expectation, and further effort can overcome a student's poor cumulative GPA. A structural equation model study of introductory accounting classes compared 74 students 25 years of age or older with 127 student less than 25 years of age. The purpose of the study was to determine what affected students' performance (examination scores). The study indicated that aptitude (SAT scores) and effort (percentage of class attendance, homework completed, and chapter study guides used) were positively correlated with performance for both younger and older students, but that effort was more than three times as important as aptitude for younger students, while only slightly more important for older students. With respect to younger students, Wooten found that effort was affected by three constructs:
 - (a) grade history which was affected by aptitude
 - (b) motivation which was affected by

- self-expectation and environment where self-expectation was affected by grade history
- (c) family

In contrast, the older students' efforts were only affected by motivation which was affected by self-expectation and environment, where self-expectation was not affected by grade history. Therefore, the younger students' performance was the result of a complex matrix of interconnected factors, but the older students' performance was only dependent upon three factors:

- (a) aptitude
- (b) self-expectation
- (c) environment

Further, of these three, aptitude was approximately 15% more important than self-expectation, and both of these were approximately 3 times as important as the learning environment.

- Wynd and Bozman (1996) observed that students from 18 to 23 years of age tended to be assimilators, whereas students 24 years of age and older tended to be convergers, where the terms assimilator and converger refer to Kolb (1998) learning styles. While both convergers and assimilators tend to be abstract thinkers (as opposed to having concrete feelings), convergers tend more toward doing and/or actions while assimilators tend to be more watching and/or reflective. That is, older students tend more towards action while younger students tend more toward reflection.

The preceding summaries assume that traditional students are younger (usually less than 24 years of age) and nontraditional students are older (usually 24 years of age or older). In contrast, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) wrote an omnibus which included most of the preceding authors, but concluded that, "Adult educators are moving from description to theory building. We are considering the sociological context in which learning is taking place, how race, class, gender, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation, and so on affect learning, thus shifting from a primary psychological orientation to a broader contextual view (p. 404)." That is, although age may be considered a surrogate for identification of whether a student is traditional or nontraditional, there are overriding factors that must be considered. According to my findings one of these is a life changing event. This study is a simplification and continuation of the compilation prepared by Merriam and Caffarella.

Conceptual Framework of the Current Model

No database for this study exists in the usual sense, because I am not testing a hypothesis. Rather, I gather information to answer a question. This question evolved during a study on how to improve accounting education from the perspective of younger and older students.

Not only has the question evolved, but the information-gathering process also shifted as I acquired more information. Beginning with my own experiences and observations as an accounting instructor, the pertinent information then expanded

to include other experiences and observations from the literature; finally, it encompassed additional experiences and observations through the use of interviews and questionnaires.

The interviews were conducted to be as open ended as possible while still retaining the basic concept of acquiring information to improve accounting education, and special note was made of any differences between traditional and non-traditional students.

All interviews began with an explanation of what the study was trying to accomplish. From a small pilot study of instructors and an examination of their answers the questions and focus of the remainder of the study was adjusted. After fine-tuning the focus accordingly, I continued to interview the remainder of the accounting instructors in the sample. The information acquired from all interviews, both pilot and main test, revealed any additional procedures that need to be performed. Subsequently, I developed an appropriate questionnaire which I administered to a diverse group of accounting students.

The questions for the faculty remained deliberately vague to elicit as much information as possible, and to try to avoid any questioner bias. Generally, the explanation of why the study was being conducted was sufficient to provoke the faculty to reveal the information I was trying to acquire. Occasionally, faculty had to be redirected if they were going too far a field. This was accomplished with general questions. Only occasionally was it necessary to ask a multitude of questions to acquire the desired information. The vagueness and open flow

of information helps explain the evolution of the study question and information-gathering process. The study was and continues to be a living document.

Methodology Specifics

This study relies on grounded theory, the intent of which is "to generate or discover a theory, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation. This situation is one in which individuals interact, take actions, or engage in a process in response to a phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 55).

Though data was derived from 30 faculty members whom I engaged in one-on-one interviews, and 54 students who filled out written questionnaires, the first 5 faculty members interviewed served as a pilot study for the remaining 25 interviews. The questions were adjusted on the basis of the answers provided by those initial 5 faculty. In the one-on-one faculty interviews, the purpose of the study was explained and each faculty member was asked to comment accordingly. During the interviews, I would note whether they had addressed all of the issues about which I was concerned. If the faculty had not addressed everything, I would gently prod them with general questions.

All faculty interviews were taped; students answered written questionnaires. After each interview, I carefully listened to each recording, making note of the responses on a spreadsheet. Similarly, I classified the answers on the questionnaires administered to the students on spreadsheets. After listening to all of the faculty recordings and tabulating their responses on a spreadsheet, then doing the same for

the student responses, I determined any themes and noted the frequency of the related responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

Defining a nontraditional student may seem like "*begging the question*." The life changing event which defines a nontraditional student is that event which has caused the student's mindset to change from that of a traditional student to that of a nontraditional student. It is difficult to define because what may be a life changing event for one person may not be for another, and some people may never experience a life changing event regardless of how old they are. In contrast some people may experience such an event early in life, and perhaps even more than once. Recall, here mindset refers to how students perceive education: its value, what is and is not important, and the general approach of what to learn and how to learn it.

We might define nontraditional students to be those students with work experience. However, the work experience can not be just any work experience; it must be experience upon which they had to depend on for a livelihood, and which perhaps required them to make critical decisions. This work experience gives them the ability to understand more comprehensive issues, issues other than just those in a textbook to which the student may not relate. Nontraditional students frequently have outside, extracurricular obligations, such as families, which limit the time they have available for school. Education is not their primary activity.

One faculty member makes the following observation as she compares what

it was like when she went to school and how it is today.

Kids, a lot of these kids have kids. They're 20 and they have a 2 year old... [When I was a student, I went to a] private university, no television in the room, no marriage, no kids, no job, this is what you did. This is all you did. You were in class about 25, 26 hours a week, in class. The rest of the time you were in a lab, you were in the library, or you were studying, and this what you did and you focused on that. And these kids are wedging this in between all kinds of other things, and they are trying to do the best they can. So they have a job and they think they have time for class. You know. And they've also got kids, and they're going to try to be Saturday with the kids, Sunday, do all of my homework... I told one kid yesterday, "Don't you find with accounting you [need to] work on it every day and with the job you have, you can't." And so a lot of what happens is they cut back on their hours; they fail a few classes; they retake them a few times.

Another faculty member incorporates work experience and family commitments into the definition of a nontraditional student.

I think that's a criterion... that a nontraditional student would have two years of work experience to be a nontraditional. Could you [also] say marital status...? A lot of nontraditional students do not get cranking until they get married, until they

have a motivation, a family. It may be a wife or a husband, [or] not necessarily [a marriage, but] two years of real life living experience, which could usually [be] defined by a marriage, or significant other, or you know, a family arrangement of some type.

Another faculty member compares older and younger students, and observes the commitment and sacrifice which older students make to attend school,

[Older students] are more committed.... They do a better job. They're more interested in the subject. They come more tired, but they're a better audience... The younger students need more, you know, prodding. The older students aren't going to cut class. The younger students are going to. They think they can afford to.... Younger are in general less motivated.... [Older students may be] re-entry students who maybe are going for accounting because they were in the wrong major in undergrad, like speech communication. When I say reentry, I mean a student who maybe did not finish college, raised a family, and then came back. (Of course we have men in that category too.) [However]...., for some reason ... [there] are fathers, or single parents with kids that come back... [Regardless,] something happened along the way [so] that they could not go straight through... They could not get their act together between high school and college.... They're all more committed, the

older students, because they're making a decision to go back to school, which is, they're making tradeoffs, short term sacrifice.

Another faculty member explains why nontraditional students choose to get an education even though it is a sacrifice for them.

My experience with the older students... ([This is] part of what I like about older students.) is that they have kind of come to "those realizations" on their own. They've gone through their 20's and they've kind of settled things out, and most of them recognize they have trade offs to do in life.

Most of them, because they are older, want to be back in school. They are here for a reason. They don't like their jobs. They don't want to be making minimum wage for the rest of their lives. They are far more committed. Their problems tend to be, "I'm juggling too many things." And their frustration tends to be more of, "I can't do it all." They need to see more than debits and credits, that [school, education, accounting] has some kind of impact.

Work experience, [the difference is not based upon] younger and older [or] undergraduate and graduate. To me, it's work experience; it's the seasoning; it's the real world aspect. ... What I have seen also is [a delayed reaction]. ... Some of the students I have had went through an undergraduate program and did lib-

eral arts or what ever ... [and] then went and became a ski bum where they were teaching, instructing; or [being] a river raft guide; or what ever, and they did this stuff for about two or three years, and they're going, "You know, this hand to mouth existence gets old after a while. It's fun to be in the great out of doors, but I can't pay the rent, ... I'm tired of scrapping by, I'm tired of living off of macaroni and cheese." ... and they say, "You know, I'm ready to go to get a graduate degree where I can earn some money." ... So I think [the difference is] that work experience, that seasoning, that maturity. [It] does not necessarily have to be work per se, but something more than K-Mart ... ten hours per week. [It has to be] something that has responsibility with it.

In addition to these preceding specific statements, there was a general tone by the faculty that there was a significant event (*life changing event*) which changed how the students approached education. It does not have to be an epiphany, it could be a gradual change, but there is a catalyst which causes the change. This definition is based upon my interviews with 30 faculty members. Unprompted, 50% of the faculty listed work experience as a criterion to define nontraditional students. The other unprompted criteria in order of occurrence were as follow: see larger picture, 37%; more motivated, 33%; married or have families, 27%; more serious, 27%; and limited time, 23%. In contrast, self-expectation was appropriate for 77% of

younger students, whereas it was appropriate for only 30 % of the older students.

Summary, Implications and Outcomes

Too often we stereotype, "*pigeonhole*," students and people in general because it is easier to do so, or simply because we do not know enough about them. Hopefully, by observing whether a student has had a life changing events will help us to better address the student's needs and his or her approach towards education. For example, do we have to make homework and attendance a part of the students' grade to motivate students to do what they should do on their own, or can we proceed directly to the subject matter?

Nontraditional students are more serious, more motivated because they have a specific reason to attend college (for example, to obtain a means to financially support their families), and that reason may need to be accomplished within a limited amount of time and/or money. Subsequently, these students do not need much encouragement. They are self-motivated.

Traditional students, in contrast, usually lack experience. They usually are not able to understand complex/comprehensive issues as well as nontraditional students because of they do lack experience. Subsequently, they are less serious and less motivated because they do not understand the importance of things as much as the nontraditional, more experienced student. The traditional students do not have as many mandatory outside, extracurricular activities as do nontraditional students. Education could be the traditional student's primary activity. They could have more time to devote to their education if they so

desired. However, because of their lack of seriousness and lesser motivation, they frequently need more encouragement relative to nontraditional students.

Finally, although what has been said in this paper may not seem like a reevaluation, it should help us re-examine ourselves and how we approach our students.

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