Re-entry Students and the TA

Students who discontinue their education for any purpose and then later return to college, can be considered re-entry students. They are usually older than what we normally think of as college-aged students and may have more varied life experiences than the more traditional students. Many of them have been away from the classroom for many years, and entering or reentering college represents a major change in their lives. For most, it is great loss of social status to again be a student.

For TAs, teaching to re-entry students can be a challenge, particularly when the re-entry student is nearer in age to the TA’s parents than to the TA. Yet, such an age difference can be equally difficult for the student. The TA needs to respect the student’s life experience and the student needs to respect the TA’s formal education. Because re-entry students tend to be very goal oriented, they want to learn and they want the TA to teach them. At the same time, a re-entry student may have some life experiences that need to be acknowledged. If the student offers such information, it need not be taken by the TA as a challenge to his or her authority. Here are some comments from re-entry students at UCSB.

Re-entry students are, for the most part, equal to their TAs in age, life style, and seriousness of purpose. Because of this, TAs may have to exert more effort in getting re-entry students to utilize their help -- a re-entry student is more likely to go directly to the professor, or feel uncomfortable asking anyone for help because of their [the re-entry student’s] more mature status. Also, re-entry students may want to know and discuss more than what is in the books. TAs need to remember that these students have life experiences and responsibilities outside of the classroom that are quite different from those of the traditional full-time student.

Re-entry students often resent being treated like traditional-aged students. In particular, when TAs fail to show respect, or speak in a condescending way, you can just see the hackles rising on re-entry students. Then I have seen re-entry students become defensive, feeling that they need to prove to the TA that they deserve respect ...and so nothing at all gets accomplished— except that everyone leaves class feeling resentful and frustrated.

Of course, there is the issue of instructors and TAs making generalizations about the relative youth and inexperience of students, or referring to the students’ likely situations, which are always based on the assumption that these are people who have just emerged from their parent’s nest, didn’t live through the Vietnam War, etc.

I have also run into some re-entry students who could use some sensitivity training themselves. It is frightening to return to college after being away; it involves risk-taking. It is frightening for TAs, who are just beginning teaching careers, to face older students. They may feel these students will be more critical of their teaching abilities, or may challenge them in front of the other students. There is an adjustment involved for traditional students as well, because they are just beginning to think of themselves as adults and they may resent having an older person for a peer, reminding them that they are not so mature after all. If the older student treats them with respect, they may respond to that person, and may seek them out for advice, and even friendship. This has been my experience, and I have seen many classroom interactions involving re-entry students and instructors and fellow students. It seems everyone could use a little orientation.
Academically, the TA’s expectations should perhaps be modified to accommodate re-entry students. There is a certain formula to writing academic papers, and there is an expectation among instructors and TAs that students will follow this formula, and that in their analysis of a topic, the students will only use the data that have been presented in class, or in assigned texts. However, re-entry students with their unique life experiences might want to relate, or may not be able to avoid relating what they are learning in class to these past experiences. I think this makes grading papers written by re-entry students more difficult for TAs, who may have no understanding of where the re-entry student is coming from.

As adult learners, re-entry students are very task oriented. They want and expect their learning to be applicable to their current lives, to their past experiences, and to their future goals.

Instructors should use a variety of teaching techniques -- not just lecturing -- to utilize and build on the students’ experiences. Active participation by the students is critical to accomplishing this task. When students are involved, they are more likely to explore alternative ways to think about the subject as well as think of alternative ways to complete the task. As a result, critical thinking skills are enhanced. One active teaching technique is having students role play situations that they have confronted. Another is large and small group discussions in which adult students are encouraged to share relevant experiences. Posing questions to students can further encourage this integration. Questions might include: ‘How does this compare with what you have seen or done?’, ‘What might prevent this from working?’, ‘Have you experimented with this before?’, ‘When might this technique fail?’

Equally effective is the instructor’s sharing examples from his or her own practice. The use of analogies and metaphors can also be extremely useful in helping students integrate new and old knowledge. 2

Adult learners often do better academically when they feel part of a learning community and are encouraged to interact with other students. Providing a class roster with the other students’ names, addresses and phone numbers (with a student consent, of course) can help all students in the class feel more connected with one another and less inhibited about asking for help and information from one another. As the TA, you may also suggest that students form support networks. 3 Assigning small group projects and study groups can go along way toward making all of your students feel more comfortable with their studies. Once students begin talking about class material with one another outside of class, they may be more willing to participate in section discussions.

Re-entry students, like all other student groups, are individuals with a variety of differences. Some will feel timid in speaking out in class, others will want to contribute as much as possible. Some re-entry students will find their studies exciting, others will worry about their rusty study skills. If a re-entry student expresses concern about their studies or themselves as students, ask them if they are aware of the re-entry student services on campus.

Footnotes:

1. Taken from re-entry student surveys conducted by Regina Fletcher, Academic Advisor. College of Letters and Science, University of California, Santa Barbara. 1995.
3. Ibid.

Text by Shirley Ronkowski, Ph.D.