

Introduction: Adult Learners in the Composition Classroom

MACY DUNKLIN

My college experience was not traditional. My fellow high-school graduates dove headfirst into their collegiate experience, but I left after one semester and got a real job, as they say, to avoid accruing college debt. After being a terrible student in high school, I was not expecting to go further than an associate's degree after a couple night classes at the local community college. Most of us taking night classes at Central Piedmont Community College were there for reasons other than academic interest. Some may have been delayed for the same reasons as me—financial need or lack of interest—but all of us had practical motivations for returning to school. My status as a recent high-school graduate was an unexpected addition to the classroom rather than the norm. At my community college, at 6:00 p.m. on a Tuesday in a town with a handful of four-year institutions, the typical student was an adult learner returning to remedial courses after taking extended time off from their educational journey.

Thanks to my time with my older classmates, however, I learned to interrogate my desire for an education and appreciate its value. When I complained about yet another essay, my classmates relayed a variety of experiences, such as getting a middle-school son involved in the essay as a moment to teach the importance of education and writing. Indirectly, they showed me the value I could bring to my assignments by connecting them to my values, which led to my first understanding of transfer. When group projects came around (with a professor who thankfully had us work on our projects in class), I was amazed to find group work functional. My classmates collaborated more like an on-site team at work than students begrudgingly meeting deadlines. They openly shared their other priorities and negotiated workloads and meetings, which taught me how to professionally advocate for myself in and out of the classroom. Moreover, they demonstrated how there is more to learn from a writing assignment than simply writing: experiences off the paper inform our ability to address multiple audiences in ink.

Nevertheless, these classes were not an oasis for returning students. A technician had to drop because she was moved to the night shift. Even if we could normally

attend class, student absence policies generally do not include stipulations for sick children or being late due to a boss holding you for a meeting at work. In addition to these struggles, we regularly faced the challenge of going to work, attending classes, *and* completing assignments in the same day. Despite my age, I shared some of my older classmates' struggles as a fellow working student. The education system felt set up for college first, work second.

My time with older students shaped and strengthened my mental capacities to even handle a postsecondary education, and the advocacy they did on their own behalf revealed to me the inflexibility and ableism of most university policies. I had my fair share of troubles as a part-time student living in a different town, but the coursework had been prepared for people like me—the recent high-school graduate. The curriculum did not include space for revisiting core skills learned in junior- and senior-level English classes, nor did it provide additional courses to help students “catch up.” If anything, the opposite was true. Early college programs were on the rise and younger students were showing up in classrooms, making it more difficult for older students to adapt.

As I started teaching amid these shifts, I wondered, how am I supposed to teach all these people, arriving in the classroom at diverse stages in their education, how to write? I searched existing writing studies literature and found few answers. Instead, I saw that age was not part of the classroom diversity discussion. Where was the conversation happening, and what were people learning?

As I returned to this question in the middle of my doctoral journey, I received the chance to be a guest editor of *The WAC Journal*. This special forum on adult learners was made possible by the Will Hochman New Scholar Fellowship offered by the WAC Clearinghouse. My experience as the first Will Hochman scholar has been empowering, enlightening, and rigorous. Over the course of the last year, I have worked closely with the Pearce Center for Professional Communication at Clemson University and members of the WAC Clearinghouse to complete two interrelated tasks: (1) to create a special forum around a topic of importance to myself and the WAC community, and (2) to direct the first journal-based mini conference as an extension of this special forum. For the first rendition of the fellowship, I chose the journal's topic to be adult learners, expanding the discussion for the conference to include age and the WAC/WID classroom.

Under the guidance of the editor of *The WAC Journal*, Allison Daniel, and the director of the Pearce Center, Dr. Cameron Bushnell, I developed the administrative and professional skills required to accomplish these goals while also being given the space to generate my own ideas and design for the special forum and accompanying conference. As a Will Hochman fellow, I had the opportunity to spotlight an area of WAC/WID pedagogy that warranted more (and ongoing) discussion as well as to

bring together those who are already passionately working towards the same goals as me.

The purpose of a mini conference based on a journal special issue is to invite scholars into a curated space to discuss key issues in the field. I believe that at our inaugural conference in May of this year, we achieved that goal. The publication of this special forum, which includes voices from the conference, continues the discussions we had and prompts others to join the conversation by responding to, applying, and citing the work presented here. I would like to draw the reader's attention to how the articles I briefly introduce next all include the voices of adult learners. Rather than talking about them at a distance or viewing them, in an objectifying manner, as a study sample, the manuscripts presented in this special forum are an expression of the passion and power of these students and their collaborators in writing education.

Jamie Hudson interrogates how innovative writing practices may create new and nuanced barriers despite the intent for new practices to be progressive and inclusive. Through reflections on participating in experiential education projects as an adult learner, Jamie provides critical feedback on how to not only include adult learners but also integrate experiential learning at work or through career opportunities. In a similar manner, **Kendon Kurzer, Natasha J. Lee, Amy Macias-Stowe, Mary Her, and Nieva Manalo** reflect on how recent programs at their university better serve learners of different experiences and education levels. By discussing their own experiences as students and teachers in a preparatory writing course, they elaborate on what elements of a writing classroom are most beneficial to resumers, a term coined to describe students resuming their education. Similarly, **Collie Fulford, Yaseen Abdul-Malik, Stefanie Frigo, Thomas Kelly, Adrienne Long, and Stuart Parrish** describe their round-table discussion groups to show how adult learners in the classroom can be beneficial to students who feel behind their peers. Lastly, **Gabrielle Kelney** presents insights from a program focused on continuing educational opportunities for adult learners. She details how her institution started a writing support group for adult learner alumni, who continue to grow their skills in a shared environment with scholars who recently resumed their academic careers.

Each of the voices in this collection targets a different area of concern for adult learners—applying new skills in their immediate environments, navigating how current curricula may or may not meet the needs of resumers, being seen as collaborators, and accessing or developing educational resources tailored to their needs. It is my hope that the stories presented here will inspire more and ongoing conversations about how we can recognize, accommodate, and empower learners of all ages in our WAC/WID classrooms.