

Chapter 2

An Understand, Assess, Apply Instructional Approach: Leveraging Student Differences for Enhanced Learning Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

As the face of higher education continues to change, instructors must develop effective strategies and innovative pedagogical techniques to engage an increasingly diverse set of learners. Specifically, instruction should provide opportunities for connection between disparate concepts as well as between disparate learners. How can teachers effectively leverage the unique qualities and experiences of non-traditional students to enhance adult learning and increase the value of the classroom experience for all students? This chapter offers instructors a unique perspective not only on the cognitive processes of non-traditional students but also research-based personality and behavioral assessments, transforming them into innovative pedagogical tools with immediate practical application. By understanding the strengths that adult learners bring to the classroom as well as the cognitive processes that support learning and skills acquisition, instructors can devise teaching strategies that enhance the learning and development of all students within their classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The higher education landscape is facing unprecedented challenges and increased scrutiny as consumers question the relevance, value, and quality of both in person and online education. Regardless of one's stance about the direction of higher education's future, the prospect and speed of change is inevitable. Instructors must retool in digital technologies to keep pace with changes and to reach an increasingly diverse set of learners. In the midst of rapid change and uncertainty, it is heartening to have a host of resources that enhance classroom engagement and promote the achievement of learning outcomes. This chapter offers instructors insight into the cognitive, behavioral, personality, and social differences between non-traditional students, or adult learners, and traditional undergraduate students. It also provides overviews of several research-based personality and behavioral models and assessments. Through the recognition of differences in cognitive processes between traditional and adult learners, the identification of student strengths and behavioral tendencies, instructors can intentionally leverage this diversity to enhance the classroom experience for all students.

Unlike the majority of traditional undergraduate students, often defined as individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 who enter college directly after highschool, adult learners are those over the age of 24 and must balance the demands of family responsibilities and/or full time employment with their educational pursuits (Hittepole, n.d.). This presents a unique challenge to the instructor who navigates a class composed of both traditional and nontraditional students, especially in an era of active and experiential learning that regularly incorporates collaborative work. One of the most common frustrations with group work relates to schedules. A regular refrain among students is the challenge of finding adequate time when everyone can meet. Research by Burdett confirms what many instructors grasp intuitively; among the worst aspects of group work identified by students are "unequal distribution of effort, difficulties of accommodating different work schedules for meeting times, [and the] lack of staff support" (2003, p. 184). Too often instructors make the mistake of assuming that students will know how to navigate group dynamics and have the interpersonal skills necessary to make collaboration a rewarding learning opportunity for all; "it is likely that groups will be formed with little consideration given to personality, life experience, ability or aptitude, so that a successful mixture of individuals is more likely

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