

ADULT LEARNING AND COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION

According to the Census Bureau figures for 1980, 34.3 percent of the students currently enrolled in higher education are over twenty-five years old. Compared to 1972, that figure represents a 20 percent increase in men over twenty-five and over a 100 percent increase in women over twenty-five.¹ At many schools, such as the state university in southern Idaho at which I last taught, the percentage of older students is even higher. According to the director of institutional research, over 50 percent of the student population is over twenty-five years old, and only 15 percent of the entering freshman class can be considered "traditional," i.e. students who have entered college full-time directly after graduation from high school.²

Yet even with this large population of adult learners enrolled in college campuses across the country, little has been done to address the needs of adult learners. This is certainly true in the literature on composition instruction, which has given scant attention to the specific needs of this population.

Part of the problem, I suspect, is that teachers see no reason to separate the way adults learn from the way adolescents and children learn. Indeed, predominant models for learning at *all* levels have generally been based on assumptions about adolescent and child learning.³ Common sense would say that adults as well as adolescents and children share many of the same problems when they sit down to write. All suffer anxiety about their writing; all often do not know what they want to say; all must learn simple skills before they learn complex ones; all suffer problems that can be

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¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *School Enrollment: Social and Economic Characteristics of Students, October 1980*. Advance Report (Washington, DC: GPO, 1981), p. 6; National Center for Education Statistics. *The Condition of Education: Statistical Report* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1980), p. 104.

² For a similar description of students at Queensborough Community College of The City University of New York, see Lynn Quitman Troyka, "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980s," CCC, 32 (1982), 252-253.

³ See, for instance, Barry M. Kroll, "Developmental Perspectives and the Teaching of Composition," *College English*, 41 (1980), 741-752.

characterized as developmental: egocentrism, failure to abstract or form conceptions.⁴ Because adults and adolescents share many problems, teachers may see no pressing reason to treat adults differently from adolescents. Perhaps more important, however, even if they did, they might not know how to characterize the special developmental characteristics and needs of adults. There is, for instance, no generally accepted theory of adult learning and, indeed, the question continues to be raised whether or not there is such a thing as strictly "adult learning" as opposed to "child learning" or "learning."⁵

However, even if adults share many of the problems that children and adolescents have when they begin writing and even if we lack a generally accepted theory that describes adult learning and development, we can describe a number of ways that adults over twenty-five appear to differ from children and adolescents. And in doing so, we can begin to sketch out a rationale for methods that take into account some of the specific needs of a particularly large percentage of such students.

A first simple observation that can be made about adult learners is that they, much more than children or adolescents, tend to be self-directed.⁶ K. Patricia Cross, for instance, characterizes this self-direction as a function of self-concept and points out that at higher levels of ego, moral, and cognitive development, adults can assume increasing responsibility for their learning activities.⁷ Roger Gould points out that within different age groupings, there are different "themes": those aged 16-18 consistently express the theme "We have to get away from our parents"; those 18-20 tend to express the theme "We have to get away from our parents" from the perspective of individuals who are worried that they might not succeed in escaping family "pull"; while those 22-28 tend to express concern for living in the present and building for the future.⁸

Increased self-direction in adults reflects societal expectation: to become truly adult, individuals should become self-directed. They should move away from home, be independent and successful individuals. The flyleaf of a self-help book some relatives gave me reads:

A modest adjustment in our habits can enable us to move with greater agility, function with greater economy, maximize power,

⁴ See Andrea Lunsford, "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," *College English*, 41 (1979), 39-46; Karl Taylor, "DOORS English—The Cognitive Basis of Rhetorical Models," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 2 (Spring/Summer 1979), 52-65.

⁵ See Russell Knudson, "Humanagogy Anyone?" *Adult Education*, 29 (1979), 261-264; K. Patricia Cross, *Adults as Learners* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981).

⁶ For typical discussions, see Malcolm Knowles, "The Emergence of a Theory of Adult Learning: Andragogy," in *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, 2nd ed. (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1978), 27-59; Shannon Widman, *Adult Learning* (ERIC ED 114 661); Alan Knox, "Adult Learning," in *Adult Development and Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), pp. 405-469.

⁷ Cross, p. 238.

⁸ Roger L. Gould, "The Phases of Adult Life: A Study in Developmental Psychology," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 127 (1972), 521-531.

minimize injuries, learn faster, score higher, and win more often. A better performer lies dormant in every one of us; in effect, for most of our lives we are driving a high-powered engine in low gear.⁹

Even if adults do not see themselves as high-powered engines, they do recognize the need to control their own lives, make their own decisions, set their own goals. Shannon S. Widman points out:

One major difference in adult learning vs. adolescent is the degree of voluntary determinism. In contrast to the typical high school and college age student, who learns (or at least is expected to learn) because older persons decide he has a need to know, the adult learner deliberately chooses to learn something because he has definite requirements for that knowledge or skill, and the reason directly relates to his own perception of his unique needs.¹⁰

Students who are *invited* to attend, rather than expected or required to attend, do not need to stay in college if college does not meet their needs and expectations.

It may seem obvious that adult learners are self-directed, but such self-directedness has implications that are often overlooked when composition teachers decide on materials and methods of instruction. Teachers and textbook authors, for instance, often spend much time trying to convince their students that writing is "good" for them, an observation which may be appropriate for many traditional freshmen but which most adults have already made. In a typical preface to a textbook on "essential college English," Norwood Selby writes, for example:

Think about how important communications is in all phases of day-to-day life and how you can benefit from having confidence in your use of language. If you couldn't communicate, how could you get a date, order a pizza, or pass your English course?¹¹

Ralph E. Loewe writes to students:

"Sick" compositions hurt your grades, not only in English classes but in every course where writing is required. Success in school, on the job, and even in your social life often depends on your ability to communicate effectively.¹²

Rory D. Stephens points out to students that they use language all the time:

Not only do you use it for conveying information, but you also use it for joking, being sarcastic, telling someone your feelings, singing, doing business, making love, playing games, and a

⁹ Laurence E. Morehouse and Leonard Gross, *Maximum Performance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977).

¹⁰ Widman, pp. 36-37.

¹¹ Norwood Selby, *Essential College English: A Grammar and Punctuation Workbook* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 3.

¹² Ralph E. Loewe, *The Writing Clinic*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. xiii.

hundred other activities. Language is a versatile tool you employ in a number of ways.¹³

He continues:

There are two groups of people in this society who can expect to do a lot of writing. The first group includes people whose jobs usually require a college education, such as business managers, social workers, journalists, lawyers, and medical personnel. The second group consists of people who are going to school to prepare themselves for those jobs: students like yourself. As a student, therefore, you are at the point where writing is a skill you need in order to survive, both in college and in your future profession.¹⁴

Stephens' assumption that students go to college to become "professional" is reasonable in many cases. Yet adult students often have many other goals, and such a statement is inappropriate for them. Certainly, adults who plan to be professionals already know that professionals write, and those with different career plans already have an idea of the value of writing in their lives and education. The real problem with such statements is that they may mask a more subtle and dangerous assumption and may send a subtle and dangerous message: students who don't share these goals are not motivated to learn; do not appreciate the value of their education; do not have the right incentives. Taking the traditional freshman as the audience may lead teachers and textbook authors to explain what is obvious to adults, thus to appear condescending, and to deny adults the validity of their own goals and expectations. And if adults do not respond well to materials clearly addressed to youngsters, teachers may wrongly blame the students or the methods, not the unintended condescension.

Although strongly goal-oriented, not all adults who enter college have a clear understanding of the kinds of goals they need to set for themselves, the kinds of activities that will prove fruitful, if they want to learn to write well. Unfortunately, teachers often do not give them the opportunity to evaluate teacher goals or to establish and perhaps reevaluate their own goals within their own learning contexts. Textbook authors often make claims for the effectiveness of the materials and methods used, but fail to provide just those explanations and proofs a critical adult learner wants. In an introduction to a book of copy exercises, for example, Donna Gorrell writes:

Probably the biggest difference between this textbook and others you have used is the copying. Called controlled composition, these copy assignments are an up-to-date method of improving writing. The approach is used not only by college freshmen but also, under the term *imitation*, by professional writers who want to improve their style.¹⁵

¹³ Rory D. Stephens, *Sequence: A Basic Writing Course* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), p. 1.

¹⁴ Stephens, p. 1.

¹⁵ Donna Gorrell, *Copy/Write: Basic Writing Through Controlled Composition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. xix.

Certainly such an explanation of copy exercises is adequate to instill a willingness to try the method if students accept textbook claims unquestioningly; yet such assurances do little to help more questioning and more perceptive students to understand the value of such copy exercises; to understand what "an up-to-date method of improving writing" is; to understand how professional writers' "imitations" are similar to copying a text word-for-word (a point many adult learners might question). Indeed, the explanation does not help adult students to weigh the value of such a method for their own writing problems. Later on, Gorrell writes a "final word":

As you use this textbook, think of yourself as a writer, with an audience of people who are interested in what you have to say.¹⁶

Any goal-oriented adult learner is liable to ask how copying something someone else has written can possibly lead to writing of his own that an audience is interested in.¹⁷

Many teachers have become excited about the possibilities of sentence combining as a classroom activity, yet the way they present such exercises in class may affect the perceived value of the exercises for many adults. William Stull, for instance, writes to students:

To help you master writing from the inside out, *Combining and Creating* brings together two proven strategies: sentence combining and generative rhetoric. Sentence combining is a way of improving writing without formal grammar instruction. It will help you translate into writing the grammar you already know as a speaker of English. It works by asking you to combine simple Dick-and-Jane sentences into more mature ones that establish close relationships among ideas.¹⁸

Stull emphasizes "proven" strategies, yet he does not say how the strategies have been "proven" to be useful without the "formal grammar instruction" that many older students are predisposed to see as more relevant—how, exactly, they will recognize "more mature" sentences or "close" relationships. Students who practice sentence combining are to compare their results with the versions written by professionals. Stull writes:

In some cases, you may feel that you have actually done a *better* job than the professional. But what's important is not whose version is best, but rather how the versions you and your classmates write are similar to, and different from, each other's and from the original author's. In other words, *Combining and Creating* puts you on an equal footing with the masters. And you will be surprised at

¹⁶ Gorrell, p. xxi.

¹⁷ I have written elsewhere on the usefulness of copy exercises. See "An Assessment of Controlled Composition as a Technique for Teaching Basic Writing," *The English Record* (Summer 1982), 17-20.

¹⁸ William L. Stull, *Combining and Creating: Sentence Combining and Generative Rhetoric* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), p. 2.

how quickly your writing begins to stand up to theirs.¹⁹

How combining sentences and comparing versions with those of professionals really puts students on an "equal footing with the masters" is not clear, nor is it clear how students will know that their writing "stands up" to professionals. Without much more specific and detailed explanations than they usually get of how methods work, either from their teachers or textbook authors, adult learners who come to writing with specific goals—for example learning to do things "correctly" or learning the "rules" to good writing—may not have the knowledge to understand, evaluate, and/or modify those goals.

The attitude of teachers toward materials like sentence combining exercises can contribute to the problem. Barbara Fassler Walvoord, for example, explains to college teachers of different academic disciplines that sentence combining has students, "like toddlers with blocks, both build towers and break them down":

In the hands of a skilled teacher, these exercises can also produce a toddler-like glee. In a professional demonstration of sentence-combining method, I once watched a pretty, lively woman delight her sixth graders by dancing up and down the aisles of the classroom while blowing soap bubbles.... In the high school or college classroom, the English teacher or the skills center tutor may not blow bubbles, but the sentence-combining exercises will be much the same.²⁰

If teachers expect sentence-combining exercises to stimulate "toddler-like glee" in students of all ages, they may not recognize the need to explain the benefits and drawbacks of such exercises, the rationale behind the practice, and the ways in which students can recognize and measure success while using the method.

In addition to being self-directed learners, adults also tend to be pragmatic learners. Malcolm Knowles points out that adults look for immediate application and often come to education because of some inability to cope with life problems.²¹ Cross reports that adults who voluntarily undertake learning projects "do so more in the hope of solving a problem than with the intention of learning a subject."²² Another way to view this pragmatism is in terms of biological/psychological time. Bernice Neugarten, for instance, suggests that, as people grow older, they gradually shift from viewing time as time-since-birth to viewing time as time-left-to-live.²³ Adults with little time to accomplish as much as they want to accomplish

¹⁹ Stull, p. 2.

²⁰ Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord, *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide For Teachers in All Disciplines* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1982), pp. 161-162.

²¹ Knowles, p. 38.

²² Cross, p. 189.

²³ John Flavell, "Cognitive Changes in Adulthood," in *Life-Span Developmental Psychology: Research and Theory*, ed. L.R. Goulet and Paul B. Baltes (New York: Academic Press, 1970), p. 252.

are less apt to be interested in making long-term commitments.

Another source of this pragmatic orientation is work experience. Students who work to pay for their education or come to school as part-time learners or returning students tend to be influenced by practicality. In the world of work, ideas and projects have consequences. Tasks lead to accountability, often measured in terms of visible products or observable outcomes. When workers enter school, they often expect their education to have consequences: better jobs, money, respect, promotion, etc.

Those who are concerned with making the most out of the time they have left may be uninterested in postponed success or mediated success, and, indeed, writing tasks are often built around the assumption that people are willing to work for future results, even if the results are somewhat nebulous. David Bartholomae, for instance, tells students that there are many fringe benefits to learning to write:

As a result of the writing you'll do in this course, you will experience an increase in self-awareness. In addition, you'll be more aware of the complexity and beauty in the world around you. And, if all goes well, you will be more confident, not only of your ability to communicate in writing, but more confident in general. And you'll be a more interesting person. I think these are important benefits. I hope you experience even more.²⁴

Such goals are certainly worthy ones: self-awareness, awareness of the "world," self-confidence, increase in interest-quotient. Youngsters, perhaps, can be encouraged by such promises, but not all adults. Even when adults accept such goals as worthy ones, few will see them as practical ones—as central to their immediate problems and purposes or as realistically achievable in ten to sixteen weeks.

One approach to teaching writing is to see the process as a gradual and incremental one in which students begin with words, move on to sentences, progress to paragraphs, then to five-paragraph themes, and finally to mature themes. Adult students will bridle at this regimen. Katie Davis explains the organization of her book on sentences and paragraphs as follows:

Of course, the very first step in the writing process is the construction of good sentences. Because this is true, the first twelve lessons of this book are designed to make you more aware of the various elements that make up a sentence, the ways these elements can be put together to form a good sentence, and the ways you can achieve sentence variety by using various combinations of these elements.... When you have completed the first twelve lessons, you will no doubt have mastered the technique of good sentence writing and will be better prepared to master the technique of good paragraph construction.²⁵

²⁴ David Bartholomae, *Sometimes You Just Have to Stand Naked: A Guide to Interesting Writing* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 7.

²⁵ Katie Davis, *Sentence Combining and Paragraph Construction* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), p. ix.

Davis' twelve chapters on the sentence include drills on sentence elements, compound subjects, compound predicate objects, compound direct objects, compound predicate nominatives, compound adjectival modifiers, compound adverbial modifiers, participial phrases, gerunds, gerund phrases, and more. Such a plan appears logical, and some students may enjoy such practice—particularly students who are content with passive, teacher-directed learning. But many adult learners will find such drill work to be impractical and time-consuming—too time-consuming, in fact, considering the limited amount of time they believe they have to reach paragraphs and real themes.

The circumstances under which practice writing sentences should precede writing paragraphs and longer papers are, I think, few. It may be, in fact, an inappropriate sequence for most adult learners. As a director of a writing center, I have for years counseled almost all students to work on larger units first—organization and cohesion in their own full-length manuscripts—because of the amount of immediate, practical success they can get especially in courses in other disciplines besides English. Students who work on organization and cohesion in larger pieces of discourse can, in fact, improve their grades often by more than a full point; students who spend their time honing isolated sentences do not improve in their ability to solve the global discourse problems that impede communication of subtle perceptions. And only the young and disoriented will work away on sentence and paragraph drills with no other reward than praise from their English teachers.

Certain tasks can be defended, but not on grounds of immediate, practical applicability. Free writing, for instance, may help students to loosen up, postpone closure, gain confidence, and discover meaning. But unless presented so that students can recognize and appreciate such outcomes, free writing may be perceived as useless and wasteful. Likewise, sentence combining takes time—over twenty hours, says John Mellon²⁶—and adult learners may not be willing to commit their energies or attention to such tasks unless they can see the value of "syntactic maturity." And one of the major problems teachers face in introducing spelling to many adult learners is that spelling takes time—so much time for some that they may not be able to recognize progress toward their goals. Adult learners who see themselves with only a limited amount of time may not wish to watch their bodies grow old while they continue manipulating letters in words, learning rules, and watching out for exceptions. Furthermore, with the introduction of spelling programs for word processing, the value of learning to spell may well decrease even further in the minds of many students in the next few years.

²⁶ John Mellon, "Issues in the Theory and Practice of Sentence Combining: A Twenty-Year Perspective," in *Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing*, ed. Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg (Conway, AK: L&S Books, 1979), p. 26.

Not only are adult learners goal-oriented and pragmatic learners, but they are also experienced learners. Composition teachers, of course, are well aware that students bring with them considerable stores of experience. In answer to the question "Who are our students?" Marie Ponsot writes:

...student writers come to us with 18 years of experience and with 18 years of experience with language. They come with 12 years of school experience so varied that while we see all freshmen know something, we can assume little about the facts, attitudes, and skills transmitted to them, not even that schools have been transmitters.²⁷

While eighteen-year-olds have had experience, older students have had even more. They have had the opportunity to interact socially as equals with other adults. Outside of school, their ideas are often taken seriously by their peers, and they often have roles that carry responsibility. Many have been married, sometimes divorced; many have children, sometimes the same age as traditional freshmen; many have had military experience, welfare experience, experience with governmental agencies; many have lived long enough to have seen relatives and loved ones die and experience the anticipation of their own deaths.

Teachers often attempt to tap this experience as subject matter for their composition courses. Recognizing the importance of such experience, they often emphasize personal narratives and descriptions, one-to-one conferences, class discussions, and laboratory approaches that allow students to work on individualized projects and assignments. Lou Kelly emphasizes that "student talk is full of special knowledge, vivid experience, and honest feelings."²⁸ William E. Coles, Jr. writes to students:

In order to deal with [these assignments] you will be supplying your own information and materials. After all, you have held various jobs and played games. You live in a variety of communities. And for a number of years now you have had your own thoughts and feelings about things. This is your experience, and from this seemingly shapeless and yet entirely individual source you will derive whatever it is you have to say.²⁹

Viewed positively, the experience students bring to the classroom gives them something to write about and can be a source of inspiration and motivation. On the other hand, such experience can also have a negative effect on classroom instruction, especially for older students. Established attitudes and values determine how students react to certain methods and materials. For example, introducing the technique of free writing and journal keeping, Peder Jones and Jay Farness emphasize the game-like quality

²⁷ Marie Ponsot, "Total Immersion," *Journal of Basic Writing* 1 (Fall/Winter 1976), 32.

²⁸ Lou Kelly, *From Dialogue to Discourse: An Open Approach to Competence and Creativity* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1972), p. 20.

²⁹ William E. Coles, Jr., *Teaching Composing: A Guide to Teaching Writing as a Self-Creating Process* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, 1974), p. 10.

of free writing, pointing out that "to get moving, we must trick, tease, or cajole stored information out of our minds."³⁰ And they suggest a number of ideas for making journal entries:

- imaginary dialogue
- outrageous comparison
- fake love letters
- if I could make myself invisible...
- New Year's resolutions
- the world's greatest party
- the world's worst party
- your thrilling moments in sports or theater or dance
- the Insult Hall of Fame

They ask: "Don't the names of the journal-writing games listed...tickle your fancy just a little bit?"³¹

Such suggestions may "tickle the fancy" of some adults—and for those students, such journal entries might be effective—but many will remain untickled, especially those who bring to composition class a strong belief in the value of rules and of handbook instruction and drillwork in learning how to write "correctly" or those with a strong belief that writing and learning is serious business. Indeed, Jones and Farness tell their students that "if you have never kept a journal, now may be a good time to try one; the joys, surprises, crises, and occasional absurdities of college life make for great journal entries," yet such encouragement may mean nothing to a thirty-five-year-old welder who has come to school to retool after a job disability.

Other motivational devices may be ineffective with adult learners. One author tells students:

You are the doctor.

Your compositions are the patients.

Your instructor is the Director of the Clinic.³²

Yet not all adults may be willing to accept such role playing—especially those who have been patients all their lives. Another analogy suggests that grammar is like football:

The grammar game and the game of football have a lot in common. Both games have teams with a certain number of positions on them, and both have tactics, rules, and goals. In football, there are eleven positions on the team; in grammar there are five positions on the team of words we call a sentence. The players on both teams are selected on the basis of the skills required for the positions.³³

³⁰ Peder Jones and Jay Farness, *College Writing Skills: A Text with Exercises* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 4.

³¹ Jones and Farness, p. 6.

³² Loewe, p. xiii.

³³ Myrtle Bates and Renee Freedman Stern, *The Grammar Game* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1983), p. 2.

The authors point out that the analogy is useful because it "helps to clarify a difficult subject"—but not only is the analogy cute and oversimplified, but it will not interest students who lack knowledge of and interest in the game, and will offend others for whom comparison of grammar with a game suggests a lack of seriousness.

Experience not only establishes the biases and attitudes that affect the responses of adult learners to instructional materials and programs but may, in fact, shape the ways adult learners perceive problems, search for solutions, and accept advice. Many adults, for instance, firmly believe that "grammar" and knowledge of grammatical terminology will help them to write better. Many believe that there is something scientific about judging "good" writing and that teachers have that scientific knowledge. Many believe that if they do enough drills and practice hard enough on the "basics" (whatever those are) they will automatically "cure" their poor writing habits.

Helping adults to understand the limitations of their own perceptions of their problems—helping them to change their perception that grammatical knowledge will automatically help them to write better, to accept the limitations teachers have in judging "good" writing, to believe that learning to write involves more than building correct habits by drill—may be extremely difficult. Much more difficult, in fact, for older students than for younger students. Jane C. Zahn, for example, suggests that "the most difficult task for an adult is to learn to do a familiar task in an unfamiliar way or to view a deeply valued concept in a new light."³⁴ Donald H. Brundage and Dorothy MacKeracher suggest that effecting change in established patterns requires a "greater input of energy" than the subject matter might suggest.³⁵

Adults who have had long experience coping with problems in their own ways or who have commitments to particular beliefs may find changing their approaches or beliefs very difficult. Alan Knox suggests, for instance, that past experiences can negatively affect the creativity of many adults, causing them to search through their repertoires of past solutions instead of generating novel solutions.³⁶ Such unreceptiveness to new approaches or beliefs may cause adults to reject or ignore advice calculated to help them improve their methods of "discovery" or "invention." Peter Elbow, for instance, suggests that students learn to "lie":

Write down quickly all the odd or crazy things you can come up with. For example: "The French Revolution wasn't started by the Wobblies in Seattle, or by Lenin, or by Marx, or by the Marx brothers. It wasn't part of the women's movement. It didn't last forty days and nights, it isn't in the Bible, they didn't just get the

³⁴ Jane C. Zahn, "Differences Between Adults and Youth Affecting Learning," *Adult Education*, 2 (Winter 1967), 75.

³⁵ Donald H. Brundage and Dorothy MacKeracher, *Adult Learning Principles and Their Application to Program Planning* (ERIC ED 181 292), p. 33.

³⁶ Knox, p. 445.

enemy drunk and slide them into the sea." If you let the nonsense roll effortlessly for ten or fifteen minutes—spelling out some of the individual fantasies at more length, too—you can discover some ideas that will help your thinking even if they are not true. (And they may be true. Could the French Revolution have been part of the women's movement?)³⁷

Elbow's advice gains support from theorists in creativity who emphasize that people can learn to brainstorm, withhold closure, and generate unconventional solutions to problems.³⁸ Yet such a solution may appear to be impractical, immature, or simply wrong-headed to many adults—especially if they have a commitment to answers, rules, and facts.

Similarly, adults may learn to use heuristic techniques that ask them to "change perspectives" or to consider problems in different contexts. However, they will strongly resist using such techniques on subjects about which they have firmly held beliefs or for which they have strong commitments. To do so might require more than simply changing "perspectives"—indeed, might require a significant reassessment and structural reorganization of fundamental perceptions.³⁹

I have touched on some of the implications of considering the needs and characteristics of adult learners. And it might be worthwhile here to summarize these and suggest a few more:

1. Teachers of adult learners cannot talk to them the same way they would talk to adolescents. They may not, in fact, be able to use the same textbooks or motivational devices with both adolescents and adults.
2. Teachers of adult learners must choose methods that allow their students to set goals, assess their own progress, and understand the rationale behind instructional programs.
3. When using materials that do not offer immediate and obvious rewards—materials such as exercises in free writing, controlled composition, sentence combining, grammar, or spelling—teachers will need to help their adult students to understand why such programs are essential in achieving their goals and when and how to recognize success, change, or progress. They cannot expect their instructional materials alone to stimulate adult learners to work harder, enjoy writing, or discover adventure. And explanations will require more than simple exhortations: changing any adult's perceptions will require effort, hard facts, and individualized attention.
4. Teachers who design programs to help students to "think" better, to become "aware," to become more "involved" or "concerned" with social issues or other controversial issues may need to pay extra attention to the

³⁷ Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 72.

³⁸ See, for instance, James L. Adams, *Conceptual Blockbusting: A Guide to Better Ideas* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1974).

³⁹ See, for instance, Jack Mezirow, "Perspective Transformation," *Adult Education*, 28 (1978), 101.

difficulties they will have achieving success with older students whose attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives are more firmly set than younger students. 5. Teachers who teach adults skills—for example, punctuation, sentence analysis, or stylistic analysis—may find that skills that appear simple to them are much more difficult for their adult learners to master than they expect. In order to learn new ways to perceive and to solve old problems, adults often must unlearn old ideas and strategies.

Some of these guidelines and cautions suggest reassessing the way teachers approach teaching younger students as well as adults. Certainly treating younger adults as adults can often help them to mature. And by treating young students as adults, teachers also take into consideration individual differences in such areas as goals that affect the ways younger learners approach learning. Yet I would emphasize that adults are sufficiently different in the ways they approach learning, set goals, and perceive their problems that teachers cannot teach all students like adults. Different methods and materials as well as different expectations are appropriate for different student populations. We need more materials designed specifically for adult learners. And we need specific strategies for teaching adults to recognize both the value and limitation of their own perceptions and experiences.