Home | Current Issue | Editorial Board | Instructions for Authors | Contact

A Twist on Diversity:
The Influence of Age, Gender, and Culture on Peer Instruction

Cheston Saunders
University of North Carolina Wilmington
Wilmington, North Carolina, USA

─────────

Citation:

─────────

In recent years, the popularity of peer-instruction methods has risen drastically within the educational community. In years past, many professors have looked down on instruction "presided" over by students who are not currently pursing graduate education. Not only do students who receive collaborative instruction by baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate students demonstrate the same level of subject matter mastery as students who received instruction from graduate students, they also report higher levels of interest in science itself, particularly biology (Walvoord et al. 2008).

Essentially, there are six ideas effective supplemental instruction leaders regularly employ: build relationships, examine metacognition, say it, see it, make use of emotions, and actually do it. Supplemental instruction sessions should be meaningful for the participants and the leader, this means actively cultivating relationships. "Chat 'em up" occasionally on non-curricular issues like what you did on your vacation, how much you like their shirt. If they are afraid of you or don't like you, they will not learn from you. Give the participants some "voice and choice" in the session. On occasion, it is important for a supplemental instruction leader to show his/her emotions (within reason) as it can lead to an increase in trust and facilitate the formation of appropriate relationships. A little encouragement has the potential to carry a lot of weight with a struggling student.

Often times, students may find a subject difficult because he/she have the view of "Why do I need to know this?" It is important for supplemental instruction leaders to take advantage of metacognition by explaining what is going to be reviewed in a session and why it is important, "real-life" examples have a tremendous ability to increase one's ability to recall a given concept. In order for a supplemental instruction leader to present information in an informative and rewarding manner, he/she must first understand the demographics of his/her session participants. In essence, an effective supplemental instruction leader is cognizant of the diversity of his/her session and, subsequently, will employ a variety of pedagogical techniques and "real-life examples" to appeal to these diverse learners.

Although diversity in tutoring has become increasingly important in recent years, this is only within the styles of teaching and learning. Diversity is a non-limited term and should expand beyond methods of teaching and learning to include multifaceted/multimedia/inter/multidisciplinary studies in addition to identities such as gender, age, race, and sexuality.

Even though feminist theory provided the pedagogical framework for modern learning centers, few individuals note the role of gender peer instruction. Feminist theory argues for peer instruction to focus on "learning as a process" rather than the achievement of a new skill. Feminist theory also calls for a relationship between the tutor and tutee that is friendly and personal while professional (Brannon, 1982).

Many individuals hold the view that females exhibit more traits that are associated with tutoring such as "empathetic, patient, sensitive, diplomatic, friendly, intuitive, supportive, responsive, and caring," than their male counterparts, this results in a high female-to-male tutor ratio (Birnbaum, 1995). Hunzer (1997) claimed that, "student writers who attend the writing center are actively aware of the gender of the tutor, and this awareness is usually tainted by the gender stereotypes that permeate society."

Often times, students display a tendency to rate tutors of the same sex as "more effective" than tutors of the opposite sex. Female students citied the "affinity for general discussion and approachableness" as the basis for their higher rating of female tutors, where as male tutors were evaluated to be less effective by female students because they were deemed "too intimidating and narrow-minded to be sufficiently helpful." Conversely, the male students justified their higher evaluations by the male tutors' "perceived aggressiveness and specific instruction" and viewed female tutors "as unassertive and lacking a clear focus" (Kiedarsch & Dinitz, 1991; Hunzer, 1997).

It is a widely accepted fact that changes in cognitive abilities and learning accompany human aging (Grannot, 1998), yet cohorts of older adults are rarely mentioned in discourse involving tutoring and supplemental instruction. It is common practice for tutors and supplemental instruction leaders to refer to themselves and their colleagues as "peer facilitators" or "peer tutors;" however, it is important to note the varying age range of students who utilize learning services. Some older and elderly students may consider the term "peer" to be offensive when used in reference to individuals drastically younger than themselves. Mrs. Jordan (2008), a 68 year old first year college student, stated "I may not be a smart or as [mentally] fresh as these kids [tutors and supplemental instruction leaders], but I still have a lot of life experience that they [tutors and supplemental instruction leaders] don't have. I don't like calling someone the same age as my grandchild a peer…it's almost humiliating."

Adult non-traditional students constitute approximately 23% of the student body at the University of North Carolina Wilmington; therefore, it is essential for supplemental instruction leaders and tutors to be aware of the specific needs and interests of older cohorts. It is common believe that older students express more motivation than their younger counter-parts (Wolfgang & Dowling, 1981); however, recent research suggests that although older students may display more motivation towards academics as a whole, there are no indications of a correlation between a student's age and the "desire to perform well in a particular course (Justice & Dornan, 2001)."

The most effective supplemental instruction leaders and tutors engage students in active dialogue and, as a result, form a personal relationship. In order to forge these relationships, supplemental instruction leaders and tutors should understand that older students are typically motivated by different factors than their younger counterparts. Older students typically cite the experience of a "critical life event" which results in a shift among their "goals and priorities" and a desire to attend college for personal fulfillment, whereas, younger students often cite "social relations and parental expectations" as the driving force behind their education (Justice & Dornan, 2001).

Supplemental instruction leaders and tutors should consider the effect of a student's age on his/her motivation to attend college and the ramifications of a less-than-desirable grade on said motivation. Older students are likely to view a poor grade as an indication of personal failure accompanied by a significant reduction in self-esteem. Younger students, on the other hand, are more likely to view a poor grade in terms of the "here and now" rather than an indication of self-worth. Supplemental instruction leaders and tutors must approach academically-depressed older students with care and relay the notion that "you aren't what you do; you are who you are (Dodd, 2008)."

It is the supplemental instruction leader's responsibility to ensure that older adults are comfortable and are afforded the opportunity to engage in a session's activities. Nontraditional college students rarely participate in university sponsored social events and extracurricular activities (Quinnan, 1997), a social disconnect that often becomes all-too-apparent during supplemental instruction sessions with group components. Many older students view their success in college as a result of the ability to integrate life experiences with course content (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). By engaging older students in active dialogue during a supplemental instruction session, two goals have been accomplished. First, younger traditional students are exposed to situations which merit the application of course content and reinforce conceptual thinking rather than simple linear memorization. Secondly, older nontraditional students develop social and intellectual relationships with their younger counterparts resulting in a richer educational experience for all involved.

Culture, race, and ethnicity are factors that influence the perceived efficacy of a supplemental instruction leader and the benefits of the sessions for the students. For instance, our society is based on social norms such as "informal interpersonal skills, manners, linguistics, lifestyle preferences [sexual orientation], educational credentials, speech patterns, and mannerisms" and they are collectively known as cultural capital (Berger, 2000). Because educational institutions adopt the "collection of [socially] accepted norms," students who possess cultural capital comparable to that of their chosen university are likely to succeed (Thomas, 2002). On the other hand, students who, as a result of "ethnicity, age, gender, socio-economic status, lifestyle [sexual orientation], and/or beliefs" possess cultural capital that is considered incongruent with the social norms of a given institution face harsh social sanctions and stresses (Saenz, 1999).

In order to provide the most effective and rewarding supplemental instruction sessions, leaders have a responsibility to understand the "cultural capital" of their session's participants. In order to understand the needs and backgrounds of students, the supplemental instruction leader must take initiatives to engage his/her participants in conversation and nurture the interpersonal nature of the supplemental instruction model. The primary duty of supplemental instruction leaders is to provide effective and enjoyable reviews on the content for a given course; however, as members of a greater university community, supplemental instruction leaders are presumed to provide assistance and social support for students facing difficult situations.

Supplemental instruction leaders should strive to develop and maintain an "inclusive" atmosphere within the framework of their session. Construction of an "inclusive" setting requires supplemental instruction leaders to maintain a positive deposition and refrain from derogatory comments or slurs of any kind, especially as some aspects of diversity such as sexuality, some ethnicities, and religion may not be blatantly apparent. Dr. De Vito's statement "a teacher may teach a class that is all male of all female, or that is all white or all black…but he or she will probably never teach a class that is all straight," alludes to the notion that one's inclusion in a minority group is not necessarily obvious and that diversity, in at least one form or another, is ever-present in our society.

Peer-facilitated instruction is not exempt from Roughgarden's (2004) statement that "each academic discipline has its own means of discriminating against diversity;" however, through understanding, education, and cooperation, supplemental instruction leaders have the opportunity to engage and connect with diverse learners. According to Lovelock (1979), "as diversity increases, so does stability and resilience;" therefore, as supplemental instruction leaders become educated on and address the needs of diverse learners, the very model of supplemental instruction is strengthened.

About the Author

Cheston Saunders is a rising senior at the University of North Carolina Wilmington with majors in biology and sociology and minors in psychology and gerontology. He is employed by the University Learning Center of UNCW as a supplemental instruction leader in cell biology and a tutor for courses in genetics, chemistry, and modern biology. He would like to thank the staff of the UNCW University Learning Center, namely Tom Kunz, Will Wilkinson, and Carol Porter, for their support and

encouragement to pursue certification as a tutor with the College Reading and Learning Association.

References

Berger, J. (2000). Optimizing capital, social reproduction, and undergraduate persistence: a sociological perspective, in J. M. Braxton (Ed.) *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbuilt University Press.

Birnbaum, L. (1995). Toward a gender-balanced staff in the WC. *The Writing Lab Newsletter, 19(8),* 6-7.

Donaldson, J., Graham, S. (1999). A Model of College Outcomes for Adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50, 24-40.

Dodd, D. (2008). Personal Interview. 26 March 2008.

Grannot, N. (1998). We learn, therefore we develop: Learning verses development—Or developing learning? In M. C. Smith & T. Pourchot (Eds.), *Adult learning and Development: Perspectives from Educational Psychology (pp. 15-34).* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hunzer, K. (1997). Misperceptions of gender in the WC: Stereotyping and the facilitative tutor. *The Writing Lab Newsletter, 22(2),* 6-10.

Jordan, N. Personal Interview. 12 January 2008.

Justice, K., Dornan, T. (2001). Metacognitive differences between traditional-age and nontraditional-age college students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 51, 236-249.

Klein, J. (1990). An analysis of the motivational characteristics of college reentry students. *College Student Journal*, 24, 281-286.

Kiedarsch, J., Dinitz, D. (1991). Learning more from students. *Writing Center Journal, 12,* 90-100.

Lovelock, J. (1979). *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Quinnan, T. (1997). *Adult Students "At-Risk": Culture Bias in Higher Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Roughgarden, J. (2004). *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Saenz, T., Marcoulides, G., Junn, E., Young, R. (1999). The relationship between college experience and academic performance of minority students. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 13(4), 199-207.

Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: the role of instructional habitus. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 17(4), 423-442.

Walvoord, M., Hoefnagels, M., Gaffin, D., Chumchal, M., Long, D. (2008). An analysis of calibrated peer review (CPR) in a science lecture classroom. *Journal of College Science Teacher*, 37 (4), 66-73.

Wolfgang, M., Dowling, W. (1981). Differences in motivation of adult and younger undergraduates. *Journal of Higher Education*, 52, 640-648.